Be Positive

by deliriumbubbles

Summary

As Kurt slowly tries to piece himself back together after the break-up, he and Adam circle around one another in New York without truly meeting. When Kurt comes home for Christmas, however, a confrontation with Blaine, and then the discovery that Blaine’s partner a few months ago didn’t use a condom, causes Kurt to take Blaine to a local clinic to get tested. While they wait at the clinic, the two of them run into Sebastian, who, after trading a few barbs with Kurt, decides to play a little trick. Soon after, the test results come in, and Kurt gets a shock that will change his life. Reeling from the news and still trying to be strong for those around him, Kurt returns to New York with baggage weighing heavily on his shoulders that will complicate his life more than he thought possible. Then, he runs into Adam at NYADA.

Notes

This story includes a plot with HIV. I imagine this to be sensitive for some, and I try to be honest and not appropriative.
Chapter One

Come home, kid. We miss ya.

Kurt’s lips etched a slight smile across his face as he looked at the email from his father. Riddled with grammar errors, blunt and to the point. Kurt ached with how much he missed his family. He could hear his father’s voice speaking in his head, so casual, gruff, fond. Maybe worried.

Kurt hadn’t been home since he’d hitched outta Lima. He’d intended to have more trips back and forth, but work had been so busy, and plane tickets so expensive. Rachel’s fathers were paying her half of the rent (and all of the internet and cable service Rachel couldn’t live without), but Kurt was slammed at the office and waiting tables in his off hours just to make it each month. Even at Vogue, internships turned assistantships weren’t at the top of the pay scale. But his father had told Kurt not to worry about it.

"Work’s work. You gotta put in the time, pay your dues, take your knocks. Finn misses your help on Friday dinners, but I guess it’s about time he and I learned to do for ourselves. Carole misses you too, by the way, and it’s got nothing to do with your cooking."

“Misses having someone to watch Project Runway with, probably.”

He was sure that his father was actually a lot more disappointed that Kurt had been away so long than he’d let on. Finn had not so deftly hinted that was the case over the phone, but Kurt had sensed it in that underlying layer of his father’s voice when they were on the phone. They could read one another better than anyone, that way.

The day was over and most everyone had gone home, but Kurt was still at his desk. His tiny desk, but his.

This could be a career for me.

The almost urgent keen of his own voice made Kurt wince. His traitor eyes flickered over to his phone...

Seven new text messages. Three new voicemails. Blaine’s incessant urge to reach out and touch were easing up a little under the weight of the radio silence. A pit of something dark and bitter had formed in Kurt’s stomach. He should really just block Blaine, if he wasn’t going to look at the
messages. Why did he have to torture himself by letting the temptation linger there?

“Hey, Twink.” Chase ducked his head into the office. His mouth slipped into a sideways slump. “How’s it goin’? Is Mr. Too Cute still bugging you? We can make sure the mailroom rejects anything he tries to send you here.”

“No. I mean,” Kurt sighed. “I don’t know. I think that’s a little too cruel, isn’t it?”

Chase held up a box. “Do you want it then?”

Kurt’s eyes fixed on the brown, rectangular package, emblazoned with the word “AMAZON” across the side. He swallowed.

“Not really.”

Chase clasped his hand into a fist and pounded his chest twice. Kurt frowned.

“Be strong, bro,” he said with a grin.

“I think you’re a little old to be doing that,” Kurt teased, raising a brow.

“Okay, jailbait.” The humor dropped from Chase’s face. “I’ll tell Raymond to send the packages back. If the ex has a problem with it, you can tell him that this is your workplace, and it is inappropriate. Unless...?”

“No. I don’t think whatever he ordered from Amazon will help anything.”

“I wonder why he thought it would.”

Kurt rested his cheek on his fist. “To know that, I’d have to talk to him.”
Chase nodded, with a little knowing smile.

Kurt sighed again. “Thanks. For intercepting that for me. My willpower can only last so long.”

“And he knows it.”

“He’s not that calculating. Believe me, if he were, we’d never have had this fight. He just...” Kurt’s fingers moved over the smooth metallic paint on his phone.

*COURAGE*

He closed his eyes. “He doesn’t think sometimes. A lotta times. It’s funny, because he’s such a friggin’ people pleaser. You’d think sometimes that would go into pleasing *me*.”

“I know how complicated these things can get, but...” Chase hesitated long enough for Kurt to look up at him. “Look, hon, in my experience-- and in only mine, mind-- a cheater is a cheater. Guys who cheat are guys who are *going* to cheat. There’s nothing you can do about it. Unless you want an open relationship with him.”

Kurt paled. His daily level of jealousy around Blaine was high enough, let alone if Blaine was regularly going out for ‘hook-ups’--

No. Blaine wasn’t beyond redemption. He wasn’t Satan. But Kurt wasn’t sure that their relationship could be saved, either. He wasn’t even *really* sure if Blaine was sorry.

”*I was lonely, and you weren’t there!*”

His stomach felt unsettled whenever he thought of it. It was the same feeling when he’d realized that Blaine had been spending all that time with Sebastian behind his back.

“Hey. How about I buy you a drink, hm? You need to get out of this office for a little while. Do you work tonight? I mean at wherever that other place is.”
Kurt tightened his lips slightly in the semblance of a smile. “No, I have the night off.”

Chase set the package on the table by the door. Kurt could see that Chase had already written “Return to Sender” on it. Just in case. He came over to Kurt’s desk slowly, like Kurt might spook and skitter off like a sad Bambi.

“You deserve a night of fun. And I say that in the least creepy-older-guy way possible. I do have a boyfriend, so I promise I’m not trying to push you into anything untoward.”

Kurt let out a nervous laugh. “That does help, actually.”

“C’mon. Whatever you’re working on can be sent in the morning. You get here early enough.” Chase held out his hand.

Kurt deftly turned away from the touch and exited the desk from the other side, pretending that he needed to grab something out of the drawer and put it in his bag. If Chase noticed, he didn’t say anything.

“Let’s go, jailbait.”

“I’m not that young,” Kurt protested on the way out the door.

“Young enough that I’m gonna have to slip you past the bouncer at front door.”

Kurt let his eyes linger as they walked down the hallway together. Chase was a nice guy, or seemed to be. He wasn’t exactly a mentor figure (nor would he be with the suggestions he made at creative meetings), but he was nice.

Kurt could use with some nice. He had Isabelle, and he had Rachel. Superficially anyway. But Rachel was always busy with school and twirling around the city with her boyfriend and fellow NYADAns. He’d been working too much to really connect with anyone else, and it felt a little like conversations with friends back home always seemed to redirect to Blaine.

He could really use somebody.
Adam checked his phone for the twelfth time, leaned against a wall just beside the door, and then shoved his hands into his pockets. He just wasn’t sure if he had it in him to go inside today.

It had been a rough week at school as well as work. He’d gotten a fair round of mocking from teachers and fellow students alike, found out that the Adam’s Apples had been turned down for funding yet again, and gotten stiffed on his tips at the cafe. On top of everything else, he’d missed his weekly phone call from his mother, and hadn’t called back, because she would know that he wasn’t happy. She always knew. He rolled his shoulders and forced a smile as he looked down at his scuffed shoes and threadbare jeans.

The current problem? ‘In-there’ there was no forcing of smiles. ‘In-there’ was raw guts and truth. ‘In-there’ he would manage brightness and cheer for other people, but when the circle came around to him, he would have to introduce himself, and speak to his own pain. There was no glass half full in those moments, as hard as he tried. And it was ever so important that he tried.

“Hey, saaaxy.”

Adam turned to the high, familiar voice. It was Aude, in all her tiny glory, and also in boymode: buzzed hair, tight pink and white striped shirt, and fitted skinny jeans. She was utterly devoid of glitter, wig, dramatic shadow and lashes, and frills. Though she was wearing some lip gloss. One must be presentable, of course. So Adam should probably switch pronouns, but it was hard since he thought of her so often in conjunction with her spectacular performances. Regardless, Aude had never seemed to mind pronoun slippage, so his motivation to self-correct was a bit lacking.

“Hullo, darling.”

“Aw. Poor, Adam.” Aude pouted and bounced on her- his heels.

“I’m... I’m not, poorly. I’m fine. Feeling good. Just a rough day.”

Aude offered her arm. “Come tell us about it?”
“Sorry, dear. Don’t know if I’m up for it today.”

Aude looked down, her thick lashes covering large, dark almond-shaped eyes that were hazel with a golden amber glint. “I wish you’d come. I know that you do not like to dwell but you do need support.” Her voice dropped out of perky sweetness, and was now colored with the weight of her hard years. “We all do, y’know. There’s no reason you should have to do this alone.”

“Aude, nothing’s changed since I started coming to group. I’m not sure if it’s really what I need. Life can drain you, no matter how your cards are dealt. Maybe we have a bit of a worse hand than some, but...”

Aude twined her arms in front of her and pinched her lips together as she frowned. Her eyes darted to the window, which was blocked for privacy by music and movie posters.

“Let’s go get something to eat,” Aude suggested. “I’m broke. You can feed me.”

Adam smiled widely and took Aude’s arm, glad for the reprieve from society. He missed having this one on his arm. Even if she’d gone off to date someone better suited to her, he’d always enjoyed her company.

But Adam wasn’t alone by any means. Not as much as Aude believed, even if his mum was across the pond and he rarely, if ever, spoke to his father and sister. He had the Apples, who were, beyond the singing and creative works, his friends. He spent most of his time outside of school and work trying to figure ways to make their lives easier at NYADA. But something was missing, Aude was intuitive like that.

She knew he needed the support tonight, but couldn’t stand to be around all the people, with their hard stories, and retelling his own... Digging out his insides for them to see. So instead, they sat across from the table from one another at a little place around the block, unloading about their week.

Aude leaned on her hand and took another bite of thin, floppy pizza. “Don’t be saaad.”

“I’m not sad, darling,” Adam chided.

Aude touched his hand and looked into his eyes. He leaned forward and lifted her hand for a kiss.
“Thank you for the time.”

Aude rolled her eyes. “It’s about all I can do, after you’ve kept me off the street. Sweet ladies like me,” she said coyly, “Don’t do well on the street.”

“I oughtn’t get credit for basic humanity.”

Aude ate an olive off her plate. “It’s not humanity... It’s the ability to see humanity. People didn’t see me. They still don’t. Now I’m just that bright spark that inspires them to live their lives better. To appreciate life. Oh, that drag queen. How fabulous! How fierce!”

She curled her lip and let out a little growl. “May we all be so happy and gay!”

And Adam smiled. It was hard not to. Aude was the spark of life. She just wasn’t his spark. She was, if anything, her own.

“If only.” Adam nodded abruptly. “Do you work tonight?”

“No show. Not tonight. It’s group therapy night.” Aude raised a thin, perfectly-groomed brow high.

“Right then. We-” He paused to smile widely because he refused to acknowledge her hint that he should make more of an effort toward therapy. “-are going to go trolling up and down the neighborhood in search of an adventure!”

Aude clapped her hands together and giggled. “I love an adventuh!” she squealed in a mock Cockney.

Adam popped up to get them some take-away boxes and returned feeling a little more energized. The evening could end anywhere. So long as their energy lasted.

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“I should just get fat.”

Kurt avoided Rachel’s eyes. He stared out the window, but he didn’t see clouds. Just like he hadn’t really seen anything since they’d left the halls of McKinley behind. All he could see was Blaine’s shining hazel eyes. His begging expression.

Forgive me.

It was the same refrain Blaine had been singing since that the night he’d flown in out of nowhere and shattered Kurt’s heart to pieces. And since then, Kurt had been choked on words, barely able to respond, to even really name what he felt. Weeks of limbo, wanting to know, but not to know. Because knowing meant facing the loss that accompanied that understanding.

His stomach churned and his body was slack. It hadn’t been dramatics that had caused him to tell his brother he felt like he was dying. He didn’t know how he felt about Blaine, about them, but his body... he felt hollowed out and weighed down at the same time.

Once his eyes had lit on Blaine backstage, the desire to speak to him had drained away and he felt empty and cold once again. The play unfolded before him, with their painfully skinny Sandy and the vocally flat Danny, and Santana there for some reason, and Tina stealing scenes and making the audience laugh even when Jan wasn’t supposed to be the focus. (Get it, girl! he’d thought idly at one point. He’d been there.). Then Rachel was up and leaving the auditorium. Kurt turned his head and caught a glimpse of Unique back in boymode, which didn’t make any sense.

Then the hallway, and Blaine’s eyes, and begging, and the sound of Blaine’s strangled voicemails surging in his ears along with blood and panic.

You have to forgive me. Kurt, I need you! Why won’t you answer?

All of it crowding up in his brain, causing his heart to lodge in his throat, and making itself at home there with other hurtful, painful noise.

This is cheating, Kurt.

It’s not right, but it’s okay.
I was with someone.

*It doesn’t matter who I was with, Kurt! What matters is I was by my* myself. *I needed you. I need you around and you weren’t there.*

The whole weekend had been a blur. Its only redemption, from the long flights to the drive from the Dayton airport to the lackluster play and Kurt screaming at Blaine in the hallway, was getting a few hours alone with his dad. In all these months away from Lima, Kurt had never realized what he needed was a mug of warm milk, a heavy, secure arm around his shoulders, and a *Top Gear* marathon.

A less desperate man would have been embarrassed to fall dead asleep under his father’s weight and warmth, probably murmuring a little as he sagged into his father’s body and probably distracted him from the TV.

“-so there’s no reason we can’t come back from this,” Rachel babbled pausing only a minute to gesture with her hand, “stronger than ever!”

Kurt didn’t answer. He turned his head, narrowed his eyes, and rose from his seat. His head felt like it might explode with the pressure of so many words and lies and demands on him.

“Oh, I can... Kurt?” Rachel scooted back, looking up at him with wide eyes.

He ignored her and slipped down the aisle with purpose. A quick smile to the stewardess, and he closed himself in the bathroom. Water. Face. Hands through the hair.

Then he turned to the bowl and emptied his guts into it forcefully. His hand pressed against his mouth, and he fell back against the door, his shoulders shaking.

*This is cheating, Kurt!*

*I was lonely... and I’m really sorry.*
Pack your bags up and leave! Don’t you dare come running back to me!

There was a rapping on the door.

“Um, excuse me! Excuse me!”

Kurt rolled his eyes and hit the button, causing a loud whoosh before he opened the door. A woman glared at him and pushed past with her grubby little kid. He touched his stomach and didn’t begin walking back to his seat just yet.

“Can I help you with something, sir?” the lovely ochre-skinned steward asked as he drifted back toward the refreshment cart.

“Just, um... a little sick,” Kurt muttered.

“Oh. Well, do you like ginger ale?” He smiled. Big white teeth. Precious dimples.

*He’d just fuck you and break your heart,* a sick little voice told Kurt.

“I don’t hate it. Think it’ll help?” Kurt tried to force a smile.

The steward bent over and lingered, looking for the right can. Almost automatically, Kurt’s hand flickered over to the cart. His fingers wrapped around several little bottles and slipped them in his pocket.

“Here we go.” The steward’s rich brown eyes twinkled at him. “You can have the can. I hope it works! Would you like some ice?”

“Yeah. Please.” His lips tried again at the smiling thing.

“You look...” The steward snagged a cup and filled it with ice. “Let’s get you back to your seat.”
“I’ll be okay. I always am,” Kurt muttered, his voice hitting that weird, low gravelly sound that it seemed to have discovered since Blaine had spoken in the park and with mere words removed the firmament from their world. He could feel the little bottles clinking in his pocket.

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Blaine slumped back into a chair covered in cardigans, took a swig from his beer, and hit the play button one more time on his computer. The flatscreen came to life with the beginning of their Christmas special from last year, with himself and Kurt doing their Christmas duet, scat singing and prancing around.

He remembered Rachel urging Kurt to send an addendum to his NYADA application after it had aired. As Kurt ended up putting his application together at the last minute, no presidency, no big part in the school play, Kurt’s spirits had been low, as though he already knew what would be the ultimate reward of all his efforts to get into the school of his dreams. In the end, he was just scribbling down anything he could think of and shooting names of things at Blaine to see if it sounded like it might be good on a resume.

"Okay, so... Cheerios, New Directions, Warblers, the shop, French club... Do you think I can put freelance designing on there? For the outfits?"

Blaine shrugged and then nodded. He looked around the coffee shop and then took a sip of his latte.

“Maybe... Add the Lima Bean? It’s not like they’ll reject me from working here.”

“Well, probably not. If they’re hiring.”

Kurt frowned. “I’m putting prom queen on here,” he said flippantly as he filled in the boxes with small, neat letters.

Blaine bowed over laughing.

“If these pubescent chimps are going to give me the honor, I’m taking credit for it.”

“Well.” Blaine fought his smile valiantly as his hand moved soothingly over Kurt’s back. He could
see Sebastian grinning at him on the other side of the shop. “That’s the idea. I’ll be right back?”

Kurt nodded as he tapped his pencil on the table. “Maybe I’ll ask Rachel…”

Blaine finished the bottle and set it on the dresser with the others. Now, here he was. Boyfriendless and directionless. Kurt wasn’t ever going to forgive him. And it was like everyone at the club was just tired of hearing about it. Didn’t anyone care how he felt?

“I hope they didn’t get lost in this dreadful weather!” Kurt on the television said, shuddering as he spoke.

”God, I sound like a grandma and a grandpa there,” Kurt muttered.

Mercedes chuckled and squeezed Kurt’s shoulder. They were all sitting around the choir room, looking at the copy of their television accomplishment.

Blaine squeezed his hand. “We really stuck all the moves in that song without it looking artificial. This was way more fun than doing the play.”

“Well, there’s a difference between doing your own creative works and reviving someone else’s script that’s been done the same way a frillion times,” Kurt said dryly.

Artie’s eyes flickered over to them, but Kurt didn’t see him. Blaine gave Artie an apologetic smile.

“Doing unconventional arrangements is one of you hobbies, isn’t it?” he said.

Kurt shrugged. “I have to rearrange everything. I’m not the kind of performer that can just step into a pre-fabbed role. And I’m just not destined for pre-fab, I guess.”

“Well. Not everyone can be a Zeffron.”

Kurt rolled his eyes and pulled his hand back, sucking his cheeks.
“You’re more like um...” Blaine searched for an actor that seemed appropriate.

“Heath Ledger,” Sam said. “Doing like, weird characters, like in Rocky Horror.”

“You’re a chameleon, baby,” Mercedes said. “You’re a star.”

Kurt bowed his head. “Blaine’s our star. You’re just confused. Because of all the glitter.”

Puck and Mike howled in laughter. Kurt’s bright expression faded a little.

Blaine bit his lip and squeezed Kurt closer to him. It was the holidays, and Kurt was a little bluesy, but Blaine felt good. He knew how to make him smile again, and his parents were out of town that weekend.

Blaine’s door opened. He bolted up, chucking the bottles into the wastebasket and turning around defensively. Instead of his father’s crisp suit and trademarked slim, red tie were Cooper’s flashing white teeth, perfect hair, and too-tight black shirt.

“Relax, baby brother.” His nose wrinkled. “Damn, I didn’t know you were throwing a party this weekend.”

“I’m not.” Blaine paused the video and slumped back in his chair.

Cooper raised a brow. He grabbed a chair for himself and sat on it backwards. “Sorry I didn’t make it back for your play.”

“I had a small part, anyway.”

“Well, that sucks. Who do I complain to? What jerks, cutting you out of the lead during your senior year, just ‘cause you’ve gained a couple of pounds.”
Blaine glared at him. “I have not. And I told them I didn’t want it. I can’t focus on anything right now because of the break up.”

“Break up? You were dating someone? Someone hot?” Cooper leaned forward.

Blaine tilted his head to the side. “Really? You met Kurt!”

“Ohhh, oh, right. You were still with that guy? Well.” Cooper shrugged. “Really. You could do better, looks-wise. And he’s such a drama queen. All these super intense fights? Maybe it’s better this way. Do you really need the stress he caused?”

“What are you even talking about? Kurt was a great boyfriend. He brought me flowers and stuffed animals when I was upset, and he checked up on my car, and he sang to me, and with me...” Blaine pressed his hand to his chest and looked at the ceiling, scrunching up his eyes and sighing piteously.

“Hang on.” Cooper got up and started looking around the nightstand.

“What?”

“You’re clutching, but you forgot your pearls.”

“This isn’t funny!” Blaine exploded. He shot out of his chair and turned to get his wallet.

“Oh, c’mon.” Cooper grabbed him around his shoulders in a hug. “Look, I’m sure you guys cared about each other, but you were just high school boyfriends. I went through about four or five major relationships in high school. It’s not a big thing. In a few years, you’ll see that it was for the best.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I never thought Kurt was all that good for you, anyway. I mean, don’t you want a guy who’s more of a guy and less of a nagging wife?”
“Get off me. You always give terrible advice.” Blaine slipped down out of Cooper’s grasp.

“You want some advice? Forget whatever stupid little thing Kurt freaked out and dumped you over, and start dating hotter guys.”

Blaine grabbed his jacket. “Leave me alone.”

“And stop drinking. You’re getting a beer gut,” Cooper called after him.

Blaine paused on the top of the stairs and touched his abs. Okay, they weren’t as flat as they’d been a year... or so... ago, but it wasn’t that bad, was it? Kurt had never minded his abs being not quite as abulous as Sam’s.

He jogged down the staircase and grabbed his keys from the table by the door before anyone else could see him, though he didn’t think that either of his parents were home. He confirmed it as he reached the driveway, where his dark blue Audi TT sat next to Cooper’s obnoxious orange Mini-Coop. His parents’ cars were nowhere in sight.

He hopped in, turned the key, and waited for a moment to start up. Despite putting a car together the summer before starting high school, Blaine didn’t really have a glut of knowledge of how cars worked. Not beyond the basics, and the Mustang he and his father had put together differed a lot from the Audi. They’d sold the car they’d put together to get Blaine his car, and after a few years, the thing kept lagging between gears, and sometimes he’d shift between and end up nowhere. The dealer kept telling him he was driving the stick wrong, but he’d learned on his dad’s saucy Lexus IS F, so it wasn’t his bad driving.

Today he was lucky enough, and managed to pull out and get on the road. He wasn’t sure where he was headed. Maybe coffee, or Scandals? But before he’d gotten too far, he attempted to shift between second and third gear and the car slowed to a stop. A car whizzed past him and his heart pounded. His head was also whirling, and he knew that it had been a mistake to leave the house. How many had he had?

The dealer was too far and wouldn’t be open at this hour. He needed to get back to the house, but if his gears were sticking this bad, he might not make it... or he could call Cooper and see if his brother would bother to pick him up. He probably would, with commentary all the way. Still, Blaine pulled out his phone and dialed the number. No answer.
He pulled the stick again, trying to go back to second, then tried first. He took a breath and shifted back into second, and kept going for a bit. Then he spotted 11th street and realized how close he was to Mr. Hummel’s shop. He took the right turn and lurched on forward. He pulled into the parking lot and got out, looking around to see if anyone was still in the shop. A figure moved past the window, and Blaine felt a wave of relief. He went inside.

Burt was leaning over his work desk, and an older gentleman (Cassius maybe?) was out on the floor with his head popped under a truck. Blaine took a breath as he looked around. He remembered visiting Kurt here, during summer mostly. Kurt knew his way around the shop. He didn’t exactly love Blaine’s car, either, and had spent some time with his shirt stripped off and his eyes on Blaine’s engine, wearing a frown that he normally reserved for an outfit or arrangement that was critically flawed in some way he couldn’t work out. Blaine was beginning to lose the love for his Audi himself.

“Oh, hey!” Burt rose from his desk the moment he spotted Blaine in the doorway.

“Hey. Um. My car... It’s probably too late for uh...”

“Did you get in a wreck? Are you okay?” Burt moved around the desk more quickly than Blaine had expected. Blaine blinked several times, trying to gather his thoughts. It was always a little awkward now around Burt, because Kurt hadn’t even talked to his dad about them breaking up right away. He wasn’t sure what Burt knew about why Kurt had dumped him.

“No, I’m just having trouble getting it to go when I shift gears.” Words tumbled carelessly out of Blaine’s mouth. “I called my brother, but I guess he went out... or... If it’s too late to look at it, maybe I could just leave it here so it doesn’t get towed?”

“We won’t tow it. What’s the make and model?” Burt came closer and peered outside.

“Audi TT-S. It’s the dark blue?” Blaine looked up at Burt, who had a grumpy expression on.

“Well, we can take a good look in the morning.” He hitched his hands on his hips as he stared at it. Same as Kurt’s ‘Why is this outfit just wrong?’ look. “Could be a couple of things. Audis got a few common problems. Timing belts, which can wreck your whole engine, or transmission. If you take it to the dealer, they’ll probably want to replace the whole thing, and that’ll run around $6,000.”

“Six... thousand?” Blaine leaned back as if struck by the number.
“We’ll check, though. If we can just replace the mechatronic unit to get you limping, then that’s a bit... well, it’s not cheap, but it’s no six grand. I’d never have let Kurt get an Audi, honestly. Repairs cut too damn deep. Relax a bit, son. We’ll see what’s wrong before we try to charge y’for anything, and at least get an estimate to see if the dealer will do anything. Promise.” Burt looked to him. “I c’n set you up with a rental...”

Blaine raised his brows as Burt trailed off. His gaze grew sterner and sterner, until Blaine had the urge to bolt from the garage. This was much like he’d expected Burt to greet him, most of the time, but it had come out of nowhere. Where would Blaine go if his car wouldn’t move?

Burt leaned in, then suddenly grabbed the front of his shirt and pulled him forward. Blaine flailed backward a little, but was otherwise too stunned to fight it. Burt sniffed twice. Then he shook his head and let Blaine go.

“Have you been drinking??” he boomed.

Heat rushed to Blaine’s cheeks. “I-I uh...”

“Goddammit, Blaine!”

Cassius turned his head toward them.

Blaine was only able to hold Burt’s gaze for a second before casting his eyes onto the floor, completely unable to face Burt Hummel’s disappointment and fury. Burt touched his back once more.

“Cass, I’m takin’ Blaine home. When you’ve finished, go ahead and lock up, okay?”

“No problem,” Cassius said smoothly.

Burt was barely touching him, but Blaine felt as though he was forcibly guided out to a black, four-door truck, and before he knew it, he was buckled into the passenger seat and being driven home.
“I’m sorry-” he started.

“Don’t wanna hear it.”

Blaine covered his mouth and leaned into the side of the car door. He had a brief mental image of jumping out of the car and escaping, but again, it was no real solution.

“You have got to care more what happens to you,” Burt said after awhile. They were nearly to Blaine’s house, and Blaine was surprised that Burt remembered the way. “You have to think. You probably got lucky, with your car being broken. Y’smell like a bar. You shouldn’t be driving, and you could get yourself friggin’ killed, okay? You could fucking kill someone else!”

Blaine said nothing. He just focused on breathing.

Burt pulled the car over and turned on the inside lights. “I’m not trying to... Look, you’re drivin’ me crazy.”

Blaine looked over in confusion.

“You could die. Do you care about that? You could wrap that sports car around a tree and die.” Burt licked his lips and sighed. His hand dragged over his mouth. “You could hurt yourself, or take someone else away from their family. If a cop had come over while you had trouble on the road, you’d have that on your record for the rest of your life...”

Burt’s hand moved as though to touch him, but pulled back.

“I’m not your father. You don’t gotta listen to me, but I sure as hell don’t want to have to watch your family put you in the Goddamn ground.”

Blaine’s eyes stung. “I didn’t mean to... I was just trying to get out of the house.”

“Well. Maybe we can find another way to get you outta the house without breaking your neck.” Burt took another breath and turned his head to stare out the window.
Was he really *that* upset?

“I’ll be more careful,” Blaine promised.

“You’d better be.” Burt dipped his head, still avoiding Blaine’s gaze.

The gesture was familiar. Another family thing, avoiding Blaine’s eyes to avoid the rush of emotion that would come from looking at him. Imagining the awful thing he’d done. Or imagining him bloodied and lifeless in the proverbial ditch on the side of the road... Imagining someone *else* he loved bloodied and lifeless in a ditch on the side of the road?

“Is anyone at your house? Your brother?” Burt said finally. He eyed Blaine with all the gruffness he could muster.

“Probably.”

“And he just let you go out? Like this?”

Blaine shrugged. “I don’t think he realized that I left.”

Burt scratched the back of his head, then started the car up again. There was silence until they reached the house, and then Burt turned to him.

“I’ll give you a call before then about your car before Friday, and we’ll figure out what to do about it.”

It might have been the alcohol, but Blaine’s head was spinning from this conversation.

“Okay,” he found himself agreeing. As if he would ever refuse.

“If your brother’s home, I’d like to have a word with him.” Burt opened the door. It seemed that he
had every intention of walking Blaine into the house.

So Blaine followed him, letting Burt in. His mother still wasn’t home, thankfully, so he just called out for Cooper, who was redirected outside by Burt, and the two of them disappeared for nearly twenty minutes.

When Cooper finally entered the kitchen, where Blaine had been unearthing some leftovers for dinner, his brother stared at him for a moment, then wrapped his arms around him in a huge bear hug.

“Um... what’s going on?” Blaine muffled through Cooper’s chest.

“Shut up.”

He let go and went to the refrigerator and started pulling out beers. At first, Blaine wondered why, since Coop usually avoided alcohol for the calories... until he started methodically opening each one and pouring them down the sink.

“Hey!” Blaine protested.

Cooper swiveled around. “You are eighteen fucking years old! If you need something to take the edge off, I’ll make you a **damn cocoa!**”

Blaine stepped back and crossed his arms as he watched as Cooper drained his entire supply of alcohol. Not just Blaine’s. Their father’s. Then he cracked open the bottle of wine waiting in the refrigerator and poured that out, too.

“Mom’s not going to like that,” Blaine muttered.

“They’ll deal with it. Or I’ll tell her I drank it, or something.” Cooper looked at the door to the pantry for a moment.

“I won’t,” Blaine said automatically. “Don’t, Coop. Mom will flip out if you pour those wines out.”
“You’re just eighteen,” Cooper said quietly. He leaned over the sink for a moment, sucking in his lower lip. Blaine listened to his breathing, quietly, waiting for something. Another explosion, maybe.

Instead, Cooper came over and rubbed his hand over Blaine’s hair. “You want me to order a pizza or something? That crap in the fridge is over two weeks old.”

“I guess.” Blaine shrugged. “If you want to.”

“Well, the last thing we need now is food poisoning.” Cooper put his hands on his hips and squinted at the take-out menus covering the fridge.

“Maybe some glasses would help,” Blaine said.

Cooper smirked. “I’m not old. I don’t need glasses.”

“So you claim on your resume,” Blaine teased, lightly.

“Go put something on the Blu-ray.” Cooper pulled out his phone. “Well. Damn. I forgot to turn it back on.” He shrugged. “Well, it’s on now. Pizza incoming.”

“You never eat pizza.”

“I do tonight. I might take the cheese off.” Cooper started dialing.

“That’s no fun.” Blaine leaned forward on the counter.

Cooper peered over at the casserole. “Hm. Maybe this once. Hi! Yeah, I’d like to place an order... delivery.” He grabbed the whole dish and took it over to the trash, turning it upside down and knocking it heavily against the inside.
Blaine hugged his arms around himself and walked into the den, where he kicked off his shoes and curled up onto the sofa. It wasn’t as comfortable as the one in Kurt’s house. Maybe that was just association. He wondered if he could still go over there to visit Sam now that Burt had caught him drinking. He really didn’t know if Burt knew about anything between him and Kurt. Couldn’t, until he got it out of Sam or Finn, since Kurt wasn’t talking to him.

Cooper came flying over the back of the sofa and landed next to him.

“Ahh!”

“Keep ‘em guessing!”

“You wouldn’t crash on the sofa if mom were here.”

“Well, she’s not. Her loss. More pizza for us.” Cooper picked up the remote and started flipping through channels. He grabbed Blaine with one arm and held him close.

By the time he’d gotten used to the weight of his brother around him, the doorbell was ringing with the pizza.

***

“Don’ you worry, girl. Silicone floats!”

Laughter pealed all around Kurt. Isabelle curled around his arm and walked with him over to a group of her friends. On the other side of the room, Rachel and Brody were back to their weird heterosexual mating games.

“Heeey. What can I get you, sweetie? Anything?” Isabelle asked.

“No, no, um... I’m okay. I’ll be okay.”

“Yeah, yeah. That’s what they all say.” Isabelle drew her lips to the side slowly. “Is this all too
much? I thought it would be fun...”

“No, it is. Everyone’s singing, and laughing. I’ve never had a party where so many people came,” Kurt said.

“Oooh, girl!” a tall drag queen said.

“Oh, shoo, Tifa.” Isabelle waved her off. She looked up at Kurt’s face, her eyes creasing on the sides.

“Really. Thank you. The distraction is nice, and I don’t really get out to enjoy this kind of thing.”

“Well, why not?”

Kurt shrugged. “I work a lot.”

“Ooo! Was that a read?” she laughed.

“That’s not reading you. It’s a self-read. When I’m stressed, I focus. I hyper focus. I focus myself into the ground.”

Isabelle took his hand and petted it. “Well, I’m glad to have you, but take care of yourself, okay? The first big love is just so hard to get over. Give yourself the time to heal. You’ve earned it. And get back out there at your own pace. You’re just at the beginning of things! Did he...?”

“I told him we’ll talk about it at Christmas. And that... I’m trying. But I’m not there yet.”

Isabelle nodded. She started to speak again as a heavy beat started to pound out through their stereo:

*Manila!*
She touched her ears, and motioned to the hallway. Kurt shook his head, lifted her hand and pulled her out into the open space to dance. She nodded and threw her arms in the air.

_Give it everything you’ve got! Tryin’ to make it to the top! Never ever gonna stop! Even if you get the chop chop chop chop..._

“You’re a good dancer, kiddo,” Isabelle said.

“No, no, I’m not. My ex was a muuuch better dancer than me.”

“Yeah, I’m sure he was a reeeegular Ginger Rogers,” Isabelle teased, rolling her eyes, and then she grabbed Kurt’s hands and pulled him back and forth in time to the music. He had to laugh.

At some point, Kurt thought he saw one or two of his neighbors drift in. The first for sure was Warren, from downstairs. He was yelling at the drag queens, but somehow he got sucked into the kiki. Shangela snatched his glasses off his head, and the next time Kurt spotted him, he was wearing a sparkly wrap and dancing like he wasn’t a hugely out of place dorkball.

It was surprising how many people could fit into one loft apartment with sparse furniture and blaring club music. This had to be some kind of hazard. Fire, probably.

“Bitch, where you been!” one of the girls yelled. She wrapped her arms around a tiny girl with long, slightly curled black hair and an iridescent dress that looked like it had been folded meticulously from special Christmas wrapping paper.

“Girl! There was traffique!” The girl in the shining dress kissed either of her friend’s cheeks, and lifted her head to look around. Her skin was warm, golden, rosy; carefully contoured with make-up, thick eyeliner. Little jewels framed her large almond-shaped eyes.

Kurt suddenly felt tired. He touched Isabelle’s shoulder and pointed to the kitchen. She started to follow him, but he mouthed, “I’m fine, _fine_. Go dance!”
Her brow creased, but she let him go.

All in all, he felt lucky to have Isabelle. What other fairy had a godmother willing to throw him a kiki on Thanksgiving just because he was feeling down? He knew it wasn’t that Isabelle couldn’t find something else to do. She had all of the Glitterati to hang with, if she chose. Her friends had brought too much wine and food for this to be completely impromptu.

“Hi hi hi!” the girl in the shining dress chirruped, snaking her tiny body around Kurt to reach a bottle of wine. “Strawberry!”

“I think that’s blush,” he said.

Her lashes were thick, glued on, and her lips were pouty and full, but painted with a demure, pearly pink to let her eyes be the focus of the artwork she had created for the evening. They were large, hazel with a hint of gold. Kurt was imagining a design for a t-shirt featuring her eyes when she spoke again.

“Pink’s good enough for me.” She emptied the bottle into her wine glass. “This is a nice place for out in Nowheresville.”

“Not everyone can afford to live in Manhattan.”

She shook the bottle, then looked around, and tossed it in the recycle bin. “I know I can’t! But I do anyway.” She laughed and did a little wriggle with her shoulders and arms, then sipped the wine. “Mmm, plush blush. Baby Bee brought good stuff.”

Kurt shrugged. “I don’t know who that is.”

“Ahh.” White-tipped pink nails circled around the rim of the glass. “She kai-kais with Tifa. The taaaall one. Of course, everyone is tall to me. You been in the scene long?”

“Not at all, actually.”

“Really?” She looked him up and down. “But you’re cuuute. Don’t be shy! We’ll take you down to
some of the good spots, sometime... Wear less, though. The boys’ll crawl all over you!”

“I could do without that, I think.”

“Oh no.” She leaned on the counter. “Don’t be saaad, pretty boy. I hate it when pretty boys can’t smile.”

She stuck her lip far out, and Kurt smiled a little at the overdone and clearly buzzed performance. He didn’t know if her bubbly personality was innate or due to inebriation. He looked more closely at her dress.

“That is Christmas wrapping paper!”

“You like!” she squealed. She twirled around. “I’m a prezzie!”

“I love. How did you get here in the rain?”

“I float!”

Kurt laughed. She wiggled again and emptied her glass.

“Dance with me, pretty!” She held out her hand.

It wasn’t until they were moving together to the music that Kurt realized that she was another drag queen. Something about having been taken in, having been fooled by someone else’s gender instead of his own being under inspection the way it had always seemed at home, lifted Kurt’s spirits immensely. There were so many different kinds of people here, people he’d never had had the chance to know before.

Kurt spent the rest of the night dancing and talking to fabulous divas of various genders. It was like the New York clubs had been deposited into his apartment. And Kurt decided that he really needed to stop mourning his life. He couldn’t force himself to forgive Blaine before he was ready, and he couldn’t force himself to be ready. He’d tried.
He just had to let things play out, and stop trying to control absolutely everything. Closing the door to a less than fairytale romance with Blaine didn’t mean he couldn’t have a happy ending. And it certainly wasn’t the end of everything for him. Kurt was in New York. It was time to choose to just live.
Chapter Two

Kurt’s fingers moved slowly through the side of his hair, and his lips pursed, slightly, as his brow furrowed in concentration.

“Better make the right choice,” a deep, merry voice said.

Kurt jumped practically a mile. He touched his chest and laughed as the man behind him stumbled backward, surprised by Kurt’s surprise.

“Sorry. I was deep, deep in thought about which crazy breeds of nonfat latte I’m supposed to be bringing back to the office.” Kurt gave the tall, muscular man an apologetic smile.

The barista curved her plump lips as she watched them.

“Office? Sure you don’t mean schoolyard?” the man teased. It was then that Kurt caught the bright whiteness of his teeth and was convinced that this man must be a toothpaste model. Or he could be another kind of model, since he didn’t seem to have brushed his hair, and quite a few of the pretties came into their shoots with the ‘homeless chic’ look.

Alternatively, he could have been a lumberjack.

Arms.

“Who has schoolyards anymore? Don’t the kids all have guns these days?” Kurt suppressed a shudder, and then he licked his lips slowly, flicked his eyes to the barista’s name tag, and pointed to the menu. “Sherry, could I get two Americans, one cinnamon dolce, one almond milk vanilla spice latte no whip, one nonfat soy milk sugarfree amaretto latte with only TWO pumps-”

The man behind him was chuckling. Kurt made a show of taking a deep breath.

“And one drip, Italian roast.” Kurt took out the office card reserved for specialty lunch and coffee runs. He stepped aside while the girl at the cart swiped it and looked back at his observer.
“Hm. So which one are you?” the man asked. He put his hands on his hips.

*I’m a lumberjack and I’m okay! I sleep all night and I work all day!

Kurt’s eyes bulged as the song crashed into this thoughts, and he forcefully shook it from his mind. This man’s waist was slim, but his shoulders were quite broad. Kurt could easily imagine him tossing bales of hay or lumber or livestock or something.

“Care to make a bet?” the man pressed.

“What kind of bet?”

He leaned his head in slightly. “If I guess right, you give me your number.”

Kurt tilted his head to the side and looked back for a moment at Sherry furiously trying to complete his order. She was alone today for some reason, and while no one had been there when he’d come up, there were people lining up now. Apparently everyone needed their coffee right away. Kurt took another step to the side to give them some room, and his admirer stepped with him.

“Just a minute!” Sherry called as the customers grumbled. Her cheeks were flushed, and not from the cold.

“My real number?” Kurt replied cheekily, leaning back against the cart and looking up at the handsome man. God, he was as tall as Finn.

“Preferably.” His strong shoulders rolled backward, as though shrugging off a heavy weight.

*I cut down trees. I eat my lunch. I go to the lavatory! On Wednesdays I go shopping and have buttered scones for tea! Ooooh, I’m a lumberjack and I’m okay-

Kurt bit his lip, fighting a grin.
“Hey! I have to get to work!” a middle aged man with graying red hair spat at Sherry. “Maybe you could move your fat ass a little faster-”

“Yeah, it’s a pity there aren’t a thousand coffee places in New York where you could hassle the baristas,” Kurt snapped. “I mean, I guess you could just get up earlier, but that would just be hell, right? Not like this girl’s been here since six am, or people have bigger problems than slow coffee service during the prime time for business people to send their minions out for coffee.”

“The hell...? Don’t you talk to me like that!”

“You want teenagers to bow to your whims? Get thee to a Starbucks, you 60-year-old brat.”

“I’m 42!”

“Same difference to me. You might want to consider a hair treatment for those stubborn grays, because, Mister? That’s not your natural color. That’s not anyone’s natural color.” Kurt shrugged and looked away from him.

The older man stared at him for a long minute while the people behind him in the line started to chuckle just a little.

“Outta line, ya douche,” man in a scruffy ballcap and jacket said loudly.

The man let out a huff and stormed off in the other direction.

The handsome man who had been talking to Kurt stared down at him, blinking slowly.

“Hm.” Kurt raised a brow. “Still want that number?”

Big, toothy grin. “You look like a vanilla spice, to me.”

Kurt sucked in his lower lip, smiling as he watched the merry brown eyes drink him in. “Sorry. I’m a regular joe today.”
“Oh.” The man’s smile faded. Then disappeared. Twin spots of red lit up his cheeks. “Okay. Sorry to bother you.”

Sherry set his drinks in a carrier and set a bag of the usual pastries beside. “Have a good day,” she said, giving him a bright smile. The man stood there awkwardly for a moment as Kurt tried to get the coffee in hand, and then he plucked the bag from the counter.

“Oh... Thanks,” Kurt said. “You could put that in my bag-”

“Oh... Thanks,” Kurt said. “You could put that in my bag-”

“Oh... Thanks,” Kurt said. “You could put that in my bag-”

“Or I could just help you carry it.”

“I uh... sure. Thanks.”

His lumberjack followed him. “I’m Gio, by the way.”

“Kurt.”

“Where are we headed?”

Kurt indicated the Vogue building across the street with a free finger.

“Yeah? Impressive.”

“Yeah? Impressive.”

“Not that impressive. I’m just an intern.”

“I don’t think you’re just anything.”

Kurt waited at the light, humming to himself.

Gio looked down, a frown creasing his furry brows. “Is that like a new pop song or something?”
Adam clapped his hands and did a jazzy side step, moving his hands in front of him as he sang cheerfully:

“Hear the snow crunch, watch the kids bunch! This is Santa’s big scene! And above all this bustle you’ll hear!”

He clapped his hands again and pointed at the girls, who looked at him skeptically.

“It’s silver bells,” Adam said. “That’s what you hear.”

“This isn’t going to work,” My said with her hands on her hips.

“But...” Adam pouted. “Silver bells. They’re pretty.”

The others laughed around him. He smiled in spite of himself. The Apples were fairly good sports about him coming in with a random concept and no idea of how to execute it. Joey leaned over the piano, looking at the sheet music.

“I hate to say this, bro, but this song only has a couple of lines. If you speed it up, it’ll be like half a second long.”

“You’re crushing my lovely Christmas dreams,” Adam said with a mock pout.

Kiera came over and hugged him around the waist. She barely came up to his chest, but her comfort was appreciated. “We could mash it in with something,” she said.

Adam petted her short blond cap of hair.

“Yaruki Switch,” My suggested. “Setsugekka?”
“A Christmas song.” Kiera narrowed her eyes at My.

“Oppan Gangam Style!” My grinned madly and threw up jazz hands.

“She’s having a stroke again,” Joey said. My picked up the frilly pink umbrella she’d brought with her today and Joey took off just before she whacked him with it. “So we’re thinking just ‘silver’ as the connection or...” He huffed and ducked just before she got him. “Or thematic?”

Adam deepened the corners of his mouth and strolled over to the piano bench to take another look at the score. “Themes... We’d could go with the city as the theme? Or bells, I reckon.”

My stopped her quest for revenge and tilted her head to the side. A few of the others frowned, as though they were thinking. Kiera pulled out her journal and started sketching ideas. For a moment or two, there was a lot of scribbling and little organization, until Adam rose and moved them into groups so they could bounce ideas off of one another.

The Adam’s Apples didn’t get many chances to shine. The school administration was not in the least supportive of their group, and so entering into competitions, while something they’d discussed originally, had fallen by the wayside a few years ago. That was all well and good, because Adam was not very competitive anyway. Now, they settled on finding venues where they could perform, and this Christmas, Adam was happy to have them performing at a fundraiser for the Ali Forney Center. There were a lot of homeless teens in New York, and Adam felt keenly blessed to be able to do something for them.

“These are old town blues... They have all melted away. I’m about to make a brand new start of it, right here in old! New! York!” Joey sang to himself.

“Christmas time is here,” Kiera sang with My and Annabelle. “It’s Christmas time, in the city.”

“And I find it kind of funny, I find it kind of sad. These dreams in which I’m dying are the best I’ve ever had.”

“Hark how the bells, sweet silver bells, silver bells, it’s Christmas time in the city, all seem to say, throw cares away. Merry merry merry merry Christmas.”
Adam sighed. They could make it pretty, but he wasn’t sure if he could make it upbeat enough. And if not upbeat, at least positive sounding. They were allotted a window of time that meant they could do three to four songs. He wanted the songs to be fun and light. There would be kids from the center there, and he was sure that most of the other performers were going to milk the audience with “Do They Know It’s Christmas” and “River” and every dreary, weary Christmas song they could dredge out. Even the very pretty Christmas songs tended to sound a bit melancholy.

“Guys, I would like us to be somewhat positive. I don’t mind if we mash Gary Jules at another time, but I honestly associate that song with...” Adam made a circular motion with one hand as he tried to think of a delicate way to say it.

“I associate it with suicide,” Jinx said bluntly.

“Well... Yes.”

“‘Silver Bells’ doesn’t exactly lend itself to pep,” My said, looking at him closely to see if he was upset.

“I suppose not.”

“I think we need to consider our overall theme for our setlist.” Jinx scratched the bare side of her head underneath the line of mohawk. “Because right now, I’m confused as to what we’re actually trying to convey with this performance. We could go all artsy. We could write some of our own songs, although I don’t think we have the time. We could really just do a bunch of silly off-brand Christmas songs. The Big Voodoo Daddies’ version of ‘Heat/Cold Miser,’ and ‘I Want an Alien for Christmas,’ things like that. And that would at least add some cred to this ‘event’, because everyone’s gonna be doing the same old boring-ass Jesus-y buy-our-crap nostalgiafuck standards.”

“But do we wanna do funny songs? Because people already think we’re a joke,” Beltre said. Joey nodded slowly.

“I dunno, actually. Maybe we need to go back to concept on this. I just...” Adam spread his hands. “A lot of people have a very hard time around the holidays. These kids have a harder time than most. They’ve often been abused, and driven out of their own homes, and lived on the street. Many have been forced into prostitution and turned to drugs. Some of them are living HIV. I... I want to give them something beautiful and hopeful and...”
He shook his head and frowned. Maybe he was asking too much. There was candy bubblegum consumerism Christmas and weepy nostalgia(fuck) Christmas. Maybe there wasn’t a non-canned approach to this to reach out to the lost and lonely.

“So no ‘Blue Christmas’?” Joey deadpanned.

Adam smiled and looked at him. Joey had been with them for two and a half years now, and was as dedicated as ever. Joey pressed his lips together and made an exaggerated shrug.

“Let’s mash a couple of songs. Not just two,” Jinx suggested. “My suggestion is to start with Rent. Most people aren’t gonna go Broadway.”

“For a reason,” My said.

“If we do that, and the admin gets wind of it, they might bring heat down on us for not being good enough,” Kiera warned.

“Not the whole song, but ‘Christmas Bells are Ringing’ has good parts to it we could weave in and out without overwhelming the melody. Have people singing some of the parts as we go, and maybe add in another, and simple mind, song,” Jinx said. “The admin can’t complain if we’re making something beautiful. Tibs always says she wants ‘Artistes’ And anyway? Fuck them. I don’t fucking care what the cannibals think.”

A few people clapped, and Jinx shook her head, then smiled and bobbed her head from side to side and raised a hand to wave off the praise.

Adam bit his lip and played a few bars of “Christmas Bells.” It had been a long time since he gone to see Rent.

“Kiss me it’s beginning to snow,” he sang softly.

“Can that be the ending?” Annabelle asked. She flounced into a seat and started messing with one of her dark, disheveled rehearsal pigtails. “I think that’s sweet.”

Adam nodded and started to play again, but not the Christmas song this time. He needed to see how
well he could blend a pop song into this.

“Christmas bells are ringing,” Joey started. The boys followed in harmony, and then the girls. “Christmas bells are ringing. Christmas bells are ringing. On TV- At SAKS.”

“City sidewalks, busy sidewalks, dressed in holiday style,” Adam sang, working the melodies out on the piano as the others sang behind him, some following “Silver Bells” and some singing from the “Carol of the Bells.” They could organize it all later. “In the air, there’s a feeling of Christmas...”

He took a breath, held up a hand to signal a chance, and kept playing. “The storm is coming, but I don’t mind. People are dying; I close my blinds.”

“Can’t you spare a dime or two,” the Apples sang, with Jinx guiding them. He could almost feel her eyes on him. “Here but the grace of God go you. You’ll be merry, I’ll be merry, tho Merry ain’t in my vocabulary!”

“Children laughing, people passing, meeting smile after smile. All I know is that I’m breathing, now. And on every street corner you’ll hear...”

“Can’t you spare a dime or two? Here but for the Grace of God go you,” the Apples sang, with one or two chuckling at the juxtaposition.

“Silver bells,” Adam began with the chorus, and they followed in behind. They could work out harmonies later. “Silver bells. It’s Christmas time, in the city. Ring-a-ling. Hear them ring. Soon it will be Christmas day.”

“Kiss me it’s beginning to snow!” Kiera and My belted out suddenly.

Soft laughter.

“All I know is that I’m... breathing, all I can do is keep breathing...” Adam continue to sing softly. “All we can do is keep breathing now...”
Jinx gripped the back of his shoulders. “So... our target audience here isn’t the deep pockets so much... or it is, but who we really want to sing to... It’s the kids, isn’t it?”

“They need...” Adam pressed his palms together in front of him and drew in a breath. It was hard to speak to this, even in front of the people he felt closest too. “They need something to get them through the holidays. Every holiday.”

The image of Aude’s half-frozen, bruise mottled face as she huddled on the corner flashed in his mind. It was the first time he’d seen ever her. She had been sixteen, then.

Bless.

“We’re gonna have look at all these songs really carefully,” Kiera said. “‘Christmas Bells’ is harsher than the other two, by like a lot. ‘Carol of the Bells’ is okay, but overwhelming. We’ll have tone issues.”

“Then we’d better balance them right,” My said softly. “And practice a lot.”

Adam turned to see them watching him. “Not so fun, I guess?”

“Just because it’s serious, doesn’t make it not fun,” Annabelle said with a shrug. She pulled her loose t-shirt back onto her shoulder. “This is the most creative thing I’ve tried all semester. The Mainstreamers just want me to sew costumes for them. And not even interesting ones. Blah, blah, tailored suit, blah blah, shiny ho dress.”

Adam clapped his hands together. “Right then. Well, we have this to work on. I think Jinx’s suggestions were good for other songs we can do. I’m not certain we have time to remix another number, but I’m up for whatever you guys think.”

“We should spend the bulk of our time working out this number,” Jinx said. “But we should get the rest of the set list down first. We have to make sure that everything blends.”

“Will it BLEND??” Joey yelled, throwing his fists in the air.

“It’s not too late for your beating,” My said.
“Save the beating for after rehearsal. We’ve work to do,” Adam said. He looked to them all. “Okay, let’s… vote on our other numbers, if anyone has any other suggestions?”

***

Kurt wiped his palms on his server’s apron and lifted up a tray of salads and appetizers.

“This is for seven, right? I don’t see the ticket, but they had the kale and kimchi, and the meat and cheese plate.”

Jason lifted his head up, then looked around his area. “Okay. Okay. Here it is.”

He stretched up and placed the ticket on counter. Kurt peered over it and identified his own handwriting.

“Oh, great. Thanks!” He scurried off to get the food to the table. That group of friends had already been short with him about the wait. As though a Friday night in any bar in Bushwick would be empty. It didn’t help that they had two people out that evening, and that’s why they called him in.

“Okay!” he sang as he approached the late-twenty-somethings. “Here we have the large kale and kimchi-- and I brought some extra bowls and plates-- and the cheese & charcuterie.”

He laid out each of the plates as quickly as he could, then straightened up and looked around. “I can bring over some more water, too. Is there anything else I can get you?”

“I’m still waiting for my Brooklyn Fizz,” the woman with the bangle earrings said with just a tinge of impatience.

“All right!” Kurt said with an eager nod. “I’ll check on that for you.”

“And my Sierra Nevada,” the tall man with a goatee said. “Make it two, since it takes so long to get one.”
Kurt raised his brows, but nodded again and headed for the bar. Brathattanites. The scourge of Brooklyn’s waitstaff.

“Tandy? Did Jill get around to that Brooklyn Fizz and the Sierra?” He leaned forward against the bar and gave him a helpless, pouty look. He didn’t have the training yet to make drinks, which meant he was at the mercy of the bartenders.

“No, kiddo, she had to go take some tables.” Tandy shot a few drinks over to people, then went over to grab the gin.

“Thanks.”

“No problem. Sierra?”

“Times two.” Kurt flashed two fingers in the air.

“C’mon around.” Tandy motioned with his head to the case behind him.

Kurt jogged around and grabbed the two beers, opening them on the bar, then accepted the Brooklyn Fizz from Tandy and hurried out to the table. All five of the Manhattanites looked up at him, and his heart raced as he set each one down on a coaster. On his first night, he’d spilled three drinks and dropped a whole tray of appetizers.

“There we go. Flag me down if you need anything else, okay?”

“Do you have any fruity girly drinks?” a blond guy asked.

“Oh, um.” Kurt shrugged. “Well, Tandy can make you anything you want. The bar’s fully stocked. Did you have something in mind?”

The guy winked and grinned. “Surprise me. Do you have a favorite?”
“I’m nineteen, and I work constantly. I don’t really drink a lot.”

The woman with the bangle earrings burst out laughing.

“So, maybe a Fuzzy Navel, a Sex on the Beach, Cosmo?” Kurt suggested.

“Are any of those pink?” the guy asked.

Kurt felt his ears starting to burn. He really had no idea, and he wasn’t entirely sure if this guy was making fun of him. “I’ll ask. We’ll getcha somethin’ pink.”

And that was his next three hours. He managed to get to his other tables, set them up with drinks and appetizers, and some dinner, but the one table of Manhattanites kept him running back and forth so that he didn’t have a spare minute to himself. Not to check his messages, not to bolt down dinner, not to even go pee. When they’d finally left, the table was in such disarray that Kurt felt the need to pile some of the plates for the busser coming in behind him.

They’d only left him a small scattering of coins. Kurt ran a hand over his mouth. And there he stood for nearly a full minute, not moving. Then he let out a breath, went to check on the other tables, then excused himself to stand out back for a minute, rubbing his arms and watching his breath cloud in front of him.

He’d never been that rude to waiters. And he always budgeted so he could leave a tip. Snapping his fingers at a waiter once or twice didn’t equal this treatment. Snapping fingers still left them with a decent night’s wages at the end of their shift, and when people snapped at Kurt, at least that meant he could give them attention and try to get them what they wanted.

He swept a look around the alley and turned to head back in. He pulled on the cold, metal handle. It didn’t budge.

“Oh... Come on!” Kurt jerked the door again and let his arms drop to his sides. He pounded on the door. “Come on!”

He blinked quickly, puffing out his cheeks, and stepped back, looking around. Well. Nothing was insurmountable for Kurt Hummel. He ran around the building. God. How many tips was he going to lose tonight?
When he came around to the storefront again, his cheeks were bright red with cold, and he pulled the front door open and stumbled inside. He caught his breath, then went over to the couple on table six.

“Some more water?” he panted.

“Oh, God. Did... Didn’t you just go...” she pointed to the back.

“Got locked out,” he laughed, still out of breath.

She pressed her hands together in front of her lips and smiled. “More water would be great. Thank you.”

Kurt hurried back to the kitchen, washed his hands, and got back to work.

It wasn’t the worst night he’d ever worked, but it was a fair contender. He’d gotten stiffed twice. Locked out. Reamed out for bringing a table the wrong wine and again at another table for there not being enough bacon in the mac and cheese. (Gross) By 10:30, he was sore and exhausted.

As he collected his tip from the sweet but very slow couple at table six, Kurt lifted his eyes and saw a familiar face at the front door. His tall, broad-shouldered Lumberjack. Gio Torregrossa. He spoke with the hostess for a minute, and she guided him over to a table in Kurt’s section.

Gio scanned the bar, then sat down at the table. He spotted Kurt and flashed him a wide, toothy grin as he shucked off his heavy brown leather jacket and plaid flannel shirt, revealing a tight, forest green sweater underneath. Of course, big, tall, and ruggedly handsome would come in looking so bite-able and put together, while Kurt was a hot mess of sweat and grease and stains and chapped cheeks.

“Hiya.” Kurt strolled up and pulled out his notepad. “Whatcha doing down in Bushwick?”

“Hm. Why in the world would I go bridge and tunnel to slum on down to Crooklyn?”
“‘Ey, naw.” He pointed at Gio with his pen. “You in the ge-hetto naw, boy. You betta watch it.”

“That sounds a little more like a N’awlins accent than Brooklyn.” Gio leaned back in his chair and touched his lips.

“Well.” Kurt shrugged. “I’ve only lived here since September. I’m not enrolled in the stage accents class yet. What can I get you?”

“When do you get off?”

Kurt’s cheeks went red. They’d met up a couple times for coffee since meeting Monday morning, once for lunch. Kurt couldn’t say that he didn’t like the guy, but it was confusing to like someone else when his heart was still so mixed up over Blaine. They were supposed to be kismet, fate; they were supposed to be forever.

But they weren’t. Obviously.

“Well, it depends,” Kurt said. “The kitchen closes at midnight, but people sometimes hang around until closing, so I have to wait on them.”

“You have to wait on customers here? Straaaaange place of business...”

Kurt rolled his eyes. “Well, if you’re not gonna order anything, I should check on the hipsters in the corner.”

“Hipsters?” Gio touched the table, rocked his chair onto its back legs, and peered around Kurt. “Wow. Those are some skinny jeans.”

“They’re just kinda tacky.” Kurt grimaced. “It’s not that I’m inherently opposed to hipster fashion.” He raised one hand. “As someone who works at Vogue, I have to respect the innovation of any movement, and I’m always for any group that promotes boys wearing girls’ jeans. Not to mention that I actually love to wear skinny jeans, or any pants that are tight enough to leave loving imprint on my legs for hours afterward, but! Sometimes it just seems a little too fake and cliquey for me to bother with? You know? Like sometimes I make up fake band names to see if they’ll tell me how amazing their sound is.”
Gio leaned forward as a deep laugh rolled out of him.

Kurt fetched a menu and put it in front of Gio. “My ex was a legit hipster, y’know.”

“Oh? What’s a ‘legit’ hipster?” Gio stared up at him with that perfect row of white teeth flashing.

“Oh, I don’t know. I just feel like they do things just to be cool. He was not trying to be cool. I’m not sure he could if he tried.”

Gio laughed loudly.

“No, he just genuinely likes old stuff. The old as dirt bands that he loves? He really does love them. There was no pretension or pretending about that kind of thing. Though he has a tendency to blend into whatever he’s paired with. Not unlike tofu in many ways.”

Gio bit his lower lip and crossed his big arms.

Kurt looked down at his notepad and licked his lips. “Sorry. Babbling about my ex is probably the most attractive thing I could do, right?”

“No, it’s okay. It’s what’s on your mind.” Gio rested his chair back on the floor and looked up at Kurt seriously. “You were dating him for a while, weren’t you? It can take a long time to move on completely. My sister always said that it takes half the time you were dating to get over someone.”

“Oh.” Kurt pushed his hand through his hair. “Oh, no, no no. I don’t think so. I don’t think I can live through a full year of mourning here.”

“Maybe you can find something to distract you.” Gio’s lips twitched, slightly.

“I’m excellent at finding distractions. I’m superb at pouring myself into projects to avoid dealing with things.” Kurt cast a look over his shoulder. “They just find ways to creep back up sometimes.”
Gio licked his lips slowly as he looked up at Kurt. “What kind of beer do you have?”

Kurt turned the menu over on the table and pointed to the list. “Do you have a particular kind you like? I’m not very good at giving advice on what kind of alcohol to imbibe.”

Gio chuckled. “Ya make me feel like an old man. No, I got it. I’ll have a Dogfish Head. You got any suggestions on what to have for a late dinner?”

“Do you eat meat?”

Gio’s dark brown eyes lifted from the menu once again, and Kurt dipped his head and scribbled the drink order down.

“Um. Hm. I like the salads. The roasted beet salad, and the Big Salad, aka a large salad with a lot of stuff in it-- and you can add tuna steak to that-- the Spaghetti Squash and Quinoa Salad-”

“Keen-what?”

“Keen-wah,” Kurt pronounced. “It is the mother of all grains. It’s a mother-shucker. I didn’t even know what it was a year ago, but now that I do, it has changed my life. I can dress it up, I can dress it down. You can go sweet, or savory. Eat it with breakfast, lunch, and dinner.”

“And if I’m a fan of the meat?”

Kurt quirked his lips to the side. “I’m told the burger is really good.”

Gio chuckled.

“Not just a flat bar burger patty. It’s made with bacon fat and topped with Vermont cheddar, aioli, alfalfa sprouts, pickles, and greens.”

“Sounds pretty yummy.”
There’s also a BLT with aioli and cheese, and a pulled pork sandwich.”

Gio set down his menu and narrowed his eyes. “Call me a hick... I don’t really know what aioli is.”

“Oh!” Kurt laughed. “It’s really... just a kind of sauce. Just garlic, olive oil, lemon juice, and egg yolks. When they mention a particular vegetable, that means it’s an addition to the regular recipe.”

“Gotcha. I’ll try the burger, then.”

“Would you like the roasted potatoes?”


“Alright, Mr. Torregrossa. I’ll be right back.” Kurt turned and walked toward the kitchen to deliver the order.

He may have taken a little time on his way there. Hipsters weren’t the only ones who wore tight jeans.

Gio stayed until Kurt’s tables had cleared, and left a generous tip on his credit card. Kurt spruced up his hair in the bathroom before coming out and meeting Gio by the entrance.

“Tell me to go away, if you want to,” Gio said as he stepped out the front door.

“Why would I do that? Now I have a bodyguard to walk me home.”

Gio wrapped his big arm around Kurt. He was warm and exuded a scent of musk and crisp citrus.

“I was kind of kidding. The neighborhood doesn’t really scare me.” Kurt didn’t want Gio to move his arm, though.

“Yeah, but it gets a little rougher in the area where you live, and it’s late.” Gio directed Kurt towards the light.
“This isn’t the way to my place.”

“Yeah, but have you eaten?”

“It’s after midnight.”

“The city never sleeps,” Gio said. “You know that, of course.”

“Of course... There’s a pastry shop near our apartment that’s open all night.”

“Do you like Italian?”

“I, um. Yes.” Kurt looked up at Gio and hoped the heat in his cheeks didn’t mean his face had gone completely red. Names didn’t get more Italian than Gio’s.

The large man paused at the curb. “Do you want to go on a date? This place, Arancini Brothers, stays open until 4:00am. You won’t find ‘em in the Zagat’s guide, but they have some of the coolest and most original food in the area.”

He released Kurt and slipped his hands into his pockets. “Or do you just want to go home? We’ll do whatever you want. I can even stop being pushy, if you say pretty please. I’m told I can be controlling.”

“I’m told I can be, too,” Kurt admitted.

“It’s just... You seem like you’re always busy. And you have a lot on you right now,” Gio reasoned. “So if I want your precious time, I’m going to have to be assertive, which I’m good at, because I’m a New Yorker, and maybe a little creative. And I do want it. You’re smart, and funny, and bold, and really...” He dipped his head slightly in a sign of shyness unexpected from such a big man. “... very sexy. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t impressed the day we met by how you laid into that douchebag harassing the barista. Guess you know what it’s like to be pushed around.”
The warmth of Gio’s chest seeped into Kurt’s body. For perhaps the first time on these streets, he ceased to be aware of his surroundings. There was only those dark, intense eyes and the rough, end-of-the-day stubble.

“Let’s go out. You pick. I could stand to be a little more adventurous.”

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The bed was warm, even if the air was cold. December was making itself known. Kurt was wide awake, his heart in his throat. The sun was just cresting over the horizon, and the light flooded into the loft. He closed his eyes, listening his own breath move in and out of his lungs.

Kurt Hummel had just had a hook up. Or he thought so, since he’d just met this guy, and when they’d gotten back to the apartment, it turned out that Rachel was staying over at Brody’s. Kurt had made coffee. They’d talked for about an hour, and then a rogue condom appeared.

And now here he was. Sleepless but sated. Lonely but not alone. He swallowed and looked back at Gio. Well, he was out like a damn light.

Kurt breathed in and out once more, then slipped out of his bed to go to the bathroom, where he washed his face and smeared on a light bit of moisturizer. He would need it, if he was going to keep frowning like this.

A noise out in the loft. Kurt peeked his head out of the bathroom, but Gio hadn’t moved. Kurt dragged a hand over his mouth, then let out a breath and told himself to stop freaking out.

He had the morning off, and he’d done nothing wrong. He could let himself enjoy this, just for a little while.

Kurt returned to the bed, scooted closer to Gio, and smiled as Gio rolled over and wrapped his arm around Kurt. Snug. Safe.

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“Um, hey. Just... calling you one more time to make sure you got the message...” Kurt said with the most casual tone he could muster. “I’m out at a show tonight... the one I invited you to befoooore. Sooo, I’ll be turning off my phone. Hope you had a good week. Maybe I’ll... catch you around the coffee cart.”

Kurt pressed end. “Ass.”

Brody leaned forward with a braying laugh. “Wow. Is this that weepy, helmet-headed teenager from Callbacks? Is that who isn’t calling you?”

“No. I broke up with the weepy teenager. This is the guy I met at the coffee shop, went on a few casual coffee dates with, and then gave it up for a couple of fried balls.”

Brody laughed again, but Rachel held her hand up to push him back.

“Wait, what? Is this the lumberjack?” she asked.

“You dated a lumberjack?” Brody shook his head in disbelief. “Dude. I wish I were gay. You get better stories than anyone.”

“He’s not actually a lumberjack,” Kurt clarified, closing his eyes slightly against the light of the train and clinging to the pole for dear life. “He was just... tall. Enormous. And somehow? Just slightly unshaven every time I saw him.”

Brody started to howl again, but Rachel smacked him.

“You two...” She flailed a hand. “...spent the night?”

“We got groiny. Yes.” Kurt nodded once.

“Oh.” Rachel pressed her hand to her chest dramatically. “Kurt, I’m so-”

“Oh, save it. I got dumped by a guy after putting out. I wouldn’t be the first to fall for that one.”
Rachel narrowed her eyes. “I don’t believe you.”

“You don’t believe men tell girls and other men things they want to hear to get into bed? Ah, well, then I have a story to tell you about my origins in the unicorn forest.”

“Stop. I mean, it seemed like you really liked him.”

“I liked Blaine.” Kurt jerked a hand into the air in punctuation. “I liked Sam. I liked Finn. I’ll survive liking the guy I’ve known two weeks.” Kurt let out a heavy sigh.

“Well.” Rachel paused, then said very, very quickly. “I’m still very sorry that happened.”

Kurt pointed at her. “Stop.”

“Sucks, bro.” Brody smirked.

Kurt tilted his head back. “So... gay guys at NYADA probably outnumber you hetero bros about nine to one. Am I really that much of a novelty to you?”

“They don’t hang out with me.”

“The entire gay population of NYADA won’t hang out with you?” Kurt drawled in disbelief.

Brody laughed softly and shrugged. “Must be intimidated.”

Kurt let his eyes drift down to Brody’s pants. He tightened his mouth and frowned critically. “No. That can’t be it.”

Rachel’s giggles bubbled up as the train came to a stop. Kurt adjusted his rhino head broach on the way out.
Adam gave a quick sweep of Callbacks. No one had begun singing yet, likely since the Showcase performers were still there, and no one had imbibed enough to be the first to sing in front of Rachel Berry.

It was odd, though. Adam had found her performance to be a bit false, if loud. Technically, she had quite a lot of skill, but not the kind of emotional connection that Tibideaux seemed to favor (though the dean had obviously liked it). Maybe it bothered him that her show faces for both her main performance and the encore she’d been allowed had been the same. Same emotional expression, same technique. Someone like her would never join the Apples, but if she did, he’d be pressing her to stretch herself a little bit.

Adam tugged on his collar and nodded to his friends, who were taking over a booth en masse. With a deep breath, he headed straight for the table where the striking young man who had braved all to get his chance to audition sat with his friends. Adam pumped himself up systematically as he forced one foot in front of the other.

It had been quite a while since he’d been so nervous about talking to a boy. Felt like he was in boarding school again. (Granted, he hadn’t tried to ask anyone out since Marcus... not that he wanted to think about his ex at the moment.) Though this wasn’t the first time he’d felt that way around Kurt. Adam just hadn’t known his name before. He’d seen him around Callbacks with Rachel, but imagined that he was just a friend, since he’d never gotten up to sing, despite some heavy-handed prodding. He only watched, and clapped, and sipped wine, occasionally letting out a lovely, resonating chuckle. Adam had never mustered up the nerve to just walk up to him cold and never felt a purpose to it. He wouldn’t have made anything of their association in any case. And what did he have to start off with? He rehearsed words over and over in his mind, and they all seemed to shoot out of his mouth too quickly and ineffectively.

But Kurt had been amazing up there and deserved to be told so.

Adam could speak to this handsome young man. He would. The opportunity, given Tibideaux’s obvious fickleness surrounding auditions, might not present itself a second time.

Adam could speak to him. He could. He would.

“Hullo,” he said when he reached the table.
Kurt was in conversation with Rachel Berry, and due to the noise, neither turned their heads. Brody, sitting with his arm around Rachel, saw Adam standing there, and rolled his eyes.

Adam lifted his chin, pressed his lips together, and gave him a smile. No reason to stoop to his level. Of course Brody Weston had plucked up this girl before any other guy had a chance to notice her. He had always been crafty.

“Hullo!” Adam said a bit louder.

Kurt turned his head. “Oh! Hi.”

“I just wanted to tell you that I thought your song was absolutely lovely! You’re a phenomenal singer!” Adam laughed and clapped his hands over his ears.

Kurt smiled and waved both hands around his head to signal that the noise was crazy.

Rachel straightened up to give Adam her undivided attention and launched into a full, preprepared response:

“I’m so glad you enjoyed my performance. I know that I’m just a freshman, but I’ve been spoiled in the arts since I was a toddler, and performing... is my life. I have such a personal connection with Barbra Streisand. I think our spirits might have known one another in a past life, so I have always, always striven to pay the utmost respect to her legacy—”

She went on after that, and on, and on. And Adam nodded as politely as he could, but he could hardly follow the rapid-fire acceptance speech for a compliment that hadn’t been directed at her. He started to feel awkward, and wasn’t sure how to redirect what he wanted to say to Kurt without being rude or cruel.

“Hey, Barbra,” Kurt interrupted in a dry, low tone. He picked up her drink and shoved it in her face. “Don’t let your pipes go dry.”

She nodded quickly and began to sip what looked like a cocktail. Brody must have given them the drinks. They both looked underaged.
Adam tried to gather his thoughts to try again to speak to Kurt. “Actually, I ah...”

“Where are the Horse Apples?” Brody asked.

Adam frowned slightly and offered him another smile as he began to motion towards the booth.

“Are you drunk?” Kurt asked before Adam had spoken. “That is the single weirdest question I’ve ever heard in a bar.”

“No, he’s just referring to my friends over there,” Adam said.

Kurt rolled his eyes. “Oh, so not drunk. Just rude. Business as usual.”

Brody grinned. “You know you love me.”

Kurt pursed his lips, then shook his head slowly, and said in a higher tone, “No... That can’t be it.”

For some reason, the three of them seemed to find that uproariously amusing. Perhaps the alcohol was the reason, or it was some kind of inside joke? It was odd for Brody to tolerate someone repeatedly insulting him to his face, no matter how charming. Maybe he did like them. He seemed to spend a lot of time with Rachel. Brody didn't always seem to fancy the stars he hitched himself to.

“I just came over to-” Adam began again.

“Thank you so much,” Rachel gushed.

“Actually, I...” Adam looked at Kurt, who was staring straight back at him with an open, friendly expression. His heart swelled in his chest.

But Kurt was good friends with these two. There was no indication that he would ever want to associate with the likes of Adam and his Apples.
A phone rang on the table and Kurt picked it up.

“Ohhh my God,” he said, his eyes widening.

“Is it the weepy teenager?” Brody asked.

“Okay, first, his name is Blaine, not Weepy Teenager, and it’s Gio.” He paused a beat when Rachel and Brody didn’t respond and just stared at him blankly. “Fine, the lumberjack. It’s the lumberjack.”

Adam laughed in spite of himself.

Rachel bumped Kurt’s shoulder and sang, “Well, answer it! He probably missed your calls and wants to see you!”

“Um. I don’t know how I feel about that...” Kurt waited another second before pressing the ‘accept’ icon and turning away from the table with a wave. “Gio? Hi! I just... No, I’m just in a bar. Callbacks, the Showcase is over...” He pressed one finger to his other ear. “No, no, I just... I hoped I wasn’t calling too much... Yeah, I enjoyed it, too... I understand...”

Adam felt extremely awkward about standing there, so he gave Rachel another wave and smile and retreated to the booth the Apples had secured.

“How was it?” Joey asked through a mouthful of bread.

Adam moved his hand around like a plane and then let it swoop downward, culminating in a crashing sound. Kiera and My pulled him into their side of the booth to engulf him in hugs. It was funny that My had wanted to come to the after-party, but refused to go to the Showcase. It probably was because her ornate Lolita dress would have gotten her kicked out, like last year. Maybe she had intentions of dragging them to a club tonight.

“That’s what you get for talking to Mainstreamers,” Joey said. He chugged down some water. “Jeez. What were you expecting.”
“So, what, did he laugh in your face when you asked him to join the Apples?” Kiera asked.

“No, I didn’t get the chance. That Rachel girl and Brody were all over him, and then he got a call from his boyfriend...” Adam shrugged.

“That doesn’t mean he wouldn’t want to. We don’t know anything about him yet. Anyone who wears camo pants and a rhino broach to a formal function has to be at least *part* awesome,” My argued.


“Shut your gob.” My swatted Joey’s chest. “That is *absolutely* true.”

“I just said-”

“Boy, don’t mock me if you want your giblets intact by tomorrow.”

“Adam,” Kiera whined balling up her little fists and beating them on her short, blond hair. “Buy us drinks! No one believes that I’m twenty-one!”

Adam laughed and hugged her. “Alright, but I need you to chip in a bit or I won’t be able to take the train home.”

My pulled out her little pink Hello Kitty purse and started looking in it. “On me. I’m flush.”

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“No, can you just listen for a minute?” Kurt interrupted Gio and took a breath. He looked back at the table to see Brody putting a glass of wine out for him, and he mouthed a thank you. “Look, I just got out of a really bad relationship. With a badness that I’m only *just now* gaining the tools to really deconstruct.” He sipped the wine and ignored the frown Rachel was giving him. “You could probably tell that.”
“I had a sneaking suspicion. But I’m glad you’re starting to see some of it. It’s a little hard to talk to you. You’re kind of an impenetrable wall,” Gio paused. “I mean that in a not completely condescending and insulting that way.”

“No, it’s fine. I kind of am right now. I had a really good time when I was with you. I hope you could tell that, too. But if you just want to be friends, I can refrain from calling you multiple times like a psycho swim fan. I’m probably not ready for anything serious anyway.”

“I’m glad you said that. I wasn’t sure how to go forward from here. I didn’t plan on...”

“Yeaaah, me neither. But it happened. Maybe we’ll see each other around? No avoidance or weirdness. We tried something and it’s not working so much right now, but maybe if you’re still interested when I’m willing to be penetra- Oh. No, I am not going to say that.”

Gio laughed loudly. Kurt relaxed a little.

When Kurt got off the phone, he took another long sip of his wine, and Rachel hugged his arm.

“Sweetie! Why would you do that?” she asked.

“I’m not ready, Rachel.” He shrugged. “I can’t pretend I am.”

“But you wanted him to call.”

“I wanted someone to want me. There’s a difference.” Kurt pinched the side of his lips together and leaned on the table.

“Aw.” Rachel pouted.

“Okay. No brooding. Rachel’s a superstar tonight,” Brody announced. “I signed us up for the first three slots.”
“Kurt! Sing with me!” Rachel pleaded.

“I don’t know... I just did a really draining number,” Kurt said.

“No, something fun! Oh, let me think... I’ll pick us out the perfect song!”

Kurt finished off his wine and shook his head. He had to be realistic. She was going to have her way with this one.

“And another round!” Brody announced, grabbing Kurt’s glass.

Kurt tried to breathe deeply as he looked around at the clutter of faces. He wondered how many of them had seen him here before when Blaine had sung to him. The memory of that night crept along his skin, heating his face until the shame must have overtaken his cheeks and ears.

Instinctively, Kurt’s hands moved up over his cheeks, then covered his eyes. He didn’t know how to begin processing what had happened in that performance only half an hour ago, let alone what had just happened on the phone, let alone letting this near stranger near him, or rather in him, let alone...

His insides were wreckage. It was lucky that Gio hadn’t been that invested.

A hand touched his shoulder. “Hey.”

Kurt let his hands fall away. Before him stood a small young woman with short cropped blond hair.

“Are you okay?” She leaned onto her elbows on the table.

“Oh. Yeah, I’m... I’m fine. I will be.” Kurt waved his hand at her. “Thanks.”

“I loved your-”
Rachel came to his other side and grabbed his hand. “Come. We’re singing from *Wicked*!”

“Isn’t that a little obvious? Oof!” Kurt stumbled as Rachel jerked him away from the table. “Rude!”

He looked back at the girl and gave her a wave and a smile, then pointed to Rachel and twirled his finger at the side of his head.

She laughed and blew him a kiss, then turned to give someone behind her a big smile.

“Kurt, you are going to ruin your reputation before you even start the semester!” Rachel chided.

“Um, I’m not even accepted yet. Save the scheming until I get my letter, Machiavelli.” Kurt found himself up at the front with her, then looked back at the crowd. “I don’t want to do this right now.”

“Come on. I already have our music...” Rachel looked through the arrangement. “Hm... I need this to be in my key...”

Kurt snatched the music from her and moved over to the piano. “I can transpose it.”

He played a few bars for the sound, trying to pretend that people weren’t staring at him, then looked up at Rachel with a nod. She put her hands on her hips and grinned wildly.

“Ready, Guylinda?” she teased.

Kurt sucked in his cheeks and arched a brow high at her.

“There’s been some confusion over rooming here at Shiiiiiz,” she began.

“But of course I’ll care for Rachel,” Kurt added, playing along.
“But of course I’ll-” Rachel squeezed her eyes shut and belted the next note. “RIIIIIISE above it!”

“For that’s how I know you’d want me to respond. Yes,” they sang together. “There’s been some confusion for you see my roommate is...”

“Unusually and exceedingly peculiar and altogether quite impossible to descriiiiibe,” Rachel sang out, her voice clear and loud like a bell.

Kurt smirked at the crowd. “A diva.”

Rachel opened her mouth wide and glared back at him, but refused to miss a beat. “What is this feeling, so sudden, and new!”

“That I felt the moment, I laid eyes on you,” Kurt responded. Then he joked, “Y’know, this song is partially autobiographical for us.”

“My pulse is rushing,” Rachel sang with a bit of warning in her voice as she pointed at the piano.

Kurt kept playing. “My head is reeling- sheoncekissedmyboyfriiiiiiiend!”

The whole room erupted in laughter.

“My face is flushing- He gave me a terrible makeover! He made me into a sad hooker clown!”

The laughter increased.

“She told our show choir coach not to let me have solos for my own goood,” he sang.

“He...” Rachel faltered. “He said I have jowls!”

The other students had completely given themselves up to laughter at this point. With all the self-involved preening they probably saw on this stage, comedy seemed to be a rare treat.
“She let the cheerleading coach try to bully me into wearing drag for our Nationals competi-
tiooooon!” Kurt added, singing the last note deliberately high.

“No one else said anything either,” Rachel protested, falling out of the song. She huffed and pointed at him while looking at the crowd. “He practically boycotted my wedding!”

“Oh, because that was what actually stopped you from doing it!” Kurt laughed and played a run across the keys. “When I ran for senior class president she threw me under the bus and decided to run against me and steal my geek vote so she could be more impressive for her NYADA application.”

“I stepped down!” Rachel crossed her arms and looked down. “He threw me a flash mob to convince me not to get plastic surgery before I was out of high school.”

Kurt chuckled and continued to play the refrain. “She got the guys in our dorky show choir to stand up to this jock who was threatening to kill me. She sang a duet with me when no one else would.”

“They dunno know what they’re missin’, buddy.” Rachel leaned on the piano and bopped his nose. “I would never have made it this far without him.”

“Oh, yes, you would have.” Kurt rolled his eyes. He bit his lip and plinked around on the keys a few times. “We’re hitting creepy ‘Wind Beneath My Wings’ territory here.”

“I COULD FLY HIGHER THAN AN EAAAAAGLE!” Rachel belted, gesturing widely with one hand.

Kurt bowed over the keys, chuckling, then played a few soft bars. “You know this one.” He took a moment to compose himself, then sang, “What would you do... if I sang outta tune? Would you stand up and walk out on me?”

Rachel smiled. “You and the Beatles, I swear;” she teased. “Lend me your ear, I’ll sing you a song, and I’ll try not to sing out of key.”

“Do you need anybody?” they sang. “I need somebody to love. Could it be, anybody? I want somebody to love.”
“What do I do when my love’s gone away?” Kurt lead the next verse.

Rachel draped herself near him. “Does it worry you to be alone?”

“How does it feel by the end of the day?”

“Are you sad because you’re on your own?” She brushed her fingers over the side of his face.

“Join in, if you know it,” Kurt encouraged, looking away from her. He played through the chorus a few times, with the NYADAns singing along.

Several glasses of wine and many songs later, Kurt staggered with Rachel towards the subway. They locked arms together, and she leaned her head on his shoulder.

“You’ll see him at Christmas,” she murmured.

“I... What?”

“Blaine. You two are going to meet up, right? Don’t be sad. You’ll see him soon!”

Kurt said nothing as he huddled closer to her for warmth and tried to make his way down the stairs. It was hard to say what he wanted out of his visit home. Though he was pretty certain that meeting Blaine face-to-face again wouldn’t alleviate any of his problems.

Probably the opposite. Just the thought of talking to Blaine made him tired. It seemed like he was always tired, lately. He should start a vitamin regime, or something.
Chapter Three

The cabin was starting to get stuffy with the plane taxiing along the runway. Kurt tried to stretch his legs and blew air through his lips impatiently. It wasn’t much longer, but as exciting as it had been only a year and a half ago to fly for the first time, Kurt had found that he was not a fan. It made him anxious. Not because they might crash, but because the quick succession of deadlines, between getting to the airport, through security, to the gate and being there and not anywhere else in the airport when they decided to board the plane, just wound him up. He’d not slept at all on the plane, despite popping an Ambien to try to make that happen.

Patting a hand on his knee, he sat up straight, practically vibrating in anticipation. He shot up the moment the unfasten seatbelt bell chimed, then grabbed his bag from the overhead and stood to wait again.

He didn’t know much about science fiction, but they really needed to get to work on those teleporters.

It took too long for the people in front of him to start moving. Then they trudged along while Kurt clenched his jaw, and the moment he started to step forward an older man suddenly decided to stand and take his time pulling a huge bag out of the overhead.

Kurt bit back his annoyance and helped the man get it down, then let the man and his wife go in front of him.

By the time he was walking out into the terminal, his legs stretched with every step, grateful to be able to swing free. He drew breaths in and out. One last step, and the tension would loose from his shoulders like a snapped cord.

He looked around for the sign to the luggage claims and hurried in that direction. As he walked past the security guards, his heart started to speed up in anticipation. He scanned the people coming and going all over the front of the airport.

Then his eyes spotted a familiar baseball cap. His heart skipped, and then so did he, for at least a step, as he hurried toward his father.

“Hey!” Burt’s arms opened wide for Kurt to come into.
Kurt wrapped his arms tightly around his father. His shoulders relaxed, and he just couldn’t let go. Burt patted his back and hugged him, laughing softly.

“Can’t wait to get you back to the house.”

Kurt reluctantly pulled back. “Yeah?”

“We didn’t put the tree up yet! Didn’t seem right without’cha.” Burt reached over for Kurt’s bag, but Kurt hefted it back up on his shoulder and started towards the luggage carrel.

“I can’t wait. I have this whole vision for Christmas decorations this year,” Kurt said excitedly. He reached into his bag as they stopped with the crowd to wait for the belt to start bringing out the luggage. “I got something for you.”

“Hey, we said no presents,” Burt objected. “I know you kids gotta to save your money right now.”

“I just couldn’t help myself.” Kurt pulled out a black ball cap and presented it to his father. It read NYADA across the front.

“Hey! Can always use one more o’those.” Burt took the cap in his hand, then frowned and looked at Kurt. “Holy shit. You got in!”

“I got in!”

As Kurt submitted to his second hug, he couldn’t believe he’d even thought for a moment about not coming home for the holidays to see his family.

No blue Christmas for him this year.

***
Kurt opened the door to the Hudson-Hummel abode and smiled. The house was in disarray, but the air smelled like cinnamon. With a deep breath, Kurt felt himself being swept back.

“Aw, baby. Did you wait out here all night?” His mother scooped him into her arms and laid down with him on the couch, while the lights from the tree flickered on them.

“Sana came,” Kurt mumbled and pointed at the meager offerings under the tree.

She kissed his forehead and looked up at his father. “Let him sleep a little?”

“No... I’m not... sleepy,” Kurt protested.

He yawned, and his father’s big hand ruffled his hair.

“Get some shut-eye, kid. I’ll whip us up some pancakes,” he said. “You want chocolate chip? I bet I can get the smilie faces without setting the oven on fire this time!”

“Please don’t,” his mother pleaded. She rose and deposited Kurt into his father’s arms, and he curled up there, warm and secure.

“And that’s how we get chocolate chip pancakes for Christmas breakfast,” he whispered in Kurt’s ear.

“Yay,” Kurt murmured.

Kurt’s fingers brushed along the dusty old boxes. Within were the memories of his childhood, waiting to be freed to haunt their house once more.

“Just you and me, kiddo.” Burt held Kurt’s hand as he lifted up the little ornament that Kurt had made. It was small, and pretty, and it smelled like her.

Kurt reached up and Burt let him take it in his small hands to put it on the tree.
“She’ll always be with us, y’know.”

Kurt felt his throat closing, and he could feel his father’s eyes on the back of his neck. What a homecoming. He was making himself depressed already. Hadn’t he promised to be less of a downer this Christmas?

“I wanna raise a glass to us,” Burt said.

Against their better judgment, Burt and Carole had let Kurt make mimosas to go along with their Christmas brunch, a tradition that even Finn enjoyed, because it meant getting to snack on a bunch of delicious breakfast foods all day, and he didn’t have to cook. Instead, that evening, he and Carole would go visit Carole’s family, and Kurt and Burt would have some alone time.

It had worked out almost seamlessly, actually.

“I can’t say how grateful I am to have us all here together,” Burt continued.

Carole patted his arm and threaded their fingers together.

“No, I’m serious. This fall started off like hell on Earth. All those kids in news killing themselves, my heart attack-” He looked at Carole. “-and death threats. It was like a friggin’ epidemic this year, and I thank God you two didn’t get taken out by it.”

Finn’s eyes widened slowly.

“There’s nothin’ a parent fears more than having to outlive their kid.”

Carole nodded and looked at Finn and Kurt with gratitude in her eyes. “So true.”

Finn turned his head slowly, eyes still bugging in alarm. Kurt looked up at him and forced an almost deranged smile.
“But we’re all fine now. And we’re a family,” Kurt pointed out.

Finn’s arm came around his shoulder and squeezed Kurt into his side so tightly it almost hurt. Somehow that made it sweeter.

“Damn straight.” Finn’s voice was rough, and a little choked.

They clinked their glasses together and drank.

“Hey! It’s the big city boy!” Finn exploded from the kitchen wearing an apron and held his big arms wide.

Kurt laughed and set his bag down to let his brother wrap him up tight. “Hi, Finn-Finn.”

“I’ll be right out!” Carole called.

“I can come in there!” Kurt offered.

“Not if I never let’cha go, little brother!” Finn teased.

Burt shut the front door and came over to rub Kurt’s back.

“I’m trapped,” Kurt complained.

“If you want the tree decorated, you’d better let ‘im go,” Burt said.

“I can do without a tree,” Finn argued.

“How about my caramel popcorn for the movie tonight?” Kurt suggested.
“Aww.” Finn released him and brushed his hand over the tips of Kurt’s hair. Kind of him not to mess it up too much.

“Kurt!” Carole came out, and Kurt was once again embraced, and this time given a firm kiss on the cheek as well. “How are you, honey?”

“Oh, I’m good,” Kurt answered vaguely.

“Were you not good?” Burt prodded.

“Kurt thought he might be coming down with something last week,” Carole said. She kissed his cheek again and rubbed his back. “We’re lucky you recovered in time for your flight!”

“You make it sound like it was actually serious. It was just a cold, or a microflu or something.”

“You oughta get your flu shot,” Burt advised.

“Maybe when I get back,” he said, mostly to assuage whatever worries his father and Carole might be harboring.

Before they put him to work, Carole brought out a plate of cookies and tried to get Kurt to let her bring him something more substantial to eat, and they sat around the sofa and easy chairs catching each other up on their lives, starting with Burt waving around the NYADA hat, and Kurt telling the story of his impromptu audition, which had somehow not made it back through Rachel.

Kurt prodded Finn for info on the New Directions, and hassled him a little about community college applications, an effort that was supplemented by Carole’s pointed looks.

“I still don’t really know what I wanna do though, you know?” Finn shrugged.

“That won’t matter. If you get in through community college, then you can work on core requirements and getting your grades and experience where it needs to be to get into a program that you really want to do.” Kurt held up his hands. “This is the last thing I’ll say, and then we can bust
out the tree.”

“Whoo!” Burt pumped his fist.

“No one believes in you more than the people in this room, Finn. I just don’t want you to get stuck in that place, okay?” Kurt reached for Finn’s hand and rubbed it. “You’re more than that.”

“It’s not that bad. I’ve actually liked kinda being in charge of the New Directions.” He shook his head. “Until we lost.”

“Um, Mr. Schue didn’t always win, either. And he had years of teaching experience and he still pulled some really boneheaded moves sometimes. Where was he when you guys needed him?”

“In Washington.” Finn pinched his lips to the side.

“That girl needed help,” Carole said sharply. “And not the kind you could have given her. She needed a doctor. I hope she’s getting that. But I have to say that I’m disappointed none of her friends came to you, or any of her teachers. I’ve been that age. Girls know more than they’ll say.”

“I just wish there was something I could do. Like, something was happening with her, and I was there the whole time, and I didn’t see it,” Finn said.

Kurt tilted his head to the side and narrowed his eyes. “Now you really do sound like Mr. Schue.”

Finn laughed. He gave Kurt another squeeze. “Let’s break out the tree,” he declared.

Kurt spread his hands in front of him and looked off into a far away point in the pretend horizon. “I’m gonna make this whole town shine.”

***

“Children laughing, people passing, meeting smile after smile...”
Kurt’s bright, sweet voice rang out through the shop as Blaine entered with Sam by his side. He froze where he was and stared up at Kurt. Somehow his memories didn’t do justice to the graceful creature before him, perched on a chair and singing with such a clear, pure tone that Blaine believed he was shuddering from the sound, not the snow outside.

Had Kurt been so rawly beautiful when he’d left? Blaine seemed to remember a cuddly, adorable boy, defiantly proud of his sexuality, in the abstract anyway, while being almost afraid of the physical reality of it.

The Kurt up there-- hanging a delicate string of garland with glittery green leaves, molded silver leaves and twigs, and little ringing bells-- was not his Kurt. It was a New York City fashionisto, a star on the cusp of being discovered. This guy was so far out of Blaine’s league it almost hurt. Just the way Kurt held himself and dressed himself. It wasn’t the multiple layers of self-defense that had marked Kurt’s Lima wardrobe... It was casually sexual.

Kurt stepped up on the desk to keep setting up the garland. Blaine leaned forward slightly. Those were some... tight pants.

Sam laughed and smacked Blaine’s arm. “Dude.”

Kurt jerked and half turned. Blaine darted forward, afraid Kurt would come tumbling to the ground. But he didn’t, he just looked down on Blaine, his brow arching slowly as the moment between them ached on with an ever yawning silence.

Blaine imagined himself eventually slinking away out of sheer awkwardness. But thankfully, Sam broke the ice with a wave.

“Hmm, never seen you after hours, Moneypenny... lovely.” Sam curled his lips around the words in faux Scottish accent.

Kurt laughed and shook his head. He took a second to recover and then said, “Flattery will get you nowhere.” His eyes narrowed coyly. “But don’t stop trying.”

He stepped back down onto the chair, and Blaine reached out to take Kurt’s hand. Kurt hesitated, briefly, then apparently decided that it wasn’t worth it to crack his head open just to avoid mixed signals.
“Are you guys having a good winter break? Are you on break yet?” Kurt asked.

“Friday’s the last day,” Blaine said.

“Finn said you got in last night,” Sam said. “I was over at Blaine’s.”

“Oh. Sleep over. Fun.”

Blaine’s heart was rushing into his throat. “Do you want some help...? Actually, I need to get changed.”

“Changed? Here?”

“Young dad is letting me work off debt on my car.” Blaine winced and shrugged. “The transmission went kerplooie.”

Kurt rolled his eyes. “I told you that car—”

“I know, I know.” Blaine shook his head. “Believe me. Now I know.”

“So he has you doing repairs and...?” Kurt jerked his thumb behind him.

“No, mostly just simple stuff. Oil changes. Refilling windshield washer fluid and replacing bulbs. But the other guys are giving me tips so I can help them with other things. It’s been a good experience.”

“Well, that’s nice of him.”

Blaine tried to attribute some warmth to the carefully measured statement, but found none. Kurt was looking out over the shop. He seemed more nostalgic for working in here than he did for talking with Blaine.
He couldn’t say that it didn’t hurt, or that it was unexpected.

“Yeah, well,” Blaine said. “Finn’s only working part time now, so Burt needed someone... probably could’ve used someone with more experience, I guess.”

“You’ll adapt. I’m sure you will.” Kurt patted his shoulder lightly.

“I’m just here because I’m bored,” Sam pitched in.

“Oh? No plans with Britt-Britt?” Kurt asked.

“She dumped me.”

“That was fast!

“Or I think she did, because she started dating another girl and now she only talks to me in Glee club.”

Kurt fought a smile, then covered his lips and shook his head. “Ohhh, Brittany.”

“Yeah. I mean, I guess I’m used to it. Santana never bothered to break up with me either. She just picked a different beard.”

Kurt rubbed Sam’s shoulders. “One day, Sam, you will meet a nice girl who likes you for you, and remembers she’s dating you. But as a consolation, Brittany would probably date you and the other girl at the same time if you were into it.”

Sam couldn’t help but laugh. “What about you?”

“What?” Kurt’s voice jumped up into his upper register.
“You dating anyone?”

Blaine gave Sam a sharp look.

“Oh. Um...” Kurt paused for almost too long. “No...”

Blaine looked down at his hands and swallowed. “Kurt, if you’ve found someone, you don’t have to lie for me.”

“I’m not. It was just... I work so much. It’s not a good time to try to devote to starting a relationship.” Kurt crossed his arms and shrugged. “So I’ve gone on dates, but nothing exclusive.”

“Wow.” Sam pinched his mouth to the side and shot another look to Blaine. Go for it.

Blaine scowled at him. “I guess as... as long as you’re safe.”

Sam tilted his head to the side.

“I’m not stupid. Of course, I’m safe,” Kurt said.

“I just, um, want to know that you’re okay out there,” Blaine tried to cover lamely.

“Hmm.” Kurt’s gaze moved back over to Blaine. “I can take care of myself. I’ve always been a survivor.”

“Yeah. You have.” Blaine drew in a deep breath.

“I hope you have been, too,” Kurt said after a moment.

“Surviving?”
“Safe.”

The word cut through the air. It was tinged with just enough annoyance to bring Blaine back to why it was so awkward between them. Not just the distance, or the break up, but the reason for the break up. Which undoubtably Kurt had not been trying to highlight, but it had come to the surface of everyone’s thoughts anyway.

“I’m not really seeing anyone, either,” Blaine admitted. But still, that night...

Kurt pressed his lips together. He looked back up at the garland he’d been stringing. “I’d better finish this. I’m meeting Mercedes and some of the girls later.”

“Oh. Okay. I’ll change.” Blaine exited for the bathroom to change into his coveralls. When he returned, Kurt and Sam were talking easily about some British television show with zombies in it.

“No, you weren’t seeing things. It’s coded gay. Gay without labels, but definitely, definitely more than just homosocial,” Kurt said energetically while Sam nodded.

Blaine wasn’t sure what he’d been hoping for. Maybe that his connection with Kurt would override everything that was broken between them.

But it clearly didn’t.

Sam bid them both goodbye, and Kurt returned to his chair. As Kurt finished up the decorations, Blaine disconnected his brain and just did the oil and bulb changes as ordered. But he wasn’t thinking about Kurt now, or how they’d promised to have a conversation about their relationship (which was seeming less now like something Blaine should be looking forward to). He was thinking about Eli’s unopened condom left on the dresser as Blaine had left his room.

“Ow!” Blaine pulled his hand back and shook it.

“You have to let the engine cool.” Kurt came over and peered over the engine. “This one looks like the cooling fan needs to be replaced. What did they bring it in for?”
“What?”

“What’s the work order?”

“I... don’t know. Cassius just asked me to take this apart.” Kurt picked up the clipboard and wrote down a few notes. Then he looked at Blaine’s hand, set the clipboard down, and touched his fingers. “You hurt yourself.”

Blaine looked back at him. His heart raced as Kurt held his hand in his own. “It’s fine. I just scraped it. I just wasn’t thinking.”

“Hmm.” Kurt narrowed his eyes, then walked back over to Burt’s desk and ferreted through some papers. He pulled out a bottle of alcohol and a clean rag and brought them over.

Blaine bit his lip as Kurt gently cleaned off the cut. “I’m sorry.”

Kurt sighed and focused on Blaine’s hand.

“I mean it. I was... I was selfish, and I know you couldn’t control your schedule- ow!”

“Don’t be a baby.” Kurt smiled at him softly.

“I’m not!” Blaine swallowed.

“So you don’t think it was my fault anymore?”

“What?”

“You said that you did that because you were alone and you needed me.” Kurt let go of his hand and focused on screwing the cap on the bottle.
“Oh.”

Kurt sighed again and started to turn away.

“Kurt, don’t. I shouldn’t have said that. It was me. I lost faith in us, and I was selfish, and mean. I knew how much that would hurt you, and I regretted it right after. Like, right after.” He looked at the car engine. Because he couldn’t look at Kurt right now.

“You knew it would hurt me. You did it on purpose.” His voice was quiet, as measured as any other words Kurt had given him since that night. Aside from the ones in the hallway.

*I don’t trust you.*

“A little, yeah. It wasn’t just that you weren’t there. You were lightyears away, and not just physical distance. And I started to feel like maybe you didn’t care.” Blaine touched the side of the car. “I knew what would *make* you care.”

“How can you say that I didn’t care? You *told* me to go!” Kurt was still fighting to remain composed, but a brief look at his eyes said he was struggling with that. “I know that sometimes I’m not always honest about how I feel, especially when I think you won’t like it, but I really don’t know what I did to deserve this.”

“I mean, you couldn’t even pay enough attention to help me pick out a tie-”

“You broke my heart over a friggin’ tie?”

Blaine straightened. Kurt’s voice hadn’t been loud, but it had *resonated*.

“It just felt like you weren’t that interested in my stuff anymore,” Blaine said. “And then you couldn’t talk to me on the phone-”

“Not when I’m *working*, no, I *can’t*.”
Blaine crossed his arms over himself. He had to look away. Kurt’s shining blue eyes were just too intense.

“Does my dad let you gossip on the phone when you’re on the clock?” Kurt pressed.

“No, it’s just.. I wanted you to understand my side.”

“I got your side. We all got your side. I’m pretty sure there are space aliens out there that know you think I’m a negligent boyfriend,” Kurt said.

“That’s not... Kurt. Be fair.”

“Do you want to know how I feel? Well, you get to hear it anyway, because I’m up to my ears in your feelings about this. I feel like I’m completely worthless. I feel like you took everything that was important between us, and you just threw it away, like it was nothing. Like what I gave to you, of me, was nothing. Haven’t I shown you that I’m willing to listen? Haven’t I always been the one to try to work things out when we argued?” Kurt lifted his chin and held his jaw tight. “We could have fixed this. But you shattered it.”

Blaine looked down and exhaled slowly.

“And I can’t get over that. I know myself. I can’t. I can hardly deal with how it shook me when you refused to stop seeing Sebastian. Even went behind my back, just to get complements from a guy who was awful to me. But this? I can’t, Blaine.” Kurt threw his hands up. “I have no hope of ever getting over this.”

“Is this what you wanted to tell me? Our big ‘relationship discussion’?”

“I was hoping we could do it over tea and cookies,” Kurt said dryly. He dropped the smile and held up a hand with a shrug. “I said I wanted to still be friends. Not that we would get back together at Christmas.”

“I’m not sure I want to just be friends.”
“Well. That’s the only option.” Kurt sucked in his cheeks a little and looked over towards his bag. “See you later.”

***

The girls were already ensconced in their booth at Breadstix when Kurt entered. He’d taken the time to go home and change into a slick pair of jeans and a wisteria colored corset-vest over his white shirt.

“Hey, ladies.” Kurt gave them a wink as he slid into the booth with Mercedes. “How are we this evening?”

“Oh, don’t you sit all the way over there!” Unique got up and came over to give him a squeeze. Suddenly Mercedes was on his other side doing the same.

Marley sat across from them, twining her arms together awkwardly and biting her lip, and she shrugged at him when she caught his eye. It must have been strange for her. She barely knew Kurt, though Mercedes had come by to do some vocal coaching for them for the musical and for Sectionals.

Not that it mattered now.

Unique released him but when she sat, she touched his hand and she and Mercedes started grilling him on what it was like to work at Vogue.

“How do you afford those clothes?” Marley asked after being silent for the first section of Unique and Mercedes’ interrogation. “Do you get a discount?”

“Oh, not really. Sometimes Francesca will give away old items-- she’s in charge of the Vogue closet. But most of the time I shop bargains, swap, or make things myself.” He moved his finger down the embroidery on the front of his vest. “Like this.”


“You should’ve seen the stuff he came up with in high school. There was this one sweater that
looked like he skinned a cat,” Mercedes said with a booming laugh.

“Y’know, I make good money on my knock offs,” Kurt pointed out. “Even the ugly ones.”

He pinched his lips together, then grinned and licked his lower lip slowly. “Though there are other specialty outfits that pay just as well and are easier to do.”

Unique laughed. “Oh, honey. It’s gettin’ dirty in here.”

“Your mind is dirty. I’m talking about convention clothes.” Kurt shook his head. “People spend good money on well-tailored costumes.”

“Yeah, like you haven’t sewn up a dress or two for a man who didn’t want to go out and buy it,” Mercedes said.

“How do you know it was a man, baby?” Unique said with an arch of the brow.

“There are limitations for what men, and women, can find in stores that will fit them. Off the rack is mostly cookie cutter. To look really good, you have to get creative,” Kurt said.

The waitress came by to take their order. “Are you kids ready?”

“Well, I am,” Mercedes said. “I’ll have the classic lasagna.”

“Ravioli de Portobella,” Unique said, raising one hand with flair.

Marley toyed with the menu anxiously.

“Is anyone interested in splitting anything?” she said a little quietly.

Unique’s eyes moved over her with concern. “Um, well...”
“I will,” Kurt said. “My stomach is in knots from talking to my ex this afternoon. Do you like capellini pomodoro? It’s... pasta. With tomatoes and a little olive oil. If we split that and each had a salad, that would be good, but not too heavy, right?”

“That... that sounds great, actually,” she said, flushing a little.

Kurt smiled.

“Like you need to be any skinnier.” Mercedes poked his ribs.

“I work at a fashion magazine. Believe that I am always aware of my weight.”

The girls laughed, and the conversation started up again as soon as their waitress left. Unique insisted on trading places with him, saying that she wasn’t going to let him pick off their plates when he got hungry.

“My metabolism has gone crazy since my last growth spurt. But the joke’s on you. I’ve been baking cookies most of the day.” Kurt flipped his napkin out and winked at Unique coyly.

“I thought you and Blaine were banging things out,” Mercedes teased.

“Girl,” Kurt said simply, pointing at her.

“Boys suck. You get away with everything, and your metabolisms are faster, too,” Marley complained.

“Well, it’s not all fun and games. Too much testosterone can shorten your life span, or kill your swimmers, or make you bald.” Kurt smirked and leaned over to sing in a higher voice, “But that’s not my problem!”

“Are you sure about that? Your dad is awful bald,” Mercedes teased.
“I’m much more careful about the frequency of my hat wearing,” Kurt volleyed back. “Enough about the drawbacks of hormones.” He pointed between Unique and Marley. “Glee. Update.”

“Not much to update,” Unique said. “We lost.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean the club ceases to exist, does it? We won Nationals last year. Figgins can stuff it up his money grubbing ass.”

“Apparently they lost their practice space to Sue,” Mercedes said.

Kurt narrowed his eyes.

“And that’s my fault,” Marley muttered. Her lips drew together as she looked into her lap.

“Hey. No way.” Kurt touched her shoulder. “There’s always things going on around competition time. Remember our first Sectionals, Mercedes?”

“Yeah.” Mercedes let out a laugh. “I finally got a solo, and the other two show choirs had all our numbers.”

“And ask Brittany who leaked the set list to them,” Kurt added, “and how no one got mad at her for it.”

“Regionals we did lose that year. Because Rachel had to go date that St. James jerk.” Mercedes shook her head. “And I was mad at her for that.”

“True, but that didn’t last long. And you were mad mostly because we told her that this guy was bad news,” Kurt said. “We also had member go into labor right after our set.”

“Wait... what?” Unique laughed.

“Yep.” Kurt looked up. “And then the next Sectionals... I guess I was the drama that year? But not like they really needed me.”
“We did, and the drama was coming from Rachel and Finn and Santana,” Mercedes argued.

“-and the year after that it was technically Mercedes bringing the drama-”

Mercedes pointed at him. “I put up with a lotta sh-”

“Well-deserved drama. But in the end our big crisis came because Rachel decided to cheat in the presidential race, and got suspended. And we did fine without her, but when the STAR-” Kurt flailed his hands in the air. “-can’t perform, everyone melts down.”

“Remember the Kiss that Missed?” Mercedes leaned forward and grinned.

Kurt made his dinosaur hands impression, and Mercedes stuck her tough out in a mockery of a French kiss. Marley and Unique laughed and looked at one another shaking their heads.

“Is it any surprise that I fangirl these two?” Unique asked Marley.

“If there isn’t drama, it isn’t a show choir competition,” Kurt said seriously. “The ones who win are the ones who don’t let it bring ‘em down. And Mr. Schue wasn’t there for you. He should be taking responsibility for this. At least, he could’ve given you guys a real teacher along with Finn. I love him, and he’s my brother, but he doesn’t have the training to do it alone and it’s not fair to anyone to put him completely in charge.”

“But now we’re practicing on the roof.” Marley shook her head despondently.

“Or whatever open room we can find,” Unique added. “Sometimes there are people on the roof who throw things at us.”

“Or Coach Sylvester invites her Cheerios up there to make laugh at us.”

Kurt creased his brow and accepted his salad as the waitress set them down in front of him and Marley. “What’s in the Glee room now?”
“Stuff for her ‘super elite’ Cheerios,” Unique said with an eye roll. She reached over and stole a cherry tomato. “We’ve all joined other clubs, but we still try to meet. I don’t know what for.”

“Are you doing a Christmas concert?” Kurt picked up his little dish of dressing and drizzled it on his salad.

“No, I don’t think so,” Marley said.

“Not even for the school? Huh. I’ll talk to Finn. Last year we performed at the local soup kitchen.”

“That would be a great way to keep the club going with some kind of a goal. Nonprofit performances,” Mercedes said. “Emphasis on the non.”

“Right. And you should also consider doing a spring play.” Kurt stabbed his salad. “Everyone could use extra lines on their CVs.”

“I would love that...” Marley widened her eyes and shook her head a little. “But... I should try for a smaller part. Lead is so much pressure, and I felt bad that a senior didn’t get it.”

“There’s no reason to. The seniors kind of bailed,” Unique said. “Tina refused to try out, and then got mad when she didn’t get my part. Brittany wanted to be the dancer. Blaine refused to take the lead part. Artie was director...”

“Maybe this time they could try to choose something a little less white,” Mercedes said.

“Right?” Kurt chuckled. “Ahhh, Glee. Oh, and you guys could start working on some arrangements for next year.”

Kurt bumped Marley’s shoulder. “There’s plenty of learning to do in an off year. And all the seniors won at Nationals last year, so don’t worry about them too much.”

Marley didn’t look too convinced, but she nodded and took a small bite of her salad. Kurt figured that eating with friends after being publicly shamed for an eating disorder had to be stress-inducing,
so he hoped the conversation would be a good distraction and keep the pressure off of her.

“A couple of us seniors could drop back in on the song-writing lessons. Not that our first songs were that good, but I’ve got a lot more now.” Mercedes reached into her purse and pulled out a little bound journal.

“I um.” Marley looked up at Mercedes. Her fingers pressed hard against her fork before she managed to speak. “I have some songs, but... I don’t really know how to arrange them.”

“That’s perfect to practice with! Let me show you some of my first drafts so you can see how crazy stupid they are.”

Marley’s face lit up, and she ate a grape tomato, letting it pop in her mouth.

Kurt smiled. Then he felt his phone buzzing in his pocket. He pulled it out and looked at the name, then sighed. His eyes skimmed over the faces of his companions, now embroiled in talk about song writing. He glanced down again and opened his messages.

*I need to talk*, Blaine’s text pleaded.

Kurt let out a slow sigh. *I’m at dinner with friends. Can it wait?*

*Please. I’m really scared.*

Kurt blinked at the answer and stood up. “I’ll be right back. Phone call.”

“Hot guy in New York?” Mercedes asked.

“Grindr?” Unique teased.

“I’ll be right back. Phone call.”

“Hot guy in New York?” Mercedes asked.

“Grindr?” Unique teased.

Kurt lowered his lids at them and went into the bathroom. He steeled himself for a moment, and then hit Blaine’s name, and called him.
“Kurt?” Blaine sounded almost startled.

“Well, yeah. Unless an alien has taken over my body and forced me to call you. I don’t think that’s the case.”

Blaine was quiet for a moment.

“What is it, Blaine? You said you were scared. Are you okay?”

“Yeah. No, no, I’m okay. I just...”

“Well, then what happened?”

“It’s just... The last guy I was with...”

“The guy that you...” Kurt couldn’t finish his sentence. He knew what the end of that sentence was. And he knew that Blaine knew the end of that sentence, too.

“Yeah. That guy.”

Kurt pinched the bridge of his nose and exhaled forcefully.

“I’m sorry-”

“Is he there?”

“What?” Blaine’s voice practically went soprano.

“Is he there? Is he bothering you? Is that why you’re scared?”
“No, no. It’s about what you were talking about before, and it got me thinking.”

“Blaine. Sweetie. I don’t have the slightest idea what you’re talking about.”

“He didn’t use the condom.”

Ice seemed to spread through Kurt’s veins. “He- He didn’t? Why the hell not? Did he just say no, or...?”

“No, I mean, we were fooling around, and then things started to get a little more heated—”

Kurt quite literally felt a pain spreading in his chest. He wondered if it was a heart attack.

“And I gave it to him, but I lost track, and when I left... the condom was on his nightstand.”

“What a dick!”

Blaine laughed. Probably out of surprise, but Kurt felt himself getting angry.

“This isn’t a joke, Blaine. You don’t even know this guy. You don’t know where he’s been, what he’s done, who he’s done!”

“Sorry. That was kind of why I called... Actually, I don’t know what I expected you to do—”

“Have you gotten tested?”

“Well, I’m not sick or anything.”

“Blaine, you didn’t call me scared because you’re so incredibly stupid that you think nothing could
happen to you. There is a clinic not too far out of town. You can go there and get tested for all kinds of things.”

“Yeah.”

Kurt waited. For all of three seconds. “So you’re going to go?”

“I- I guess I should.”

Kurt rubbed his hand over his chest and took in another deep breath. Even if he couldn’t be in a relationship with Blaine, he still wanted the guy to be taken care of. Unfortunately, it seemed like there was only one person who was going to do that right now.

“I’m coming to get you tomorrow, and we’ll have our first test together.”

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“This is your Christmas present, by the way.” Kurt sat with his legs crossed primly at the knee. “It’s all you’re getting.”

There was something wrong with him. Going with his ex to get tested for STDs that said ex might have contracted while sleeping around on him.

There was definitely something wrong with Kurt. Something this clinic probably couldn’t help him with.

“I know.” Blaine’s hands fidgeted. “But thanks. I just couldn’t ask Coop to do this.”

“I very nearly threw one of those bizarre metallic blobs in your front yard at his head before you came out.”

Blaine chuckled.
“What did you tell him?”

“Oh, he’s just seen me whining about the break up. He means well, I guess, but he’s still an Anderson.”

“Well, that explains everything,” Kurt muttered.

“As I live and breathe,” a smug, velvety voice came from behind them.

Kurt’s insides clenched.

“It’s Gay Face!” Sebastian said cheerfully as he strolled around to face them. “Ah, and Didn’t Place.” He chuckled to himself, then bounced on his heels. “How’s Glee club?”

“We’re fine,” Blaine said with a pout.

“They’re taking the time off to rally more opportunities for club members to develop their skills and beef up their resumes. We can’t all have daddy buy our way into school, can we?” Kurt replied swiftly. Being near Sebastian just made his blood boil. One look at that hamster face and smug demeanor, and all the frustration and grief from Blaine’s infidelity weighed him down even further.

“Fun. Missed havin’ you around, Gay Face. What’s on your agenda these days? Serving coffee in New York now?”

“Ah, no. Just working at Vogue.”

Sebastian leaned on the back of Kurt’s chair and laughed loudly. Kurt was doing his best to make Sebastian’s head explode.

*Kill him with your brain. Kill him with your brain.*
Instead, Kurt reached into his bag for his billfold and handed him a card. “Here. Don’t call me.”

Sebastian studied the card for a moment, then held it up to the light and examined the watermark. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Don’t be sad.” Kurt pushed out his lower lip. “You’ll find someone else to harass. I have faith in you.”

“I thought you’d given this up?” Blaine said finally.

“That was until we won Sectionals,” Sebastian muttered. “Hunter told me to play nice with the competition, and neither of you are that any longer.”

“You must feel really good about yourselves,” Kurt said. “There’s nothing quite like winning because one of your competition’s lead singers is being bullied to nearly to death.”

He could feel Blaine’s eyes on him now.

“Then again, maybe you could use this as an opportunity to raise money for some kind of cause... make The Warblers look good on the back of a tragedy... again.”

“That wasn’t just to make The Warblers look good,” Sebastian said, flicking Kurt’s card at him.

Kurt placed it back in his billfold. “No? What did Dave say when you visited him in the hospital? Hm? Anything?”

Sebastian flattened his lips and arched a brow. “So are you two back together? Things can’t be going that well if you’re already here.”

“We’re just here to get tested,” Blaine said firmly. “It’s the responsible thing to do.”

“For you, maybe. For the virgin princess here...”
“That’s true. I don’t frequent clinics that often. Since I have a real job with real insurance, and, you know, standards... but you, they probably know you by name here, huh?” Kurt said with a sickeningly sweet smile. “You’re in, what? Every other week? You could probably start up a business here solving crimes given the number of guys you know inside and out.”

The nurse called Kurt’s name, and he rose. Sebastian moved his hand forward with a smile, and Kurt pulled backward to avoid touching him, then blew him a kiss as he followed the nurse inside.

***

Sebastian didn’t even bother to keep talking to Blaine. He turned around and dropped down by his friend Frankie who he’d run into today. His cheeks were burning, and his head throbbing. Normally playing with Kurt was fun. Who did that prissy little princess think he was? He wasn’t better than Sebastian, and no, Sebastian hadn’t gone into the hospital to visit Dave, but that wasn’t. It really wasn’t any... He just couldn’t do it at the time. He couldn’t, and it was none of Kurt’s damn business how he’d handled it.

He ignored Frankie’s questions about who he’d been talking to, until he realized that Frankie had already come out from his appointment.

“What are you still doing here?” he asked.

“Waiting on a prescription. They have a sliding scale for guys who can’t pay.”

“Oh. Anything good?”

“Oh, uh.” Frankie blinked and coughed. “Just a refill on antibiotics.”

“Don’t be coy with me.” Sebastian rolled his eyes. “We’ve got enough dainty queens in the house for one day.” He paused. “Frankie, it’s me. C’mon.”

“It’s um... syphilis.”
Sebastian grimaced and patted Frankie’s shoulder. “Hey, did they take your blood?”

“Yeah?”

Sebastian nodded.

It took him a few minutes of flirting with Damian at the front desk to get in the back without a nurse. They made out in the supply closet, and then Damian had to slip back to work, and Sebastian promised that he’d find his way back to the waiting area.

Instead it was a quick trip around to the lab, with his gloves on, of course, and as luck would have it, it was open, and empty. A look at the computer, and the corresponding numbers assigned to the names for confidentiality among the lab techs, and Sebastian had all he needed. A quick copy and paste to switch the numbers, click save, and prank completed.

Wouldn’t Mr. Perfect get the shock of his life when his tests came back positive for the syph?
“Isn’t this the beginning of a bad horror movie?” Kitty kept her hands on her hips as the kids walked into the cold warehouse.

Finn looked around, trying to hide his doubt. The building was old, and dark. There was a makeshift stage in the middle, but otherwise the place was empty and looked like it hadn’t seen human occupants in a couple of years.

“I’m not sure... we’re in the right place... Are we?” Marley held her hands in front of her, curling the ends of her sleeves around her fingers.

“No, apparently this place is, um...” Finn frowned. But he wasn’t going to complain about the space. Any space to perform without harassment. He appreciated all the help from the former Gleeks, especially since Mr. Schue was gone again, and the club would more than likely to fall apart and disband without a real advisor. “It’s really...

“Familiar,” Blaine said, hopping onto the stage. He did a spin and grinned at Sam.

“Looks busted,” Mercedes said. She turned in a circle, then sang the first line of “Baby, Please Come Home” while the kids stared in awe or feigned disinterest. “But great acoustics.”

Kurt nodded to her. “It’s been used for some parties, and sometimes for people to shoot commercials. It’s cheap to rent because the owner hasn’t been able to sell it. Cheap enough that I’m fairly sure that some of your parents-” He moved his finger around to Sugar, Brittany, Tina, Artie, Blaine, and Kitty. “-could altogether probably rent the place for the rest of the year without putting a dent in the social activities section of their budget.”

“My dad could buy it,” Sugar said with a shrug.

“But why would anyone want this filthy hole?” Kitty said.

“I can’t get on that stage. The ramps are too narrow for someone to carry the chair,” Artie pointed out quietly.
“Ahh!” Joe screamed, grabbing the back of his dreads. “Stop pretending to be a spider, Kitty! That is the least tight thing you could do!!”

“Whatever.” She stepped away from him and crossed her arms. “We don’t even have a reason to sing anymore. This is a lot of effort for no point.”

“No! C’mon, guys. Didn’t we decide to keep the club going?” Marley begged. “At least this place has a roof. Last week we were singing in the snow.”

Kurt snapped his fingers. “Enough chatter. And you won’t need to get up there, Artie. This is just practice and there’s not enough room on that stage for everyone, anyway. We can bring in the roller stage and our chairs in storage.”

“Wait, are we going to do another wheelchair dancing number?” Artie wheeled closer to the group.

“Wheelchair dancing?” Kitty narrowed her eyes at them all.

“Buzz buzz, Quinn Lite.” Kurt waved his hand in a circle and snapped his fingers shut in her general direction.

Her mouth dropped open, and Finn laughed softly. Kurt’s impatience with her nonsense was exactly what she really needed.

“I’ve scheduled you self-pitying pubescents on a string of gigs-- pro-bono!-- over the Christmas break. The teen shelter in Lima Heights Adjacent, the homeless shelter, the children’s ward, the soup kitchen downtown, and the community center where people are getting free therapy for drug addictions, PTSD, and depression, sometimes attempts on their own lives.” Kurt raised his chin slightly, daring further complaint.

“We’re singing at the homeless shelter,” Sam said with a tiny fist pump then held his hand up for Blaine to slap, which he did, awkwardly.

“Are you serious?” Kitty said. “Tell me you’re not serious. Look, I’m down with this we are the world crap, but the last thing we need is more people encouraging the losers of society to stay on
their asses and not get jobs because we’re all ‘okay.’ I’m not going to spend my Christmas break encouraging other people’s laziness.”

“We get it, Kurt. Other people have it harder than us. Wah wah wah,” Tina rolled her eyes. “We’ve done charity work this year already.”

“Tina! Why would you say that?” Mercedes put her hand on her hip. “Helping others ain’t a once a year deal. You can do charity more than once. My church has tons of groups doing charity work year round.”

“Yeah, mine too,” Jake said. “Like, why is this even a question? I’m doing the music for the youth group’s, um, puppet show at the senior citizen’s center on Oak Avenue.”

Marley turned to look at him with a slight crease in her brow. He shrugged and made a puppet out of his hand at her and started to mime what other people were saying.

“I just don’t want him to think we’re not doing anything! We did things! We painted over graffiti on the school. At Thanksgiving we helped hungry poor people,” Tina argued as Jake’s hand babbled along beside her.

“People who should get jobs and buy food. I’m not sorry for them,” Kitty said.

“Who asked for your ‘sorries’?” Mercedes snapped.

Jake started poking Marley in the shoulder with his puppet ‘mouth,’ and she swatted at him. Ryder raised his own hand and started to puppet-duel with Jake.

“It’s not about you pitying people who aren’t asking for your pity,” Finn boomed. He was getting a little angry at all this kickback, though he got that most of them were probably just feeling very vulnerable and frustrated. They all looked at him, silliness in the background forgotten. “Or about looking down on other people who don’t have as much as you do.”

“I liked hanging with the little kids last year,” Brittany said. “That was really fun. They were so happy.”
“Losers spend their break cheering up the hard-luck cases and doling out soup,” Kitty argued.

And that was it, Finn figured. They felt like the losers. He could relate. He was about to speak to that, when Kurt spoke first, his voice ringing into the empty space.

“What I see here is a group of performers scared to do anything just because one opportunity has been taken away. Why give into that fear?” Kurt pursed his lips. “You’re afraid of what? Losing popularity? Losing each other? It’s not like the school can take anything else away from you. You should be afraid of losing yourself. Because popularity is fleeting, and it will not follow you after high school, but you can control whether or not you get to still be together as friends.”

Kurt walked over to the stage and set down the large duffle bag he brought with him. “We don’t have instruments in here yet, but if we end up renting the place for practices, maybe we can do some fundraising and get some equipment. For now, we use what we’ve got.”

Finn took that cue to reach into his own bag. “We’ve also got some flyers... There are community theatre parts available for last minute replacements in some plays, for whoever’s interested. What I wanna do is um, first get a set list for our performances over the break, and then those of you who want help with auditions, for now or for schools or other plays later... Well, we have a bonafide NYADA student here.”

“That’s the New York Arts and Drama Academy,” Kurt said. “And, as someone who failed the first time through... and at various New York auditions, I can at least give you some perspective on deciding how to audition. You guys have so much talent it’s comin’ out of your pores. Figuring out how to brand yourself part of deciding to be a professional artist who has to deal with the public, versus a regular artist who creates for him or herself. It’s a question of audience.”

“Speaking of audience.” Unique raised her hand halfway. “How are we dressing for these performances? What’s allowed?”

“You can be yourself,” Mercedes said. “We’ll talk exact wardrobe later, but I’ll make sure that part is taken care of.”

Finn looked around at the Glee club. Some of them hadn’t spoken much. Some still looked annoyed, or anxious about the setting.

“If you don’t want to be a part of this, you can leave,” Finn said suddenly. “I sat down with Kurt
and Mercedes, and we had a long talk. You need audiences to perform for, and you need to be thinking of that audience above everything else. These people have been through a lot. Singing a great song isn’t going to cure that. It doesn’t cure anything. But we’re not going to add to their bad day by giving them some half-assed performance where the performers don’t even care.”

“Well, I’m in,” Jake said immediately. “It’s better than sitting around all break being depressed.”

“Me too,” Marley said quickly. She looked at Finn and pressed her lips together.

Unique came over and locked arms with her. “If my girl’s in, I’m in.”

Marley smiled at her warmly and tapped Unique’s nose.

“I’d love to have another chance to perform,” Blaine said. “And for those of you not that into it, this is great to put on a resume. The Warblers used to do that during the off season all the time. Do a benefit concert in the grand auditorium to raise money for a local charity... I don’t think they’ve done that in a few years.”

“And we can’t do for profit, because that means you won’t be able to perform next year,” Finn added. “Believe me, we learned that quick.”

“But now that you mention it, they can do other types of performances,” Kurt pointed out. “I can talk to dad about that. Maybe there are other local places that wouldn’t mind some free actors in their commercials. You get the line on your CV either way.”

“Okay, I’m asking,” Artie said. “Is anyone against doing stuff versus singing in the snow for no reason while the Cheerios pelt us with things?”

All eyes went to Kitty. She rolled her eyes. “I guess. Could we get a maid service in here first?”

“Nope!” Kurt chirruped. “We’re gonna clean. The email asked you guys to wear comfortable clothes.” He unzipped his duffle and tossed her a rag.

Finn would treasure the look on her face to his grave. Kurt turned on the music, and soon bubbles
were flying and everyone was singing.

This was Glee. Finn had missed this.

***

Adam stretched back on the sofa, letting his feet hang over the armrest, and looked up at the soft, glowing Christmas lights around him. The apartment smelled like sugar cookies. Not that he’d baked, even though he would love to (he was scraping by until the next check); they had just lit up a candle that Jinx had brought home from her second job. It made the apartment very nice and Christmasy, and Adam was just tired enough to put on a playlist of winter songs, lay back, and take in their meager decorations affixed to the walls.

He liked their place together. It was small. It was cramped. Sometimes Jinx’s cat seemed like it had multiple personalities and tried to sit on his head in the mornings to be fed. But Adam felt lucky to have met Jinx during his sophomore year at NYADA. He might not have continued his studies, otherwise. He’d been missing his mum so dearly (still did, actually), and what with the blow up with his ex, and the wreckage from that mess, and then he’d gotten sick... Adam had barely managed to pass some of his midterms that semester. NYADA professors weren’t big on second chances, and certainly not from a performer that most of them didn’t quite believe in. Adam had Dr. Kohl and the dramatic arts department behind him, and Cassandra July seemed to like him (even if she critiqued his dancing brutally). Madam Tibideaux had always been lukewarm on him, however. A fact that tended to make itself clearer with every attempt to approach the administration lately, what with her promotion.

“Ugh. God, this stuff, Adam.” Jinx pushed the door open and set down a big bag. “Can’t you turn on some better music? I’m getting diabetes.”

“No. It’s Christmas, so I shan’t.”

She rolled her eyes and leaned over to give Pooka the cat a scratch on the head. “Have you eaten?”

“No, I was taking a break. Long shift. More people at the diner around Christmas.”

“Well, good. Don’t want them to close.” She pulled a box out of the bag and started picking at the edge of it.
“What’s that?”

“Space heater.”

“Do you want me to call the landlord again?”

“No. I don’t want to piss the madfuck off.”

“He won’t be pissed off.” Adam sat up and curled the ends of his sweater around his fingers. “He has to give us heating.”

“He’s just so weird about shit that doesn’t matter. I asked once already. You remember how crazy he got when Darla asked to leave some stuff in the hallway when she was moving.” Jinx pried the box open and pulled out the space heater. She tossed the box by the door, which Pooka immediately investigated.

“I can talk to him. He seems to get along with me better.”

“I defy anyone not to get along with you.” Jinx set the heater on a stool and plugged it in. “Okay, I have money. Where are we getting dinner?”

Adam got up a little bit after Jinx made the call, and set plates and napkins out on the floor. She got up to change the music to her own playlist, and Adam smiled as he heard a ska-esque song about spiking the eggnog start playing.

“Yours is certainly more cheerful,” Adam said, pouring pink sparkling Hana Awaka for each of them into a zombie and owl mug respectively.

“I don’t know why you want to sit around and mope anyway.” Jinx leaned back against the sofa and sighed.

“I’m not moping. I’m basking.” Adam waved his hand in the air. “Glowy lights!”
“They are nice. Even nicer right now.” She closed one eye and tilted her head to the side. “I need new glasses.”

“How badly?”

“I’m getting halos. Not metaphorically.” She flipped her glasses onto the top of her head and accepted the offered zombie mug of sake.

Adam sat with her and sipped his own sake. He didn’t drink often, so he savored the sweet, pink rice wine. The two of them chatted companionably for a few minutes before Jinx decided that she had to share her day with him—drama around her second job in Bushwick. Jinx had such a keen mind for details that Adam enjoyed hearing her stories, even if he’d never met the people involved.

“Anyway, she quit, but not before turning our lives upside down for three weeks. Hard shift. What’s going on with you lately, Mr. Cheerful?” Jinx started to poke him, but there was a buzz from downstairs, so Adam patted her knee and inched the pink bottle back toward her and rose to get the takeout himself.

“Coming down!” he said into the intercom. Then he slipped on some flat shoes and headed out to jog down the stairs. It was even colder out in the hallway, and the staircases just went around and around. No elevator. He’d definitely had days when he’d considered moving and paying more to have one available. Walk-ups had been a bitch, the last time he’d gotten an upper respiratory infection.

It had been a little scary, as well. He was no germophobe, but the anxiety that came with the first serious illness after diagnosis was no joke. It was the only time he’d gone to group without prodding. He’d needed the release of stress that dearly.

Adam opened the door and smiled at the delivery man, who held a large, clearly heavy paper bag with “MAI NOODLES” emblazoned across the front. His arms were covered, but his sweater clearly clung to broad, well-developed shoulders.


“Picking up for.” Adam held out the money, with tip, and took the bag from him.
“Have I seen you somewhere?” The young man had honey brown eyes that folded into warm crescents as he smiled.

“Oh, I dunno. Have you ever been in The Crab Apple Café? In the Flatiron district? I work there, most days."

“Huh. Maybe.” He leaned against the door. “So you like Vietnamese, huh? Are you vegetarian only, or do you occasionally like a good piece of meat?”

Adam raised his brows and looked over the delivery boy. Yes, boy. He had to be eighteen or so. A bit young, even if there weren’t other factors.

“That wasn’t exactly subtle,” Adam replied with a smile.

“I don’t usually deliver to someone worth making a fool of myself for.”

“That’s sweet, darling, but I’m not exactly looking for a date right now.”

“Aw. Well.” He shrugged his shoulders, still grinning. “Worth a try. Enjoy your dinner. Hope I didn’t make it awkward for you and your guy.”

“My roommate, actually, and I’m sure she’ll laugh.”

The delivery boy gave him a sharp salute, turned, and jogged down the steps. Adam smelled the fragrant dinner in the heavy bag and headed back up the staircase.

He might not mention the proposition to Jinx. She’d start giving him the side-eye for once again shutting down even the slim possibility of a date. But he still wasn’t ready. It was possible that he wouldn’t ever be.

***

“You okay?” Kurt sat down next to Blaine.
Today’s practice had been pretty grueling. Their first performance would be before the end of the week, and the club members hadn’t shied away from difficult songs. In the end, they’d all decided that they wanted to put on the best show possible for their viewers, and even Kitty was snapping her fingers and forcing people to work their hardest. Kurt was kind of proud of them. He remembered what a struggle it had been to get into practice after losing Regionals sophomore year.

“Just tired, I guess.” Blaine sighed.

Kurt drew his legs up, with his knees splayed apart slightly, and wrapped his arms around them. “Are you feeling okay?”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m just not sleeping very well. I’m nervous.”

“Not so much about singing for a bunch of sick kids, hm?” Kurt hesitated for a moment, then rubbed Blaine’s back.

“I kind of deserve this. Thanks for going with me.” Blaine sighed again and scrubbed his hands over his face.

“We’ll get the test results soon. And you’ll be fine,” Kurt said firmly.

“You don’t know that.”

“You said Cooper and your parents were around more. That you were all spending more time together?” Kurt shrugged his head to the side. “I think the only reason I survived high school at all sometimes is because I had my family. Whatever happens, you’re stronger than you think, Blaine. I’m not saying that you don’t make mistakes, even selfish, careless ones. But you don’t deserve this. No one does.”

He paused and shrugged both shoulders. “Not even Sebastian.”

Blaine laughed and rubbed his lips. “I don’t think Sebastian worries about this kind of stuff.”
“I bet he does. He doesn’t think about it the same way that we do, but I don’t mistake his cavalier attitude about sex for complete ignorance of it.”

Blaine rested his chin on his knees and looked up at Kurt. “Are you getting even taller?”

“No. Believe me, I would know. I’d have to redo the hems on all my pants.”

“You just look so different. That’s a good thing. I just... I dunno.”

Kurt stretched one leg out in front of him and folded his hands over one knee. “I’m not sure I’ll be recognizable by the end of the year. I’m changing so quickly. I spent the latter half of 2012 feeling worthless, and now I have this amazing job, and I’m in the school of my dreams. It’s hard to even fathom something this good happening to me.”

“You deserve it. You worked really hard on your auditions.” Blaine licked his lips and shook his head. “She should’ve let you in. If not the first time, for your second audition tape.”

“Maybe. I don’t know. She might have been a little right. Tibideaux is looking for something specific. That’s actually what I talk about when we discuss auditions after practice. I was anticipating not being good enough, so I just showed her everything I had... and my audition tape, while technically very strong... I know it was hollow. I felt hollow when I was making it.” Kurt smiled suddenly, trying to push the gloom of what he was saying away. “I guess it is kind of difficult to put much depth into ‘Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go.’ I... I wasn’t even supposed to send that one in. I was just so distracted when I was putting my materials together that I put the wrong file on the disc.”

Blaine was quiet for a moment more. Funny, because he usually had something to say. “I know you don’t want to hear it, but I am sorry.”

“The funny thing is that I know putting on a happy face and shellacking on a veneer of positivity only works when people aren’t looking too closely.” Kurt leaned on his palm and turned to face Blaine. “Sometimes when you’re smiling, the whole world doesn’t smile with you.”

“I don’t want to be the jerk ex, but you’re actually really good at putting on a happy face. Even when you’re miserable.” Blaine creased his eyes and jerked his furry brows upward. “I’m not the most astute guy in the world. I think I missed stuff all the time-”
“I obviously missed signs, too.”

“Yeah, but... My point is that sometimes it’s hard to get past that veneer of yours. Even if you see it.”

Kurt narrowed his eyes into slits. “I like to think of it as a leathery hide.”

Blaine dipped his head forward and laughed.

“That’s enough, lovebirds!” Tina yelled.

“Oh, stick a legwarmer in it!” Kurt shouted. He pushed himself up on his knees and offered Blaine a hand up.

Blaine took it and quickly looked over at his friends. Kurt let go of his hand and headed over to Finn. He hoped one day, this would stop being so terribly awkward.

He also hoped one day that he could trust Blaine again.

***

That evening after rehearsal, while Finn stayed to clean up and work some of their upcoming lesson plans out with Mercedes, Kurt took Finn’s truck to run some of the kids back to their houses. The car started off full, with shivering show choir kids in the flatbed cheerfully singing carols, but eventually they all dwindled away, one by one, until only Marley remained, huddled on the bench behind the seats.

“You can come sit up here,” Kurt offered, patting the leather seat cover. “The heat doesn’t work too well, but it’s somewhat better shotgun.”

He slowed to a stop and waited for Marley to crawl up to the front seat. She took a moment, seeming to decide whether she really wanted to be up there, then twisted her angular body in between the seats and fell onto the leather, her legs tangling in front of her.
Kurt smiled gently as she sorted herself out. There were moments when he didn’t recognize her as a sixteen year old. She was so solemn sometimes. There was a weight on her shoulders. Then sometimes she would dance around the practice space, flailing her arms in the air and beaming in a pure, free happiness.

Today had not borne happiness for her. Today, he’d noticed Kitty saying something to her that had caused the spirit to just draw completely out of her. Then Kitty had stormed away and snapped at three other people before bowing over to work on their costumes and pretend she wasn’t crying. Marley had simply shut down. She could barely be heard during vocal practice, and she couldn’t seem to stop fidgeting. Even now she kept pulling at the fabric of her loose shirt. Her hands reminded him of the spindly legs of a bird in winter.

And it was too, too familiar. The genders were different. Dave may not have worn a cheerleading uniform, but Kurt could see the similarity nevertheless. He needed to talk to Finn about this before things got even worse.

Kurt turned on the radio and hummed along to the music, idly joining in with the lyrics every once and a while. As he tuned into what he recognized as his old neighborhood, Kurt realized that Marley was humming with him. He looked to her, and he knew the words, so he began to sing along.

“I can’t stay on your life support. There’s a shortage in the switch. I can’t stay on your morphine ‘cause it’s makin’ me itch.” He waved a hand around in air and gave Marley a saucy look. “See I tried to call the nurse again, but she’s being a little bitch.”

“I think I’ll get outta here,” Marley joined in.

And then they were singing together. Marley had seemed so small in rehearsals, and Kurt had barely noticed her (or anyone) during Grease. He hadn’t realized how rich and powerful her voice actually was.

“Where I can run, just as fast as I can! To the middle of nowhere! To the middle of my frustrated fears, and I swear! You’re just like a pill! Instead of making me better, you’re making me ill! You’re making me ill!”

Marley danced in the seat beside him, bouncing and swiveling her head around. Kurt laughed, and enjoyed the blend of her full, warm voice with his own bright tone. They continued to rock out to
P!nk, even after Kurt had pulled the car up to the address Finn had written down for him (with the note that Marley should be dropped off last). When the song had finished, they looked at one another, laughing, and Marley threw her head back and pressed her fingertips to her mouth.

“I should’ve failed senior year so we could duet together at Sectionals, huh?” Kurt nudged her when her expression tried to grow serious.

“Can you sing in Korean?” she asked. “Because I dunno if you’d cut it with Finn’s avant guard show choir plans.”

“Oh ha. Not that I know of, but I learned ‘Music of the Night’ in German, so I think I could probably figure it out.” Kurt unlocked the doors and unbuckled so he could get out with her.

She shifted her bag onto her shoulder and pulled her jeans up at the waist with one hand, and then followed him to the sagging porch attached to an equally saggy yellow house, fumbling for her keys.

“Is anyone home?” Kurt peered into the darkened house.

“Mom’s at her other job, so, um...” Marley looked back at him and turned the key in the door. She jigged it twice, then pressed her foot against the door, turned the handle, and gave a hard push.

“Oh, the wonky lock dance, I remember you well,” Kurt mused to himself as he came in with her. She didn’t seem to question his continued presence, which he was glad for, because he wanted a moment or two with her.

The house was cold. Very cold. The floors were hard wood but worn, and there was a battered olive green dumpster-dive of a couch with duct tape patches by an uneven coffee table. On top of that were a mess of papers, bills, and various hairbands, combs, coins, and makeup supplies. And there was an odd odor in the air, like the mold Kurt remembered from his basement bedroom. Even after they’d scrubbed it out, the smell had remained, only to be banished with Kurt’s efficient use of Febreeze candles.

Marley grabbed a sweater flung over a lawn chair sitting opposite of the couch and pulled it on over her head. “Sorry it’s so cold in here. The heat’s been out.”
Kurt blinked. “This is Ohio. We’ve got weather.”

Marley shrugged. “We’ve just been piling on extra blankets and stuff.”

“Won’t your landlord fix it?” Kurt pocketed his keys and frowned at the space. A narrow staircase, a living room, and a cramped kitchen. From the size of the building, there was probably one bedroom and maybe a bathroom upstairs. It looked like someone might be sleeping on that couch full time.

“We’re not really supposed to be here,” she said, walking around the living room and nervously trying to straighten things. “We’re kind of renting from a renter. So she has to get the landlord to do it, but she moved to Westerville for work, and he doesn’t know we’re in here yet.”

Kurt’s brow furrowed. That wasn’t exactly an anxiety-free living situation. Then it dawned on him what else was missing here: Christmas decorations of any kind.

He put the thought aside. “Could I see the tank? For the heat?”

“Oh, um. I’m not sure where it is?” Marley started looking around.

Kurt smiled. “I bet I can find it. Where are your bathrooms?”

He let Marley guide the way and found the system pretty quickly in the downstairs laundry.

“I thought that was a closet,” she muttered.

“Your friend should’ve shown you where this is.”

Kurt rolled up his sleeves and pulled up the plunger-like lever. His eyes scanned over the system, while Marley shifted from foot to foot behind him. She was probably freezing. He touched the large pipe running into the bottom of the boiler, and then took a look at the valves.

“It’s the fuel. I mean, first we need to clean these valves, but you’re out of fuel.”
Marley’s eyes widened. “How do you get more?”

“I’m gonna call my dad and have him get some.”

“Oh, no, he can’t—”

“Hon, he’d be mad if I didn’t call him with this. And anyway, he knows friggin’ everyone in town worth knowing. That’s how he got to be a senator for a year.” Kurt rubbed the dirt between his fingers and reached for his phone. “Hold on a sec.”

One phone call later, interspersed with Kurt having Marley bring him things to clean out the valves, and Kurt was sure they would get heat in this place before the temperature dropped again later in the week. He hoped it was soon enough.

“This is really nice of you,” Marley said as Kurt washed his hands in the kitchen sink.

“I’m not sure I consider this nice. I think it might be the basic level of humanity, not to let people die of exposure.” Kurt wiped his hands on a red kitchen towel and turned around to lean back against the counter. “I’ll bring some space heaters to the next practice, and you should take a couple home until we get the heat working.”

“Do you think anyone—” She cut herself off and nodded. “Thanks.”

Kurt reached over and touched her shoulder. Marley’s eyes were grateful, but cautious. Like she didn’t know how to owe him this much.

“How much longer before your mom is here?” Kurt returned to the busted couch and sat on one of the arms.

“I don’t know. Um. Probably soon. You can go, if you need to.”

Kurt narrowed his eyes. “I could. But I’m on break, so it doesn’t really matter. Come hang with
me. I wanted to ask you something.”

Marley sank into the couch and looked up at him. “I’m so glad Glee is still going. It’s even better like this. All that pressure...”

“Yeah, it can get pretty tense. Is that what you and Kitty were talking about earlier?”

Marley looked at her hands and a little line appeared in her brows. “That’s not... I’m fine now. We were just talking.”

Kurt swallowed, then took a deep breath. “Y’know, high school was pretty rough for me, too.”

He didn’t tell all of it. That would take too long, and it was too graphic for a sixteen year old (never mind that he’d been that age living some of it). But the bullying, the groping, the sexual assault, the death threats. All there, if in brief. He didn’t look her in the eye as he recounted all of this stuff. He just sort of fixed his eyes on a stain on the far wall.

When he finally slowed, he could see Marley’s wide eyes on him. She reached for his hand, and he let her squeeze for a moment.

“Really, the trick about high school is to keep breathing and just survive it... You still cold, sweetie? I’ll get a blanket.” He rose and grabbed one of the blankets piled in the open closets.

“She doesn’t mean it,” Marley said quietly as Kurt wrapped the blanket around her and curled in next to her. “I mean, I don’t think she does, anymore. She said, like a week ago, that she didn’t mean for me to get hurt, but...”

“What did she do?” Kurt asked gently.

Marley shook her head. “Just... stuff she said. Just words. Kitty never did anything to me.”

“Words can do a lot, though. ‘I’m gonna kill you’ are just words. ‘Faggot’ and ‘lady’ are just words. But they changed the entire environment at school. Just words. They made McKinley a war zone for me.”
Marley blinked a few times and her nose wrinkled. “I’m so sorry that happened to you.”

Kurt combed his fingers through her hair.

“I don’t think it was the words, though. I think it’s just me. I’ve always worried,” she admitted. “I don’t want to. I love my mom more than anything. But she was always dieting when I was growing up. Always. And my aunt, too. I love them, but it really scares me that I could end up just like them. And Mom gets sick, sometimes, and the cold makes it impossible for her to get up the stairs. Her joints aren’t good. I know the weight came before, y’know? But her health makes it even harder for her to ever get rid of it and it just feels like if I start to gain weight, I’ll just get bigger and bigger and bigger—”

“Honey.” Kurt met her eye, and she let out a sigh. “Marley, you can’t think about your life like that. Metabolism changes happen with age, hormones, and screwing up your body from dieting. You can’t change the first two, except with medication sometimes, but you can live your life while trying to be healthy. I guess I’m not telling you anything you couldn’t find out from the counselors. But I tell my dad all the friggin’ time that he can’t skip meals, and he does, the dope.”

Marley laughed softly.

“He’s not single anymore. Y’know. He’s not on his own without me like he used to be, but I get the worry. Trying to take care of your parent. Worrying about inheriting their health problems. It really colors your relationship with them, but it’s not everything you have together.” Kurt laid his head back and looked at her. “You know you’re absolutely beautiful, right? You do know that?”

“No, I’m not. I’m plain, and chubby, and boring-looking, and my eyes are too close together.”

Kurt narrowed his eyes. “I think you have some kind of poltergeist messing with your mirror.”

Marley’s lips formed a half smile, and she looked own at her fingers.

“Seriously. You are lovely. And I say that as a gay man who could either dress you up as a Glamazon diva superstar or imagine you as an adorable little twink if you buzzed off all your hair.”

Marley chuckled softly, then tilted her head back and smiled at him. “I’m not sure I believe you, but that sweet of you to say.”
“Will you do me a favor? Don’t listen to anything Kitty says. Not a single word. If she tells you that Santa Claus isn’t real, don’t believe her.”

Marley let out a spirited laugh and swatted his arm.

“She clearly has her own problems. If I learned anything surviving McKinley is that some of your bullies are struggling as much as you are. But you aren’t responsible for her damage. You have enough on you just to handle your own. Just don’t talk to her.”

Marley nodded. “Yeah. Yeah, I get it.”

“And take care of you, too. I know your mom is top on your list of priorities, but make you a priority, too.”

“She has me going to therapy sessions. And we really can’t afford them. They are crazy expensive. It’s like $200 a session. That’s groceries for three months.” Marley crossed her arms. “I feel like I have to get better, fast, or we’ll be in even bigger trouble, financially.”

“But you get that this extra stress isn’t helping you do that?” Kurt squeezed her shoulders. “Do you trust your mom to handle your finances?”

She shrugged. “Sometimes. She can’t handle everything. She won’t even let me get a job. She says school is my job.”

“My dad used to say that, too. And, of course, I never listened.”

“How am I supposed to not care? We’re all each other has.”

“Because you can’t control your mother’s behavior, and you can’t change your family’s situation by yourself, but getting better? That’s what you can do. It’s something you can focus on. Making you better is making things for your family better, because Marley, you matter. And if you can only afford so many sessions with this person, there are options for continued treatment. Have you ever talked to Ms. Pillsbury?”

“She’s not that helpful. She gave me a pamphlet that says, ‘So You Like to Throw Up.’”
Kurt held back a laugh at the deadpan look of judgment for their quirky ‘guidance’ counselor. “She can be a little... I should show you some of the pamphlets I got from her. Her and Mr. Schue. Teachers of the year.”

Marley rolled her eyes. “I don’t like to throw up. And I really hate the laxatives. That’s not what it’s about. When I was thirteen, it was just... drinking a lot of water to fill up. Or I’d just take like, an apple for lunch and maybe a piece of cheese so I wouldn’t get dizzy. Whatever it takes to keep you going, and then, you learn to like the feeling of being empty. Because that’s what ‘being thin’ feels like, you know? And then... without that feeling, anything else feels like you’re going to bust out of your clothes.”

Kurt nodded slowly. “When I was on the Cheerios I survived mostly on celery and Diet Coke.”

“That’s awful. Diet Coke is terrible for you, dude.”

Kurt covered his mouth and shook with laughter.

“The bulima... It’s what Kitty suggested I do. And I’m so dumb. She acted like she wanted to help me, and I believed her. And sometimes, it really felt like we were friends. She sang a duet with me, and we were good at it... She promised to let me know if I looked fat in something...” She sighed. “What is wrong with me?”

“You’re honest. You believe in people. After I came back from Dalton, I was the same way. I had been tortured by these people for years... but when I came back, and they weren’t actively attacking me, I thought they were better.” Kurt sucked in one cheek and shook his head. “And they wrote me in for Prom Queen.”

Marley’s brows shot up.

“That was... humiliating.” Kurt patted her knee. “You’re not the only dumb bunny here. You go through high school, and you get your scars, and you hope to come out on the other end able to still relate to people. Kitty’s one girl. That doesn’t mean you can’t trust people ever.”

Marley nodded, seeming to think about that for a moment. Then, “Did you win?”
“Ha!” Kurt bobbed his head. “I won. And I took my pictures in my crown, and I went up in front of everyone to accept it, and I said, ‘Eat your heart out, Kate Middleton!’”

“What?” Marley gestured with one hand emphatically. “I wanna be fierce like that.”

“We’re gonna make you fierce, babe. I’m gonna leave Unique in charge, and she’ll report back to me.”

“Can we do our reports with music videos? Because she and I sing really well together.” Her eyes looked up and to the side as she spoke. “And I want to use glitter, and Julie Andrews.”

“I think those kinds of reports would make my day.” Kurt tightened his lips and looked up to the ceiling. “Maybe I could send back lessons on shade throwing.”

“I’m pretty good at that, actually. Y’know. In my head.” She twisted her arms around as she grinned. “But... I don’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings.”

“Hmm, yeaaah. It needs to come out of your mouth.”

Marley scrunched her lips together and rested her head on Kurt’s shoulder. “Yeah, yeah. It’s just easier, when you’re defending someone else, to say what you think of people.” She sighed again. “Do you have to go?”

“Not for a little while. I can stick around.” In fact, he had no intention of leaving her there alone. He remembered what it was like to wait for his father to come home from work in an empty house.

“Can you tell me about New York? I’ve always wanted to go. My audition song for Glee was about New York.”

Kurt petted her hair. “Oh, dahling, I would love to tell you about New York.”

***
Finn came down the stairs rubbing his eyes. He hadn’t changed out of his clothes yet. He’d just come straight in after Mercedes had dropped him off, and fallen onto his bed, dead to the world for a few hours, at least. But he heard the truck pull up and then managed to drag himself out of bed and into the bathroom. After peeing and washing his hands and face, he’d poked his head in Kurt’s bedroom to see if he was in there before heading down the stairs.

A light was on in the kitchen, and Kurt was singing softly, his high voice perfectly articulating every word:

“Girls in white dresses with blue satin sashes, snowflakes that stay on my nose and eyelashes, silver-white winters that melt into spring...”

“Hey,” Finn said, announcing himself.

Kurt looked up from the table, where he’d arranged paints and various crafty things. There were some other bags beside him, and Finn tilted his head, trying to figure out exactly what his brother was doing.

“Hey. How was whatever you were doing with Mercedes?” Kurt picked up a little box and opened it. There was a small glass rose inside. He then opened up several paints and bit his lip as he looked at the rose critically.

“Oh, uh, fine.” Finn shrugged his head to the side and sat next to Kurt. “We figured out the harmonies on ‘Happy Xmas’ and ‘I’ve Got My Love to Keep Me Warm.’ So, uh... what kept you? You were out a long time.”

“Mama Rose wasn’t home, so I stayed with Little Rose for a while...” Kurt’s brow furrowed as he painted something very, very carefully onto the rose. Then he continued, “Their heat is out, too. So after I dropped by Walmart, I brought them a couple of space heaters. I just decided that it couldn’t wait until I saw them again.”

“Oh. Wow. That sucks. I mean the heat being out. Is she okay?”

Kurt bobbed his head from side to side noncommittally.

“What is that?” Finn asked finally. “What are you making?”
“Raindrops on roses.” Kurt set the rose aside and opened up another. “And whiskers on kittens. Bright copper kettles and warm woolen mittens.”

Finn laughed. “Are we going to redo the Christmas decorations?”

“No. We’re going to give Marley and her mom something beautiful to look at in that dismal house of theirs. Marley likes Julie Andrews, apparently, and so do I.” He began painting raindrops on the second rose.

Finn’s brows shot up and reached for the package with the hooks. “Oh. So these need to be ornaments. You’ll need something attached to them. Lemme do that part.”

Kurt smiled up at him warmly. “Thank you.”

Finn got up to grab the glue, then returned and began fixing hooks onto all the little kittens, and then when the roses dried, them too. The two of them worked together with companionable humming.

“So, how’ve you been, Finn? I kinda feel like I’ve busied us up so much with projects that we haven’t really had time to talk.”

Finn set down a little present ornament in the drying row. “Things are fine. Better, with you here motivating everyone.”

“They really respond to you.” Kurt shook his head. “Just like people did when we were in high school. You don’t always have the ideas, but that’s not really your job, if you’re going to teach them. I mean, really teach, and not lecture. Most people don’t work that way, actually. You just... need to learn how to facilitate learning a little better. And it’s not exactly your fault that Mr. Schue disappeared and didn’t teach you how. Not that he was always the best.”

“It’s really hard. Everyone has their own ideas, and the kids have all this personal stuff.” Finn sighed. “Nothing’s gone right. I mean, I guess we’re lucky we kept Blaine, but I think any day that the new guys are gonna try to whack him in the head with a chair and take his solos.”
“Ah, Glee. Pack of diva monsters. Nothing changes.” Kurt was quiet for a moment. “You should keep Kitty and Marley apart.”

Finn lifted his head. “Uh. They get along okay now. Did Marley say something?”

“No, Kitty said something, to her. And of course Marley won’t say exactly what, but there’s a lot of pressure for her to be ‘okay’.” Kurt set down a bell and looked straight at him. “I can say something if you want. I’ve just been trying to piece this timeline together, between the problems Marley already had, to the things Kitty, and some of the others, have said about her and her mother, and what Tina said about Marley not fitting into her costume during the play. Marley was painfully thin then.”

Finn’s hands froze on a little kettle. “Do you think Tina...?”

“I don’t know what Tina planned or didn’t plan. But I do know that if the costume keeps getting smaller, and Marley keeps on getting smaller, at some point someone had to notice that the measurements were being screwed with, and the person making those measurements should have noticed and said something. Do you read me? I think something more was going on, and I know that Kitty was putting words in her ear at the same time.” Kurt rubbed his fingers over his mouth. “I’m not saying to kick Kitty out. But I’m just barely saying that.”

He rose and walked over to the counter. “Do you want some coffee?”

“Dude, I hate coffee.”

Kurt’s laugh rang out and shattered the tension in the air. “Tea?”

“Uh...”

“I’ll bring you a soda.”

“I’ll keep on eye out,” Finn promised. He paused. “Santana said... it was right before sectionals, but she said that Kitty gave Marley the laxatives.”

“I believe it,” Kurt half-sang. He put the kettle on and bent over the fridge to grab Finn’s Mr. Pibb.
“Kids are so hard.”

“We weren’t any easier. Bullying, homelessness, teen pregnancies...”

“I am so glad none of the girls are pregnant. I’d be half a second away from punching the kid who did it in the face.”

Kurt laughed again as he poured Finn his soda. “You wouldn’t side with the guy?”

“Depends on the guy. I don’t think any of our girls would lie about something like that... except Kitty, and she wouldn’t not use protection.”

“Ah, teaching. The one job that never stays the same.”

“They’re all weird little bundles of issues.” Finn took his soda from Kurt, who had poured it into a Christmas mug. “I can’t believe how much I miss you.”

Kurt’s brows rose.

“I know, hard left into a new topic. But I do. I miss talking about stuff with you.” Finn shrugged and looked down at their handy-work. “I miss doing projects like this. Planning funerals, and weddings. Working through things over a glass of warm milk. I didn’t even know warm milk had magical properties that make you feel better.”

Kurt smiled and crossed his arms.

“But only when you heat it up. It doesn’t work unless you do it,” Finn said in his most deadpan, oblivious tone.

Kurt sucked in his lower lip, and his face lit up in a big smile. “I miss you, too. You know, you can come see me, even if you don’t want to see Rachel. I can’t always get off work, but maybe if we both save, we could get you a weekend ticket sometime...?”
“That sounds pretty awesome. Or maybe spring break. I bet Rachel goes on another cruise.”

“If she’s not working The. Broad. Way. by then,” Kurt replied, with jazz hands for effect.

“Nah. Not yet. I mean, I believe in her. I think she can do it, but she’s got stuff to learn, before she makes it.” Finn drank his soda and watched as Kurt went to get the kettle off the stove. “If she got a part now, she’d probably start back-talking the director and get fired off her first big break.”

Kurt made a noise as he poured his tea.

“Huh? What was that? Trouble in the Hummelberry loft?”

“I don’t want to get into it. She’s had mega attitude since she won the Winter Showcase. It’s like, yes, yes, they really like you, Sally Fields. Now stop giving people random acceptance speeches.”

Finn bowed over and outright cackled. “God, I love her.”

“Good, because someone will have to identify the body if she doesn’t stop warbling in the wee hours of the morning and stealing all my hot water.”

Finn rose and came up behind Kurt to rub his shoulders. “I’ve never lived with anyone before, but that one night our parents tried to shove me and Rachel together was really... Maybe you just need to talk to her.”

“It’s fine. Once I’m at NYADA, we’ll be spending more time together as friends instead of just roomies. We’ll re-bond. Like welding a bumper back onto a very, very annoying rear end.”

Finn snorted and gave Kurt’s shoulders another squeeze as Kurt looked back at him.

“Let’s finish this up? Tomorrow’s another big day.”
“Thank you for helping me with this, Finn.” Kurt bobbed his teabag for a moment as he walked back to the table. “It could’ve taken all night.”

Finn grinned lopsidedly. “We should totally sneak off in the middle of practice tomorrow and set it all up in Marley’s house.”

“This is why I love you, big brother.” Kurt took his seat and held a paintbrush aloft. “You’re really just as much a fan of sentiment and big gestures as I am.”

“Shh.” Finn picked up another box of hooks. “Don’t tell.”
The nurse led Kurt into a smaller room and took her seat across from him.

He tilted his head to the side, his mind only half in the room. Blaine had been taken into the other room to get his results. He was so nervous. Among Kurt’s feelings of irritation and judgement and hurt, there was a little concern, as well. He couldn’t help it. A person couldn’t help still caring about his first love, could he? Especially about something like this.

“There’s no easy way to say this,” she said in a gentle but firm tone, inclining her head forward to meet Kurt’s eye.

He lifted his chin and nodded. “Yes?”

“I’m very sorry.” She sighed softly. “But your second test came up positive.”

Kurt’s body straightened up as though he was being pulled up tight on a string. The nurse’s name flew out of his head, and his lungs refused to take in air.

“I... My second... I’m sorry, what?”

It had been nearly a week since he’d gone in for these tests, just to support Blaine. Coming back to the clinic today, he had been preparing himself for two things: 1) possibly seeing Sebastian because he seemed to be perpetually lurking in places where Kurt liked to or needed to be, and 2) supporting Blaine if his ex’s luck had failed him that night.

Kurt wasn’t prepared to hear these words coming at himself.

The nurse folded her hands. “Your tests came up positive,” she repeated, her voice firm but caring. “I’m so sorry. This is obviously still a huge shock.”

“It’s... it’s uh...” Kurt blinked a few times and tried to keep his throat from closing. “I’m what? Are... No. No. No, that can’t be right.”
The nurse licked her lips and reached over to touch his hand. He pulled away and closed his eyes. His arms hugged himself tightly, and his face burned along with his eyes. He could hardly hear what she was saying, couldn’t begin to make sense of this moment. Hadn’t he been good? Hadn’t he been careful?

“You’re going to need to notify your sexual partners,” the woman continued gently.

Kurt just stared at her. He couldn’t be hearing this. He couldn’t be.

“Do you need to think for a minute? Take some time, make sure you get all the names—”

“There are only two,” Kurt blurted. He looked up at her plaintively, as though she might just take this back if he convinced her of what a good boy he’d been. “Only two, and the other one’s right out there. Does... Does he...?”

She shook her head. “I can’t talk to you about his medical information, even if I did have his chart, but the two of you should definitely—”

“How can this be happening? I thought being a prude got me nothing else but protection from this!”

But he hadn’t been his normal prudish self lately, had he? His face began to burn hotter. He wanted to hide.

Her expression was pure sympathy, though, and then words were coming out of her mouth again and Kurt bowed his head and shoved his hands through his hair. He couldn’t breathe. A hand descended on his shoulder.

“Sweetheart, I want you to come back for counseling. You’ll want to get treatment as soon as possible. Medical advances really make it very easy to live with HIV these days, and while there isn’t a cure yet, it isn’t necessarily a death sentence. Okay?”

He said nothing.
“I’m going to get the doctor to talk with you—”

“I don’t live here,” Kurt said suddenly. “I live in New York. I only did this to make sure my friend got tested.”

“Then lucky for you he needed the push, hm? Detecting this early could have saved your life.” She stood from her seat. “We can give you counseling, set you up for an exam, and send the information to your primary care provider. They would be able to give you a referral to a specialist and the closest ASO and therapy options. Do you have a PCP in New York? It’s really not a good idea to put off treatment.”

“I do. My job, um... Yeah, I do.”

“Good. Let me get the doctor.” She rubbed his back gently. “Just try to breathe.”

***

Blaine was still reeling from the wave of relief that had washed over him when Nurse Erin had given him his results, followed by a short lecture on safe sex.

There was nothing more terrifying in his mind, right now. Some guys didn’t think about HIV much these days. Some thought there was practically no risk anymore. Blaine sure hadn’t considered it much, until he’d met Kurt.

"If I’m perfectly honest," Kurt said as he walked alongside Blaine on the way back to the Audi, “as much as I love the music and the artistry and the energy of Rent, I never really appreciated it much before.”

Blaine looked over at Kurt. Kurt always kept a safe distance from him. Maybe his new friend was making sure Blaine didn’t get the wrong idea. He seemed a little bit like a touch-me-not, and that was fine, though Blaine had to keep that in mind sometimes when they were together. Kurt was magnetic. He wasn’t exactly attractive. Kind of a sweet face, though. It just was harder to keep away from Kurt than to just be pulled into his field of influence.
“Yeah? I admit I’d only ever heard the music before now. I never had anyone to see it with.”

“I watched the movie with a few kids when it came out. We weren’t supposed to be there, of course, but we got in, anyway.” Kurt’s head hung downward and he looked at the snow as their feet crunched through it. “One of the girls-- Mandy, I guess-- saw Angel for the first time and squealed loud enough to bother half the other people in the theater: ‘Look, Kurt, that’s you!’ “

Blaine laughed loudly.

Kurt looked at him and curled his hands into his sleeves and then his arms around himself. “And... I’m not a drag queen, but at the time? It was close enough. It was close enough to the first image I’d ever seen in movies or tv that reflected me. So I thought, ‘That’s it. That’s me.’”

He paused and stopped walking. “And then I died.”

Blaine couldn’t help it. He leaned forward in a bark of a laugh. “Gosh. Yeah, I didn’t think of it that way.”

“Well, there’s more now than when that came out, and there was Will & Grace, which my dad wouldn’t let me watch, and Queer Eye for the Straight Guy which my dad also would not let me watch.”

Blaine shook his head, and they continued down the sidewalk.

“That’s not fair. I’m sorry your dad’s not more supportive. My dad... He’s weird about it, but he would never stop me from watching something... or going somewhere.”

“He was just... Well, for Will & Grace, it wasn’t like it was age appropriate for me when it was on. I think he also didn’t like Jack as a role model for me. He doesn’t like it that the guy who is so invested in musical theatre is the butt of the joke so often. Also that the straighter acting guy is a successful lawyer, but the less straight acting guy is basically a dumb slut.”

“I don’t think he’s that bad...”
“Well, from my dad’s perspective. I doubt he’s watched more than an episode.”

Blaine paused. “Okay. True. Did you know that John Barrowman went out for the part of Will and was rejected?”

“I just don’t think it’s believable for John Barrowman to be single as often as Will was. He’s liquid sex.”

“He’s okay. He kind of reminds me of my brother, so I’m not that attracted to him.”

Kurt’s brows raised high. “Your brother looks like John Barrowman? Do tell.”

“I would...” Blaine shook his head. “Rather not.”

Kurt chuckled. “I’m lucky Finn’s not any cuter than he already is. Or I’d be in trouble.”

“I think we’re lucky to live in the era of LOGO.”

“Absolute truth.”

Until Kurt made him feel all insecure about using protection, Blaine hadn’t given his experience with Eli another thought either. It hadn’t been an issue with between him and Kurt. Kurt always insisted on using protection because of cleanliness. He’d forced Blaine to read one of the pamphlets Burt have given him about urinary tract infections. That hadn’t exactly been sexy. Maybe necessary, but not like the stuff Cooper had shown him.

Blaine rubbed his hands over his pants and looked at the door where they’d taken Kurt. What were they talking about in there? His meeting had only lasted a few minutes. Maybe Kurt was collecting information, or doing something responsible like getting the latest statistics and extra condoms. Kurt was always well-prepared like that.

By Blaine’s calculations, Kurt had been in there almost twenty minutes total when the door opened, and he tentatively stepped out, holding a small bag and some pamphlets. Nurse Brenda gave him a smile and squeezed his free hand, and finally, Kurt turned out towards the waiting
room. He caught sight of Blaine, then looked away and headed for the door.

“Kurt!” Blaine blinked, looked back at Nurse Brenda, who was at the front desk filling out some paperwork already, and then hurried after him.

He burst out the door and scanned the parking lot Kurt, who had stalked around the side of the building and was now pacing back and forth in a little groove that he’d created in the snow. His arms crossed tightly over himself, and he held the materials the doctor had given him in one hand with a death grip.

Blaine realized that he was holding Kurt’s coat, so he came toward him, slowly.

“Hey. Kurt?”

“Don’t you even look at me!” Kurt snapped. He lifted his head, uncharacteristically messed hair falling into his enraged eyes. “Don’t even talk to me. Don’t... just don’t.”

Blaine narrowed his eyes and stepped back. “Why are you so mad?”

“How many were there, Blaine? How many guys? Really?” Kurt demanded. “Were you ever faithful? Or did you wait until the night I left to get started out of deference for our relationship of one and a half years? I mean, you did practically shove me out of Lima!”

Blaine shook his head, with his mouth hanging open. He wanted to find a response, but he couldn’t fathom what Kurt was saying. He was even angrier than the night they’d broken up. Kurt never exploded like this.

“There were no other guys!” Blaine responded finally. “How can you even ask me that?”

“Are you freakin’ kidding me?!” Kurt shrilled, shaking his hands in the air.

“There was Eli Carter, and I told you about him right away. That was it. I flirted with Sebastian, but we didn’t, I mean... It was just the once, and that was after you and Chandler-”
Kurt’s breathing, or failure to do so, was getting really scary.

“And we didn’t even-! I mean it was just a blow-”

“I don’t want to know that!” The force of Kurt’s anger made his voice loud, but it still sounded empty from lack of air.

“Kurt, I’m sorry. I didn’t tell you because... I knew how much you hated him. But that was it, Kurt. I swear. I swear it, okay? There was no one else.”

Kurt was barely holding on. There was a hair’s breath between the wideness of his eyes and tears falling, and he shook his head rapidly before turning away again. Didn’t Kurt believe him? Why would he even bring it up?

Watching him holding back was hard enough, but watching him shaking like a leaf was untenable. Blaine knew he should be outraged at the accusation, but at the moment he was too bewildered. He could get mad at Kurt later.

Well, don’t you think he has a good reason to think you’d slut around?

The voice intruded abruptly into Blaine’s thoughts. He’d never tried to think too hard about that before, and it wasn’t exactly welcome now, either. Blaine told himself to shut up and came over with Kurt’s coat. “Kurt, it’s freezing out here. You’ll catch your death!”

Kurt crossed his arms over himself and physically recoiled. He stared at Blaine for a long, long moment.

“Why aren’t you carrying any pamphlets?”

Blaine very slowly brought his brows together, staring back at Kurt, then letting his gaze drift down to the white bag in Kurt’s hand.
“They offered me some condoms and told me I should get tested regularly.” Blaine shrugged. “I pocketed them. What did they give you?”

“How is this happening to me?” The anger had emptied out of Kurt’s voice, and all was left was this sick, hollow gasp.

Kurt’s shoulders were continuously shaking now, and Blaine just stood there ineffectually, because his brain was starting to catch up, and he was trying very hard not to let it.

“I’m negative,” Blaine said numbly.

“I thought we... We were...” Kurt’s body seemed to give in, and he stumbled backward and dropped down on the curb. He curled over like a comma.

“God, no.” It was a prayer and a denial. “You haven’t even been with anyone else! This has to be a mistake!”

“I have. I have been with... But...” Kurt’s head kept shaking back and forth. “It was just the one guy, the one time, and he... he seemed nice. Really nice, and kind, and generous. He...he works at an architecture firm near the Vogue.com building, and he... We only... It was safe. It was all really safe!”

Kurt lifted his head. Confusion was written over every part of his body. His eyes pleaded. And Blaine felt sick. Kurt hadn’t looked that lost since their first time at the Lima Bean. Blaine came over to the curb and sat, even though the snow would make his pants wet, and draped Kurt’s coat over his shoulders and rubbed his arms.

No more was said. Blaine knew he wouldn’t be feeling any anger for Kurt later for the things he’d said. Something had changed, in how they were with each other. He didn’t exactly know why. When Blaine caught his breath, it would be anger for this guy, this nameless asshole who had wormed his way into Kurt’s trust and betrayed him more deeply than words could describe.

Blaine’s hands stopped moving.

If he hadn’t done the very same thing to Kurt, there was no way Kurt would have let this predator into his life.
Kurt had been vulnerable because of things that Blaine had done.

_You probably got lucky._

_You could get yourself friggin’ killed, okay? You could fucking kill someone else!_

_You could hurt yourself, or take someone else away from their family._

Blaine fought a wave of nausea. And he fought, hard, _not_ to think about Burt.

“C’mon. My heater works really well now. B-Burt did a really good job on the car. I don’t want you to get sick,” he said. His voice sounded more in control than he felt by far. “We can get back to Lima for the meeting with all the Glee alums—”

“I can’t do that tonight,” Kurt blurted. “I can’t.”

Blaine shrugged. “I understand. I’ll tell them... something. Do you want me to stay with you?”

Kurt said nothing at first. His pale fingers touched his lips, feeling along the flesh and shaking. Blaine was about to try to get Kurt up and into the car once more when Kurt finally spoke:

“I don’t know.”

“Well, I’ll ask when we get home, okay? Just... Just let’s get out of the wet and the cold. Please?” His voice cracked on the last word, and Kurt looked up at Blaine. “I’m so sorry.”

Blaine had said it so many times. Now that he _really_ meant it, and felt regret in his _bones_, the words sounded like nonsense.

“Get tested again, okay?” Kurt told him. “In two months, like they say? _Promise me._”
“I will.” Blaine rose and urged Kurt with his hands. It took Kurt a moment, but he made it to his feet, and he followed Blaine closely. The new snow crunched beneath their shoes.

***

Kurt had only gotten into one accident in his driving career. As the other car had come at him, nothing slowed down. He didn’t see his life before his eyes. His hands seemed to fly as he pulled the wheel to the side, and the only thought that his mind was capable of holding onto was, “Is this really happening?”

Kurt lay on his bed, staring at the ceiling, numbness overtaking him from head to toe. He wasn’t even sure how long he’d been lying there, heart pounding and extremities tingling. His throat was painfully tight. All he knew was that he couldn’t breathe. And he had to pee.

He remained in his bed, remembering every moment of that night. The romantic car crash that was Giovanni Torregrossa.

“Because of your CD4 count is already low, we recommend that you begin treatment immediately. Please take this seriously, Mr. Hummel. Someone in your condition-”

“I don’t understand. I don’t understand anything.”

“Let me simplify. It is very likely that you could succumb to an opportunistic infection if you don’t start antiretrovirals as soon as possible. Your immune system is not strong right now. Have you been feeling run down?”

Kurt put a hand over his eyes. Surely it was normal to feel tired when you worked two jobs, when you’d just suffered a painful break up. It wasn’t like he’d really been sleeping properly. Hence the Ambien and the odd late night purchases... Surely everything he’d been feeling was normal, wasn’t it? At least within the range of heartbreak and overwork?

He turned the appointment card over in his hand. The doctor had recommended, kind of insisted, that he return for a physical that week. To get a full exam done and to pick up his first round of medication, to get him started before the holidays.
Merry Fucking Christmas.

A sharp rap on the door jolted him from his thoughts.

“Hey!” Finn yelled. “Blaine said you didn’t feel so hot. We were gonna get some dinner. Do you wanna come?”

“No, I’m not hungry.”

“Can I come in?”

“...No.”

“C’mon. It can’t be that bad. What is it, the flu or something?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Dude, I’m not going until I know you’ll be okay. Do you want some warm milk or something? Tea? Cold water?”

Kurt turned the card over again and slid his thumb over the raised print. Then, he shoved himself up and tucked the card under his pillow. He tried to push some air into his lungs as he approached the door. Then he opened it and hung against the frame.

“Wow. You’re really pale.” Finn reached for Kurt, but Kurt jerked away. “Maybe you should see a doctor.”

“I’ll be fine. I’m just tired. I have a headache.”

“Well, I’ll get you some Tylenol. Okay? Hang on.”
Kurt looked up and down the hallway, then headed for the bathroom. He took a few minutes in there, splashed some water over his face, and then came out to sneak back into his room. Burt had just rounded up the stairs and gave him a frown.

“Hey. Finn says you’re not comin’ with us.”

Kurt didn’t move at first. His father was one person he was very bad at faking out.

“Not hungry,” he said quietly. It was true.

“You’re the color of milk.” Burt came over and cupped the side of Kurt’s face. “Maybe we should stay home.”

“No. No, dad. Go out. Have some fun with Finn and Carole. I’m probably just gonna sleep.”

Finn appeared with a cold bottle of water and some pills in his hand. “Water.” He held the bottle aloft and brought both over to Kurt.

Better get used to this. Kurt took the pills in his mouth and took a big swig.

“What’s wrong?” Burt’s hand petted over the back of Kurt’s hair. “You’re frowning.”

Probably ‘cause his head hurts. That’ll do it, though.” Finn said, pointing at the water and meaning the pills.

Burt looked at the stairs, then back to Kurt. “You sure you’ll be okay on your own with this?”

“Dad, stop worrying so much. I’m not a little kid. And I hardly ever get sick.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Burt sighed. “Okay. You call me if you start to feel worse.” He arched a brow and leaned in. “Promise?”
“I promise. Just go.”

Burt patted Kurt’s back and nodded to Finn. “Get ready. Your mom’s doin’ her hair.”

“You want me to call someone?” Finn asked. “Mercedes? ...Blaine?”

“No. No, I’m better off alone right now. Just go get ready.” Kurt waved his hand.

Finn screwed his brows together, then wrapped his arms around Kurt, who stood there stiffly. “Stuff is getting weird again with Blaine, huh?”

“Never stopped... That’s not... Not all of it.”

“‘Kay. I’ll check in before we go. You tell me if you need me to bring anything up? Or I can bring some blankets down to the sofa so it’ll be easier.”

“Just go!” Kurt snapped. He stormed into his room and slammed the door.

He climbed onto his bed and tucked his knees up against his chest. He was thinking again, and his hands were shaking. How could he possibly tell them? How could he look his father in the eye and tell him this?

God, he’d been absolutely terrible to Finn just now.

“Sweetie?” Carole’s voice floated through the door.

Kurt focused on keeping his voice calm, although her concern was making him shake even harder. “Yes?”

“Hon, there’s some applesauce in fridge, and I set out some bread if you want toast. I could make you some right now, but Finn said you weren’t hungry.”
“No, Carole, that’s okay. Don’t worry about me.”

“We won’t be too long, but call us if you need anything?”

They were so worried over a faked flu. His body was alive again with anxiety pricking him all over.

How could he possibly tell them?

“I will,” Kurt managed in a voice that sounded alien with its brightness.

He tried to listen to her goodbyes, and thanked her. When his father came by, he opened the door and gave Kurt a slight back rub and a worried frown.

And then they left.

As if his body was catching up with his mind, a few minutes after the door had closed, Kurt bolted from his bed and ran to the bathroom to throw up his guts. He hadn’t eaten since breakfast, so his throat burned bitterly as his stomach rejected its near liquid contents and his eyes watered in sympathy. His whole face was aflame.

When he pulled back, Kurt leaned back against the cool tub and stared vacantly in front of himself. His body began to quiver, and tears came, finally, as he curled over on himself.

***

“Have you lost weight lately?” Dr. Allan asked.

“Possibly,” Kurt replied, lifting his chin so the doctor could feel his throat. “But I work in fashion.”

The doctor tilted her head.
“There’s kind of a culture of salad.”

Dr. Allan smiled. “It could be that, or related to stress you have in your daily life—”

“I have some of that, yeah.”

“I think though, that given the circumstances, you should be careful about keeping your weight up.”

“I do live close to a cake shop,” Kurt breezed, holding still as the doctor moved in with her stethoscope.

“Hm. Get as much nutrition as you can. There’s a chance that your weight loss will increase unintentionally. Those who start antiretroviral therapy for the first time often experience nausea and gastrointestinal upset.”

“Seriously?” Kurt lifted and narrowed his eyes. Exactly what he needed was a beginning semester at an elite arts school with a side order of IBS.

“Seriously. Nausea, diarrhea, tiredness, and headaches are most common. Angelia at the front will give you a full list of possible side effects for the drugs we start you on, as well as possible drug interactions. You should talk to your PCP if they are too severe for you. Sometimes it takes a while to get a good cocktail, or they may decide to simply give you something to counteract the effects. That’s also common.”

“Well, if it helps me kick my Ambien addiction.”

Dr. Allan wrote on her chart. “Are you serious about that, or is this another joke?”

“I did mention that as one of the medications I’m taking.”

“Is it an addiction?” The tall woman sat on the stool by her desk and scooted it forward.
“...No. But, I’ve had trouble sleeping without it. I’ve had trouble sleeping... for a while, and I’ve been a sleepwalker since I was a kid...” Kurt moved back on the table and tucked his paper gown under his legs. “Not regularly.”

“Talk to Angelia about possible interactions. From what I know, Ambien won’t make your medication stop working, but your protease inhibitor might increase the side effects. And if you’re taking Ambien regularly, you will have withdrawal symptoms if you try to go off it cold turkey. Talk to your PCP about that too, and be careful, okay?”

Kurt nodded slowly.

“I know this is all too overwhelming, but I’m glad you’re being honest. It’ll help you in the long run.”

Kurt raked a hand back through his hair, which only flopped forward again. “Isn’t this going a little fast? Straight to the pill popping?”

She forced a little chuckle.

“In your case, I wouldn’t feel comfortable letting you leave us without starting a round of medication. But the trend for the medical community is moving towards getting our patients started on medication sooner rather than later.” She set her clipboard down and leaned forward on her knees. “Slow the spread of infection from person to person in communities, limit the number of new cases. Especially in teenagers like you.”

Kurt rolled his eyes then looked at the floor. Impromptu counseling for the dumb, sick kid.

“It’s an ongoing fight, until we have a cure.”

When Kurt made a scoffing sound, Allan spoke more firmly. “It’s not impossible. I do keep up with the research, and I believe we will find a better solution in our lifetime. This isn’t a death sentence.”

“People keep telling me that.” Kurt looked up at him with hard eyes and a tensed jaw. “So why
does it feel like it’s all over? Why does it feel like I spent most of my life fighting just to have everything cut short when I’m finally finding something that looks like real acceptance and success?”

Allan rubbed her lips. “Kurt, you just got this news. Have you talked to your family yet?”

“And how does that conversation go?” Kurt swallowed. “I can’t. How can I tell my father something like this is happening to his son? I just can’t.” He pressed his lips together for a moment, then managed in a shaky voice, “He’s gonna be so disappointed in me. And so scared.”

“You should talk to someone. And before you decide that everything is useless, know that you can take the time to grieve for the life you thought you were going to have. You’re allowed to feel sad. To feel angry. It’s all allowed.”

Kurt sucked in his lower lip and looked at his hands.

“If it helps, I’m not seeing any other signs of illness. Which is good, considering how your tests from the clinic came in. At this stage, we’re looking for other opportunistic infections that might complicate your treatment. Aside from your CD4 count and the weight loss and tiredness that may be attributable to other factors, you appear to be very healthy.”

Kurt made a bitter noise.

“And that’s a good place to start,” she assured him. “It was lucky we had a cancellation and were able to get you in here today. Have you talked to your sexual partners?”

“I may have done some screaming yesterday, yes. At both of them.”

Her brows raised in curiosity, then lowered in sympathy. Kurt cringed inwardly at the thought of Gio reacting to Kurt’s irate messages filling up his voice mail... Again. But part of him, a darker part, hoped Gio choked on his anger.

Allan stood and touched his shoulder. “You can get dressed. Do you want a referral to a psychologist you could talk to? Or a group?”
“No. No, I just want to spend the rest of my time in town with my family.”

“The holidays can be very hard,” she pointed out.

“True. They always have been.” The spirit left his voice. “Just not like this.”

“You don’t think they’ll know something’s going on with you?” Allan prompted.

He could understand her perspective. He was a patient, coming in at Christmas with a terminal illness. One who was not reacting well to his diagnosis. One who was very, very young in her eyes. She wanted to prod him into being honest with his family. She wanted him to make it through the holidays.

“I’m a much better actor than people give me credit for,” Kurt replied.

***

“Where is he?” Marley asked.

“I can’t believe he’s not here. This was his idea,” Kitty snapped. She crossed her arms and looked like she might stamp a foot.

Everyone was crowded together in the space they’d been given to prepare before going on, and Finn motioned for Mercedes to come over from where she’d been doing Unique’s hair.

“He still sick?” she asked.

“Yesterday he looked pretty miserable,” Finn said loud enough for everyone to hear. “I wasn’t gonna pressure him to leave the house. I haven’t seen him since this morning, though. He’s probably still in bed.”

“Maybe after this we can go cheer him up?” Blaine suggested.
“That would be awesome. We really should do something for him,” Marley said, looking at Finn hopefully. “He was there for us. We could sing something for him?”

“I dunno that he wants company. I mean, I can text him... But we’ll talk about it after, okay? Right now, let’s just focus on giving these kids as good as a performance as we did at the hospital, okay?” Finn motioned for them to get into order to do their vocal warm-ups.

“Hey, guys!”

Finn turned to see Mr. Schuester walking in. The Glee club members looked at him briefly, then returned to their warm ups. Mr. Schue seemed a bit put out, so Finn handed the baton off to Mercedes (who had done more for them vocally this year than anyone), and went over to see him.

“Hey, Mr. Schue.” Finn put his hands on his hips. “Glad you could make it. I figured it would mean a lot to them to have you here. They’ve worked really hard to get these performances together in time.”

“They don’t really look very happy.”

“Kurt’s been helping us push them and get their spirits up after losing Sectionals. He’s not here, so they’re kinda disappointed.” Finn shrugged and bobbed his head to the side. “But they have other performances tomorrow and on Christmas day. We’ll get him on his feet so he can see them perform.”

“Huh. Well, maybe I can help get them motivated.”

“Mr. Schue, I don’t think-” Finn stepped back as Mr. Schuester walked up beside Mercedes.

She cast a look back at Finn, tilting her head to the side sharply and rolling her tongue in her cheek. The Glee club slowly quieted, looking to one another curiously.

Mr. Schue clapped his hands together. “Guys, I have to say, I’m really prou-”
“I’m sorry, but who are you?” Kitty asked, leaning forward a little aggressively.

Mr. Schuester blinked as the others laughed softly. “Kitty, you know me.”

“She’s making a hilarious joke about how you abandoned us.” Tina crossed her arms.

For the first time, Kitty and Tina looked at one another and gave each other a snap.

“I’ve been fighting to keep music programs going for the whole state,” Mr. Schue protested.

“I’m so sure I came from a nationally recognized show choir to be completely ignored here,” Unique said. “I’m sure all of these hot bitches joined up so you could run off and not be our teacher.”

“Yeah, I don’t wanna be rude and inappropriate or anything, but you really left us out to dry,” Jake said. “Not that Finn didn’t try. He pulled in anyone who was willing to help to give us pointers. It would have just been nice for us if there had been someone with the connections to find us a teacher with any kind of power to protect us.”

Marley’s eyes bulged, and she looked to Finn and mouthed, “Oh my God.”

He bit back a laugh.

“It’s great that you’re proud of us. We appreciate that. But...” Artie shrugged. “We have members who barely know you. And we have a performance to do in a few minutes, so it would be kind of great if you could let us get ready right now? And we can talk about this another time?”

“Maybe in class,” Marley suggested, shrugging her shoulders and smiling. “If we ever have another one.”

Finn leaned forward in disbelief. He’d never seen her talk back to a teacher. The whole club being of one mind, for once, probably helped her sense of security.
And Mr. Schuester stood there, staring at the club members in confusion. Suddenly, their eyes lit up. Marley was bouncing in place and then sprung forward, shortly followed by Brittany, Sugar, and Unique. The others came over more slowly, and Finn turned to see Kurt being overwhelmed by girlish hugs.

Some things never changed.

“Finn’s right, you do look like death,” Kitty said.

“Stop it, Kitty,” Marley urged. She turned and beamed at Kurt. “I’m so glad you came. Are you feeling okay? Do you need... to lie down, or we could get you some water...?”

Kurt tilted his head towards her and took her arm as he walked her back toward Mercedes. “I think I can make it. Are we almost ready to go? Sorry I missed last night.”

“The kids loved it,” Brittany said. “They were all-” She failed her hands and bounced in a circle.

“Our setlist for them was perfect,” Blaine said. Artie nodded seriously.

Kurt patted Blaine’s shoulder lightly and met his eye for a second before looking at the others. “I wish I’d been able to see it. But I figured further spread of disease might be a bad idea. I can’t wait to hear you guys up there, actually. It’s always different watching the performance.”

“We were just warmin’ up,” Jake said.

“Well, don’t let me keep you guys from it. You all look great.” Kurt stepped back and motioned to Mercedes.

Finn looked at the bright smile on Kurt’s face as he watched them preparing. It didn’t budge as he went out to watch from the audience, and only brightened as they performed. Finn didn’t have the time to really study his brother, since he was busy paying attention to the Glee club, but he was glad to see Kurt there with them, and seeming in such good spirits.
Marley’s hands were trembling as she stepped forward to the front of their stage. Then she felt a hand touch hers, and she looked back to see Unique, mouthing “Kick some ass, girl!”

She smiled and turned back around to face the audience. Kurt and Mercedes had been insistent that everyone, over the course of all their planned performances, put themselves in the spotlight. Which basically meant that each of them were up for little solos here and there, and some big ones. As Kurt had first explained the idea, Mercedes and Finn had started to nod as thought they recognized what he was saying, even though they hadn’t mentioned it before. This group had so much history. They’d seen glimpses of it, but for those who had just started at this school, that history had gotten a bit lost in the drive to win.

Marley looked out over the sea of faces. Teenagers, like herself. Probably some with the same problems she and her mom had. Some with worse. She could see a few that looked skeptical of the performance, and she couldn’t blame them. She knew how she’d feel, if CPS had successfully taken her from her mom, and a group of singers had come by at Christmas to try to tell her how everything would be okay. That was kind of why she liked opening with this song. Besides Julie Andrews, this was one of her favorites. Sam had agreed pretty loudly on the number, too.

She saw Kurt looking up at her with an encouraging smile, nodding for her to begin, and then flashing some jazz hands. He and Finn had done so much for her family. Their father had, too. So she closed her eyes, banished her nerves, and sang to them.

“Weee’re on the islaaand of Misfit Toys,” she sang in a slow, jazzy tone, growing louder as she continued. “Here... we don’t want to staa-ay. We want to travel with Santa Claaaus... in his magic sleeeeeigh...”

“A pack full of toys means a sackful of joy!” Artie burst in as the tempo sped up, popping a wheelie in a spin beside Marley. “For millions of girls and for millions of boys!”

“When Chriiiistmas Day is here!” she belted, backed up by Artie’s harmony. “The most wonderful day of the year!”

The crowd laughed as the singers behind Marley and Artie broke formation, some of the girls skipping to their next position, each taking their lines and dancing energetically. Some, like Brittany and Tina did an excellent job of imitating dolls in their performance, and Marley pulled out a prop gun for her water pistol line.
The boys followed the next number, led by Sam in “Jingle Bell Rock,” with the girls miming air guitars in the background, and in one part, doing the Jitterbug with each other. Marley was very busy with the choreography and not dropping Sugar by accident, but she did glimpse a few boys in the audience getting up and dancing with each other as well, and her heart leapt at the sight.

Finn came up after that to take the mic. “Hey, guys. Thanks for doing that with us!”

“We’re better dancers than you!” one of the boys shouted, to peals of laughter.

“Shut up!” someone replied.

The boy pumped his fist in the air, then sat down and crossed his leg at the knee.

“You were pretty good! If you ever want to transfer to McKinley, we’ll take ya,” Finn said. “Anyway, I just wanted to really thank you guys for having us tonight. It means a lot for us to perform for such a great audience.”

He turned. “I’d like to introduce our first soloists, Marley Rose, Artie Abrams, and Sam Evans.”

There was clapping from the teens and the staff. Then, “You get it, girl!”

Finn laughed. “Next up, we’ll have Tina Cohen-Chang and Unique Adams with Marley on ‘River,’ and then Blaine Anderson with Jake Puckerman, Ryder Flynn, Sam, and Artie on ‘My Love Will Keep Me Warm.’ Then we’ll have Kitty Abrams, Brittany Pierce, and Sugar Motta. So I’ll can it, and let them take it away. Girls?”

Marley came up with Tina and Unique. She wasn’t nervous at all about the trio. Mostly because she didn’t have to be. Tina and Unique were the only ones who had solo lines here, and she was just helping with harmonies. It was comfortable, and fun, to hear their voices together.

The rest of the performance flew by. The boys had a blast doing Sinatra, dancing around with their fedoras, and then Kitty, Brittany, and Sugar did a version of “Santa, Baby” that had the whole crowd laughing uncontrollably.

For the finale, they all came together and just stood on the stage, some holding hands with each other. Sam bounded down the stairs and grabbed Finn’s hand, dragging him up to the stage to sing
with them. “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas” was one of their more sentimental numbers, so it was the finale in all of their performances, while the other numbers would change up to give everyone more opportunities to shine.

The audience clapped, and there were a few sharp whistles as the club bowed and waved. The kids at the hospital had been appreciative, but had been a very different audience. For them, they’d done more movie numbers. Songs the kids might recognize. “Misfit Toys” was towards the middle, instead of the beginning. And of course, everyone had enjoyed being around the kids. The teens were different. The teens were them, in different circumstances.

Marley saw the boy who had danced before coming up to the front, and she came down the stairs to meet him.

“Hey. You want to show us your dancing?” She gave him a bright smile.

“I know you, y’know. Up in Lima North?”

Marley’s eyes bulged. She did know him. Though someone had buzzed off all his hair. Smooth caramel-colored skin and deep brown sloe eyes. The boy was lithe and lean and could be a dancer or a model, someday. Cady Branston. He’d seen her get in a fight.

“C’mon.” She tugged his hand, and he hopped up the steps with her. She knew why he was here. And frankly, he was better off here, than with his uncle.

“Hey, guys!” she said into the mic. “Do you want to hear one more number?”

Marley looked to Finn, realizing she should have asked first. He frowned in confusion, but then saw her with the boy and heard the clapping, then shrugged and nodded. The others didn’t seem to know where to go, so they stayed on the stage.

Marley looked to Cady and smiled as she began to sing. “The first noel, the angels did say, was to certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay.”

“In fields where they,” Cady joined in, his tremulous tenor making a clear, bright sound through the room, “lay keeping their sheep on a cold winter’s that was so deep.”
“Noel, noel, noel,” they sang together as she beamed at him and the rest of the club began to harmonize behind them. She remembered that he loved to perform. Even when there wasn’t a stage. “Born is the King of Israel!”

They sang the second verse together, with the back up of her friends. When they’d finished, the audience was quiet for a moment.

“Go Cady!” a boy with a deep voice hollered. Laughter followed, and Cady bent over in a curtsy with his sweater.

Marley turned to give him a hug. They hadn’t been close, but he had never been cruel to her. “If you ever bust outta here, I’m sure my mom would let you stay,” she said quietly.

“It’s not that bad here. They feed you, anyway. Do you get fed?” he said, cocking a brow. “Do you let them these days?”

Marley shook her head. “It’s just there, if you want it, okay? C’mon, let’s get some cookies.”

She released Cady to go talk to his friends, and noticed that he’d swung by to flirt with Jake before doing so. She had to laugh as Jake looked to her in confusion. Then he looked a little smug.

“That can’t be the first time a guy’s hit on you.” She picked up some carrots from the tray and put them on her little paper plate, along with some broccoli and cherry tomatoes. But not celery because she hated it.

“How old is that kid?” Jake said.


“You don’t seem that young.”

“Thanks.” She crunched down on a carrot.
“No, I mean.” Jake creased his eyes, seeming to think about what he wanted to say to her, then his expression softened.

“Oh! Hold on.” Marley skirted through a group of people towards Kurt, who she’d just spotted leaning on Mercedes. “Hey...”

“Oh, baby girl! You guys were so amaazing.” Kurt beamed at her and then closed his eyes as Mercedes scratched the back of his head like calming a tired puppy.

“Yay.” Marley clapped her hands together and came over to take his arm. “It means so much that you came. Are you feeling any better? There are cookies. Aaand I think I saw some peanut butter kisses, which are the best cookies in existence and anyone who disagrees is wrong and should reevaluate their life.”

Kurt chuckled and squeezed her arm. “No, sweetie, I’m not hungry.”

“Split one with me?”

Kurt raised a brow. As though Marley hadn’t been onto him with the food sharing thing.

“Okay. Get us some.”

Marley smiled and bounced over to the table to collect a few cookies, then returned as Mercedes was guiding Kurt to sit in one of the folding chairs.

“We were just talking about how good ya’ll sounded up there. Next year, you’re gonna take it all,” Mercedes said, helping herself to a sugar cookie with green sprinkles.

“You really think we’ll be ready?” Marley broke a peanut butter kiss in half, watching the chocolate kiss on top ooze apart. These were fresh. The volunteers must’ve just made them. “We’re kind of a mess.”
“Oh, they’re all a mess. Show choirs, I mean. At least the ones I’ve been in.” Kurt took the cookie. “We were just talking about who should be your new director. I mean, with Finn’s help.”

“I feel a little bad about tryin’ to replace Mr. Schue,” Mercedes said, “but we can’t come back all the time. We want you guys to be taken care of.”

“I don’t really know him,” Marley admitted. “He wasn’t my teacher for that long.”

She bit into her cookie, smiling at the burst of sugary peanut butter, and draped her arm over Kurt’s shoulders. His head leaned toward her. “My mom wanted to thank you, by the way. We were so freaked, when we got home and saw that tree. I was gonna call the police.”

“What, for breaking and decorating?” Kurt chuckled to himself.

Marley rubbed her and up and down his bicep. He seemed to be shaking a little, and she hoped he wasn’t too cold.

“Well, I saw the ornaments, and I knew it was you.”

“Finn helped make them. They might not’ve had proper hooks without him.”

“Wait, what did you do?” Mercedes asked.

“Finn and I pulled a reverse Grinch on the Roses and snuck in some Christmas decorations,” Kurt told her.


“On top of already fixing our heat. And Finn has a key, so, I kind of figured who had done it... after a little while.” Marley looked down and watched Kurt fiddle with the half-cookie. “It means everything to us. All you’ve done. Mom was so stressed about not being able to afford to do anything for Christmas because of... You know. I don’t know how we can ever thank you.”

Kurt tilted his head back. “Be happy. Be healthy. Do that for me?”
Marley’s brows knit together as she considered his face. *For* him? “What happened?”

Mercedes sat beside him and rubbed a hand over Kurt’s back, concern written into every line of her body.

“Nothing happened. I’m fine. Just tired.”

Marley knew that she believed people too easily, trusted too easily even though she always got hurt. But that was a complete *lie*. Oh, he was probably tired. But he looked like he was *mourning*.

“You want some company?” Mercedes offered. “I could bring over *Burlesque*.”

“Are you *trying* to kill me?” Kurt asked in a scandalized tone.

“I just don’t think you can call yourself a gay man if you don’t like Cher.”

“Listen, you.” Kurt pointed at her and narrowed his eyes as Mercedes giggled, but didn’t continue.

“No, we should get pizza and watch *Pitch Perfect*. I love Fat Amy more than anything in the world,” Marley insisted. “She’s my spirit animal.”

Kurt squeezed Marley’s fingertips and looked at Mercedes.

“Yeah, yeah.” Marley rolled her eyes. “A show choir kid watching a movies about college show choirs. But I love Rebel Wilson. Do those even exist?”

“College show choirs?” Kurt shrugged. “Well, yeah, probably?”

“Y’know. If you have time to hang out with a high school kid on your break. You don’t have to. But Mom would really like to have you and Finn over sometime, anyway.”
“Kurt’s a mom favorite, for sure.” Mercedes chuckled and smiled, shaking her head.

“Not always a dad favorite,” Kurt joked.

“Well, no worries about him being around.” Marley shrugged. “But, you know, whenever you’re up to it.”

“I’d love to. Maybe after Christmas?”

Marley nodded. “Don’t take any time away from your family. Mom’ll be happy any time.”

She stayed a little bit longer to rub his tense shoulders and listen to Kurt and Mercedes chattering about what was wrong with *Burlesque*. The weird tension in Kurt’s demeanor that Marley had noticed a minute ago was gone, as though it had never been there. But it still worried her. She waited for a moment, then gave Kurt a squeeze before being spirited away with Unique and Sugar to meet more of the kids who lived here. But she still looked back from time to time. Just in case.

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It wasn’t until after the singing and talking with the teens and sharing Christmas cookies, when Finn was walking to his car that he noticed Kurt’s shoulders slumping, his smile disappear, and the weariness once again reach his eyes.

“Dude, you really feel like crap, don’t you?”

Kurt jumped. “God. Stalk much? Why didn’t you tell me you were coming out?”

“I didn’t know if you had a ride.”

“No. I took a cab.”

“Why?” Finn frowned and leaned against the brick wall of the center with him. The snow was starting to flutter down again, and the daylight was fading.
“Because I was out, and I no longer own a car,” Kurt said. He pushed his hands into his coat pockets.

“I’ll drive you home, then.”

“Thanks.”

“Thanks for coming. Maybe... you should just take it easy tomorrow.” Finn slipped his arm around Kurt’s shoulders. He was starting to shiver.

“Maybe.”

Kurt rested his head against Finn, and Finn’s lips slipped sideways.

“I don’t want to let anyone down,” Kurt murmured.

Finn squeezed him. “Nah. They’ll understand.”

“I’ll think about it. I guess it depends if I get any sleep tonight.” Kurt looked over at the falling snow.

Finn reached over and felt his forehead. “You’re not warm.”

“I never had a fever.” Kurt stepped forward and then swayed in place.

“Whoa.” Finn’s eyes widened in alarm as his arms reached around Kurt’s unsteady form.

“I’m fine. I just haven’t eaten much today.” His lips twitched slightly.
“C’mon. We’ll get you some soup and some sleep.” Finn held onto him as they headed across the lot.

“I’m really grateful to have you as a brother, Finn,” Kurt said quietly.

“Yeah, me too. I’m glad you could make it home for Christmas.”

“Sorry I snapped at you before.”

“I don’t even remember that, so I must’ve forgiven you.”

Kurt went quiet again. When he fell asleep in the car, Finn felt worry taking up residence in his chest. But Kurt’d said he wasn’t sleeping and hadn’t eaten. A little family therapy would make everything better.

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Kurt’s eyes opened sluggishly. Like he’d slept long and hard but was still exhausted. He couldn’t blame the pills. He’d only been taking them for a day. His exhaustion was all on his complete inability to cope with his situation.

And more and more he felt a responsibility to cope with it better than he was. Just seeing how this affected his family made his body feel even more weighted down, and his insides more unstable.

At the moment, he could hear some singers on TV finishing up “Don’t They Know It’s Christmas?” And he felt large fingers combing through his hair, gently. He blinked once more and realized he was on the sofa, covered in several blankets, with his head in his dad’s lap.

“Dad?”

“Hey, there. Sleep more if you want. Looks like y’needed it.”

Kurt blinked again a few times. “It’s Christmas Eve.”
“Yep.”

“Shouldn’t... we be with the Hudson clan?”

“Carole said she’d make excuses for us. We didn’t want to wake you. Especially if it means we get you feelin’ a little better in the morning.”

Kurt didn’t bother trying to lift his head. Pressing back his tears of frustration took all the energy he had at the moment.

“Sorry for messing up Christmas.”

“Oh, lay off yourself. You can’t help this. And nothin’s messed up.” Burt’s hand moved down and rubbed Kurt’s back.

Kurt swallowed hard. “Dad?” he peeped, looking back a little. He couldn’t tilt his head that far from this angle.

“Yeah?”

Kurt’s heart swooshed hard in his chest, making his face hot and his arms feel weak. He shook his head quickly and laid it back down.

“Just tell me what you need. I’ll get it,” Burt offered.

“No, this is good.”

Burt scratched lightly on Kurt’s back. “These kids are pretty good. A bunch of singing groups for a New York charity. If you’d been in the city, you could’ve gone.”

“Oh.” Kurt stared at the woman belting “O Holy Night.” “Don’t tell Rachel, but this has to be my
least favorite Christmas song.”


Kurt smiled slightly. He remembered, when he was little, his dad picking up him and dancing around the living room, singing that song.

“And Julie Andrews. Your mom liked those songs. Played them every year. You two, singin’ along together.”

“We always had a lot of music,” Kurt murmured.

They watched the performers together. Kurt may have dozed a little. He woke again when he heard a boisterous:

“Christmas bells are ringing! Christmas bells are ringing! Christmas bells are ringing! On TV- At SAKS!”

There was a medium sized group of performers, split into smaller groups passing one another by as they each sang their part of the number. The weaving of “Silver Bells” in was beautiful. “Christmas Bells” was jarring. “The Carol of the Bells” filled the dead spaces, and flowing in with the main melody:

“All that I know is that I’m breathing. All I can do is keep breathing.”

“I know that guy,” Kurt murmured.

“Yeah? Celeb or something?”

“Silver bells, silver bells...”

“He was at the Winter Showcase. Not singing, he um... he came up after to talk to Rachel about how good she was.” Kurt squirmed a little as the blond man sang with his group, looking to the
audience plaintively. “They’re pretty good.”

“More original than most of the talent in this line up. Some of ‘em were starting to make me sleepy.”

“All we can do is keep breathing. All we can do is keep breathing. All we can do is keep breathing.”

Kurt felt his eyes starting to prickle with tears.

“All we can do is keep breathing. All we can do is keep breathing. All we can do is keep breathing, now.”

“SNOW!”

Kurt drew in a sudden, sharp breath that startled Burt.

He leaned forward. “You okay?”

“Just...” Kurt breathed in deeply once more and let it out slowly. “Forgot to breathe.”

“Well, don’t do that,” Burt scolded. He petted Kurt’s hair again.

“Much less crispy without all the gel, huh?” Kurt joked.

“Yeah, we all know that won’t last.” Burt touched Kurt’s cheek, feeling for a fever, no doubt. “You hungry at all?”

“No.” He filled his lungs once more.
“Tell me who, who spiked the eggnog? I know the culprit’s here!” the lead blond sang as his group crowded around him snapping their fingers in their second, extremely lively number.

Kurt laughed.

“That’s good to hear,” Burt said. “How about you try to eat something anyway, huh? Consider it an early Christmas gift to me.”

“Okay. I will.” Kurt shifted himself so his father could get up.

“Don’t move. I’ll bring it.”

Kurt curled up in the blanket he didn’t remember being draped over him and watched Rachel’s fan leading his singers in a spirited, if not technically complicated dance as they sang a lovely Christmas tune about alcohol.

“The first one went down easy!” a dark hair guy sang.

“The second, nice and smooth!” crooned a tiny blond girl.

“By the third my head was spinnin’ round,” sang a guy with fluffy, untamed dark hair, “and that’s when I got the clue!”

“Tell me who, who spiked the eggnog! C’mon and show your face!” their leader dipped back in.

Their vocals were pretty good, and their moves were on point, if not that ambitious. Kurt wondered if they all went to NYADA or just the leader. He hadn’t spent enough time with Rachel’s crowd to really recognize anyone she didn’t bring home or talk to at Callbacks.

Burt returned with a tray that held a big mug of soup and some of the homemade bread that Kurt had baked with Carole earlier in the week, before he’d gotten the news that had been weighing him down and sapping his strength. As he took his first sip, Kurt suddenly realized that he’d barely
eaten in two days. And what he’d eaten hadn’t stayed down.

“Good?” Burt looked on hopefully as Kurt downed the soup.

Kurt nodded, then reached for the bread.

“Slow down a little. I’ll bring you more, if you can handle it.” Burt’s expression was unadulterated relief, even if he was trying to keep it cool.

Kurt swallowed and looked at his father. “Thanks for taking care of me, Dad.”

“I love you, Kurt. I hate to see you suffering.”

“I love you, too,” Kurt replied.

Kurt took another sip of his soup and wondered if he’d ever manage to tell his father that he had HIV. He wasn’t sure that he could. He didn’t know if he could bring that kind of pain on the man he looked up to most in the world.
By the time Kurt first stepped foot in NYADA as a student, he sorely needed a break from his Christmas “break.”

It had been no such thing, of course. The couple of weeks off with his family had been saturated to the brim with stress and effort. There was the baggage of the ex (who insisted now on guilting all over him), and the ex’s friends (who still wanted them to get back together), and the guy the ex used to flirt with (who insisted on smugging all over *Kurt when they’d run into one another at the Lima Bean). And of course, Kurt had to load himself down with decorating and cooking making, and wrapping presents, and launching a whole new plan for Glee club with Finn and Mercedes.

But after his diagnosis, everything had taken a new weight. Much of that had been self-inflicted, after he’d determined to be nothing less than a basket stuffed full of sunshine and rainbows from Christmas on to keep his family and friends from worrying. That was just exhausting. And the weight just kept building. There were the pills to hide, the puking on Christmas day, the worried looks of his family, and his continuous promises that was feeling better, really. Angelia had said he would actually feel better, eventually, after he got used to the meds.

And then, Kurt got home.

He’d only been back to work a week and a half. As the plate slipped from Mavis’ hands, Kurt made a lunge to grab for it, but it was too late. She’d pulled back as she was meant to be handing it to him, and the salad plate shattered against the floor. She jumped back, and Kurt tried not to take it personally. There was flying glass, after all.

Still, as the customers gave them a round of applause, Kurt lifted his chin, pressed his lips together, and rolled his tongue around in his cheek, breathing in and out slowly. This was the second time today that someone had pulled away from him prematurely, and this time it had resulted in damage that was coming out of someone’s check. He didn’t know why Mavis insisted on trying to take his plates from the window anyway.

“Sorry- No, no!” Her hands lunged forward as she saw Kurt picking up the pieces of plate from the floor. “D-don’t do that. Honey-”

“I can still do my freakin’ job, Mavis,” Kurt snapped. He cleared the big pieces, then got the broom to sweep up the rest. He could feel his coworkers’ eyes on him.
He was a little scared that it was all in his head. But he was more frustrated that for some of them, it wasn’t.

He’d made the critical mistake of chatting with Tandy before work on his first day back in town. He wasn’t even scheduled that day, but he’d come by to sit at the bar drinking Diet Coke because rotting in his apartment alone was too depressing. When Tandy had asked why he looked so tired, Kurt had waffled a little bit. Jet lag, stressful trip. Why he’d mentioned the medication, he didn’t know. Maybe because he didn’t know anyone else who he could talk to, and he was aching to tell someone just a little bit about what was going on.

Jokingly, Tandy had pressed to find out what was wrong, guessing a number of ridiculous ailments from gout (“Do I look like I have gout to you, Tan?”) to zebra-style super-herpes before hitting on the truth, purely by accident. It had obviously been a gag, going down the line of fictitious and real sexually transmitted diseases because Kurt was a virtuous, underaged monk in their eyes here. But in a split second, Kurt failed to be an actor.

Tandy had said nothing. Mavis’ eyes had widened, but her mouth remained shut. Though only for the duration of the time it took her to get back to the break room.

Now he simply couldn’t tell. Were people skirting past him on purpose? Were they avoiding touching things he’d touched? Had Dan encouraged that couple to get another server because he was trying to protect them, or because he was a tip hog?

It was like coming out all over again. Once again, he was disgusting to the touch. Vile. Contagious. But it couldn’t be all of them, could it? Then again, people he’d considered his closest friends had openly mocked him sometimes. There could be layers of discomfort in each of these people. He’d learned that intimately during his time at both McKinley and Dalton.

Kurt couldn’t lie to himself. He had more than a few layers of discomfort himself. He was a hair’s breath from taking Mavis’ suggestion from earlier that week and wearing latex gloves all the time.

But no one was going to get AIDS from touching a plate he had just handled, and he wasn’t the kind of server to jack off into anyone’s food. He stormed over to the large trashcan in the back, dumped the ruined dinner salad in the bin, and ducked into the men’s room to wash his hands before going out to apologize to the woman who would have to wait longer for a stupid salad.

She smiled at him and tried to assure him that it would be all right. Clearly Kurt appeared more upset than dropping a salad warranted, so he gave her a smile and went to get Jason to make another one.
“I can get back there and help if you need me—”

“Don’t you be bringin’ that nasty back here!” Jason called back.

Kurt stepped back from the window and froze. Had people out on the floor heard that?

He willed his feet to move, but he was cemented to the spot. It felt like he was underwater, and people were swimming freely around him. Everything sped up again as the new dinner salad clinked against the window.

“Be careful with this one, huh?” Jason barked.

When Kurt hesitated, Jason looked back from the next plate he was preparing.

“Jesus, take a joke, will you?”

Kurt picked up the plate, grabbed some silverware and flew out to the table, setting it in front of the woman with a thousand-watt smile and thanked her for her patience. He buzzed around the room, checking on his tables.

At the end of his shift, he walked into the manager’s office, and told Alice that he needed to put in his two weeks notice.

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Tandy had apologized repeatedly, but there wasn’t anything to be done. Kurt had told him so, and that he didn’t hold any hard feelings. When pressed, he’d made up an excuse for Alice about not being able to handle the hours now that he would be going to school full time. Though that was a blatant lie. Now he’d have to get a new job somewhere. He just didn’t want to explain the situation to her. He didn’t want more people to know than was absolutely necessary.

Really. Considering how well it had gone with that small sampling of humanity, Kurt felt justified
in keeping his private life more private than usual. He’d always thought his coworkers liked him, even though of him as sort of this cute little Midwestern mascot.

In some ways, he felt lucky that Rachel was so wrapped up in herself these days. He could collapse into the sofa and not have to answer any questions. She was far too busy with her new fame from winning the Winter Showcase and with her boyfriend. As the semester loomed closer, she came in every other day with excitement, or drama. Kurt saw her more and more sparingly. He figured that when he found a new second job and they were both at school during the week, they’d have some quality time.

He couldn’t have been more wrong. He barely saw Rachel during his first week of school. She was always dashing away to meet Brody or her friends. Kurt navigated the new terrain on his own. Ballerinas, classical actors, stage fighters, classical voice... everyone had their place. And Kurt? He was again at the bottom of the food chain. Standing out glaringly in every class. He hadn’t realized that such a small school would be so cliquey, but the incredible level of competition should have tipped him off.

On top of everything else, Kurt was a brand new face. A student entering the second semester when everyone else in his year already knew each other very well. He was marked as second rate at the very same time he heard the other students whispering about his showcase performance and people sneaking surreptitious glances his way. And apparently the dance class they’d slotted him in was populated by second semester beginning students (of which he was the only one), and those who Cassandra July had failed their first semester.

“See you later, babe!” Rachel said quickly as she kissed him on the cheek and abandoned him on the stairs.

At least Rachel didn’t think he was untouchable. Yet.

Kurt drew in a breath and tried to reorient himself. Keep breathing. Keep breathing.

As he made his way through the throngs of students, he approached the activities board, scanning the flyers for something he could participate in that wouldn’t suck too much of his dwindling energies. And maybe some requests for employment.

“What’s the Adam’s Apples...” he murmured to himself.
“NYADA show choir! You should join! It’s super fun,” a voice breezed behind him.

Kurt turned around to find the source of the familiar sounding voice. But the man was already gone. Had that been the lead he’d met the night of the Showcase?

For the first time since Christmas, the quickened beating of his heart was almost pleasant.

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“Mister. Adam. Crawford.” Madam Tibideaux drew his name out slowly as she signed a stack of papers in front of her.

“Morning, Madam,” he said cheerfully.

“Sit.”

Adam came up to her desk and sat down, crossing his legs and then folding his hands at the knee. She made a shooing motion to the assistant with his hands full of papers.

“It looks like your club has been getting a little more attention than usual.” As always, the Madam’s tone was nearly impossible to read.

“Yes, well, I assume you’re talking about the Ali Forney benefit a few weeks ago. We were glad to do it, although, yes, it was a bit more high profile than our usual Christmas performances.”

Tibideaux looked up and frowned at him. “In the interest of permitting creative freedom for our students, President Archambault is not inclined to shut down any extra-curricular activities.”

Adam lifted his chin slightly. “And I’m certain the student body appreciates that policy.”

“I’m sure.” Tibideaux sucked in her cheeks and took a sip of the glass of water on her desk. “Let me be clear, Mr. Crawford.”
Adam leaned forward slightly.

“That performance was an embarrassment to the school. It was sloppy. The dancing was subpar, and the vocals were only so-so. Including yours.”

Adam swallowed and kept his slight, pleasant smile in place.

“Worst of all, the arrangement of the first number was a jumbled, incomprehensible mess. I don’t know what the fascination with ‘mash-ups’ is with your generation, but I assure you, whatever creative goals you had with that piece were not met.”

With his cheeks flushing and his eyes stinging, Adam gave a slight nod. “We were attempting to give a more nuanced perspective on the season beyond the commercial and the sickly sweet nostalgia, and particularly reach out to those who struggle so much around the Christmas holidays.”

“Those people struggle enough. I don’t think they deserved to have to hear your little band of ragtag stagecraft and behind-the-scenes show choir enthusiasts murder not one, but four songs.”

*Keep breathing. Keep breathing.* He lifted his head and looked up at the ceiling for a few seconds.

“You’d better get used to criticism, Mr. Crawford. You’ll be hearing it often.”

“I imagine that’s so.”

“In light of this recent humiliation, which was brought to my attention by an alumni, by the way—” She lowered her glasses and looked at him over them. “—there will be an additional form for student clubs to have signed in advance of any performance they intend to put on for an audience beyond the professors and students here at NYADA.”

Adam licked his lips slowly. “That’s not that unreasonable, actually.”
“Hm. I’m glad that you think so.”

“And that form would go to you?”

“Yes. And part of that approval will include my sign-off on any numbers you intend to do.”

“I don’t mean to weary you with concern, but will you have time for that?”

“I will sign off on paper. You will have to convince a staff member to sign off on the performance prior to submitting to me.”

“Ah. I see.” Adam bobbed his head. “Well, thank you for this notice, Madam. I’m sorry you had to hear such poor reviews though our alumni.”

“Honestly, Mr. Crawford, your time would be put to better use completing your coursework,” she said sharply.

Adam straightened his neck and watched her as she looked down at her papers.

“You may go,” she said after a minute.

Adam gave her a slight bow and exited the office, slipping the strap of his bag over his shoulder and powering down the hallway. He made it as far as the dance studio when he literally ran into someone, lost his balance, and crashed straight onto his ass.

“Ohhh, my God! Are you okay?”

Adam recognized the voice immediately, one he’d been working up the nerve to give a full pitch to about the Apples. As he looked up at Kurt Hummel’s graceful, concerned face, his heart thudded raucously and his face burned.

“Well. Hullo.”
Kurt held out his hand. “I’m so sorry, I wasn’t paying attention.”

“Nor was I, clearly.”

“I was hoping to run into you, but not like this!” he said with a little chuckle.

Adam found himself just staring, and smiling haplessly.

“Do you... like it down there?” Kurt asked.

“Oh. Oh, I suppose not. But you’ve got to admit, it’s a nice angle.”

“For getting stepped on?” Kurt narrowed his eyes. “Because I’m good at that from any angle.”

“Ohhh. Dark.” Adam shook his head. “Sorry. I’m having an ‘on the floor’ type of day.”

He took Kurt’s hand and pushed himself to his feet.

“I know the feeling.”

“So... You said you were looking for me?” Adam could hardly believe that.

“I was... but I have to go change for dance class like...” Kurt looked at bare sleeve. “Five minutes ago.”

“Don’t anger Madam July,” Adam advised merrily.

Kurt nodded and laughed. “Will you be around... um oh, I work then. Um...”
“My number’s on the sign-up sheet for The Adam’s Apples.”

“Oh. Well, your phone must be blowing up all day.”

“Not exactly.”

Kurt looked back at the studio. “Nice colliding with you.”

“And you. Let’s collide again sometime.” Adam leaned forward, both cringing and laughing.

Kurt smiled widely and shook his head as he disappeared into the dance studio.

Now the day had been both so good and so bad that Adam didn’t know whether to go make cookies in frustration, celebration, or self-humiliation.

***

The upstairs neighbors called Kurt “The Rooster,” and not because of the hair (not entirely). He liked to do vocal practice early in the mornings, and if he did it out on the fire escape, he could avoid waking Rachel. But Jaylin and Emory upstairs asked that he not start before six am, so he came out about the same time every morning to work though his scales.

Right after the break up was when they came up with this arrangement specifically. Because he couldn’t sleep, he practiced and practiced, trying to think of something he could do to impress Carmen Tibideaux. Arias, vocal tricks, rearranging songs to highlight the alternate extremes of his vocal range. At the time, he could only believe that it was his skill that had been lacking. At his first audition, she’d praised the risk he’d taken, and the arrangement he’d done of the number, but then ultimately rejected him.

It took a long time for Kurt to admit that he’d been depressed even before he’d gotten his rejection letter. That was what his life had become. A string of blows to the teeth, and neck, and belly, aimed critically at those moments when he thought he was finally getting a grip on life again. Success demanded a sacrifice from him. Refused to let him take solos in high school, nearly took his father from him, humiliated him publicly, took his boyfriend, and with it, his belief in romance and happy endings.
He’d been cautious about getting too excited about acceptance into NYADA, even under those bizarre and brutally unfair circumstances. Now, Kurt mused that he couldn’t connect his current tragedy to being accepted. Gio had happened before that. There was no cosmic arrangement punishing him and stealing his smiles. It was just the result of his own poor judgment. There was no one else to blame.

“Be my friend,” Kurt sang, letting his voice lift high and delicate into the crisp New York air. “Hold me... wrap me up, unfold me! I am small, and needy. Wrap me up... and breathe me.”

Hi voice dipped low and tremulous. “Ouch, I have lost myself again. Lost myself and I am nowhere to be found.” He gasped a breath. “Yeah, I think that I might break. I lost myself again and... I... feel... unsafe.”

The wind out on the fire escape bit into his cheeks and leached into his bones. He felt paper thin. Insubstantial. He felt like he could feel poison moving through his veins. No wonder no one wanted to touch him. He could barely stand being in his own skin.

As he finished his piece (for which he was glad had little to no audience, as it was self-indulgent and self-pitying to a degree that was kind of ridiculous), Kurt leaned forward on the railing, squeezing the freezing metal and feeling the cold burning against his flesh. It almost felt good. The pain was real. Solid. He closed his eyes and let himself breathe for a few minutes before he headed inside to make himself some tea.

Kurt set up the tea kettle and looked at his phone. He hadn’t called Adam yet. How did you tell someone that their performance gave you a moment of hope when you were drowning? Voice-on-voice action seemed utterly intimidating. Maybe because Adam was already a huge Rachel fan, and Kurt seemed doomed to always lose when put in comparison to her. Maybe it was because Adam had such a raw, casual beauty and Kurt had no idea if Adam was even gay. At NYADA, the chance rose a bit, of course, but Kurt couldn’t really think about a romantic prospect. Maybe that was part of it.

Maybe it was also because he was still loathe to talk about this with anyone. If Adam pressed him for why the number had meant so much, he might find it strange. He might not understand how someone could be so affected by what was basically another mash-up.

The kettle whistled, and Kurt sang along with it for a second before lifting it up off the burner.
“I can sing high and sing low,” he sang to himself as he laid out a row of sliced lemon onto a small plate on his tray next to the zucchini bread. He pulled out a yellow mug for himself. Bright colors stand for energy and vitality, and yellow provides relief from anxiety and emotional burnout. Especially in dreary winter weather. “I can sing high and sing low.”

He chose a red mug to set next to his. Rachel should be up soon, and she usually liked tea in the mornings with a little lemon. Good for the throat for two songbirds vocalizing to the extreme every day.

He spotted Rachel coming out of her bedroom as he began to pour the water into a mug. “I can sing high and sing low. I can sing high and sing looooow, would you like some teaaaaaa?”

“Shhh,” she whispered. “Yes, I would, but shhhhh.”

Kurt’s brows shot up, and he lowered his voice. “Brody, did- Did he spend the night?”

Rachel’s face lit up like it was Christmas morning and she’d gotten into her packages early. “Yeah!” she whispered. “We had dinner at Balthazar, and he insisted on taking me home-” She put a guiding hand on Kurt’s shoulder and looked over her shoulder to be sure that her guest was still asleep. “-and the train ride back to Manhattan is really long so-” she sang her words quietly, “I invited him to stay over!”

Kurt looked at her in disbelief and almost laughed. “Rachel Berry,” he whispered in his Southern lady voice, “Ah am scandalized!”

Rachel bubbled about seizing the moment and not second guessing herself, and Kurt wobbled his head from side to side as he bobbed his teabag in the water.

“Hm. I guess. As long as you’re happy. And you use condoms.”

“Kurt!”

“Lots and lots of condoms. And a white noise machine. Plus more condoms. Maybe industrial strength.”
“I’m not going to get pregnant,” Rachel scoffed. “I’m far too smart for that.” She swatted his bicep lightly. “How are you?”

Kurt hated that it was such a loaded question. Still, he was grateful that this was the first she’d asked since he’d gotten back. She probably hadn’t heard him throwing up. She wasn’t home enough. And thankfully, mundane grinding nausea seemed to be more common than the technicolor nightmare symptoms.

“How was your first week?” she prodded again when Kurt didn’t answer right away.

Ahhh. NYADA. That other new thing in his life. Safer topic.

“Oh. Well... good. A little lonely,” he admitted. “But I was thinking to meet people I’d join the show choir called the Adam’s Apples- WHAT?”

Rachel had gasped and started to laugh before he’d even finished speaking, and maybe the lack of sleep and his lack of desire for his own breakfast despite being really hungry was getting to him a little.

“Don’t snap at me, sweetie,” she pleaded. “It’s just.” Her lips barely suppressed her amusement. “Listen to me. There is a very rigid performing arts hierarchy at NYADA. And show choir? It’s like the lowest of the low. It’s beneath stage managers and carpenters. That is social and career suicide.”

“But at McKinley-”

“We’re not at McKinley anymore. We’re done being underdogs. If you wanna join a club, just do anything but The Adam’s Apples. If you do show choir at college, you might as well be doomed to a life of being a dancing teapot at Disneyland.”

Kurt closed his mouth and looked at her sadly for a moment. He felt strangely alienated from everything around him. He didn’t belong in this space where he was sitting. “I think I’d probably rather be Lumière,” he joked after a moment. “Or Peter Pan. I think I have the face for it.”

“C’mon, there have to be other choices than that straggly, misshapen pack of outcasts. What other clubs were you thinking of joining?”
Kurt sipped his tea and rose from the sofa. “I have to get going. I have an appointment before work and I haven’t even picked out my outfit.”

“Oh, Kurt. Don’t be mad,” she pleaded.

“I’m fine. I just...” Kurt put his hand on the back of the futon. “You know, they performed at a Christmas benefit that was on television. They were wonderful.”

“Kurt, you really don’t want to do this. Why would you even think about it?”

“I think... I’m just really disappointed in you right now,” he said as he disappeared behind his curtain. He expected Rachel to come after him and argue, but he heard the disgruntled stirrings of a half-naked manbeast, and she got distracted greeting him and offering him tea and zucchini bread.

“Nah, I’m on my diet,” Brody yawned. “No carbs right now, babe.”

Kurt swallowed and cringed inwardly, that feeling of suddenly knowing that someone had been around when you thought you were alone (or at least alone with a close friend). Well, who was he of all people to judge if Rachel had someone over? But Kurt wasn’t feeling very forgiving toward her at the moment, and her categorical censure of the Adam’s Apples, of choosing to do an activity that might make him not popular...

He felt oddly like he was in the apartment with two strangers.

***

Doctor Saunders’ door was painted with faded white letters. The glass was frosted. Presumably so that no one could see the people waiting inside. Of course, it wasn’t like there were that many chances for people to just wander by and spot someone. The office was on the fourteenth floor.

Kurt entered hesitantly. The building was old, but the office was nice. Cool blue colors. A horizontal stripe around the cramped waiting room and into the hallway to make the office look more spacious. Kurt came up to the receptionist/probably also a nurse, who wore the name tag Gabriel, smiled at him and gave his name. Gabriel handed him a clipboard with papers to fill out and about a flibbity-jillion places to sign things and pointed to a place where he could sit to go
through the papers.

“Oh, do you have your insurance card, hon?” he asked.

“Yeah, I do.” Kurt dug his wallet out of his messenger bag and slid him the card.

“Great. I’ll just make a copy and enter this into our records. You get started on that, okay?”

Kurt sat down and felt his heart creeping into his throat. He was still in car wreck mode as he eased into his increasingly medicalized existence.

How was this even happening?

He skimmed through paper after paper, not even looking up when the bell on the door jangled. A few of the patients chatted with Gabriel pleasantly. Kurt didn’t need to be up in anyone else’s business. Even though, if they were coming to this office, their business was probably the same as his own.

Kurt was nearly on the last page, when he felt a delicate hand on his shoulder. He looked up to see vibrant, hazel eyes, with a hint of gold.

“Oh! Hi.” Kurt blinked a few times as he recognized the sprightly little drag queen from his Thanksgiving party.

“Hii-eee,” the young man said. He was wearing a mix of clothing now, but no wig or make up (well, a little eyeliner). Instead of a dress that looked like it might have come off a particularly difficult Project Runway challenge, he wore a sunny yellow blouse, and shorts that came to the knee over textured blue sweater tights. There was a little snowflake on the strap of his sandals.

Kurt shook his head. “Sorry, I was admiring your ensemble.”

“I like yours. Gosh, are you going to a fashion shoot or something?”
“Maybe if I live that long. Right now I’m just headed in there.” Kurt jerked his thumb towards the interior door, surprised at his own grim joke. “Actually, I probably will be at a shoot before the end of a day, but I’ll just be taking notes and running errands.”

“Really! Exciting.” He shrugged his shoulders up towards his ears. “I always wanted to go to a photo shoot. A real one, not just me and my girls doing selfies.”

“I can imagine you doing that. You’ve got a good eye for how to put clothes together. Even when they’re not technically made of fabric.”

“Aw. Thanks. I just sift through whatever I can afford at Goodwill. I’m kind of like beauty on a budget.”

Kurt chuckled. “Yeah, I understand that. It was my motto in high school. I sewed so many of my clothes, sometimes I ended up going to school with bloody fingertips.”

“I had to pawn my sewing machine,” he admitted. “For things that I should not be buying.”

“Ah, yes. So hard to be a responsible adult.” Kurt licked his lips slowly, then sucked in his lower lip and signed one last time. He walked up to the counter and set his clipboard down with a smile. Then he returned to his seat where the little guy next to him had pulled his legs up into the chair with him and was toying with one of the snowflakes on his shoe.

Kurt sat down and rested his head back against the wall. “I’m Kurt, by the way.”

“Aude.”

“Aude?”

“Not odd, but-”

“No, Aude, as in La Chanson du Roland. Right?”
Aude grinned, causing Kurt to notice that a few of the teeth on the left side of his mouth had a jagged rust-colored stain. “Yes. Though I just kind of liked the sound of the name!”

“It’s not... your name?”

“It’s what I go by. Aude du Joy, aka, Aude di Pinay, aka Aude Spectacular-” He wiggled his fingers in jazz hands. “-the Magical Pixie T-girl.”

Kurt smiled again, enjoying the feeling of his chest growing lighter. Aude’s energy seemed to be mellowing as they sat there next to each other.

“I don’t like my real name.” Aude’s lips started to slowly spread as he shook his head. “Honey Bong-bong.”

Kurt let out a high laugh and covered his mouth immediately. “No. No, it is not.”

“It is. I wish I could say my mom was high when she wrote that on my birth certificate. Filipina moms have some real... creativity.” He bit down on the cuticle of his thumb. “When I came out, I told her it was the name that did it.”

“Your real name is pretty close to putting you on reality tv,” Kurt teased.

“It is.” Aude pressed his lips together and laughed silently. “Hm. I don’t know why I just told you that. I’ve dated guys for years who I never told my real name.” He leaned back as well and let his eyes drift up and down Kurt’s face. “I think I just wanted to see you smile.”

“Thanks.” Kurt watched him for a moment and swallowed. Then, he admitted, “I needed it.”

Aude reached over and rubbed his forearm. “I’ve been there. Still here.”

“Still here.” Kurt nodded and forced a smile. “So far.”

Aude’s brows tented. “Hey, remember my rule. Boys as pretty as you should never be sad.”
“I am genuinely surprised that you remember that night. Or even meeting me.”

Aude flattened his lips and nodded in agreement. “Absolut truth. But I still mean it, sweetie.”

“If nothing else good happens today, at least I got called pretty.” Kurt lifted his chin and smiled down at little Aude, who slipped his skinny arm through Kurt’s and held his hand as he waited to be called into the doctor’s office.

***

Adam wiped down a table and picked up the multicolored coffee mugs left by the last customers. It had been a slow day, which was unfortunate on two levels. First, it meant fewer tips. And people weren’t terribly inclined to tip at coffee shops anyway. Second, it gave him more time to think.

The Apples were feeling particularly low lately. Even his near infamous cheer wasn’t helping them get over the funk caused by Madam Tibideaux’s glaring disapproval of their performance. It was bad enough that the snobby mainstream performers at NYADA looked down on most of their members because they didn’t have the “look” to make it big, or they were stagecraft or writers. The hierarchy was pretty oppressive at the school. Not that this was any surprise, but it had been one of the reasons Adam had started the Apples to begin with.

It just hurt them to feel that they didn’t have their school’s, or even their teachers’, support behind them.

Adam had to remind them that donations had gone up during their number. The teens they’d talked to had liked their second number better, but for some, the first meant more to them. Getting help to those kids, that was what was important.

He set the plates in the sink and turned on the water. Might as well get this out of the way now.

*And I find it kinda funny, I find it kinda sad. The dreams in which I’m dying are the best I’ve ever had...*

Adam had been singing to himself for several minutes when he heard a soft chuckle. He turned to see Kurt’s lovely face, smiling lopsidedly as he watched him.
“Oh, hullo. I was afraid I wouldn’t see you... You know. More than just... around.” Adam was also a little afraid that his casual compliments when he’d seen Kurt in the hallways had come off as much less than casual. It had occurred to him that if unwanted, they might’ve seemed creepy.

“Maybe this counts as around?” Kurt learned forward on the counter. “Nice song. If I had to choose the song to get stuck in my head for the rest of the day, that would be it.”

“You haven’t called,” Adam teased. “I guess some untoward suitor must’ve snatched my flyer before you could get to it.”

Kurt’s smile widened until little pearly teeth just barely peeked out. “No, no. It’s just... Actually, I’ve been walking up and down the area applying in any place that will give me an application.”

“Oh, for a job.”

“No, for hair dye.”

Adam pressed his lips together in a big smile. “Ah, I see.” He turned the water off behind him. “Well, I happen to know they’re not looking for extra help here, but I can give your ah, um... number to Jinx. She knows a lot of small business owners. Not around here, though. She could give you a ring. Put in a good word.”

Kurt reached in his bag and handed Adam a crisp resume with a burgundy header and a tiny headshot on the left.

“Nice.”

“I hope so.”

“A bit much for slinging coffee.” Adam reached under the counter for some post-its and started to leave a note for his manager.

“I kind of need to get another job here in a week or so. Anything will do. My regular job just
doesn’t pay much, and I can’t ask for a raise. I haven’t been there long enough and my hours are fewer now that I’m in school,” Kurt explained. “I don’t mean to beg. I just have a lot of unplanned expenses.”

“I know what that’s like. I’ll ask Jinxy when I see her tonight.” Adam chuckled. “You could try Callbacks.”

“I spend enough time around that crowd.” Kurt rolled his eyes. “I live with one of them, unfortunately.”

Suddenly he seemed tired. Adam leaned forward on the counter and looked over his expression seriously. He seemed very tired, maybe even sad.

“Sorry. I know you have a fannish devotion to Rachel.” Kurt looked at Adam and forced his lips into a semblance of a smile, as though he were joking. But obviously he wasn’t.

“I didn’t know how to say this,” Adam began slowly, “but I actually came over to your table that night to talk to you.”

“Me?” Kurt swiveled his head in place a little and pinched his lips together. “Little ol’ me? Not Miss Rachel Berry?”

“I saw you at the Winter Showcase, too, y’know. Your performance was-” Adam paused, feeling a chill as he remembered Kurt striking his final note and letting the low, clear note resonate through the audience. So powerful. So vulnerable. “-breathtaking.”

“Oh. Thank you.” Kurt seemed taken aback by that. “That song... It just continues to expand in meaning for me.”

“It really seemed to tell a story. I didn’t know what that story was, mind, but... I could tell I was coming in midway.” Adam let out a soft laugh. “I suppose that’s an odd thing to say.”

“No. I understand.” Kurt shrugged. Then he licked his lips nervously, and his eyes lit up a little. “You, uh, you should know that I’ve seen you perform, too.”

“Oh?”
“It’s what I wanted to talk to you about, before. The Christmas Eve Ali Forney benefit.”

“Oh.” Adam’s shoulders slumped a little.

“What?” Kurt spread his hands over the countertop, feeling the marble. “My dad had it on. I wasn’t feeling very well, and I woke up, and I saw you singing that mash-up.”

“Yeah?” Adam stood by him and looked down, his brow slightly furrowed.

“If my performance took your breath away, I think... I had an opposite reaction to yours.”

Adam’s face went blank and his hands lost the grip on the pen he was holding. It clattered against the counter. “Oh.” He blinked, his mind fumbling for words. “I see. I-I’ve heard as much.”

“That’s not what I mean.” Kurt held his hand up. “How do I explain... It didn’t take my breath away. My breath was already gone. Seeing what you did with that song, and how everything came together? It just... It helped me breathe again.”

“Oh. Oh, God.” First relief washed over Adam, then he frowned again, in concern. “I’m glad it helped you. It was meant to be uplifting, not a muddle of songs... I hope things are better now?”

“I... struggle during the holidays. This Christmas was worse than most,” Kurt admitted. He leaned onto his forearms and looked up at Adam with determination. “I love that The Adam’s Apples do things like that. I’m about as self-involved as they come-”

“I don’t believe that for a second!”

“Believe what you will. I just...” Kurt shifted his head to tilt in the other direction. “I can’t really explain, but what you put into that song really meant a lot to me. I keep thinking of it. I just...”

Kurt seemed to lose the words, and Adam watched his tired, jewel-like eyes flutter as he turned his head to study the bookcase beside the register.
“It really means a lot to me that our song touched you that much,” Adam offered in return. “We worked very, very hard on that. The Apples and I, I mean.”

Kurt drew in a deep breath and nodded.

*Just keep breathing.*

“Would you like some coffee?” Adam turned to fire up the espresso machine.

“Oh, no, thanks. I can’t sleep as it is.”

“Ah. Well, let me get you one of our herbal teas. I’m partial to the lavender when I’m stressed.”

“I’m partial to lavender most of the time,” Kurt joked, stepping back in a little bow.

Adam fetched the tea bag. “On the house.”

“Really?”

“The least I can do for you cheering me up tonight.” Adam turned on the water from the espresso machine and filled up a large mug.

“I think anyone who came in here could have done that.”

“I don’t think they really could have.” Adam dipped the teabag in the mug and set it down for Kurt. “Don’t burn yourself now... Besides, if I don’t give you some tea, you might decide to just leave me.”

“I *do* still need to find a job.” Kurt’s fingers crept around the mug carefully.
“Well, still, maybe you oughtn’t walk around this neighborhood at night alone.”

“I can take care of myself.” Kurt raised a brow at Adam and went over to the little table with the sugar and silverware.

Adam watched his choices carefully. One packet of sugar in the raw and a spoon.

“We’ve got some Truvia, if you want,” Adam offered.

“No, this is fine. I haven’t really eaten since...” Kurt’s brows furrowed, trying to remember, and suddenly seeming to realize quite how long it had been.

“That’s not very encouraging! I’m afraid we’re out of sandwiches, though.” Adam crouched down by the glass case to see what they still had. “They’ll not be as fresh, but we do have some pastry still.”

“No, I’ll be fine. Don’t worry. I’ll get something before heading home.”

“Are you sure? I could walk with you. We close in less than an hour.”

“I don’t know...”

“Ah, well. As I am an astute man, I think I can intuit that I’m coming on a bit too strong.” Adam took a few steps backward.

“Oh, no, no.” Kurt shook his head and then looked down at the teabag bobbing in his mug. “It’s not you. Really.”

“I’m not bothering you?”

“Not at all.” Kurt wrapped the string of his teabag around his finger and tossed the bag in the trash. “I kind of like having someone at school who doesn’t think I’m a leper.”
“I can’t promise joining the Adam’s Apples wouldn’t exacerbate the problem. However...” Adam took two leisurely steps towards Kurt. “We would give you a place to be. And you’re utterly incredible. I’ve talked to the others about you already-”

Kurt paused with the mug near his lips. “About me? Were they at the Showcase?”

“Some went with me. Some saw you at Callbacks after.” Adam leaned back against the counter and smiled lopsidedly. “Then we did some googling.”

“Oh, did you?”

“We found some great stuff! We loved the television special. Your character was so entertaining. And your singing, lovely. Just lovely.”

“Well... Thank you. That’s very kind.”

“It’s very true.” Adam touched his lips with his fingertips for a moment and resisted coming closer. He could practically see Kurt’s anxiety, though what was causing it, he couldn’t discern. “It is, Kurt,” he said more gently. “We took a vote. About you.”

Kurt brows raised and he sipped his tea.

“We need you. We want you.”

Kurt held the tea in his mouth for a moment, then swallowed. “We?”

“I... ah...” Adam felt his cheeks getting warm. “The Adam’s Apples.”

“Mm hm.” Kurt narrowed his eyes slightly and let out a heavy sigh. “I should go.”

“Will you think about it? Joining us?” Adam straightened up as he watched Kurt’s face. The red
around his eyes, the shadows. He was tired. He was overwhelmed. He was sad. This had little to do with Adam. But that didn’t stop Adam from wanting to help, somehow.

“Maybe.” The corners of his mouth deepened slightly.

“Well, maybe, you could come by the auditorium on the west side of campus. Sit in on a practice? If you’re not too busy.”

“I might not be too busy for that.”

Adam took one step forward and dipped down slightly in a modified bow. “Well, then we’ll be ready to see you... Tomorrow? 4:00pm?”

Kurt took a long drink of his tea and frowned slightly.

“So...”

“No, I’ll be there. I might be a little late, but I’ll come.” Kurt set the mug down and reached into his bag. He pulled out a pen and bent over the table to write on a napkin. “I’ll call you, if I get held up, but I should be there by 4:30, I think.”

Kurt handed him the napkin, and Adam looked at the number written there. He grinned so wide that his cheeks hurt.

With a little more coaxing and promising that they would have to throw them away otherwise, Adam sent Kurt on his way with a couple of almond cream croissants and a pink strawberry banana nut bagel. As Kurt thanked him and exited, worry constricted Adam’s chest. There was something different about the Kurt Hummel that Adam had met in the hallways and the one he’d see singing himself to life in NYADA’s round room.

Adam knew better than anyone that no one person could fix your life for you, but he would help where he could.

***
Kurt saw Rachel lounging by the television as he came in and walked immediately towards the fire escape.

“Kurt!”

The sound cut off as he closed the window behind him, and he sat down on the cold steps and took out his phone to check his messages. While he clicked through, he took one of the almond croissants out of his bag and started to nibble it. Then, just as he heard a tapping on the window, his phone began to buzz. He looked to Rachel, waved his phone, and took the call.

“Hi, Finn.”

“Hey, dude! Wow, I can’t believe I caught you. You’re hard to get a hold of these days.”

“I’m working a lot. And the past week or so... school.”

“I got you now. How’s it going? You lovin’ it? All the theatre people?”

Kurt flicked his attention back over toward the window. Rachel had disappeared somewhere in the apartment. He tucked his coat more tightly around him. “It’s um... It’s great. All my classes are really challenging, and I’m meeting new people. Everyone’s so creative. It’s exactly what I’ve been dreaming of for half my life. Every time you saw me peering out the window of the choir room, I was picturing exactly the life I have right now.”

“Cool! I’m glad, dude. You deserve it.”

“How’s everything there? Glee? Did you apply to colleges like I told you to?”

Kurt leaned back to listen, occasionally rubbing his cheeks. It was bitterly cold out here, and soon, snowflakes started to drift past. As Finn was talking about a showdown between the New Directions and the Cheerios, Kurt let out a hard sneeze.
“Are you getting sick again?” Finn asked warily.

“No. I am not getting sick. I’m just out on the fire escape, trying to avoid Rachel.”

“Is she still bugging you?”

“It’s worse than ever. But I might be a little less tolerant than I usually am.” Explaining why after claiming his life was sparkly lollypop land would be a little difficult.

“You live there, too. Tell her to knock it off.”

Kurt paused and rubbed his gloved fingers against his nose. “I know. It’s just, this week I told her I was thinking about joining a choir here, and she completely blew it off. Because these guys don’t have enough social status. It’s really bothering me.”

“Yeah, because why would Kurt Hummel hang out with a bunch of losers?”

Kurt made a scoffing noise.

“I don’t think you would. Even if everyone else thinks they are...” Kurt could practically hear Finn shrugging and crooking his mouth to the side. “You wouldn’t spend time with someone who didn’t have something worthwhile in them. Like Rachel. Man, was she annoying and selfish when we met her. No one liked her, and it wasn’t because of her ‘talent’ like she complained.”

“She was sixteen. We were all kind of annoying at sixteen. I was.”

“You were clueless. And seriously, bro, so was I. I was so dumb. But the point is, you found what was likable in Rachel. When she started trying to be a better friend. We all screw up and make mistakes, but if she wasn’t worth it, you wouldn’t still be friends with her. And I think her being judgy about the choir doesn’t really mean that much. Does she even know them?”

“No. I’m just frustrated with her. I’ll make up my own mind about the choir.”
“Maybe you should tell her she’s getting on your nerves.”

“I should.” Kurt sighed. He really should. That was how adults worked through their problems, wasn’t it?

“Hang in there. At least everything else is great right now, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll tell Burt you’re healthy again. I know you were better before you left, but he was still worried.”

Kurt nodded and sniffed.

“I gotta go. Thanks for picking up.”

Kurt bit his lip and felt guilt burning against his stomach. Or it could’ve been hunger. “I’ll try to call you guys more.”

“We get that you’re busy. We just miss ya.” Finn chuckled. “Don’t worry about it. Go be a star at your fancy school. Meet hot guys. Have fun. Oh, and Marley wanted me to say that she and Unique have a video on the way for you.”

“What?” Kurt laughed. “Oh, that’s sounds amazing. I didn’t think they’d actually do that.”

“Yep. The other girls might cameo. They saw them practicing and wanted to get in on it. It’s nice to see them all working together.”

“And... Kitty?”

“I keep her out of groups with Marley, when I can, but Marley seems better. She’s been going to therapy, and it looks like she has some of the other girls at her back.”
“Okay.” Kurt nodded slightly.

“I’m watching out for them, Kurt. Trust me?”

“I do. It’s just hard for you to see everything.”

“That’s why Senor Martinez comes in twice a week. And Miss Pillsbury does sometimes, too.”

“Oh! That’s a relief. Well, keep me updated.”

“Maybe at spring break you can come by and give us some lessons on theatricality,” Finn teased. “We were working so hard on the Christmas and audition stuff with them, I don’t think we got your specialty out there.”

“Maybe-”

There was another tap on the window and there was Rachel, holding a pizza in hand and dancing it around as she grinned insanely.

“That’s terrifying.”

“What?” Finn asked.

“I think Rachel’s going to kill me with a pizza.” Kurt reached over and pulled the window open. “Are you going to kill me with that pizza?”

“No! Come inside, Kurt. It’s freezing out!” She motioned with her hand and then reached out to grab him.

“Offering of pizza, dude. You should go for it,” Finn said.
“Okay, fine. Talk to you later?”

“Definitely.”

Kurt hung up and climbed back inside the apartment.

“I think you’re right about the Peter Pan thing,” Rachel mused as she set the pizza box on the coffee table. “I also have wine.”

“Yes, wine and pizza. Perfect date night.”

“Are you in for the night? We could play some games.”

“Sure.”

Kurt followed her into the kitchen to get some napkins. Ten minutes later, they were both a little buzzed, sitting on the floor with some of the furniture cleared out of the way.

“Rachel, you are surrounded by a harem of tiny blue children,” Kurt informed her.

Rachel giggled and spun the Wheel of Life. “You know, I told Finn sophomore year that I planned to have sex and babies after I’d established my career. You know, twenty five.”

“That’s still perfectly reasonable. Well, not the babies part.”

“I know, I know. Wear condoms.”

“They could still discover you somewhere. At a karaoke bar, at an off-Broadway show. Did Brody get the part in Magic Mike?”

“No.” She sighed. “They said he strained too much in his upper register.”
“Well, I could help him with that.” Kurt reached for his wine. “This is kind of nice. Not running around anywhere, going to work, classes, and everything. Just friends, hanging out.”

Rachel nodded and reached for another slice of pizza. “I’m glad you were home. So tell me about week two at NYADA. Anything exciting? How is Cassandra July’s class? Oh, what did you end up joining?”

“Oh. Um. So far, the Tennessee Williams play reading group. You know, work on keeping the instrument well-oiled.” Kurt shrugged. He hadn’t made a firm decision on the Apples, so he wasn’t going to mention them. “Cassandra... She’s a lot like Coach Sylvester, actually. She calls me a twinkie.”

Rachel narrowed her eyes. “As in snack food? Is that a comment on your weight?”

“Yeees. And no.” Kurt moved his car down the road. “It also refers to young gay man at the clubs.”

“Oh. We’ll, that’s not so bad. She called me Schwimmer. As in from Friends.”

Kurt chuckled. “Well, that’s ridiculous. Schwimmer wouldn’t look nearly as good with smokey eyes and short skirts.”

Rachel swatted at him and smiled. “Didn’t I tell you she was awful?”

“Coach Sylvester was worse. Though I’ve heard people referring to ours as the Class of the Damned. Apparently we’re all doomed to failure.”

“They don’t mean you, Kurt. They’ve never seen you dance.”

“And if they had, it wouldn’t be rumor, but fact,” Kurt joked. “It’s not my biggest stress right now. I’ll just do my best. My acting professor seems to like me.”

“Oh, Tate? I don’t know about him, either.”
“Did you have him last semester?”

“I did. But he’s so determined to have people act from past trauma. Some people just made up things to make him happy.”

“Some as in you?” Kurt leaned forward and raised a brow.

“Maybe.” Rachel rolled her eyes. “I have Gibbens this semester, and he seems much better.”

“We’ll see. Teachers react differently to me than they do you.”

There was a loud knock on the door. A resounding three part thrapping that Kurt recognized as Brody’s. Rachel sprung up and clapped her hands on the way to the door.

Kurt wiped his mouth with his napkin. Of course, Rachel could spend time with him tonight, if she had to wait around for Brody to come over. Kurt slumped forward and spun the wheel with one finger. He was going to have to get used to being scheduled in for stints of 15 to 30 minutes.

“I went ahead and ordered the pizza,” she told Brody, then raised onto her toes to give him a kiss.

“Everything’s up, mostly. I need to drag up some more heavy stuff. Hey, Kurt!” Brody waved at him. “Would you mind helping me with some boxes?”

Kurt arched a brow and came to his feet. “Boxes?”

“Yeah, I just have a little.” Brody circled and arm around Rachel’s back. “I put the rest of it in storage, because, y’know, last minute move. But my old landlord is cool with it, as long as I pay rent for this month and next.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” Kurt raised his hands and shook his head in disbelief at Rachel. “He’s moving here? As in moving into our apartment?”
“It was the only workable solution,” Rachel said. “We couldn’t keep going back and forth to each others places. And anyway, I’ll cover his part until he can do it. Don’t worry.”

“My worry is not finances,” Kurt snapped. Although it was, a little. “My worry is that we suddenly have another roommate that you didn’t see fit to warn me about!”

Rachel waved her hand. “You look fine. Now, can you go help him with his boxes? I’m going to warm up a plate for him. No saying no to the pizza, Brody. I know today is your cheat day.”

“You have got to be kidding me.” Kurt’s voice was deflating, and his head slowly tilted to the right.

Brody had decided to ignore their fussing and was now rolling a big suitcase into the apartment. Kurt turned and went into his bedroom.

A few minutes later, he could hear Brody laughing softly. “That was a hell of a explosion. You should’ve warned him.”

“It’s my place, too. I don’t know why he’s making such a huge deal out of this. He never had a problem with you before.”

Kurt pulled out the suitcase under his bed. Then he collected the pill bottles on his nightstand and packed them in securely. Then he grabbed his boyfriend pillow and put that inside, too. He didn’t need to deal with them asking any questions. He could hunt down any other sensitive items to be hidden later.

Once he was done, Kurt went back out, ignored Rachel’s attempt to shame him for getting angry, and looked to Brody. “Where are the boxes?”

“In the truck I rented downstairs,” Brody said.

Kurt nodded and headed out the door. Brody followed. As they pulled the boxes from the truck, Kurt informed him tersely,
“You don’t go in my room.”

“Okay.”

He hefted the box into his arms and let out a soft grunt. What the hell did Brody have in these? And why couldn’t Rachel grab a few? “And you close the bathroom door when you’re using it. You preferably lock the door, but we have three people sharing a small bathroom now. We’re going to have to come up with a reasonable shower schedule so everyone gets to work and class on time.”

“True.”

“And every third week, it’s your turn to clean it.”

“Okay, okay. Look, I’m sorry Rachel didn’t tell you. I didn’t mean to invade your space.”

Kurt looked at him sharply. “Well, you’re here. And we’re adults. We can work it out, I guess.”

They got the boxes up within a few trips, then Kurt excused himself, despite Rachel’s complaints about finishing their game and dinner, saying he was tired. He took a hot shower, knowing one would be hard to come by in the morning, and retreated back to his room.

Kurt sat there, on his bed, staring up at the ceiling until his watch beeped and he took out his medication and downed them one by one. He wished there were a window in his section of the apartment. But there wasn’t, so he got out his phone, to once again check his messages, noting to himself a few requests from Isabelle for first thing tomorrow.

Then he scrolled through his contacts. Already talked to Finn. Not going to talk to his father right now. It was too late on the west coast to call Mercedes. He slid the bar up and down, looked at Adam’s contact number, and hesitated for a moment. He was in no place to start a relationship. Not in the right headspace. Not really over the issues from his break up. And that was before really dealing with what a mess he was over his diagnosis.

But it wasn’t a marriage proposal. Just a call. And Kurt made it. He pressed the number beside Adam’s name and waited to hear his deep, smooth voice.
The open space was cold. Adam suspected that had to do with the building’s owner. Dana, who was running the group today, had brought a space heater and set it up near enough to try to get some more warmth in the room. It had been a while since Adam had come, but he could see that they had left the Christmas lights up, long strings circling the ceiling. They twinkled merrily overhead.

“-So physically, I’m doing all right. No worse, but no better, either.” The man speaking sighed. “My wife and I haven’t come to any conclusion on the kids issue, though.”

“At least she’s not completely opposed, right?” a girl with long, bright red hair said.

Adam frowned slightly. That girl looked to be his little sister’s age. That bothered him a bit.

“It’s not that she doesn’t want kids, or that she’s opposed to any method specifically,” the guy continued. “She’s just concerned that I won’t be around for her if we do have kids.”

Adam listened, nodding along. A few of them consistently had helpful things to say. Adam really ought to come more often. He didn’t know the man speaking, but there was a lawyer named John who attended sometimes, gave them legal advice. He didn’t have to, but the man was aging and felt a sympathy for the younger group members. That was the tone of the group, mostly. Mutual support. Dana kept the group fairly upbeat, smiling herself and making sure everyone had a chance to speak.

Even those prodigal members who tended to skip meetings and to not say much when he was there.

“Adam? Do you have anything to share today?” Her bright voice cut into his sense of security.

Adam smiled and he started to shake his head, as he normally did... but then looked down, licking his lips.

“We’re listening,” she said softly. “Guys, those of you who are new don’t know Adam, but we go
way back, huh Adam? He and Aude joined at the same time. Are you almost finished at NYADA?”

“Getting there. Maybe. I might be a second year senior at this rate,” he said with a thinly veiled attempt at levity. There was no ‘might.’ He was behind on his program, and all the professors he worked with knew it. Aude leaned across the person between them to squeeze Adam’s hand. He squeezed hers back and returned her kind look.

Aude had never gotten too far with school, but not for lack of smarts.

Dana smiled. “How have you been doing lately? Aside from school, unless you want to talk about that?”

“Not particularly.”

“How are you feeling?”

“I’m...” Adam looked up at the twinkling miniature lights and frowned slightly. The question was clearly about the physical, but he didn’t have much to say about that. “Conflicted.”

“And why is that?” she asked.

Adam blinked and swallowed around the lump in his throat. Suddenly, in spite of his trepidations about what he was about to say, a smile came naturally to his lips and he shrugged his shoulders.

“I met a guy.”

“Oo-oo,” Aude sang. “Is he pretty?”

“He’s absolutely lovely. Sings like a angel, moves like... beauty. He is grace. So smart. Funny.” Adam’s lips curved, remembering Kurt’s praise of their Christmas performance. “Kind. Very kind.”
“Lovin’ the heart eyes,” Cora said with a laugh. Adam had seen her around the group for almost a year. She was a good woman. Her children were sweet.

“We haven’t... I mean, we’ve not known one another other long. We’ve not even been out.” Adam paused, then admitted, “I’d never ask. This can’t go anywhere.”

“Why is that?” Dana encouraged.

“I think that’s obvious, isn’t it?”

“What’s obvious?” The man who had spoken before asked. He’d probably joined during one of the weeks Adam had skipped.

“Because we’re corpses,” Abigail said bitterly.

“That’s not true!” another man said angrily.

“Isn’t that what he’s saying?” Abigail looked hard at Adam.

“People, please,” Dana deepened her voice and issued the words firmly. “You don’t have to agree with everything people say here, but you have to give people the space to say it. That’s what group is for.”

“I didn’t mean to offend. What’s obvious for me isn’t obvious for everyone. I just...” Adam swallowed and shrugged his shoulders. “Not all negative guys are open minded. Marcus wasn’t, and... I was really...” He swallowed and let his head fall back. “I was really quite in love with him.”

His head turned as he saw Aude switching seats to be beside him.

“It’s all right,” he murmured. “It feels like a lifetime ago.” He laughed softly. “Maybe a couple lifetimes, hm?”

Aude was the only one who knew this story. She’d been there that night.
The night the man Adam loved had called him a murderer.
Chapter Seven

Kurt launched into the air, twirling around as though he were flying.

Then crashed to the ground.

Heat rushed to his face as he heard some of his classmates chuckling. “Sorry.”

“You should be.” Cassandra July paddled over gracefully, cast a censorious glance around at the class, and then looked down on him. The other students went silent. “You’re wasting everyone’s time. Do you think anyone paid their tuition to the premier musical arts school in the country to watch a sad, pathetic little twinkie with an eating disorder suck up class time by continuously failing to execute one of the most simple, most basic dance moves?”

Kurt swallowed and pushed himself to his feet. His heart sped up as he straightened his body into position, and despite his aching joints, tried the move again.

Cassandra stared him down as he landed shakily. But at least it was on his feet this time. She wasn’t his height, but she met his eye regardless.

“Mediocre.” Then she turned to the next student in line and snapped her fingers. “Are you on break, Annalisa? Do you want to go lie down, sweetie?”

Kurt scurried off to the side and took a drink of water while Annalisa gave the move a try. Then he hurried to get back in line. Cassandra would say when they were done.

Life at NYADA swung wildly between brutal criticism and praise that was nearly beyond belief. Most of it came from The Adam’s Apples, though. They were, by far, the kindest people on campus. He didn’t regret for a second adding their company to the brutality that was his week.

Life is too short.

The first practice with the Apples, they’d broken out a version of “Baby Got Back” that had him laughing and smiling, genuinely and effortlessly, for the first time in months. His shoulders felt
lighter when he danced with them, or even sat with them and brainstormed numbers. Kurt could tell
as a group they were in a funk, and boy had he been where they were right now. So it just pleased
him endlessly how happy they were to have him on board.

It sucked when the admin was intent on your destruction. It cost the school absolutely nothing to
let them keep going, and yet he could see the amount of paperwork Adam had to keep up with just
to keep their club official. Kurt hated to see the stress on him. He was otherwise such a relentlessly
positive guy.

When class was over, Kurt lingered by the front, waiting for Cassandra to finish her stretching.
After a moment or two, he started to mimic her motions, even though they had already done a cool
down.

He pretty much watched every move her body made and tried to commit it to sense memory. He
often practiced those moves later, when he had a moment or two. That was his strategy for stealing
her perfect dance technique.

“Got a problem, Twink?” she drawled after a few minutes.

“Oh, no. Well. Me. That’s the problem.” Kurt lifted his bag up onto his shoulder. “I wanted to ask
you if you have any recommendations for additional practice. Maybe someone you could refer me
to for additional training on the weekends—”

“Is my class not good enough?” She turned and put her hands on her hips.

Kurt shrugged. “I feel like I’m not doing that well. I’ve never been really confident in my dancing.
I should be getting it by now.”

“You are.” Cassandra picked up her water bottle and drank deeply.

“I, uh, what?”

“The people in this class with you? They should have gotten it by now. I have one little diva who is
about to have her flat, spoiled ass bumped back to this class. She should have gotten it by now.
That you get right up after you fall?” She pointed to the dance floor, and Kurt unconsciously turned
his head as though to see himself crashing time and again. “That’s what I want to see. I want to see
you do it well, but first, I want to see commitment and hard work. You got in here on singing and
acting. I don’t expect you to have it perfect out of the gate.”

She set the bottle down and looked him over a few times as she circled around him.

“You need to get more comfortable in your body. Or these moves’ll never come easy.”

Kurt sighed and looked down.

“Problem?”

“I think I’m more uncomfortable in my body right now than I have ever been.”

She crossed her arms, then went over to her bag, pulled something out and tossed it at him. Kurt caught it and looked at the Luna bar in his hands.

“I don’t have an eating disorder.”

She leaned against the wall. Her voice grew quieter, but held just as firm: “You’ve lost ten pounds, easy, since I first saw you before Thanksgiving.”

Kurt looked at the spare reflection of himself in the mirror at the front of the room. A stranger.

“Look, if you’re not going to go to counseling, I’ll tell you this. Repeat the moves. Over and over and over. Make it so your body cannot forget. But you aren’t missing these things because you’re a bad dancer or you don’t have the body to make it happen,” she said with an almost calm anger. “There are guys in this school, girls even, who would kill for your legs. What’s holding you back is—”

She tapped on her temple.

Kurt laughed and dipped his head a little.

“Is that funny?” she pressed.

“I dunno. I think it’s just true.” Kurt raised one hand as he shrugged his head to the side. “Thank you. For taking the time. And for-” He flashed the Luna bar in the air.

“For what it’s worth, I generally prefer people in my class not to take outside dance lessons. The best I can offer you is the auxiliary program. My TAs offer classes in the basics. If you want to try that, shore up your confidence, I’ll give them your name, and you can brush up for free.”

“That would be fantastic!” Kurt tried to dial down his excitement.

Cassandra shook her head. “You say it like I’m doing you a favor.” She pulled her PDA out and took some notes.

“You are. I need whatever help I can get.”

“You need confidence; that’s what you need.” She entered a few things in, then tucked the pen away. “Do you know how often I get students from the voice and drama programs coming to me and genuinely wanting additional lessons?”

Kurt winced a little. He could imagine how much of a drag on her resources performers like him could be. “All the time?”

“Rarely if ever. And it’s never the ones who really need to work on their dancing. Every semester I have a parade of belting brats who think they are God’s gift to Broadway and the minute they realize I’m going to hold them to the same goddamn standard I have for everyone else, they throw a tantrum more spectacular than anything I’ll ever see out of them on the stage. And I’ve bumped students from the program for it, too.” She slipped her PDA in her bag and patted Kurt’s shoulder. “It’s nice to see students taking the initiative in their own education. Never apologize for that. Not with me.”

“I still really appreciate it.”
Cassandra pointed at him, then turned around to get her bag. “But knock off that weight loss. Casting directors want willowy girls. Boys need to have some muscle. You look gaunt. It’s not going to get you parts.”

“I don’t...” Kurt pressed his lips together. “I don’t have an eating disorder.”

Cassandra narrowed her eyes and shook her head, as though she didn’t believe him. Then, slowly, she began to frown. “Are you sick?”

Kurt suddenly felt much more anxious than he had about approaching her to begin with. He looked around the dance studio, then in the hallway. People were walking by of course, but not paying much mind to them. Just another freshman facing down Madam July.

“I can’t tell you. I mean, I just... I can’t.” His voice fell to a whisper, and still the studio made it echo more than he’d like. “I haven’t told anyone.”

Cassandra’s eyes were growing intense. Wide, with deep creases at the sides. She drew some blond hair away from her face.

“Legally, I can’t press you for information. And you should be aware that no one else really can either.” Her brows rose slightly and she inclined her head forward. “Get your weight up, and don’t let the dean get wind of anything.”

“Like I need an excuse to eat cake,” Kurt breezed.

Suddenly, Cassandra laughed. It was such an ordinary sound. Kurt had never heard it before. It was warm. Strange to think that Cassandra July might secretly be kind.

She patted his back on the way out, and he headed into the halls, realizing very keenly the advice she’d just given him, and not just on dancing.

Don’t let the school know if you’re sick.

NYADA did have a hugely successful placement rate for their graduates. And a high washout rate.
It made sense that they had no time for training stars without a future. Why put all that effort into someone if they would never make it to the stage?

Kurt pulled out his phone and called his father. He had no belief that the man would be available at this time of day, but he liked to hear his father’s message. He even saved voicemails, sometimes, so his father’s voice was never far away.

“Yee-llo?”

Kurt blinked in disbelief. He nearly got trampled by a stampede of ballerinas, so he skirted off to the side of the commons and dropped onto a bench.

“Hey, dad!”

“Hey! Didn’t expect a call from you until the weekend. How’s it goin’? School good? Am I gonna get to see you kicking some theatre ass any time soon?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I’ve been pretty busy with work and school. I haven’t had a chance to sign up for any parts yet. Most don’t, during their first year. And I’ve not tried for any side stage work recently.” Kurt pulled his legs onto the bench with him and rested his chin on his knees. Cassandra July was right. He was losing too much weight. His doctor was going to yell at him. Or at least get stern and prim at him, as Dr. Saunders tended to do.

“I’m just kiddin’ you. I can wait. But when it happens, you tell me, and we’ll all head on up there to see you. Hey, have you talked to Finn lately?”

“Not for a couple of weeks.”

“Yeah, he’s gotten in on some community college classes. Trying to get his GPA up so he’ll look better for OSU.”

“That sounds wonderful. How’s it going so far?” Kurt closed his eyes to the students rushing by and honed in on his father’s voice.

He wished he could ask his dad to come up. He wished it wouldn’t be selfish to ask him to drop everything and just hang out with him in the apartment, with his arm securely around Kurt’s
shoulders.

Kurt would even watch sports if he got that wish.

***

Adam could hear Kurt humming behind him as he cleaned up shop. Kurt wasn’t any more open about what was bothering him, but he often came by The Crab Apple Cafe to get his homework done before jetting off to his new job. Jinx had hooked him up with a less well known, but hipper, diner in Bushwick that was looking for a server with some singing and design experience. They liked their waitstaff to be able to art up the place, and on the weekends, they sang as well.

With a look over his shoulder, Adam felt himself drawn closer to Kurt. He would like to think that he and Kurt were becoming friends. That might be enough. It might have to be. Adam played the part well. He kept a positive attitude. But if he had another experience like with Marcus, it might well bloody kill him.

Kurt lifted his eyes and smiled just a little.

“Hullo.” Adam was just about to come over when a group walked in, and Adam was pulled in another direction, taking orders, filling orders, and then taking their food and drinks over to them.

As he finished up, Adam snuck a look back at Kurt, who quickly turned his head back to the book he wasn’t exactly reading for his class on history of drama. Adam grinned widely and came over.

“Fascinating, hm?”

“Absolutely.”

Adam tilted his head back and tried to read what was going on in Kurt’s head. He should be able to do it. He was very good at reading people, normally.

“ Aren’t you cold?” Kurt asked.
Adam pressed his lips together and leaned on the side of the booth across from Kurt. “Not so much while I’m working. Why do you ask?”

“It’s New York. In winter. I’m from Ohio, and believe me, we got weather, but it’s New York.”

“Yes?”

“And you’re sleeveless.”

Adam chuckled. “I like this shirt!”

“I’m not sure you could call it a shirt. It’s more like a vest. With a host of scarves. You’re like a-” Kurt cut himself off and took a drink of his coffee.

“I’m what?” Adam leaned forward, unable to quell his smile.

“Nothing.” He looked down at his book and started to hum again.

This time Adam was close enough to make out the melody. His ears started to redden, and then, without putting enough thought into it, he sang in a deep, jolly voice:

“I’m a lumberjack and I’m okay! I sleep all night and I work all day! I cut down trees, I eat my lunch, I got to the lavatory! On Wednesdays I go shopping, and have buttered scones for tea!”

Kurt covered his mouth and shook in laughter.

“Do you hear this accent? Did you think I wouldn’t recognize Monty Python? That’s a point of British pride!” Adam teased. He could see Kurt’s ears going red. He looked towards the group who had just come in, then slid into the booth. “Why are you embarrassed?”

“I’m not embarrassed,” Kurt said through his hands.
“I guess the song is a bit bawdy, but I’ve sung worse in front of you...” Adam reached over and touched his elbow. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” Kurt rubbed his lips and looked away, clearly still feeling sheepish.

“I’m missing something.” Adam shook his head. “I’m the one singing limey songs about cross-dressing. I should be embarrassed, not you.”

“I, uh...” Kurt look another moment, then said quietly, “I just was thinking that the outfit made you look like a Bohemian lumberjack.”

“Ah-ha!” Adam clapped his hands together in delight. Then he stiffened his expression and pretended to straighten his beanie. “Yes, yes. I’m so very rugged.”

“You’re a little rugged. You’re definitely... very fit.”

Now it was Adam’s turn to go a little red in the face. “Oh... No.”

“When do you even have time to work out in between school and work and the Apples?”

“Oh. I dunno. There’s a spot close to my building. I’m not a gym bunny or anything.”

“Mm hm,” Kurt replied, with a knowing tone.

They were both quiet for a few minutes. Then Adam rose, made a vague gesture to the other customers (who didn’t really need anything), and slipped away. It was silly. He was being ridiculous about this. It wasn’t as though he’d never had someone interested in him, or that it had happened so, so long ago. He garnered interest on a regular basis.

Interest from Kurt was different. He wanted it. He wanted to act on it.
But he wouldn’t. Kurt deserved better. He was one of the purest, most amazing souls Adam had ever had the fortune of meeting.

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“I just want to strangle her stupid diva ass,” Kurt spat.

Adam’s eyes went round, and he looked at Kurt in astonishment. He’d invited Kurt to come over after they both got off work that day, and Kurt had readily agreed. So he’d arrived in a pair of extremely tight red pants and was in the process of slipping out of his work shirt underneath a sweater as he let out a string of unflattering descriptions of his roommate.

“You get ‘er, Kurt!” Jinx called from her bedroom.

“Sorry!” Kurt called back.

“Fuckin’ cannibals!”

Kurt laughed softly, dropped his shirt on his bag, and slid his arms into the sweater properly. “Can I use your bathroom for a moment?”

Adam felt his heart leap out of his chest for a moment. Kurt did have another pair of pants right there, and he wondered if Kurt hadn’t been about to strip down. But he wasn’t. Adam pointed and Kurt went to finish changing.

“What did she do?” Adam asked, outside the bathroom door.

“She invited Brody to live with us. Without telling me. I found out last week when he came over with his things! And they had me help haul all of it upstairs. We’re in a walk up.”

Jinx peeked her head out of her bedroom door, and Adam made a shooing motion.

“That’s really rude of her. She could’ve asked. Would you have said no?”
“If I knew then what I know now?” Kurt came out brushing his hair and walked over to stuff the red pants into his bag. He now had on his slinky sweater (with skulls) and a pair of fitted but not as tight green cargo pants.

“What do you know now?”

“Brody likes to go au natural.” Kurt motioned with one hand in the air as he emphasized the last two words.

Adam’s mouth dropped open and he had to hold back a laugh. “Really?”

“Gross!” Jinx called.

“Yes. This morning I got an unwelcome surprise with my cereal.” Kurt rubbed his eyes with one hand. “And completely waxed, by the way. It’s like he’s a friggin’ porn star.”

Adam fell back against the wall and laughed helplessly.

“What is wrong with them? That is my apartment. I’m the one who found it. I’m the one who got us the deal on it, and if I didn’t have my name on the lease, the landlord would not have let Rachel sign. She doesn’t have any credit and doesn’t even have a job. At best, she would’ve had to fly one of her dads out to cosign it for her.”

Adam reached over and rubbed Kurt’s shoulders. “Darling, I am so sorry. I laugh, but I am sorry. This is not extra stress that you need right now.”

“Nope.” Kurt sighed.

“Are you... feeling all right?”

“Please don’t tell me I need to gain weight or I look like I have an eating disorder. I know,” Kurt snapped.
“I... wasn’t going to.” He moved his hand over the curve of Kurt’s shoulder and squeezed. “I was going to suggest that we order Chinese food, or Vietnamese, and watch British television.”

“That solves a number of my problems,” Kurt said in a thoughtful tone.

“You don’t have to eat to please me.”

“No. I’m hungry, I just... food is complicated.”

“Get comfy. I’ll order, unless you have a preference.”

“I prefer... not pork? I just can’t. And nothing with weird texture? Is that too vague?”

“Actually not. I’ll order my squicky tummy standbys.”

Kurt dropped onto the sofa and folded up like a switchblade. He set his chin on his knees. “Do you get...? I mean... Never mind.”

“Sometimes stress just causes your entire body to say, ‘No. No, not today.’ And you’re left with the reality of still having to live in it.”

Kurt nodded a little and picked up the remote, flipping through the shows Adam had on the laptop hooked up to the tv.

“Do you like shrimp?” Adam asked. He sat next to Kurt with the menu.

“Who doesn’t like shrimp?”

“People with shellfish allergies, probably.”

“I’d rather die than go without shellfish. Shrimp is okay. But no pork. Or fatty beef or chicken. Do
“I do. I will be very careful. And trust me, I always order from places with an *impeccable* health rating. Do you have strong feelings about tofu?”

“I’m not really had much chance to try it. My family is full of meat eaters. You’d think I would have tried it at least, since Rachel is a fair-weather vegan.”

“What’s a fair-weather vegan?”

“One that occasionally eats meat or cheese, or cooks it if she’s trying to impress a guy or just *really* wants pizza or cheesecake.”

Adam smiled and petted the back of Kurt’s neck without thinking about what he was doing. Kurt dipped his head forward, and Adam considered pulling back, until he saw the light smile.

He leaned back as he ordered and watched Kurt’s face. The stress was leaving, a little, with the prospect of just sitting there with a friend and enjoying a meal.

“Have you seen Downtown Abby?” Adam asked when he got off the phone.

“I’ve been meaning to? My ex liked reality tv. I like some of it, y’know Tabitha, Drag Race, Project Runway, but we ended up watching a lot of his shows together. Probably because I’m a flexible tv ho, and I’ll mock and quote anything, even if I don’t like it.” Kurt wiggled his toes against the sofa cushion. “I have many years of training, watching things I don’t like just so I could have an excuse to cuddle up next to my dad.”

Adam laughed and took the remote. “I hope you *do* like it. If not, we can find something else.”

“You’re far too polite to make me watch things I don’t like, hm? I guess with my ex and my dad, it just came down to how much color commentary they were willing to put up with.”

“I don’t mind commentary. I just want you to enjoy yourself.” Adam stretched out and turned on an episode.
After a few minutes Kurt muttered, “I don’t understand what they’re saying.”

“Oh!” Adam stopped it and went up to fiddle with the computer. “We can give subtitles for a bit, until you get used to it.”

“Thanks.”

Adam started the video over and came back to Kurt’s side. Every few minutes, his eyes went to Kurt’s face, to see if he was understanding, to watch for his reactions. Kurt was extremely expressive when he watched. It was twice as entertaining, this way.

After the food arrived, Adam cracked open a bottle of wine and they ate while watching. Kurt had acclimated to the accents by this point, and was actively questioning and talking back to the television in between sips of pho and bites of the shrimp spring rolls dipped in peanut sauce.

It was perhaps one of the most adorable things to watch in the world.

“You choose the best food,” Kurt said with a sigh. He sipped his wine and smiled back at Adam contentedly.

“Enough time in the city and you’ll find these places. Especially when you start meeting people who’ve lived here. They all know the best places you won’t see in the Zagat’s guide.”

Kurt’s smile faded and he ran one finger along the corner of his mouth.

“What is it?” Adam asked after a moment.

Kurt shook his head and took a large drink of his wine.

“Sweetheart. Did I upset you?”
“I’m not your sweetheart.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.” Adam straightened up.

“No. No, I’m sorry. I was just reminded of... this guy.” He shook his head again. “He’s not you. I know that.”

“He hurt you.”

“More than I can even articulate.” Kurt put his glass down and frowned at the television.

Adam paused the show and just watched the distress on his pale but vibrant face. He was so beautiful. So amazing. Why would anyone go out of their way to hurt him?

Careless, selfish people.

“You don’t have to tell me what happened. I have my own baggage. We all do.”

“I suppose.”

“We do. I’m not particularly interested in telling you my sob story, but... You carry that with you. It doesn’t go away. It’s with you, in you, for the rest of your life.” Adam shrugged. “I don’t really know how people continue to have relationships, after a point. There’s so much wreckage to sort through.”

Kurt’s eyes had widened as Adam spoke. He blinked, then wiped a stray tear trickling down one cheek.

“Yeah.” He went silent and stared down at the ground. “I don’t know that I’ll ever be okay enough to even think about... I don’t know how to get over this. I didn’t know how to heal from what my ex did- he cheated on me, and it turned out to be with this random guy he didn’t even know. And this other guy... I can’t...”
“You don’t have to.” Adam reached over to pet Kurt’s shoulder. “I won’t say that you will get over it, or that it becomes any easier to trust people, but... the hurt stops being quite so... vivid. Ever-present. It stops intruding on all your waking moments. And you let your new reality... shift. And you learn to accept. And stop judging yourself for what happened. What you should’ve done, or could’ve done differently.”

Adam picked up the wine and poured himself another glass. “I don’t know about you, but I... I do still struggle with blaming myself. But I... Hm. I need to accept it. I can’t change it. I can only deal with what’s happened and live my life.”

He sighed and rolled his eyes, then held the bottle out for Kurt. Kurt held up his glass, and Adam filled it.

“I was deeply depressed after breaking up with Marcus.” He sipped his wine and breathed in and out slowly. “If I hadn’t had my friends... I don’t know that I would’ve made it.”

Kurt reached over and took Adam’s hand. Adam let out a soft laugh. He was supposed to be supporting Kurt here. But Kurt squeezed his hand, then rubbed his other hand over top of it and met his eye. Kurt was near tears himself and looking at Adam so intensely.

“I’m so glad you did.”

Adam tried to smile. Kurt scooted closer to him and kept petting his hand and arm.

“And it all started with Zagat’s,” Kurt muttered. “Have you ever been to Arancini Brothers?”

“No. I’ve heard they’re good.”

Kurt swallowed hard and lifted his chin. “They are. They’re... they’re really good.”

His voice was starting to grow strained and hollow. Adam lifted his hand to wrap his arm around Kurt’s shoulders. Kurt allowed it and relaxed onto Adam’s shoulder.

“No ordering Italian, then,” Adam suggested lightly.
“I don’t think I’ll ever eat Italian again.”

Kurt scrunched his face up and let out a shuddery sigh. Adam was trying to think of something to say, when Kurt let out a soft laugh.

Adam looked down at him and arched a brow. “This bloke was Italian, hm?”

“He was so Italian.”

Kurt still seemed on the edge between laughing and crying, so Adam rubbed his arm and let him just be. To cry, or laugh, or whatever he needed to do.

Eventually, Kurt reached for his wine and asked Adam to turn the show back on. Talking done. But strangely, Adam felt both more exposed and better than he did after going to most group sessions.

It could be because with Kurt, he’d actually revealed things just now, without talking about the events causing them. It could be because he was incredibly invested in giving Kurt some part of himself that would ease Kurt’s sadness. He didn’t exactly try very hard with the group. He wondered how it would feel to come out to Kurt about his status. They weren’t dating, and Adam would never, ever risk it with another negative guy, not his health or his love, but maybe, later, he could be open with Kurt about this.

It was nice to have someone he didn’t always feel the need to be positive around.

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“It’s like I’m a crazy person. I can’t stop talking about how much she is driving me out of my head right now!” Kurt gesticulated around his head wildly, causing Aude to laugh.

Aude did a little skip, trying to keep up with Kurt. “Slow down, slim!”

“Sorry. Okay, up here. Thanks for helping me with the coffee run.”
“Thanks for getting me an invite to Vogue!” Aude shoved his hands into his pockets.

“I showed my boss some of your outfits. She likes promoting young talent.”

“I ain’t that young.”

“You look young.” Kurt lifted his chin to see if there was a line at the coffee stand, then stopped short, causing Aude to stumble into him.

“Whoa! What happened?” Aude leaned forward, looking around.

“No. Um. We need to... Find coffee elsewhere.” Kurt started walking backwards.

“Ooo-kaay.” Aude turned with him and looked back at the coffee stand. “I’m starting to not dispute the crazy person discussion.”

“I’m sure he wouldn’t, either.”

“Who?”

“Gio... this guy. Oh my God. I can’t escape him this week. He’s at the coffee stand. I forget that he works around here.” Kurt scrunched up his shoulders and crossed his arms against the wind. “I don’t know what I’d do if he saw me and we actually had to talk.”

“Is this the Ex?” Aude spun around and walked backwards. “Which one is he? Is he the hunky guy?”

“Tall. Hunky. Preternaturally white teeth.” Kurt cringed and rolled his eyes.

“Niiice,” Aude hissed. He bounced around. “Honey, if you don’t want him, I’ll be happy to attach myself to that tree trunk of a leg and ride around until he’s done stalking you.”
“He, um... He’s not the ex. He’s the one that, I um...” Kurt gestured ineptly with one hand.

Aude’s expression suggested he’d gotten the picture anyway. “Or, I could follow him to his house and skin him in his sleep.”

Kurt stopped walking and stared. He’d never associated violence with his tiny, usually sparkly, friend.

“Kidding!” Aude grinned wickedly. “Sort of. Why would he think you’re crazy, though?”

“Because I lost it when I found out and clogged his voicemail with incomprehensible messages of rage.”

Aude nodded. “It happens.”

“And after we slept together, I left him so many messages before he finally called, he was probably thinking I was unstable already.”

Aude wrapped both of his arms around Kurt’s bicep. It was funny that Aude was about Rachel’s height. He seemed more substantial, in some ways, though. He probably could take out a guy twice his size.

“You need to stop blaming yourself. You didn’t know. It’s not like you were waving a flag out there, screaming, ‘Come get me, AIDS!’”

Kurt’s eyes went round and he made a shushing noise at Aude. As he looked around, Aude let go of his arm.

“This is New York, baby. No one cares what we’re talking about. There are days when I walk around in full drag, and no one says boo.”

“That’s because you pass, sweetie. I had to leave one job already. I don’t want to have to deal with that in this part of town,” Kurt argued.
“Okay. But that’s illegal. They can’t fire you for that.”

“Legally, no, but technically, I left. It’s just...” Kurt threw his hands up. “There are just so many things I can’t handle right now.”

“Clearly.” Aude rubbed his back and pointed. “Coffee shop. Let’s do coffee first. One thing at a time, and then the day will be over, and you can get some rest.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

“As an alternative, babe, you could stay over at my place. It’s small, but it’s actually closer to your workplace and school. And it’s diva-free.”

Kurt said nothing for a moment, frowning as he considered just avoiding Rachel until this diva-fit passed. It was just so frustrating. They had been doing well, until the Winter Showcase. Or so he’d thought. Now everything was spiraling out of control. His love life, his health, her behavior... it was just too much.

Aude bounced in place. “Stop. Get coffee. Go back to work. Just do one thing at a time.”

“You’re like a little motivational pocket gay.”

Aude snorted. “I’m not here to fix your life. I gots my own problems, girl.”

“And yet you try. Like Sisyphus rolling a big queer rock up the hill...”

“Hee.” Aude scooted them into the line, which was, gratefully, shorter than the cart on the street. “I got great big rocks, hon.”

“Hell, yeah, you do.”
“Okay, you’re not going to like this, but you need to come to group with me,” Aude said.

“Group cooking? Group dragging? Hold on.” Kurt fished his list out of his pocket and rattled off the list of coffee orders.

“Therapy,” Aude said. He sounded much less chipper than usual. His mouth was set a little bit like Santana’s on a good day.

Kurt looked down at him and sighed.

“Babe? You’ve been depressed since I met you. At least the people in the group know what you’re going through. They won’t judge you. I mean, they’re really in no place to. Hello? We’ve all got the same diagnosis. And they won’t tell anyone.”

“I don’t know. I’m not very good with being honest in circle formats. Maybe if they need a comedy routine to break up the emotional break-throughs.”

“You may have a skewed sense of what therapy actually entails.”

Kurt leaned back against the wooden divider between the counter and the seating.

“Look, hon. You don’t have to tell your friends. It’s your life and your business. And you don’t even have to tell your folks. I didn’t tell my mom for two years. You just need to be able to talk about these things with someone. You don’t even really tell me everything that’s bugging you. I know you don’t.”

“I’ll think about it.”

Aude took the second tray of drinks, and Kurt loaded up with drinks and pastries.

“I’ll say this, though. You could’ve reacted worse to seeing that guy,” Aude pointed out.

“What, running away from him wasn’t the worst thing I could do?”
“No, it’s really not.”

Kurt braced himself for the cold before pushing the door open with his shoulder. “I guess. Probably... if I’d seen him two weeks ago, I would’ve sat down and cried.”

“See?”

“Four weeks ago, I would’ve grabbed the nearest blunt object and come at him screaming.”

“See? Do you see?”

“It’s a miracle. I’m somehow surviving this.” Kurt let out a heavy sigh, shaking his head.

They were greeted back at Vogue with grateful eyes and greedy hands. Kurt caught the expression of awe in Aude’s eyes as he realized people were sitting down for a real meeting around them. With a little smile on his lips, he sent Aude to get the notepads and let him distribute them while Kurt set up the laptop and projector. Soon, Aude was sitting in on his first Vogue brainstorming session, eyes wide as he absorbed what Isabelle, Gail, and Deyone. They narrowed when certain others spoke.

Kurt noticed, his observation keen in this room especially, how Isabelle noticed Aude. After the meeting was over, she went over to him and spoke to him for a few minutes about his outfit and what he thought about certain topics that had come up in the meeting. Then she signaled to Kurt to follow her into her office. Kurt waved to Aude, who would have to leave soon anyway, and prepped himself for the after-meeting takedown, as had become tradition between him and Isabelle.

“She’s got a good eye,” Isabelle said as Kurt closed the door.

“He,” Kurt corrected automatically.

“Oh. Gosh. Sorry. I’ve only seen Aude around the girls.” Isabelle waved a hand.
“Well...” Kurt thought about that. “Aude’s probably numb to pronouns. He picks one at random
even whenever he refers to me.”

Isabelle smiled warmly. “Yes. Well, do you think he could manage something just a *sliver* closer
to business professional?”

Kurt raised his brows.

“There *are* days when there is no assistant around the office...”

Kurt’s heart sunk into his stomach. Despite his recent declarations of a being a survivor, he wasn’t
sure he could take another blow.

“Am I being fired?” His voice jumped an octave into nervous politeness.

“What? No, honey, *no*. Why would you think that?” Isabelle motioned for him to sit in front of her
desk.

“Well... when I started working here, it was supposed to be pretty much 24/7, and...” Kurt bobbed
his head from side to side and moved his hands around his notepad a little anxiously. “I’ve had
school, and... and um...”

“And you haven’t been in as much.” Her eyes narrowed to slits. “We’ve *noticed*. But quality-” She
gestured to him in one fluid, benevolent motion. “-trumps quantity, always.”

She folded her hands in her lap and looked at him seriously. “What’s wrong? You’ve seemed
distracted.”

“It’s...” Kurt licked his lips, looked down, and then forced himself to meet her eye. “It’s kind of
personal. I can try to be here more, but to make rent I have to put in hours at the diner...”

Isabelle nodded. “What I was thinking-” She paused, leaning her head toward him. “Interns get
coffee. They make copies. They set up projectors. But every day, you’re in here helping me
discuss meetings, arranging shoots and meetings, on the phone with designers and photographers,
writers, people I don’t want to deal with. I often find myself wishing you weren’t out fetching coffee and in here helping me. You’ve set up an entire benefit event with almost no guidance. You’re really my personal assistant.”

Kurt nodded slowly.

“I’d like for your title and- hopefully this will take some stress off of you- you paycheck to reflect that. But we’ll need to hire a new intern.” She folded her hands and raised a brow slowly.

Kurt blinked dumbly for a moment. “Wait, you...?”

“I wanna give you a promotion, kid,” she whispered, amusement twinkling in her eyes.

“Oh, oh, my god.” Kurt’s back shot straight up. “Yes. Yeah.”

“But we’ll need to set you a more steady schedule,” Isabelle added, eyeing him seriously.

He bobbed his head vigorously.

“Have you in here more time, but doing more work that I need that only you can do. I don’t want you being borrowed by anyone else in the office anymore. You’re not a secretary on lend. You’re here to make my life easier and make our product better. We’ll work with your school schedule, definitely, and there will be some off hours when I’d like you to be able to get back to me with messages.”

Kurt continued to bob his head. Even with his copay, the medical bills were making it difficult to manage his monthly expenses.

“And I understand that rent in this city is absolutely insane, but maybe you can cut back on the extra diner hours a little if you’re actually getting paid for the amount of work you’re doing here.”

“That would help a lot.” Kurt willfully blinked back tears.
“Do you think Aude would mind getting coffee and making copies?”

“He didn’t mind today, and he wasn’t even paid.”

Isabelle sat back in her chair and rested her hands on one knee. “He won’t get paid much. As you know. We were only barely able to get funding for the internships. It’s basically a poorly paid secretary. But he wouldn’t have as much responsibility as you, to start with. Just the basic daily glue in the office and collecting messages in times when you’re not able to be here.”

“Honestly, I think Aude would do it just for the opportunity to watch a real photo shoot.”
Isabelle’s lips curved to the side. “I think we could see that happen. He’s got a lot of creativity.”

“Did you see what he was wearing at Thanksgiving?”

“No... Maybe. There were so many interesting outfits.”

“The wrapping paper dress.”

Isabelle slapped the table. “Oh! Oh, right! That was amazing! Was it really paper?”

“It was.” Kurt leaned forward. “And I’ve seen some of Aude Spectacular’s performance outfits, and I don’t know how they function on a human body, but they do.”

“Let’s keep thinking about that. I think the two of you might put your heads together for a column. We could even pull in Minh. She’s Deyone’s secretary, just a bit older than you.” Isabelle sighed. “Y’know, we’re the old mavens of the fashion industry, and there’s something to be said for experience, but we’re just not getting the perspective of the up-and-comers like you and Aude. You’re multimedia, mixed methods, make it from what you have on hand. I just love it.”

She closed her eyes and smiled so wide. “I think this’ll be good for all of us. I’ve loved having you by my side, but I don’t want to see you fraying at the edges. And I’ve never been one to get in the way of someone’s dreams.”
She threw her hands up. “We’re so friggin’ proud of you for getting into that smancy-pants theatre school.”

Kurt let out a breath, and Isabelle chuckled.

“Thank you so, so much.” Kurt pressed his fingertips to his cheeks.

“Thank you. This is all from your hard work. You’re a find. I felt bad that I couldn’t give you the appropriate title sooner, but that’s how it is, sometimes.”

Kurt bit his lower lip, then pressed both lips together. “I’ve never been afraid of fighting for what I wanted... because I always had to. I just haven’t ever really...” He shook his head. “Seen such drastic results. In Ohio, it was always like nothing stuck, nothing worked. I fought and fought and... nothing. Now, good or bad... everything happens. Everything means something. Everything counts.”

“I don’t want to drag out the ‘real world’ cliche.” Isabelle tilted her head to the side. “But once you move away from home, things really do start to change. So fast.”

Kurt let out a tight laugh and rubbed his mouth. Isabelle moved closer and patted his knee.

“Don’t get overwhelmed, okay? You’re a star. In whatever field you land in, you will be. I don’t want your light burned out too soon. You’re so good at doing things for yourself, and for everyone else, you could easily wear yourself down taking care of everyone around you, and that includes every single person in this office.”

That was the second time she’d mentioned that. Kurt frowned slightly. “Have I been doing things I shouldn’t?”

“I just can’t help but notice how quickly everyone started coming to you for things they should be taking care of themselves. And I understand. You’re quick. You’re efficient. You have good instincts. And you don’t say no.”

Kurt’s frown deepened on that last one. He said no. Didn’t he?
“But you’re mine.” Isabelle put on a mask feigned severity.

Kurt laughed softly.

“Chase is the worst offender. I think he thinks you’re cute.”

“Chase? Oh, no. It’s just- With him I offer. He helped me a lot when Blaine wouldn’t stop sending packages and calling the office. I didn’t know who to talk to, and it was embarrassing, but-” Kurt shrugged. “He just had a list of things to do to make sure Blaine couldn’t get me in trouble here.”

“Ahhh. I see. And others have taken advantage, seeing you returning the favor by helping him out.” Isabelle tilted her head to the side and pursed her lips. “How’s that going, by the way? Is it resolved?”

“Blaine?” Kurt rolled his eyes heavenward and sighed. “Y’know, I haven’t really talked to him since Christmas break? It was... weird.”

Isabelle grimaced. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Well, at least he isn’t calling me all the time anymore. Maybe he decided I wasn’t worth it now.”

She clicked her tongue. “Did you want another chance with him?”

“No, I moved from frustration, to confusion, and Christmas break was just... I wanted us to have the chance to be friends, and I think he wasn’t interested in being pals.”

“Hm.” Isabelle smiled. “Guys. Well, there are plenty out there. No need to keep worrying about the one that wouldn’t get away.”

“I’m probably gonna put that stuff on hold for a little while.” Kurt opened up his notepad. “I did just get promoted. I’d like to focus on my career.”

Isabelle’s teeth flashed and she bowed over laughing. “Right! Work. So, we want to work out your
schedule today, but I want to go over meeting notes first, before we forget anything.”

She pulled out her own notepad, and they settled into a discussion. Kurt’s tensed shoulders finally released, and he let himself put everything else to the side, because something, *something* was finally going right.
Aude danced a celebratory strawberry in front of Kurt’s face, but Kurt waved him off. He’d made a whirlwind trip back to the loft to pick up clothes for a few days, then bolted out of there before Rachel got back. He disliked avoiding the person he’d considered for over a year to be his best friend, but he just needed away from the situation for a little while.

“Hello?” Quinn’s soft alto sounded rushed and a bit irritated.

“Hello yourself,” Kurt replied. He curled his legs underneath himself and smiled at Aude, who wore pink Hello Kitty pajamas and a black and gold blunt cut wig.

“Oh, hi, Kurt.” She sounded a little confused now. “I can’t remember the last time you called me.”

“I’m sorry about that,” Kurt said in a coy, familiar tone that made her laugh. “I was just hoping you had some time to come down and help Rachel.”

“What happened to Rachel?” she asked quickly. Then, quietly to someone else, “Stop it.”

“She’s landed this role in a student film—”

“Atrocious.”

“-and it includes a nude scene.”

“Oh.”
“Yes. Can you help?”

“I don’t know if Rachel ever really listens when I give her advice. She prefers to be the one helping me sort out my train wreck of a life. Why don’t you talk to her about it?”

Kurt sighed and accepted a strawberry, leaning back on the pillows. Aude didn’t have furniture in his studio apartment, aside from some shelves cluttered with books and CDs.

“Well?” she pressed.

Best to just admit it. “She and I haven’t been getting along, and... I may have gotten snappish with her-”

“It’s a miracle you don’t on a daily basis. I’d be a little more slappish, I think.”

“And I called her a slut.”

Quinn went quiet for a moment.

“I’m not the best person to talk to her about this. I mean, aside from losing my temper with her.” He shrugged. “I’m never going to be judged on this the way she is. I could do twenty nude scenes, and no one would think less of me as an actor. Ewan McGregor was literally flapping in the wind in Velvet Goldmine, and who ever even thought to use that against his career?”

“That’s a good point,” Quinn said coolly.

“It can’t come from me. It needs to come from another woman who gets it. Quinn, this could really torch her dreams before they get off the ground. I’m not saying it should, but it could. It would be the same as if I’d done the drag thing Sue wanted last year. It would follow me for the rest of my career.”

Aude made a noise and looked up at him peeveshly.
Kurt shrugged with one hand. “Not that there’s anything wrong with drag, or women in the nude, but it’s a huge gamble to do when you don’t have the social capital from major players like De Niro or Demi Moore.”

“No, I agree with that. Going into the ‘biz means grappling with the patriarchy. How soon is this happening?”

“They’re starting shooting next week.”

“That soon?”

“It’s someone’s senior project.”

“Atrocious,” she reiterated. “I’m bringing the hammer.”

“The hammer?” Kurt blinked and looked over to Aude, who was sucking on another strawberry. He waggled his eyebrows at Kurt. “So... Santana?”

A moment later, Kurt heard a familiar, throaty, powerful cackle.

“Wait, is Santana there?”

“He-eey, baby boo.”

“Do you spend any time at school? Last I heard you were back at McKinley, getting your ‘mack on’ again with Brittany.”

“I can’t be contained to one location,” Santana quipped. “Don’t worry. We’ll go all scared straight on Berry’s ass.”

“Straight,” Quinn muttered.
“Don’t tell her we’re coming,” Santana said.

“Not so much of a problem,” Kurt said. “I’m not even staying there right now.”

Santana didn’t answer for a moment. Then, “Why? What did she do?” He could practically hear her eyes narrow into slits. “What did she say?”

“We just haven’t been getting along. For a couple of weeks, actually.”

“Ohhh, you two lovebirds. Maybe we should send ya’ll to couple’s therapy.”

Quinn took the phone. “We’ve got to go, Kurt. Staying out of each other’s way might be a good idea, for a little while. Let things cool off. I know she can be a trial, but she won’t come around while she feels like she’s under attack.”

“You’re right. I know you’re right about that.”

“Don’t worry, cuddle-face!” Santana called. “The bitches are coming to save the day.”

“Thank god.” Kurt got off the phone and looked over to Aude. His lips were now flushed from the juice.

“C’mere, bunny.” He scooted up next to Kurt. “So, the girls’ve got the Rachel factor covered. You’re in a safe space. Relax, okay? You hungry?”

“Honey, I don’t need a mom here. The roof over my head is good enough.”

Aude narrowed his eyes and tapped his finger on Kurt’s nose. “I could be mommy!”

Kurt rolled his eyes and stretched his legs out. This apartment was tiny, but cozy. White Christmas lights still twinkled around the edge of the ceiling, and various little nicknacks were on all the
shelves and bits of pictures tacked up on the wall. Some were pictures of models, or magazine prints of art, and some were pictures of places with notes written on them.

It was small, but Kurt liked it. He’d built the loft piece by piece. He’d painted and buffed and made that hollow space a home. This place just was a home.

Kurt only realized that he’d started to doze off when he heard a rapping at the door.

“Stay put, hon.” Aude sprung to his feet and skipped to the door.

Kurt blinked sleepily and watched Aude chirruping up at the person there. Then he caught sight of the tall figure there. Kurt propped himself up on his elbows and rubbed his eyes.

He was a strikingly handsome man. Almost seven feet tall, with tight jeans and a striped tank top, a colorful scarf around his head, and thickly applied black eyeliner.

“C’mon, c’mon, lemme in,” he said in a deep, but hushed voice.

“Get your fat ass outta here. I told you I have a friend staying over.” Aude’s voice remained friendly, if a bit scolding. “I can’t be gettin’ horizontal with you in this tiny space when I invited him.”

“Fine, fine. Come out here and gimme some sugar.”

“It’s okay,” Kurt said. “This is your place.”

Aude looked back with surprise. “Oh, sorry, babe. My boy wants attention.”

Kurt leaned forward and arched a brow. “Does he have a name?”

“My day name, or my evening name, honey?” the man boomed, followed by a deep chuckle.
“Chocolate thunder,” Aude teased.

“Do you two perform together?” Kurt asked, pointing between the two of them.

“No. I don’t put up with his nonsense onstage.” Aude rolled his eyes and pulled the wig off.

“I don’t really perform.” The man slipped into the apartment, his expression as though Aude might beat him off at any moment. “People call me Q.”

“I’m Kurt.”

Q bobbed his head then motioned forward with one hand. “I was supposed t’be at your Thanksgiving kiki. I didn’t know they even had those!”

“Apparently they do at Vogue.”

“So maybe I’ll get a kiki this year!” Aude curled his arms around Q’s waist.

“Huh?” Q frowned down at Aude.

“I got a jaaaawb!” Aude bounced up and down.

“For real, though? That’s my girl.” Q hugged Aude close and placed a kiss on his head.

Kurt smiled and closed his eyes. “You two remind me of my parents.”

“With the mom or the stepmom?” Aude pulled on Q’s large, long-fingered hand and flopped back in the cushions.

“Babe, that’s kinda rude,” Q said.
“No, it’s fine. Neither are bad.” Kurt wiggled against the pillows. “With my mom, dad was different. They were... I can’t even describe it. It was so normal. She was in charge, and he loved her more than life itself. With Carole... They’re like giggly children, sometimes, but at the same time... comfortable. Content. Less... bright, and shiny. Idealistic. But still real, you know?”

“And which one are we?” Aude asked gently. He took Kurt’s hand and rested back against Q.

“Oh, I don’t know. I’ve seen you together less than five minutes. You’re just, like, married. Couplely.”

“We ain’t married,” Aude said.

“You could be. If you wanted. Anyway. It’s nice to see.”

“Nice to have.” Aude squeezed. “You had coupley before, right? With Mr. Hairgel?”

“Not really. I mean, we were a couple. But not like a married couple. Or a happy one, anyway. We got along, until we didn’t... and we kind of ignored each other. A lot of ignoring had to happen for us to work.” Kurt pulled his feet up and dug his toes into the soft fabric of the pillows. “And that hurt, when I couldn’t ignore it. It hurt me, a lot. Changed me in bad ways.”

Kurt pushed his hands into his hair. “Ugh! Don’t listen to me. I’m tired of my whining.”

Aude laughed. “You’ve had a hard year!”

“I’ve had a hard... sixteen years. It’s been escalating hard every year.” He pointed at Aude. “And not the good kind. Although the Italian was really good at sex. At least I got some good sexin’ before my life was over.”

He held up a hand. “I know. I know ‘not a death sentence.’ I’m just being morbidly jokey.”

“I like your morbid jokes. They’re awful.” Aude giggled. “When we’re in group, no one makes the
awful jokes. Some people are allergic to the negative parts of reality. As cute as you are when you’re being stupidly cheerful, it’s refreshing to have someone I can be awful with.”

“I don’t want you thinking like that.” Q reached around Aude and rubbed his chest.

“I have to sometimes.” Aude looked up at Q and patted his face. “Or it’s like Kurt said. You’re just ignoring every bad thing. That’s no way to have a relationship. Why would I want that kind of relationship with myself?”

Kurt rolled onto his side a little and watched Aude and Q cuddling and talking back and forth like the perfectly matched idiots in love that they were. Kurt wanted that. He couldn’t really stand the thought of trying to juggle a relationship with his personal drama, though. He couldn’t even talk to his family, let alone a new person who he had deep, squishy, vulnerable feelings for.

Why kid himself? Kurt knew who that person would be. He laughed at Kurt’s bad jokes, got his song references, and never took it personally when Kurt was having a bad day. He valued Kurt’s talents. He thought Kurt looked like a young Paul Newman.

“You gonna be okay here?” Aude asked. He was sitting up, now, and Q was checking his phone. “We’re gonna go out...”

“No, go. I just need to get some sleep.” Kurt flicked his hand in the air. “Go. Into the night. Be happy and gay.”

Q let out a booming laugh. They were so adorably physically mismatched. It was like Frankenteen Finn bending over Hobbit Rachel, only more extreme. And biracial.

Aude bent over and kissed Kurt’s forehead, and then the two of them were off. Kurt looked up at the ceiling and sighed deeply. He could mope some more, or he could just enjoy the quiet, cozy place to rest and push everything else to the periphery of his mind.

Quiet place. New job (well, same job but more money). And Adam.

The apartment above suddenly came to life as someone started drumming. Shortly after, guitars joined in, and a singer of undetermined gender started crooning to “Tainted Love.”
Kurt grabbed a blanket, curled over, and just laughed.

***

Adam had only been in Jinx’s diner a couple times before, but the architecture never failed to amuse. The place was really an art gallery that hadn’t managed to keep afloat. So when the owner had given up and was bought out by his employees, they kept the installations to display art (only put in more local work for sale), added a stage, and started hiring waiters based on both serving ability and some kind of performance connection. Sometimes they booked local bands. More often they just let their servers perform, and every Thursday there was open mic. It had once been titled “Women Out Loud,” but that had morphed into “Open Dyke Night,” and finally it became “Out Loud” or “Open at Kellos,” and other filthier versions.

Right now, it was brunch, and no one but a server with a cello was on the stage. Adam recognized the man as Harmon, who had washed out of NYADA a year ago when his girlfriend had died. Hit by a car.

Life was so, so fragile.

Harmon lifted his chin when he saw Adam, and Adam gave him a gentle smile. Jinx didn’t appear to be around today, so Adam sat at the bar and ordered a coffee. He turned around and propped his elbows on the marble counter. There was what he knew to be a Narcotics Anonymous meeting in the corner (one of the members happened to have come by the group therapy he went to with Aude), enjoying huevos rancheros and big glasses of juice. The other customers seemed like they might just be on dates. One girl sat in the corner by herself, reading and diligently underlining and highlighting a text, and occasionally writing furiously in her notebook.

Harmon stopped playing for a moment and dishes clanked in the large space. Adam looked up to see if he could spot anyone in the loft. Then he started a new song, with quick, sharp sounds on the strings. He made “bow-ba-bow” sounds with his mouth, and someone behind him tapped out an odd rhythm on the bongo they kept around for times of boredom. Adam chuckled to himself.

Then he heard singing and turned his head to see Kurt dancing up to him sideways, coffee in hand.

“I got a bad boy and that’s all right with me-” Kurt set the coffee down next to him on the bar, and then danced backwards, wiggling his shoulders and keeping direct eye-contact. “His dirty laundry’s nothing I can’t keep clean.”
Adam laughed in surprise as Kurt raised an arm over his head, and smiled as though he were the slyest player in the world.

“And when he needs an alibi,” he trilled, his voice easily reaching the upper notes, “he can use me... all night.”

A few of the casual diners laughed and gave soft clapping.

“Oooh, what’s the fun in playin’ it safe?” Kurt swiveled his hips and lowered himself. “Ooooh, I think I’d rather misbehave... your way.”

Adam watched in disbelief as Kurt gyrated his hips on the way back up. He sang and slunk around the diner like this was his job, and it was 2 am at the gay bar down the block.

Adam was never letting this man knock his own dancing again. He got up and danced along with Kurt, who just shook his head and laughed, looking freer than ever as the music shifted into a samba and they shifted their footwork to match. Adam grabbed his hand and put one hand on his waist, and gave him a dip.

“Oh baby, show me my money, my evil friend. Let’s go to Mexico, drink margaritas in sin...” Kurt slipped away, moved onto his toe, and did a pirouette. “I’ll light a candle for good luck. C’mon honey, let’s...”

He breathed in and put a finger to his lips, smirking wickedly.

Morning dancing at Kellos. And before his coffee.

“I’m here all day, ladies and gents and genderqueers!” Harmon called.

Kurt came and sat on a stool next to Adam. “So. How are you?”

“Hmm.” Adam shook his head. “Not sure how to answer that. Is this the morning routine?”

“Nah. I just got off.”
“Are you serious?”

Kurt gave a thumbs-up at Harmon. “I’ve decided that on my days off... I am going to be a Manic Pixie Dream Boy.”

“Oh, are you? Is that something you can decide?”

“Well.” Kurt craned his head far to the side. “I already decided that I was going to be aggressively cheerful today, and I’ve had a lot of coffee and not a lot of sleep. We could go out and throw glitter on things, or talk to birds?”

Adam tried to keep a straight face. “Do the birds need some help?”

“I dunno.” Kurt raised his shoulders high. “But I always do a good job helping everyone else. And that’s a Pixie Boy trait, y’know. I get other people jobs. I give them make-overs. I give them counseling for their problems, or their relationships. This Christmas I gave my old Glee club a new lease on life after they lost Sectionals.”

“Sounds like you have quite the resume for this vocation.” Adam crossed his arms and cracked a smile.

“I do. I may have been born for it. Are there any doldrums I can help shake you out of?” Kurt quirked his lips to the side and nodded as though making a transaction. “I suggest we start with ice cream, and then hit the park for adventures.”

“Ice cream?”

“I have a great need right now for day-seizing. It’s ice cream or cupcakes, which are almost like muffins.” Kurt sprung to his feet and held out a demanding hand. His lips pinched together, and he looked at Adam expectantly.

“I do have some doldrums that I’d like gone,” Adam admitted.
Kurt held up a finger, dashed into the back, and then returned with a scarf and a long coat. Adam picked up his coffee and rose to follow Kurt out the door.

“I need to change, though.”

“We could stop by your place-”

“Oh, god, no.” Kurt locked his fingers and stretched his arms over his head. “I’m staying with a friend right now. Most of my stuff is there. Ohhh!”

Adam jumped and looked at Kurt in alarm.

“Let’s go shopping. Do you like to shop?”

“Um... I don’t really do it all that much. Sometimes with Jinx, or some of my friends. Usually at Goodwill. Granted, in this city, some of the threads at Goodwill are a bit upscale.”

“We should go shopping,” Kurt asserted again. “And... I choose your outfit... and you choose mine. How about that?”

“That... That sounds fun. But somewhere in our price range.”

“I just got a promotion at Vogue. I know the places. And if I didn’t, Aude’s shown me the locations of all the best thrift stores.”

Adam stopped walking abruptly. Kurt was a few steps ahead before he turned and looked at Adam curiously.

“Too much pep? Should I de-pep?”

“No, I... Did you say Aude?”
“Oh. That’s the friend I’m staying with.”

Adam blinked and just stared. Long enough that Kurt came up to him, looking worried.

“What is it?”

“Little gender free Filipina drag queen. So high?” Adam held his hand roughly where Aude came when she stood next to him.

It was Kurt’s turn to stare, which he did for several long seconds, before, “You know each other. Wow. That’s weird.”

“I’ve known her for years. How did you meet?”

“Thanksgiving party. He just got my old intern job at Vogue.”

“Really.” Adam shook his head and ran his hand over the back. “That’s so strange.”

“Not really. I’ve been bringing him to meetings and let my boss see his portfolio. I basically got him the job.” Kurt shrugged.

“So that’s where this Manic Pixie stuff is coming from.” Adam chuckled. “I’ve seen her Manic Pixie T-Girl routine. It’s pretty hilarious.”

“Okay, my creativity for personal transformation is limited. But tell me you don’t want to eat ice cream and play with glitter.”

Adam looked on Kurt with fondness. He took Kurt’s arm and locked them around the elbows. “As long as I get to spend the better portion of the day with you, I will be giddily happy. Any doldrums or ennui, or even lingering pangs of sleepiness.”

“Okay. Oh!” Kurt pointed. “Ice cream! Then clothes!”
Kurt gave a bounce and lunged ahead. Adam was forced to try to keep up with him, or let go.

And he refused to let go.

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“Does it fit?” Kurt called.

“By your standards or mine?” Adam turned around and huffed out, looking at the long, striped pants. “Kurt, I think you got the wrong size.”

“No, that’s your size.”

“I can’t breathe in these. I may need a corset.”

“Oh, fine.” Kurt poked an arm into the curtain with another armful of clothes.

“Are these a little bigger?”

“Yes. Whiner.”

“You’re breaking my spirit with these tiny clothes. I’m bulky and awkward enough without having to live up to your model-like standards.”

“I’m not trying to do that!” Kurt came back into the dressing room and looked at him with wide eyes. “You’re not bulky.”

“Oh, no, I’m not hurt.” Adam circled his arm around Kurt’s shoulders. It took half a second to decide to pull him close for a hug. “This is for fun.”
“Yes. Fun. Fun having. For us.”

Adam patted his back. “Just give me a few extra inches, darling.”

“Fine, fine. But try the vests? Oh! And I saw a wall of hats I want you to try.”

“The whole wall, eh?”

“You can’t just wear beanies all the time.” Kurt bounced on his toes and gave Adam a kiss on the cheek before heading back out into the store.

As Adam unbuttoned his sweater, he couldn’t get his heart to slow down.

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Kurt opened his mouth wide to accept the bite of burger Adam was offering him. The taste of the grilled meat filled his mouth, along with the crunch of the toasted bun and crisp dill of the pickle. He sighed as he sat back and made an obscene noise.

“I love food. That isn’t always true.” Kurt sighed. “Food is good.”

“Not always true for me, either. It’s good. Having a good day.”

“You look absolutely fabulous.” Kurt took a fry from their plate and motioned toward the other customers. “I think all of New York thinks so.”

Adam looked down at his slim-cut vest and vertical striped pants, and smiled lopsidedly. Then he looked up at Kurt. There was no question that Adam was completely dashing. Kurt wasn’t sure about his own outfit, but he wore it with confidence. A pair of worn blue jeans, a clinging v-necked long sleeve shirt, a multicolored scarf, and newboy cap. He felt like he was taking over the Bohemian look from Adam, but with Adam looking so svelte and put-together and fucking gorgeous in front of him, it was hard to care.
He tilted his shake towards him and watched Adam quietly. There had been the bustle of clothing shopping, then they’d gone through the park, taking pictures of themselves in their new outfits. Kurt was tired now, but he didn’t want the day to end. Even this, what they were eating, would probably make him feel horrible, if he ate much more, but how could he regret a really, really good day?

“Have you worked enough of your magic on me yet?” Adam asked.

“Do you want to be free?” Kurt tilted his head back. “Are you tired of the manic?”

“You’re hardly manic. Though it’s lovely spending time with you. Whether you’re trying to fix my life or not.”

“I just wanted a day back like it used to be. I’m the one who creates magic. An orchestra playing out of nowhere, the life-changing makeover, the relationship advice, the perfect job...” Kurt took another fry and dipped it into his shake. “It’s comfortable being that person.”

“I’ll take either version of you, but...” Adam leaned on his hand and curved his plump lips, still flushed from the cold outside. “Who makes magic for you?”

Kurt bit his lower lip. “Isabelle, maybe. My boss.”

“No. She gave you a promotion based on how above and beyond you did the job you had. And I’m fairly confident from how you described your hiring in the first place that you got the job based off of a combination of your innovation with clothing and compatibility with Isabelle.” Adam tipped his hat back. “Don’t you dare try to minimize how incredibly gifted you are. I won’t have it.”

Kurt’s brows rose high. “I think that hat makes you more assertive.”

Adam shrugged. He took off the red porkpie hat and set it aside suspiciously. His lips curved into an exaggerated frown, and then he hid behind his hands.

“Oh, my god.” Kurt laughed.
Adam opened his fingers and peered out. Kurt howled and slapped the table. Adam quickly put the hat back on.

“Whew. That’s better.”

Kurt couldn’t stop laughing, so he stopped trying and just giggled helplessly and eventually flopped over in the booth and kicked his booted feet in the air.

“God, you’re precious.”

Kurt curled his feet up next to him in the seat and covered his mouth. “No, I’m not.”

“The hat never lies. Beanies do; they’re too polite. But porkpies are nothing but unfailingly honest.”

“I’m not precious. I’m damaged.”

“That’s fine with me. I’m not new off the shelf, myself.”

Kurt drew in a deep breath, then pushed himself up to look at Adam.

“I um...” Adam looked down and sucked in his lips.

“No, I guess none of us are as pristine as we once were. I was kind of a snot about it, honestly.” Kurt fell back against the seat. “Didn’t drink. Didn’t do drugs. Didn’t smoke. Of course, that had to do with protecting the voice... God, I barely masturbated. I only started having sex with Blaine because he really wanted it... at first.”

Adam leaned onto his elbows. “And... you think you aren’t worthy of being someone’s precious thing because you... Started enjoying yourself?”

“I don’t know.” It was a lie. He knew. And he did believe, mostly, that some kind of idyllic perfect fantasy life was beyond him now.
“No matter what you’ve done- Kurt.” Adam said his name rather forcefully, causing Kurt to look up again. Adam reached over and took his hand. “No matter what, you deserve to be treated as the unique, amazing creature you are. Mistakes in your life won’t change that. It doesn’t make you less pure. Just... more real, in my estimation.”

Kurt swallowed. Did Adam...? “I can’t-” His voice wobbled, and he should his head. “I’m sorry. I just... It’s not that I wouldn’t really love to, um-”

Adam lifted Kurt’s hand and kissed his fingers. “Where do we go next on our fabulous day?”

Kurt sucked on his lower lip. He hoped this was clear. He hoped that it was completely clear to Adam that Kurt wasn’t trying to lead him on in any way. He just wanted to enjoy his time with a wonderful person. He wasn’t sure he was ready for the Talk. He’d been failing to have it with anyone who mattered. Not for the first time, Kurt wondered what it would be like to really unload his most pressing problems on Adam.

That would probably solve your quandary regarding Adam as a romantic interest. Kurt banished the thought. He could dwell on it back at Aude’s place.

“You know, I’ve actually never been to Chelsea,” Kurt said suddenly. “That was just the gayest thing I could think of to do.”

Adam grinned. “I have been. And we could actually check out some of the art there, if you’re interested.”

He pulled out his wallet and put some money on the table. “If you don’t mind. You got the clothes.”

“You got mine.”

“Yes, but I’m fairly confident that my outfit cost more than yours. Plus, I got extra hats.”

Kurt stood and started arranging what he would, from now on, refer to his Doctor Who scarf. “Then it’s on you.”
“The galleries in Chelsea are free, as well.” Adam rose and offered Kurt his arm. “So I think we’ll have done pretty well for the day.”

Kurt took the arm and did a hitch-kick on their way out the door.

***

Kurt ignored the whispers around him as he headed down the main hallway of the Carnegie building. He breathed in and out slowly. All he had to do was pretend that he didn’t hear Rachel’s sycophants chattering behind him. Clearly, word of his disappearance from her life and her pulling out of a production had spread.

Apparently they all blamed him.

“Little prude. I heard he called her dads.”

“I heard he brought in a boot camp dyke.”

*Santana, Kurt thought. She’d probably like that job. And be good at it.*

“Who does he think he is?”

“Tibideaux’s little favorite.”

“Bulimic bitch boy.”

“Riding Rachel Berry’s coattails all the way in here. Ruining her chances in movies—”

“Excuse me.” Kurt turned around and stared straight at the two who had been not so discreetly whispering at him.
“Excuse me.” Jasper gestured to his chest.

“Um, no. Look, I’m sure you’re both getting so much out of sucking Rachel’s theatre-dick, but you’re not her friends. If you were, then you’d have a real discussion with her about her behavior and her choices, and how she’s going to get what she wants. Because she wants it so much that sometimes she forgets how she wants it to be when she gets there. The ‘boot camp dyke’? She loves her. I didn’t even have to ask her to come. She decided that on her own, because she wants to make sure that Rachel is taken care of.” Kurt snapped his fingers as the two started to look at one another and laugh. “How dare you say anything about her choosing to not strip down for a pathetic little student film? Rachel is better than that. When she does her first big nude scene? It’s going to be in an Oscar-winning film, not something that the seniors pass around in their last months to laugh at.”

Kurt saw Madam Tibideaux coming at a slow clip down the hallway. “Rachel is better than that,” he said again. “And fuck you for not knowing it.”

Carmen’s brows raised. She’d clearly heard the swearwords, at least. Kurt ignored it and slipped into the Round Room.

She was going to call on him to sing for everyone today. He knew it. God, help him.

“Everyone settle. We have a lot of work to do today,” Carmen announced as she walked into the room. “I have high hopes that every one of you has attended your vocal classes diligently, and today I won’t have to spend a moment addressing basic breathing techniques. Also, if anyone was planning on pulling any lazy tricks to hit their high notes or get more power, forget them. We’re not interested in what could be generated on the radio by a computer. You-” She gestured with a hand to them all. “-are to be the divine, to which the mere mortals aspire.”

She moved to sit just as Rachel rushed in, Brody at her side.

“Thank you for joining us, Ms. Berry,” Carmen said loudly.

“Oh, I’m so sorry. I had an appointment-”

“I don’t care. Sit.” Carmen looked at her notebook. Silence yawned over the whole group. “Mr. Hummel. I think it’s time for you to grace this room once again. I trust it will be similarly well-
There was some giggling at the back. Ronnie and Jasper. They stopped immediately as her head began to turn. Kurt ignored all of it, set his bag down, and made his way to the front of the room.

He gave a warm smile to Andrew at the piano as he handed him some music. “It’s probably new to you. Sorry,” he whispered.

“I can handle it. I’m a pro.” Andrew winked and passed music over to the strings.

Kurt took in another deep breath as he turned back to the crowd. He spotted a few Apples sitting together on the side. So he licked his lips and smiled tensely.

“I chose this number because a friend of mine really enjoys the band, and this song in particular... I think it’s beautiful. And while it’s not strictly a Broadway song, well... They made ABBA a musical.” Kurt heard a little more laughing, but at least this time it wasn’t directed at him. “Anyway. I’ve sort of made my career here by taking risks, so I arranged a stripped down version of the song for you today.”

Carmen was frowning. She gave a slow nod.

“This is called ‘Hi no Ataru Sakamichi’.” He looked back to Andrew and smiled. The strings began playing first, and Andrew joined, introing the melody gently.

So Kurt began singing, gently.

“Kisetsu hazure no kaze ga hakobu, omoide-tachiiii... Natsukashii egao no kimi wa tooi machi,” His expression was sad, wistful, and his tone was as clear and bright as he could manage. A wind unusual for this season blows, bringing back memories... That smile of yours I miss so much is in a distant town.

He scanned his eyes around the faces in the crowd, making sure he made a connection. The surprised looks began to fade and were replaced by curiosity.
“Takaramono da to yoberu mono wa, nani hitotsu mo mitsukerarenai mama otona ni natte yukuuuuu...” *I’m growing up, never having found anything I could call my treasure.*

As his tone grew slightly bitter, curiosity was replaced by frowns in a few people. Carmen’s frown remained, but at least he had her undivided attention.

The strength behind his voice grew and he closed his eyes and shook his hands beside his head as he continued, “Nanimokamo ga zenbu kono mama ja aware-naiiii!”

*It can’t all end like this.*

His head snapped up, staring his audience down, caught in the moment of revelation himself as he belted his next line, “Daremo ga itsukaaaa koeru sakamichi! Sono saki ni wa!”

*Beyond the hill everyone crosses someday!*

He looked to Rachel, who had her mouth open and her brows screwed together.

“Marude ano hi nooooo sugao no mama no,” he pleaded at her. “Bokura ga iru-”

*Are the people we were that day, who showed their true selves-*

He snapped his face back to the Apples, his most warm audience, and declared, “Toomawari demo kanarazu, tadori tsukeru!”

*Even if we take the long way, I know we can make it there someday!*

His chin lifted, and he let a few tears escape as he sang a promise to the audience in his richest tenor. And to himself, maybe. “Surely! Surely! Somedaaaaay!”

From that point on, there was no question that he had everyone’s interest. He happened to know that it was rare for anyone to sing a song with even a few lines of French in it, let alone a song mostly in another language. His goal, however, was not for them to understand the words.
He expected them to feel what he wanted them to feel.

Bitterness. Loss. And finally, not just hope. A demand for things to get better, somehow.

When he finished, there was clapping. Jinx sat in the back blinking in disbelief and shaking her head as she mouthed something at Kiera, who just laughed. It was probably ‘holy fuck,’ knowing her. Especially since he’d heard the song from her and My. Jasper wasn’t clapping. He had his lips pursed and looked at Rachel, hoping to give her a snide look that they could share. Ronnie was clapping his ass off, until Jasper swatted him.

But the clapping didn’t last, and there was no reason to care what the rest of them thought. There was one person here who could kick him out of the program if she didn’t think he was progressing.

“Interesting choice, Mr. Hummel,” Carmen said in an even tone. “I didn’t realize you spoke Japanese. It wasn’t on your application.”

“Oh, I don’t speak Japanese. French, Spanish, some German... not Japanese. Yet. I just really felt a connection to the song. Especially when I looked at the translation.”

Carmen tapped her pen against her notepad and said nothing for a long moment. You didn’t leave until she dismissed you, so Kurt just stood there, ignoring soft whispers in the back.

“I am thinking, Mr. Sutton. Please leave.”

Jasper’s eyes grew wide and he looked at Ronnie, who pushed him and hissed, “Go, stupid.”

“That is a big risk. A huge risk, as an artist,” Carmen said sharply.

Kurt shrugged. “I’m not here just to keep the machinery oiled. I don’t want to do the same songs I’ve always done. Life is too short. I want the risk.”

“So much could go wrong,” she informed him, but the way she projected her voice made it clear
that she was making a lesson for everyone in the room. “Forgetting the words, tripping over the language you don’t know, thinking about it so hard that the thinking is all over your face instead of true emotion, or fixating on the new language and completely losing control of your technique.

When I’ve performed operas, often the person who didn’t get the job failed not because they didn’t have the range, or the training, but because they couldn’t cope with doing so much at once on stage. It was a failure of mastery. They spent so much time in love with their own voice that they never consider the art.”

Her lips curved, just slightly. “None of those things happened. I didn’t realize you didn’t speak Japanese. Every ounce of control you have over your voice remained, and you encouraged us to be drawn into the moment with you. I have no idea what you were singing about, but I felt your pain, and you desire for the future.”

However.”

Kurt pressed his lips together and tried to push his heart out of his throat without it showing on his face.

“Next time, please choose something in English or Spanish so I can properly evaluate you. You could be singing about Pikachu for all I know.”

Kurt laughed. “Oh... no. They’re a J-pop band. The song has to do with friendship.”

“Well done. I wonder what language I’ll be hearing next.” Carmen looked at her notes. “Oh, and Mr. Hummel? Come to my office after class.”

Kurt frowned as he returned to his seat. Jinx was flailing at him with her hands. He was going to get it from her later. She and My had been the ones playing all the J-Pop and K-Pop, trying to get the Apples to do one of their favorite songs. Jinx was absolutely in love with Tomiko Van, which was funny, because she was otherwise so invested in punk music.

“Mr. Watkins.”

Ronnie rose and walked stiff-legged up to the front of the room. Kurt looked back at Rachel, who was still staring at him. He looked away and sent a quick text to Adam:
Coffee today? Or glitter?

After class, Kurt headed for the exit quickly. None of the students ever wanted to talk to him, anyway, when Apples weren’t around. Jinx and Kiera came up after him, and like he’d suspected, Jinx kept smacking his arm and complaining that she hadn’t been the first person to sing in Japanese in the Round Room. Apparently, though, his pronunciation was pretty close.

“Can I ask you guys something?” Kurt saw Carmen disappearing down the hall, and he knew he’d have to get there quickly.

Kiera bounced at his side. “Anything.”

“Have you heard what people are saying about me? I mean, is it a thing-”

“Who the fuck cares what these pampered assfaces say?” Jinx rolled here eyes and took Kurt’s arm. “Fuck ‘em.”

Kurt laughed.


“What is this, R-rated Dr. Seuss?” Kiera asked.

“Yes,” Jinx said with an unnecessary amount of seriousness.

“Seriously.” He stopped walking decent distance from Carmen’s office and lowered his voice. “I heard Ronnie calling me bulimic. Is that an ongoing thing? Are there other people saying I have an eating disorder?”

Jinx frowned and shoved her hands in the pockets of her jean jacket. Her eyes flitted over to Kiera.

“Like pretty much every day.” Kiera held out her hands and shrugged. “I dunno. You’re skinny.
Skinnier than we all saw you when you rocked the Showcase. That doesn't mean a dude’s got an eating disorder, but it’s NYADA. When most people hear hoofbeats they think ‘horsie.’ Here they see someone skinny and think ‘hungry.’”

“That’s pretty awful,” Kurt said. “Ask Adam. I don’t have an eating disorder.”

Jinx patted his cheek. “We know, Bambi.”

Kurt sighed heavily.

“Do you know what Carmen wants from you?”

“I don’t know. Probably not something good.” Kurt waved. “See you guys at practice?”

“I want to do that song.” Jinx pointed at him. “You, me, and My on leads. You’d better support us.”

“Fine, fine...”

Kurt hitched his bag up on his shoulder and prepared for a firing squad. Carmen was at her desk already, making her way through a stack of paperwork.

“Madam Tibideaux? Is this a good time?”

“I asked you to come.”

“Still. You seem busy.”

“Close the door.”

Now Kurt was getting concerned. Usually she had meetings with the door wide open. But he shut
the door and came to take a seat.

“That was quite a show you gave us today, Mr. Hummel.”

“I hoped so.”

“And not just the Japanese. Your technique, vocal control, it’s all improved dramatically since your first performance.”

“That happens, when you’re not dancing. It becomes a little more complicated when you throw other factors into the mix.”

“Don’t deflect complements, Mr. Hummel.” Carmen looked up at him with a twinkle in her eyes. “I don’t give them out often.”

Kurt shrugged and nodded. “Thank you.”

“I wanted you to know that I am noticing how hard you are working.” She adjusted her glasses. “And I’m not the only one.”

Kurt kept his expression vaguely pleasant. “I’m glad.”

“Some of your teachers have expressed concern, regarding how this is impacting your health.”

Kurt’s falsely bright demeanor elicited a subarctic tone: “A pity they can’t legally ask me about my health.”

“I see.”

“Not that I would tell them, either way. If I’m working hard and improving, I’m not sure why it’s important.”
“If you’re working so hard that you collapse on our campus, it matters indeed. Several of your teachers have mentioned how tired you seem, one suggested you might have cancer.”

Kurt threw his hands in the air. “I don’t have cancer.”

Carmen paused and stared at him for a moment.

“You lose a little weight, and everyone thinks that you’re on death’s door, or that you’re a twinkie with an eating disorder. I have been trying to regain some weight, but this just happens when I’m stressed. It happened last summer after I got rejected. I lived off of salad and Diet Coke, took extra dance classes, and worked out with Rachel every day. My friends started calling me a bobble-head.”

Well, Santana had.

Carmen was blatantly staring at him now, her eyes slightly widened, and one brow arched high.

“I’ll be fine,” he promised, with a little less overt hostility. “I’ve already regained three pounds, and I got a new job, which pays more, so less time at the diner.”

“Good. Talk to some of the upper classmen. I don’t want to see one of our most talented freshmen burning out before the end of his first semester.” Her glance cut through him, and her tight expression showed that she had much more to say.

But Cassandra had been right. A mention of the legality of what Carmen had been about to ask had cut her off.

Kurt absolutely would not lose his dream because of this.

***

Kurt came barreling into the cafe, and Adam turned his head. There was a sour expression on Kurt’s face, but Adam smiled anyway. Kurt had been texting him about new adventures, and Adam’s weekend had been the best since... since Adam could remember. It was like he was living
someone else’s life, when he got to spend time with Kurt.

Kurt pinched his lips to the side, then gave a little wave and sat down in a huff at a table. He pulled out a book to wait for Adam.

By the time Adam had taken care of his customers, Jimmy had already come by and given Kurt some tea and a big slice of cheesecake.

“The adventure today is cheesecake?”

“Cheesecake may become an everyday adventure.” Kurt rolled his eyes and then slumped forward and pressed his fingers tensely to his hairline.

“Darling.” Adam reached over and rubbed Kurt’s back.

“It’s fine. It’s fine. I’m fine.” Kurt grabbed a fork with his left hand and shifted his eyes to Adam without moving his head. “Do you wanna go out tonight? We could try one of the clubs in Chelsea before? I’ve never been to a real gay bar. Just this weird dive in my hometown where really old queens and high schoolers with fake IDs and intimacy issues hung out.”

“I get off late, but I’ll always make time for you.” Adam felt his cheek set aflame by his own ridiculousness.

Kurt set the fork down and reached down to grab Adam’s hand. “You too. If you ever need me?”

“Sure. What happened?”

“Everyone’s talking about me. And I know, I know. It shouldn’t bother me. But...” Kurt flipped his hair back and reached for his tea. “This is affecting my career. I don’t care if everyone thinks that I’m Carmen’s pet-- which is stupid, by the way, she rejected me twice-- or if they think I’m ugly, or untalented, or that I’m a sad, sick little twinkie who’s puking his guts out on purpose. I don’t care. I don’t care about that. But if the teachers are talking about me, if Carmen has to call me into her office...”
Kurt stabbed the cheesecake. “I can’t control this. I need to control this.”

“We could skip the clubs tonight,” Adam offered. “Stay in. Pizza. Downtown Abby.”

“I don’t know.” Kurt slumped down farther and put his chin on his arms. “I want to visit a real gay club before I die.”

“Well, there are plenty. It’s not exactly the hardest item to check off your bucket list.” Adam stroked Kurt’s hair. “Maybe you should just get some rest, for now. And we can space out the adventures.”

“You just want a pajama party.”

Adam smiled. “I never had any when I was a boy! Well, boarding school, but that doesn’t count.”

“Then that will be our adventure tonight. Now that I think about it, I haven’t ever had a sleepover with boys before.” Kurt waved his hand. “Blaine puking and passing out in my bed doesn’t count.”

“I have to say, the idea of meeting one of your exes at this point fills me with the same sense of joy as the thought of running into mine.”

“He’s not that...” Kurt bit his lip. His eyes widened, and he finally took a bite of cheesecake. “Mm.”

He took some more on his fork and held it out to Adam. Adam glanced up to check on his customers. Jimmy had already swung over there to refill water and waved Adam away as he moved toward the new customers.

Adam turned his head back and opened his mouth. Kurt made a whooshing noise as he flew the cheesecake in.

“Mmm. Good. But I’m not the one who needs to pack on some pounds. Eat your cheesecake, young man,” Adam said in a semi-stern voice.
“With my luck, I really will barf.” Kurt scraped the sides of his cheesecake and licked the sweet, fluffy stuff off his fork. “Can you be an involuntary bulimic?”

“No, I don’t think you can.” Adam frowned. “Do you get stressed? Is that’s what’s happening?”

“It’s not just that.”

When Kurt didn’t say anything else, just poked at his cheesecake, worrying his lower lip between his teeth, Adam decided not to press.

“I happen to keep a shitload—” Adam continued while Kurt burst out in laughter. “-of stomach medication around my apartment. Over the counter and otherwise. We’ll make sure you feel okay tonight, hm?”

“You’re the best.” Kurt sighed and took his hand again.

“It’s nothing...”

Kurt looked into in his eyes. A serious expression. Grateful. Almost... adoring. And Adam couldn’t look away, either. No doubt, there was every one of those things in his eyes, and more.

He touched the back of Kurt’s head, rose, and leaned over to kiss the top of his hair. “You’ve made me so happy the last couple of days. Every time we’re together, to be honest. You are my precious thing whether you think you deserve it or not. Don’t hesitate to tell me if you need anything?”

“Like more tea?” Kurt avoided Adam’s eyes now.

“I did say anything.” Adam pulled a cloth out of his apron, and went to wipe down some other tables.

It bothered him that people were treating Kurt so poorly at school. Adam hadn’t failed to notice how easily Kurt defended him and the Apples, whenever it came up. He deserved reciprocal
support, and unfortunately, there were only a few places Kurt could look to for it... And at the same time, he seemed hesitant to allow others to give it.

Adam couldn’t say he hadn’t been there. Until very recently, he’d been skipping therapy sessions and only confiding in Aude. He hadn’t even told his family. He didn’t know if he would, ever. Maybe, though, he and Kurt could lean into one another. Hold each other up. Everything in this life was so hard. Even if they couldn’t have anything intimate, even if Adam could never let it go that far, they could at least have each other.
Chapter Nine

The ceiling, Adam noticed, was getting dusty. He rolled his tongue around the inside of his lip as he thought about where the long, fuzzy duster was, and how much effort it would take to go get it. That was the problem with so many apartment ceilings... and sometimes the walls. They were this spotty, lumpy texture, with white paint (or off white) most of the time. Likely to keep people from noticing holes in the walls or uneven patches. A space could accrue a lot of damage over time.

He closed his eyes, saw a vague blackness, and then opened his eyes again. Nothing was spinning, but he still had a sensation that the world was moving around him, and that wasn’t so pleasant, when one wasn’t outside, looking up at the stars. He didn’t know why he couldn’t adjust to new meds more quickly. Or why, it seemed, he always had the ‘atypical’ reaction. One round, a year in to his life as a pill popper, had given him heartburn so bad that he started to choke if he didn’t eat. But, he supposed, dizziness and stomach problems were about on par with every cocktail he’d tried. Dr. Galician seemed confident that this change would help Adam overall.

Adam ought to give Kurt a call. Meet up with him another time. They’d been seeing one another regularly enough, in and out of school. Adam didn’t want to not see Kurt, though. Kurt made things better. With the exception of the strange tension when Kurt decided to pretend his life was a bowl of glitter covered cherries, there was little that Adam would change about their relationship.

Well. One thing, but Adam wasn’t about to risk that. Having Kurt in his life meant too much. After Aude had learned that they knew each other, she had pressed him several times to tell Kurt. Assured him that Kurt had no trouble with her. That Kurt was an amazing guy, and would understand.

Adam still thought it was difficult accepting the status a friend, let alone someone who might become more. And now he’d waited so long, he didn’t want Kurt to feel like he’d been manipulated in any way.

He draped an arm over his eyes, wishing he had some water, and at the same time, not feeling particularly motivated to get up for it. He’d sleep for a little bit, and then maybe he’d feel more capable of the strenuous task of sitting up on the couch with his dear friend.

It seemed like seconds later, when Adam opened his eyes to the sound of the buzzer from downstairs.

“Mm. Coming,” he said to no one in particular. He pushed himself up, swallowed hard, and made his way to the door. “Hullo?”
“Adam? It’s me.”

Adam blinked sluggishly at the sound of Kurt’s voice. He pressed the button again. “Oh, um. Come on up.”

He looked around the apartment, then caught a glance out the window. The light was fading already. Piss.

He hurried into his bedroom to change his shirt. The long-sleeved shirt he’d been wearing was sweat-stained. The jeans he had on weren’t very clean either, but he’d not had the energy for the last few days to make it down to do laundry. Then he fluffed his hair in the mirror. It was getting long and needed a cut.

With a sigh, he went back into the living room. The afternoon had completely gotten away from him.

Kurt knocked once, then opened the door with a smile. “I brought...”

Adam looked to him as he trailed off. Kurt was frowning.

“How about the mess?”

“No. No, that’s fine. Aude’s apartment is tiny. I don’t care. I mean, I care, and I’ll probably have to tie myself down not to clean for you. But I don’t judge.” Kurt closed the door and set down the bag he had with him. “Are you okay? You look really tired.”

“Just, erm, fluish, I guess.”

“You should’ve told me.” Kurt came right up and put a hand on Adam’s forehead. “Hm.”

“It’ll be fine. I just need to take it easy until it passes.”
Kurt guided him over to the couch and gave him a little push. “I was going to make us a nice Coq au Vin, but chicken soup will do, don’t you think?”

“You were going to cook?”

Kurt shrugged his shoulder high. “I’ve been feeling really good this week. And Aude doesn’t actually have a kitchen. Just a hotplate and a sink.” He rolled his eyes and sighed as he picked up the bag again. “Don’t worry about it. I like to cook. Can I get you anything before I get started?”

“You really don’t have to—”

“I’m going to get you some water,” Kurt insisted.

“It’s sweet of you to stay. Who knows what kind of company I’ll be.” Adam settled back into the couch and watched Kurt swish his way into the kitchen. Lord, the man did have shapely hips... and everything else in that area.

“I’ll take Adam-sitting over trying to make grilled cheese on a hotplate in Aude’s shoebox any day.” Kurt chuckled at himself. The water turned on, then off, and Kurt came back with a large glass of water with a straw and a tiny umbrella.

“What...? Where did you get that?”

“They’re not that hard to find.” Kurt smirked. “Aude took me to the liquor store. I brought fun juice.”

He returned to the kitchen. “Though I guess none for you tonight.”

Adam could hear the sounds of pans moving and then quick, precision cutting.

“Do you think you’ll be going home any time soon?”

“Oh. Hm. Not until spring break. I sort of have to, since Mr. Schuester’s wedding is then, and we
all swore we would. Plus... I sort of missed both the Thanksgiving and Christmas get togethers. If I don’t make it to this one, the New Directions may come after me en singing masse. Kind of like the Jets, only much less gangsta.”

Adam managed a half-smile. “I meant back to your place in Bushwick.”

“Ohhh. Well... I don’t know. Aude keeps saying I can stay, but I’m pretty sure Q doesn’t want to have to keep finding other places to have sex.”

“Q has an apartment. Or they can always find a club. There are places you can go.”

The noises from the kitchen ceased for a long moment. Adam wished he could see Kurt’s expression from the couch.

“W-well.” The knife went at the board again, with a vengeance. “Um. Sex. In public. Have to add that to the bucket list, then.”

“Have anyone in mind?”

“Not really. I think I’m officially off Love Shack visitation. For a while, anyway.”

“Sorry. Shouldn’t’ve asked. I know you’ve had a hard time of it.”

“It’s fine.” Kurt was quiet for a long pause. “Have you? Ever...?”

“In public? Um... In the boys’ lav at my school back in England.”

“Wait...” Kurt peered out of the kitchen. “You had sex in the school?”

“I did, indeed, Hermione.”
Kurt scoffed. “Whatever. That’s a complement. She was a genius, and she had hot jocks interested in her.”

Adam covered his face with one hand and flopped over on the couch. There was truly no one else in the world right now who could make him smile like this. Even at her best, Aude couldn’t make his heart this light anymore.

A few minutes later, Kurt came back in with an apron over his black corset-vest and red-black-gray-white plaid button up shirt. He pulled a disk out of his bag and knelt over Adam’s media player, with which he was by now quite intimate.

“I dunno that I’m really up for hardcore marathoning,” Adam admitted.

“I just wanted you to see this.” Kurt rose, his body arching in graceful curves. “It’s a video of my babies.”

“Y-Your...?”

“My babies!” Kurt gave him a beaming smile and drew one shoulder up coyly.

Adam wasn’t entirely sure whether Kurt was joking or if he was in for another glitter cherry afternoon.

“Well, I’ve got to say, you’ve got quite the figure for someone your age who has babies.”

Kurt wrinkled his nose and wiggled his hips. Not glitter cherry, then. Just teasing. Kurt turned on the media player and selected a video. Adam propped himself up.

“I wanted you to see them. I’m really proud. And it’s kind of nice that they think of me. In my experience, absence makes the heart grow forgetful.” Kurt sat on the couch, keeping his legs close together.

When he hit play, Adam could see a darkened stage, with two figures in the middle, one very slim, and the other curvy. The music swelled around them, a big, jazzy brass sound.
“Is this from *Victor/Victoria*?” Adam asked.

Kurt bounced. “Yes! This is my song.” He clapped his hands together. “My babies did my song for me!”

“‘Bout twenty years ago, way down in New Orleans,” the slim figure began, stalking sideways as she looked up, one side of her face visible. “A group of fellas found a new kind of music... and they decided to call it... *jazz*.” She curved a white-gloved hand around her cheek. “No other sound has what this music haaaas...”

She turned her head, revealing masculine make-up, and a drawn on mustache, with her hair slicked back. Her partner began to move and took over the verse.

“Before they knew it, it was wizzin’ round the world!” she sang in a powerful voice. “The world was ready, for a *blue* kind of music! And now they play it from Steamboat Springs to Le Paz...”

Both started snapping their fingers, launching into the iconic number as the lights came on and both girls embraced the role of a gender bent star.

“They are so amazing.” Kurt covered his lips with his fingertips, shaking his head. “And they look so good!” He pointed. “Doesn’t Marley look good?”

“They look great. Their voices blend really well, too,” Adam said, not having any idea which one Kurt was talking about at first.

“She has an eating disorder, Marley. She’s the skinny one, but she looks so much better.” Kurt suddenly stood, swallowing and blinking quickly, and walked back into the kitchen. “I need to simmer.”

Adam laid back and watched the two theatre kids belt one out for Kurt, who was clearly their mentor. Toward the end, four other girls (three blond, one Asian) appeared in the back and danced and sang for the final chorus. When the number was over, Adam grabbed the remote and played it back, so he could take in what they’d done with it. There was a lot of love in this video. A lot of call outs that Adam wasn’t sure that he understood. But surely, Kurt did.

At the end, when he let the video continue to play, both girls sat on the edge of the stage, and the girl with the long brown hair, Marley, probably, beamed and said, “I hope you liked it! We miss
you, and we hope everything is absolutely great in New York.”

“It gets betta, fools!” the other, Unique, said with a pump of her fist.

The rest continued as the two traded off, sharing what had been going on back in Ohio. The other girls chimed in here and there, with much giggling and smiling.

“Anyway, that’s all we have...” Marley narrowed her eyes darkly at the camera. “Until next time!”

“Mwa ha ha ha!” Unique laughed.

“Your babies are adorable!” Adam called into the kitchen. Kurt said nothing, but he waved, and then ducked his head out for a red-eyed nod. Bless.

“And I hope you’re feeling better,” Marley said warmly. “It was hard watching our hero feel so awful.”

“But our unicorn can beat anything!” one of the blonde girls said.

“So you OJ up and stay healthy, because we wanna see you at the wedding,” Unique practically ordered.

Adam frowned and crossed his arms as he shifted on the couch. Kurt emerged and took the remote to pick another video.

“There are a bunch on here. Performances from the old club. So, some mini me. Some chubby me,” Kurt said, clicking through the available videos.

“I bet you were adorable.” Adam wanted to ask if Kurt had been sick before... but from his personal experience, that was such a nosy question. It probably wasn’t far off from what he’d seen from Kurt anyway, on their squicky tummy order-in nights. “They seem to care about you a lot.”

Kurt shrugged his shoulders tight to his body, looking a little embarrassed. “I’m so proud. The last
few months been really hard on them. Marley collapsed, and her mother had her in the hospital overnight. Then they took her to a shrink, but her family just doesn’t have the money to afford that kind of thing for long. Unique has been getting all the bullying I used to have. I wasn’t sure the club could give them the support they need. Especially since they lost their funding and teacherly support. But they’re sticking together. It’s all you have in this world, really. In the end, we’re all worm food. Until then, we have each other.”

“That’s a bit grim,” Adam said quietly.

Kurt turned his head, almost seeming startled. “Sorry. I’d say this hasn’t been my best year, but last year sucked a big one, too. The year before that also wasn’t fabulous. Sometimes, I just...”

He clicked on a video. “There you go. Chub me. Enjoy.”

Adam chuckled as Kurt returned to the kitchen. He watched for a moment. Kurt was round faced and probably two or three inches shorter, but no where near chubby.

“All I’m seeing is a precious little moppet,” Adam called after a bit.

“Your illness has clearly ruined your vision,” Kurt called back.

“I quite like the song, too... could do without Rachel screaming, though.”

Kurt peeked his head out and shrugged. “She always did that. Top of her lungs, on every part.”

“She’ll get nodes doing that. I hope she’s more careful now.”

“I think that’s her worst nightmare. That or forgetting the lyrics to ‘Don’t Rain on My Parade’ on Broadway.”

Adam clicked on another video and watched the kids dancing around to rearranged pop songs, mostly, with less than ambitious choreography. They weren’t bad at all, though. And Adam enjoyed seeing Kurt popping around, so small and fresh faced. Especially in the mattress commercial that got put on the disk. He watched that three times, until Kurt poked in from the
kitchen and told him to cut it out.

“Can I help it that you’ve brought over the most entertaining things I’ve ever seen?”

“Hm. Not really. But I’m glad that it does.” Kurt came in holding a tray with a bowl of soup, a side of crackers, and a glass of ginger ale.

“I’m fairly certain I’ve done nothing good enough to be given such tender treatment.”

Kurt rolled his eyes and set the tray down on the ottoman. “You’ve always been perfectly good to me.”

“Maybe prior behavior counts, too. It could be that I deserve to suffer at home alone.” Adam looked up at him and frowned sadly.

“Well,” Kurt said as he encourage Adam into a sitting position. “I haven’t exactly been an angel, either.” He unfolded a napkin and leaned over to tuck it into Adam’s shirt. “But you still cheer me up and got me amazing Asian food when I wasn’t feeling well.”

Adam smiled and touched the napkin. “I have a hard time imagining what you’re referring to, not being an angel.”

“Hm.” Kurt pressed his lips together. “That may or may not involve Italian food...”

Adam smiled sympathetically and leaned over to smell the soup.

“Also, giving Rachel bad advice on guys...”

Adam chuckled and looked at him warmly.

“You know, I also once got completely snockered...” Kurt curled his tongue up to touch the middle of his upper lip. “And... Then...”
Adam raised his brows and leaned forward. “And?”

“I may have projectile vomited on the shoes of our school counselor... who has OCD.”

Adam covered his mouth.

“That’s pretty evil, right? I always meant to give her more of an apology, but I was far, far too embarrassed.”

“School counselor. So how old were you?”

“About fifteen.” Kurt laughed a little to himself and went back in the kitchen. He returned with his own bowl and sat beside Adam. “You’re not meant to suffer, Adam. Everything I’ve ever seen from you screams that you’re a good person.”

“I try to be.” Adam blew on the soup and tried to pep himself up to eating it. Kurt had gone to all this trouble. “My ex actually hates me. He’s not really wrong for doing so.”

Kurt sipped from his spoon. “Did you cheat on him?”

“Oh no.”

“Did you steal parts from home? On stage?”

“No... He wasn’t in the theatre.”

“Did you ever hit him? Or try to force him to have sex?”

“Good Lord.” Adam rubbed his temple at the thought. He knew what Kurt was doing, but he didn’t want to minimize his own failings just because other people were more evil.
“You don’t have to tell me, but... Maybe consider that even if you hurt this one person.” Kurt shrugged. “You might still deserve to have someone there for you.”

Adam looked at Kurt for a long moment, then set his spoon down and buried his face in his arms. As he let out a shaky sob, he felt Kurt’s hand rubbing his back.

“It’s okay. Whatever it was... I forgive you.”

Kurt’s lips pressed against Adam’s hairline, and Adam looked up. He wiped his eyes. Kurt reached over and pushed Adam’s hair back from his eyes.

“I’m gross. I need a shower.”

“Well, if you eat, I’ll let you go take one. And then I’ll be here, afterward, if you want. Or not, if you don’t want.”

Adam shook his head in disbelief. “You know, I have a lot of people I consider friends.” He sat back for a moment and sighed. “I don’t have a lot of people who see this part.”

“Thank you,” Kurt said quietly, taking his hand.

***

The dance class was lightly buzzing with gossip, but otherwise quiet. Kurt stretched in the corner by himself. Despite a general upswing in the feel of his body, and his mood, earlier in the week, today he was feeling kind of achy and just tired. A session with Cassandra July tended to wear him out on a good day. He only had so much energy to allocate to each activity. He spent a lot of it dwelling on when/whether people would find out, how long he could keep healthy, and if he could look forward to a short, horrible life that now precluded a boyfriend (since he seemed to encounter some kind of travesty every few months, HIV status none withstanding)-- Not much pep left over.

The talking stopped abruptly, and Kurt looked up to see if Cassandra was early. She wasn’t. The show stopper today was one Rachel Berry, walking into the Dance Class of the Damned in short black shorts and a tank top, with a pink towel over her shoulders, and her duffle bag with her name
Kurt licked his lips slowly and tilted his head to the side. She shouldn’t be there. She should be in the second semester class, or, in this moment, talking with her sycophants about what a pity it was that she couldn’t sign up for *Funny Girl* auditions (for some reason).

Her expression was blank, at first, but quickly shifted to a calm smugness, and she walked over to Kurt. He stared up at her, his tongue poking into his cheek and his brows raised, and didn’t stop his stretches.

“Kurt! It’s been a while, hasn’t it?” she said brightly.

“Has Brody figured out how to put on clothes yet?” Kurt realized, as the laughter softly chorused around them, that everyone was listening in.

“Oh, *Kurt*. You’re too sensitive about that,” she said with a wave of her hand. “You’re such a prude sometimes.”

*Yeah, I’m a real prude.* “I’m sensitive about that, *and* you ordering me around like a servant.”

Rachel pursed her lips. “I know that your song in the Round Room was about wanting to apologize to me, Kurt. You don’t have to pretend. We can be friends again.”

Kurt narrowed his eyes and slowly tilted his head to the side. “And you started speaking Japanese... when?”

“That’s why I agreed to assist with your class. You know, give a good role model-” Rachel half turned and gave everyone a big smile before turning the brights on Kurt and whispering to him. “- for all the remedial dancers.”

Kurt let his eyes fall half closed, then pulled his elbow back over his head to stretch his triceps.

“You know I’m always interested in helping my fellow students,” she added, in her best pageant voice.
“You know, I think your particular brand of crazy is causing a reaction with my meds,” Kurt drawled. Before Rachel could respond, Kurt had relocated to the other side of a clump of girls.

“God, does she have to rub it in? She was practically the worst one last semester,” one tall girl said with a curl of her lip.

“I heard Madam Tibideaux made Cassandra pass her through to the next class,” another girl said in a hushed voice.

Kurt slipped away and found himself among a group that actually appeared to be interested in stretching. When they started up a conversation, it was thankfully about what they planned to do Friday evening, and since Kurt didn’t know them well, he felt he could absent himself from the conversation.

A few minutes later Cassandra entered, a water bottle in her hand, and she surveyed the room. She had them all line up and begin the official warm ups, and came by the line to critique each of their positions. Then, one of her TAs made a brief demonstration of the moves from the previous class, and they lined up once again so that they could practice them together.

Kurt only spared a thought to wonder what Rachel’s role would be in ‘helping’ the poor unfortunate souls in second-semester loser dance class. The rest of his thoughts involved counting time and rehearsing the critiques he’d been given in the last class as he went through the moves.

“Get outta your head, Hummel!” Cassandra shouted as she walked by. “I can see you thinking through every single move on your kewpie doll face!”

Kurt tented his brows and tried to relax his face. He wasn’t sure what to think about. It was getting so hot in the studio... Making eggs florentine on Aude’s hotplate... The upcoming photoshoot at Vogue... Adam’s flu... maybe Kurt could come by again to make sure he had everything he needed-

At that moment, he turned wrong on his ankle and nearly crashed to the floor. Though he caught himself just in time, he knew Cassandra had seen. She stopped, pointed to him, and then motioned to the front. Time for individuals, and it looked like he was first.

He tried not to limp as he approached the front. Where could he go in his head that wasn’t the
dance moves?

*When you play me Le Jazz Hot, baby, you're holdin’ my soul to-geeee-ther!*

Kurt’s lips curved into a smirk, and he slipped fluidly from one move into the other. One, two, three, four, five.

And it was over.

“Excellent,” Cassandra barked. “*Finally!*” She snapped her fingers and pointed for him to head to the back. “Next. Schwimmer! Welcome back.”

“Thank you, Madam July,” Rachel said cheerfully as she hurried to the front.

Kurt watched as he rubbed his ankle. Rachel moved a little clumsily through each pose, keeping a stage smile on at all times. When she finished, she started to head back, but Cassandra strode over quickly and stopped her.

“No. No. You don’t get to half-ass these *basic* moves and prance along your merry way. Hummel just sprained his fucking ankle and came up here and *did* the moves correctly, *while taking the note I just gave him.*” Cassandra turned to the class and pointed to Rachel’s head. “This, class, is what happens when you graduate from my class and get spoiled and lazy from a little bit of *unearned* success.”

“I won the Winter Showcase all on my own!” Rachel argued. “I was *amazing.*”

Cassandra pinched her lips together and turned so slowly that the tension in the room ramped up by several thousand degrees. “You got an extra performance, when everyone else was permitted only one. *And* you got the new dean’s verbal seal of approval on your piece, which no one else was afforded either. There was no way you weren’t winning the Showcase. That much was *obvious* before the performances were even over.”

Rachel seethed in front of her, through the whole speech, and opened her mouth when Cassandra took a small break in her lecture, but quickly got cut off.

“And if you speak out of turn in *my* class, one more time, not even Madam Tibideaux will save
you. You will be out of my class, and therefore barred from any other dance classes at this academy, since you can’t manage to master the simplest movements. It will be a black mark on the rest of park and bark career, little girl, and unfortunately for you, most Broadway productions require you to do more than stand there and accept lavish praise.”

Rachel closed her mouth and looked away angrily.

“Get to the back and watch,” Cassandra snapped.

Kurt looked on wide-eyed as Rachel slunk back and hid behind the other dancers. Everyone was stared at her, though.

“You want some ice for that, Hummel?” Cassandra called.

“Um, later,” Kurt replied. He got back into the line. They were almost done with the review and would be learning a new move any minute now. He wasn’t going to miss, no matter how he felt.

“Damn right.”

As predicted, dance class was long and draining. They did, however, get a break in the middle, during which Kurt took the opportunity to ice his ankle, chug some water, and also press the ice pack against his forehead. He felt ready to fall apart, and he was soaked in sweat by the end. His head felt stuffed full of cotton, and throbbed aggravatingly. Kurt packed up his duffle bag afterward, almost falling asleep right there on the dance floor. But he chugged some water and forced himself to wrap his ankle tightly. It wasn’t too swollen, so he should try to go easy on it outside of dance class.

“Thanks for the help,” Kurt said as Rachel passed by with her duffle.

She looked back at him with big, vulnerable eyes. For goodness sake, it was like watching a spoiled puppy getting swatted for the first time. What had she expected would happen? Why had she lied? Everyone else was here because they hadn’t passed into the second semester (except Kurt, who still got the stigma of failure for being in the class). What could they have on her, really? They were all kind of in the same boat.

“I’m kidding.” Kurt rolled his eyes and shook his head. “Must be easier to breathe the air down
here with the rest of us, though, hm?”

“Of course, you’re loving this,” Rachel said. “You were always jealous of my success.”

“I’m wrapping my ankle. Then, I’m going to take a shower and go to work in Bushwick, and then take the subway back up to Manhattan and hopefully not slip into a coma of exhaustion on the car and get robbed. That’s what I’m going to do.”

Rachel was quiet for a moment. Almost everyone had cleared out. “I didn’t tell you that you had to leave.”

“No, you just made it so uncomfortable to live with you that I didn’t have a choice.” Kurt moved his ankle a little, and, satisfied with the tightness of the bandage, rose to his feet and hitched his duffle on his shoulder. “See you next class my dear Winter Queen.”

Kurt hung his head a little on the way out the door. Maybe it was better this way. Fewer people who he was obligated to share his secrets with.

“Kurt!” Rachel was trotting quickly behind him. Even limping, Kurt’s long legs outpaced her.

“What?”

Rachel let out a heavy sigh. “I’m sorry about Brody. I should have talked to you about inviting him to move in. He told me it wasn’t fair that you were angry at him for something I’d done...” She looked down and shrugged. “I can talk to him about the nudity.”

Kurt stood there, staring. Rachel Berry. Apologizing. She must really feel lonely. Or she was seeing her sudden surge of popularity crumbling around her.

“I don’t know...”

Rachel bit her lip. “I don’t think I can-” She looked up at the ceiling and sighed. “We may have another houseguest that you might not appreciate.”
“A houseguest...?” Kurt furrowed his brow. “Roaches?”

“Santana.”

Kurt stared at her for a long time. “What.”

“She came with Quinn to talk me out of doing the student film-- and you were right by the way, it was an embarrassment to production-- and apparently she dropped out of her program in Kentucky. So she just... stayed.”

“She stayed. In our place.”

“She wants your bed.”

“She can’t have my bed.” Kurt let out a groan. “Ohhh, my God, why is it always something? Can’t I have a moment of stasis in my life?”

Kurt bowed over slightly. He felt like he might just hit the floor and stay there. Then he noticed Rachel, who had just stepped back and was watching him with curious worry.

“We could handle her, I’m sure. I mean, if you came back, she might only stay a few more weeks, looking for a place.”

“So that’s really why you want me back? To get rid of Santana for you?” Kurt snapped.

“No! No... I miss you, and...” Rachel sighed and crossed her arms over herself. “New York isn’t the same without you. And I’ve been worried. People, well, you know how they gossiped in Glee club. This is one big school full of the dramatic.”

“I don’t have an eating disorder,” Kurt said in a low, irritated tone. At this point, he really wanted to put the words on a mini-recorder and just play it on a loop every time someone tried to imply something about his weight.
“I know! I just... I know that when you’re stressed, sometimes you don’t eat enough. You lose a lot of weight. I’ve seen this before, Kurt. I don’t want you to be alone. Where are you even staying?”

“With a friend. It’s been alright. The commute back and forth is kind of irritating, but I would have to anyway, for Vogue and school.”

“But not as much. Who else is here? Who are you staying with?”

Kurt blinked slowly and realized that Rachel thought someone else from Lima had come up. Did she not think he could make new friends? Or maybe she didn’t think making new friends was possible, since she’d not managed to do so, despite being at the school longer.

“Honey, I work two jobs, and I’m in a play reading group and a choir. I meet people. You should think about joining some clubs and making new friends. We’re not in Lima anymore. Honestly, not that I could afford it, but if I were just going to school, I think I’d go a little crazy with all the down time.”

Rachel made a clicking sound with her tongue. “Well, maybe you should think about doing less. You look like you’re on death’s door.”

Kurt turned and walked away.

“Kurt! Kurt, please!”

He sped up.

“I didn’t mean it like that. Come on, Kurt!” Rachel pleaded.

He stopped so abruptly that she ran into his back. He turned and leveled an utterly unimpressed gaze on her. “If you want me to move back in, you might try being nice to me.”

Rachel licked her lips, looked down, and sighed softly.
“I work really hard in there.” Kurt pointed back to the dance studio. “I work really hard. And maybe I have too many activities, but I need them, and I don’t regret a single one. You can judge me all you like for being in the Apples, and you can look down your nose at someone who actually has to work to pay his bills, but at the end of the day, I am doing the best that I can with what I have to work with, and not everyone’s daddies are going to pay all their bills. You don’t have to work. You don’t have to. So maybe instead of fixating on what’s wrong with me, you could get off your ass and take an extra dance class, or join some kind of club to help hone your god-awful acting skills, or, I don’t know, since we’re in New York, get some audition experience!”

“Kurt.” Her face was crumbling.

And he cared that she was upset. He did. But nothing he’d said was untrue. People spared her feelings too often, and it just made things like their dance class harder for her.

“You just have everything going so easily for you right now, Rachel. I wish you wouldn’t waste it. That’s all,” Kurt said a little more gently. He raked a hand through his sweat-stiffened hair. “I’ll come by tonight.”

“I didn’t mean it. I-I just- You look tired.”

“I am tired. Dance class is hard.”

“I know, but-”

“But that’s it. See you tonight.” Kurt turned again, this time unfollowed. However, the words whispered behind him signaled a new shift in the school gossip:

“What a bitch.”

“Are they really friends? How did she get to be friends with him?”
It was a long shift, but Kurt had swung by Aude’s place beforehand, so he was able to go directly back to the loft afterward. It was almost 10pm, he was exhausted, and his face felt hot and sweaty the entire time. After trudging up six flights of stairs, he opened the door, gave a nod to Brody who was sitting on the couch with at least a pair of shorts on (thank GOD), dropped his overnight and duffle bags on the floor, and headed straight to the bathroom.

Where he puked prodigiously.

No one came to bother him, so after he was finished, he wiped his brow and rinsed his mouth out as best he could. His toothbrush was in the bag by the door, and he didn’t feel like getting it. He laid a hand flat to his stomach and wondered if this was a resurgence of his difficulty with his meds, or something more.

His heartbeat quickened at that thought. Since he’d gotten his diagnosis, he’d had side effects, and almost more stress than he could shoulder, but he’d not really gotten sick. The concept of fighting off an illness, after the Lima doctor’s warnings about his immune system, was more than daunting.

“It is very likely that you could succumb to an opportunistic infection if you don’t start antiretrovirals as soon as possible. Your immune system is not strong right now.”

Kurt swallowed the fear and headed to his bedroom.

After pulling back the curtain, he saw Santana laying there, propped up on his pillows with her dark hair pooling around her and reading a book. Kurt looked at her only a moment before crawling up onto the bed and curling on the side.

“This is my bed. Get off or share,” he instructed in a voice that was less forceful than he’d hoped.

Santana frowned at him. “Where ya been, Hummelski. The nude scene fight was weeks ago.”

“Rachel’s a little much to put up with on a regular basis. I had to take a break.”

“Yeah, for real.” She reached over toward him— he suspected to shove him off the bed— but instead, she laid her palm over his forehead, and then under his chin. “How long have you been sick?”
“I’m not sick. I’m healthy. I’m the healthiest guy in New York.”

“Oh, so just preggers, then?”

“Must be. Who knows who the daddy is. I’ve been a ho.”

Santana let out a huge, faux sigh. “You bitches and your baby drama. Like we can fit a crib in this apartment.”

Kurt was thinking of another quip when he dozed off. He woke as Santana pressed a cool cloth to his forehead.

“I’m not sick,” he protested again. He closed his eyes tight and took in a deep breath. He just wanted the weight off his chest and the throbbing out of his head so he could think.

How long would it take for an opportunistic infection to do him in? Was this it? A couple of months of panic, and then dissolve into a congested, puking mess?

“Oh huh. You’re doing a great job of faking getting sweat all over the pillows. Those acting classes are aces.” She rubbed a hand over his back. “I can take the couch. I have work tonight. I don’t need your germs all over me.”

Kurt curled into a ball. “I’m a fucking biohazard,” he said through gritted teeth.

“Um. It’s probably just the flu. Is drama a specialty at that fancy school of yours?”

Ugh. School. He had his beginning acting class tomorrow.

“C’mon. Stop being a baby. Open up for Auntie Tana.”

Kurt turned his head to look at her. She was waving a thermometer in his face.
“I swear it hasn’t been up anyone’s butt.”

“Why would you even say that?” Kurt let her put it under his tongue and closed his eyes again. He woke as it beeped again.

“Yep. 100 degrees. You’re officially gross.” Santana patted his shoulder and went over to his dresser. “Do you have any man-jammies?”

“What are you even talking about?” Why couldn’t Santana talk like a normal person? He could barely understand her right now.

“You’re not going to get any rest in those hysterectomy pants. You need to change.” She pawed through his drawers.

Kurt scowled, then pushed himself up and started peeling off his shirt.

“Okay, skinny-skinny. Arms up,” she instructed. Kurt did as he was told. “So do you need tea or something? Does your throat hurt?”

“Kind of…” Kurt continued to blink. It felt like his eyes were twice their usual size. “Ugh. Why. I never get sick.”

“That sounds like a challenge for Mama Nature.” Santana gave a tug to Kurt’s tight work pants, then tossed Kurt the pajama bottoms. “‘Kay. I’ll use my magical woman powers in the kitchen to make water hot. Don’t die while I’m gone.”

“Why are you being so nice to me?” Kurt asked.

Santana shrugged as she folded the pants and set them on Kurt’s desk. “Because Berry was so god-awful that you actually moved out for a couple of weeks.” She laughed. “And because I just heard you making noises like some creature out of Cloverfield in the bathroom there. Even my thick bitchery hide has its limits.”
She came over and petted his hair. “Also, you’re going to cook me a welcome to New York dinner when you get better.”

“I think I can do that.” Kurt scooted back in the bed and tried to quell his panicking. “Thanks.”

Santana shrugged and pushed past the privacy curtain.

Kurt was glad that he wasn’t at Aude’s tonight. He didn’t want to pass this on to his friend.

***

The majority of the next day was completely lost. Most of the time, he slept, and coughed, and sweated. When he managed to be awake, he shuddered not just because of his achy body that was alternately boiling and freezing. He also knew he should try to get to his doctor for extra medication, but the thought was hard to hold onto. He’d barely managed to take his regular meds, and was lucky to keep them down.

He took some fluids that day, and between Rachel, Santana, and Brody, people popped in on him a few times. Mostly, he just slept, and tried to will his immune system not to give in to a flu so soon.

When he came shuffling out into the main room, it was dark outside, and Rachel and Santana were sitting around the TV.

“Kurt! God, it’s lucky you came home when you did,” Rachel said. She got up and came over to him, giving a quick hug that involved keeping her face away from him and holding her breath.

“We should put a scarf over your mouth,” Santana suggested. She raised her arms, like a zombie, and groaned, “Plaaague.”

“I probably just caught it from Adam,” Kurt muttered. “He was sick the other day, too.”

Santana twisted her body and leaned on the back of the couch. “Or the people at work. Customers are snot monsters. They’re disgusting. You’re waiting tables, too, right?”
“Yeah.” Kurt stopped in the kitchen. He’d forgotten why he’d come out. He looked around for a moment. “Where’s my phone?”

“Oh.” Rachel flitted over to the end table, then back again, phone in hand. “I used it to let Isabelle know you were sick... and I just talked to your professors myself. No need to get them upset with you over something you can’t help.”

“That... was thoughtful.” He stared at the phone. Who had he meant to call?

“Yeah, I know, right? We probably need to check Rachel for a virus of her own,” Santana said, flipping channels.

“Santana!” Rachel huffed.

“She has the brain worms!” Santana said in a fake-panic.

“Adam,” Kurt muttered. He thumbed through his phone and hit Adam’s contact information.

“Hi, Kurt!” Adam sounded chipper. He must be on the tail end of it.

“Hey,” Kurt rasped. He grabbed a glass and filled it with water. “I just wanted to check how you were doing. You know, with your flu?”

“Oh... you don’t sound so good.”

“I think I caught it. But you sound okay. That’s good. I might just...” Kurt stared at the water for a moment. Then he took a long sip.

“Right, right. Um. Well, do you need anything? I could bring something over.”

“I dunno. I’m probably going to go back to sleep. I might try to go to the doctor tomorrow.”
“Is it that serious?” Adam sounded alarmed.

Kurt saw Rachel exchanging a look with Santana. “Don’t know? Maybe. My fever has only ticked upward. I think it’s at 102 right now.”

“I could take you, if you need-”

“No!” Kurt pressed his hand over his forehead and cheeks. No need to blush when he was already so warm. “I mean, It’s just a couple of blocks. I can probably make it.”

“I’m not satisfied with the certainty in that answer.”

“No, no. Adam, I’m fine. I really just called because I was worried you’d gotten worse like this, but if you’re better, no need, right?” Kurt yawned.

“I’ll let you go. But don’t hesitate to call if you need someone by your side on the way to the doctor, alright? There’s no valor in getting hit by a car!”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Sleep well, darling. Oh! Have you eaten?”

“Um… sure.”

“I’m not satisfied with the certainty of that answer.”

“I don’t remember. I’ll… um… I’ll get something.”

“Take care, Kurt, alright?”
Kurt moved to slip the phone in his pocket before remembering that he didn’t have pockets. It was too late to call his doctor, and he didn’t know if they’d be able to take him tomorrow morning before he came.

What to do.

“Come sit, Kurt,” Rachel urged. She took his hand (he realized after a moment that she’d put on gloves), and led him over to the couch.

“Yeah, watch some rotten tv with us, biohazard,” Santana chimed in.

“You are always so awful,” Rachel snapped.

Santana stuck her tongue out and went to the kitchen, then returned to force a glass of cold water into Kurt’s hands. He mouthed a thank you to her, and she ruffled his hair.

Kurt curled his knees up to his body and rested his head back to the sounds of their bickering. Some time later, as he couldn’t quite follow the duration of the programs Santana was flipping through, their doorbell rang. Santana moved to go get it, keeping the remote with her.

Kurt only lifted his head when he heard Adam’s cheerful voice at the door. Sure enough, Adam was there, holding a takeout bag.

“We didn’t order anything,” Santana said, her hand on her hip.

“Adam!” Kurt pushed himself off the couch forcefully and shuffled over to him. “What are you doing here? It’s so late!”

“I figured it was my turn. I brought soup. The tom jued soup you liked from our favorite place.” Adam held up the bag and then looked at Santana curiously, like she might let him by any minute.

“You brought me soup,” Kurt said. “I love you.”
Santana raised her brows and stepped back so that Adam could enter the kitchen.

“Sorry I didn’t make it myself,” Adam said.

“That’s okay. My chicken soup is hard to top.”

“Well, it’s the least you could do, after turning him into an exploding fire hydrant,” Santana said.

Adam looked back at Santana, and he seemed to lose words. Kurt pursed his lips at her, then came into the kitchen to give Adam a hug.

“Thank you for coming.”

Adam pushed Kurt’s hair back to feel his forehead. “She’s right. Least I could do. I’ll dish you up. Bless, you’re boiling, love. I know you probably don’t feel like eating, but you need something in your belly, if you don’t want to get too weak.”

Kurt went to sit at the table and smiled as he watched Adam poke around the kitchen for spoons and things. When he brought the bowl over, Kurt had leaned his chin on his hand and started to doze.

“Up, up. Awaken darling.” His fingers moved through Kurt’s sweaty hair, and he smiled warmly at him. Then, he shifted his accent to that of a lower class English maid, “Kurt is lovely in every way. He’s funny and handsome, and he’s got such lovely teeth.”

Kurt laughed softly. His voice was rough from the sore throat, but he responded, “He’s not the boy for you, and you’re not the girl for him. He’s not a ladies’ man, Daisy!”

Adam beamed. “Eat a little, won’t you? I remember you saying the broth is godlike.”

“Ambrosia,” Kurt murmured. He lifted the bowl to his lips and sipped.

Adam slumped over to rest his chin on his arms and just watched Kurt eating. “I could still walk
you to the doctor’s in the morning. Do you have an appointment?”

“No, I just woke up half an hour ago.”

“Well, maybe an urgent care clinic would take you. Or the emergency room. Give you something.”

“It’s just the flu,” Santana said.

Kurt looked to see her still standing there, her arms crossed and her eyes narrowed as she took in every move they made.

“The flu kills people every year. It can develop into pneumonia,” Adam insisted. He looked at Santana, but was speaking for Kurt’s benefit. “It’s wise to be cautious.”

This did nothing for Kurt’s rising anxiety. One of the pamphlets he’d gotten early on had mentioned the dangers of common viruses.

“Then why are you risking coming into this den of germs?” Santana asked.

“I, my dear lady, am brilliant.” He shrugged. “I got the flu shot. Have done every year for quite a while now.”

“Meant to do that,” Kurt said softly. “Doctor told me I should do that...” He twirled his fork in the soup and sucked up some of the chewy glass noodles.

“Do your really think he’s that sick?” Rachel said, starting to sound frightened. “Kurt, do you feel that bad?”

“Don’t worry about it, Rachel,” Kurt muttered.

“How am I supposed to not worry about it? No wonder you fell yesterday!”
“I fell because I’m a klutz. It’s unrelated.” Kurt looked to Adam. “Dance class.”

“Ah. Well. Just as a tip, if you can make it back by the end of the week, Madam July will be impressed,” Adam advised. “She likes students who fight to attend every day.”

Kurt nodded. So that would be what he did. He would fight. Even though Cassandra was probably the only teacher at the school who might understand why it could take him longer than necessary to get back on his feet.

He’d already set a standard, however, of getting back on them no matter how it hurt.

After getting as much of the soup into him as he could, Kurt let himself be taken back to the couch, and Adam wrapped a big arm around him, cuddling Kurt to his chest. He was well awake by now, though, and so his mind ran rampant with flu complications with HIV. He couldn’t sneak off to google them, which was probably for the good. He’d only obsess more, and he wouldn’t be able to go until morning, no matter what.

Unless things got really bad, and he had to be hospitalized.

Kurt tried to tell himself that was unlikely to happen, having been sick for all of two days.

The girls settled on a cooking show challenge. By then, Kurt was fully preoccupied, and his fingers curled around the soft fabric of Adam’s sweater, as he turned his head away from him to cough hard.

“You’ll be alright,” Adam whispered. “I’m here, you know. We’re all here. And if you don’t get better, we’ll see you to the doctor, and everything will be fine.”

Kurt wanted to cry. But Adam’s big hand moved up and down Kurt’s back, like he could sense that Kurt was terrified, and with the words, and concern from everyone, Kurt started to feel a little better in spite of himself. It could be that he wouldn’t get any worse, and he could still fight back this virus. He would just have to wait and see.
Chapter Ten

Chapter Notes

Kadam Duet: "A Little Priest," from Sweeney Todd


Kurt’s face lit up with delight and he clapped his hands together. Adam rolled the dough between his hands and grinned back at Kurt. It was good to see him so lively again.

“I feel like Eli Roth decided to do a gay horror movie and we’re in the moment right before we all start eating each other,” Santana said. She was over at the window sighing and crossing her arms as she stared at the snow that just kept coming down, down, down.

“That’s what I was think this morning!” Kurt said in a spirited, but raspy voice. “Except I don’t know who Eli Roth is. I was thinking Sondheim.”

“Ohhhh!” Adam turned to him. “Absolutely! Blood-spurting violence and singing!”

“I know you love Sondheim,” Kurt brought his voice back down to a whisper.

“I dunno anyone at NYADA who doesn’t have a fondness for him.” Adam put another ball of cookie dough on the pan. It was a bit early for cookies, but they’d be ready and cooled by lunch time, anyway.

“Yeah, that’s just what we need in this loft. Dancing gang members that would run from a weapon,” Santana drawled as she came towards them.

Kurt picked up a knife on the table and twirled the handle in his fingers.

“Oh, shut up,” Santana sneered.

“We’re not talking about West Side Story. You’ve never seen Sweeney Todd?” Adam asked.

“Nope. Saw Johnny Depp in the other six thousand movies he sucked in with Helen Bonham-Carter, though, so I’m covered.”

Adam raised his brows. He wasn’t sure if Santana liked him or not. He wished she had a tail, so he could tell by its flickering whether she was angry.

“With the price of meat, what it is, when you get it,” Kurt sang, standing up from the table. “If you get it? Good you got it! Take, for instance, Mrs. Mooney and her piiiie shop! Bus'ness never better using only pussycats and toast! And a pussy's good for maybe six or seven at the most! And I’m sure they can't compare as far as taste!”

Adam dropped his spoon and spread his arms dramatically. “Mr. Lovett, what a charming notion—”

“Well, it does seem a waste...” Kurt shrugged coyly.

Adam took Kurt’s hands and began to spin him around. “Eminently practical and yet appropriate as
always!”

“It’s an idea...”

“Mr. Lovett, how I lived with you all these years I’ll never know!”

The two of them waltzed around the space in the loft, singing the cheery song about class war and cannibalism while Santana stared at them in disbelief. After several spins, they stood by the window to continue their scene, pretending they were looking down on potential victims.

“It’s man devouring man, my dear!” Adam sang, as though confiding in his Mr. Lovett.

Together they belted, “And who are we to deny it in heeeeeere!”

Kurt turned away, coughing almost violently from the vocal exertion. Adam cringed, feeling guilty for the moment of spontaneous fun. He wrapped his arms around Kurt and held him as he tried to clear the irritation in his lungs. Then he guided Kurt over to the couch to sit. Kurt tried to wave him off a bit, but couldn’t catch a breath yet to argue. Kurt seemed beyond annoyed with the lingering cough, but Adam was just grateful that he’d improved so much.

Less than a week ago, Kurt had been boiling up with a fever that ticked up to 104 before it had finally started to come down. When Adam had taken Kurt to the doctor (and he had insisted on taking a cab rather than letting Kurt stumble around in the cold), the doctor had taken him in the back quickly to a separate room and given him IV fluids, a few medications, and a long list of sternly, but kindly, worded instructions. Kurt had seemed overwhelmed and more than a little afraid.

Adam could relate to the fear of a ‘minor’ illness getting out of control. He’d lived through it himself, twice. Although it had turned out that his first illness after being diagnosed wasn’t all that bad, that didn’t stop him from being frightened. For Kurt, with what Kurt had divulged about his parents’ illnesses, his mother’s death and his father’s brush with death not all that long ago, it was no shock to Adam that Kurt feared illness and doctors.

To be honest, Adam was a little concerned that he might pick up what Kurt had, but it was becoming less likely, and as usual, he was doing okay with the yearly vaccine. Maybe it wasn’t smart of him to attach to Kurt the way he had, but Adam didn’t want to leave his friend alone. With Kurt’s inclination to push himself, that flu could’ve gotten much worse. Rachel didn’t seem particularly capable of dealing with other people’s problems, and Adam barely knew Santana.

“Sorry,” Adam said gently, rubbing Kurt’s back.

“It’s okay,” Kurt mouthed, to avoid another coughing jag so soon.

Adam hurried over to the kitchen to get him some water. “Here you go. Drink it slow. Have you taken your medicine today?”

Kurt shook his head. He took a long sip and then got up.

“I could-” Adam offered, but Kurt shook his head again, and disappeared behind the privacy curtain with his water.

Adam sighed, then caught sight of Santana, who was staring at Kurt, out of the corner of his eye. Adam smiled.

“He’ll be fine. The day off from school should help. I hear Monday was a rough day back,” he
“He should’ve stayed out longer,” Santana said. She strolled closer to Adam. “So where ya from, Doctor Who?”

“Oh, um. Have you heard of Essex?”

“No. Never heard of it.”

Adam creased his brow and went to wash his hands. Kurt returned a moment later, with pills in hand, and entered the kitchen.

“I need to take with food,” he whispered, “and cookie dough doesn’t count.”

“I can’t imagine that being true,” Adam said dramatically.

“Would you like some eggs?” Kurt looked up from the refrigerator and pointed at Adam and then Santana.

“Sure, why not.” She came into the kitchen as well and pulled a jar of salsa from the cupboard. “I mean, what else am I going to do right now, right? Aside from, obviously, dance around the apartment singing about pussy.”

“Pussy and pie,” Kurt added.

Santana cracked, finally. She laughed softly and swatted his arm. “You gonna live, there? That’s an awful lot of pills you’re taking.”

“No, it isn’t,” Kurt said a little defensively. He set the eggs on the counter.

Adam looked between them, and then returned to setting up the baking pan.

Santana held her hands up. “I wouldn’t know. Never gone to the doctor for the flu before.”

“He had a very high fever and wasn’t keeping food down,” Adam said. “His doctor seemed to think it was the right call.”

Santana swiveled her head around at Adam. “Yeah, I don’t really buy that. She’s getting paid for the visit, isn’t she?”

“No, she didn’t.” Kurt finished washing his hands vigorously, then started cracking eggs on the bowl. He met Santana’s eye. “Dr. Saunders charged for the fluids, but not the visit. My insurance paid most of the prescription, but we got that at the pharmacy where she called them in. My co-pay for the whole ordeal was pretty low.”

Santana leaned back on the counter and frowned at Kurt. “She didn’t charge for the visit,” she repeated.

“She said she was just happy that I came in.” Kurt gave her a hard look before returning to the refrigerator to pull out a few more items.

After a moment of awkward silence, the two of them were comfortably putting breakfast together, with Santana chopping vegetables and grating cheese and Kurt mixing and getting items on the stove top. Adam had finished prepping his baking sheet, so he stuck it in the fridge to wait until after they’d eaten a proper meal.
Kurt dutifully took his little handful of pills with his juice as they sat down to eat. Adam was glad that he’d downed his own cocktail that morning before coming over. They’d gotten the notice the night before via email that campus would be closed, and after a series of texts about spending the day together, Adam had decided it would be better if he came to Kurt, and kept him in his warm loft.

The smell of breakfast caused Rachel to emerge from her privacy curtain, alone. Who knew where Brody was. He’d made himself scarce while Kurt was sick, not that Adam blamed him too much. Brody had come home that night just as Kurt shot up and puked soup into a trash can.

“So have you gone through our DVD collection, Santana?” Kurt asked. He looked to Rachel. “We’re going to do a movie marathon.”

“I have actually, while Mr. Twinkle and Lady Toes spent the morning prancing around the loft,” Santana drawled. She rose and patted Adam’s head as she passed by. “You’re Lady Toes.”

“Ahh, okay,” Adam laughed. “Always suspected I had a touch of royal in me.”

Santana picked up a stack of DVDs and brought them to the table. “So, we have Philadelphia (hilarity), The Living End, Parting Glances-- can’t do a move marathon without Steve Buscemi-- and... Rent-- aka a musical I won’t kill all of you in your sleep for, and hmm, also, Pedro?”

Adam didn’t quite know what was going on, but Kurt was staring at Santana with an expression so cutting it might draw blood.

“We are not watching those,” Kurt said in an even tone.

“Not even Rent? Oh, Kurt, are you suuure?” Rachel asked in a wheedling tone. “Because you always cry when Angel dies.”

“Everyone cries when Angel dies.” Kurt shot Rachel an equally irritable look.

“You can’t say you don’t like my taste in movies,” Santana breezed. “They’re your movies.”

Adam furrowed his brow and turned himself to observe at Santana more closely. She’d been trying to get under Kurt’s skin all morning. He reached over and took Parting Glances, which he’d never heard of, to examine the cover.

“Well, I think we should choose the selection that is perfect for being snowed-in in New York city. Moulin Rouge, bitches!” He shimmied his shoulders. “We love those dancin’ hos!”

“Seriously?” Santana said.

Rachel giggled, and Adam looked up with a smile.

“Sure. Sounds great. That’s just what we need, a consumptive songbird, tragically dying in her lover’s arms.” Santana started to mime coughing, then flailing, and then she collapsed to the floor.

Kurt stared at her.

“Urrghh!” Santana groaned.

“I hate you,” Kurt said flatly. He rose with his half-eaten breakfast and went into the kitchen.

“Choose whatever you want.”

Adam wasn’t usually confrontational, so he wasn’t sure what possessed him to hiss at Santana as
she climbed back into her seat, “You don’t have to be so aggressive with him.”

“I have to be exactly this aggressive,” she shot back immediately. She calmly continued to eat her breakfast.

Rachel looked bewildered as she chewed a piece of apple.

Adam rose and went to Kurt, who was scraping his eggs into the trash. “Love, you need to eat more than that.”

“I’m not hungry. My stomach... I’m not even sick. I just don’t feel like eating,” Kurt said quietly.

“Well, you should. Trust me, on this.” On a whim, Adam came behind him, circled his arms around Kurt’s skinny waist, and hugged him securely. “Maybe I should start taking you to the gym. Drive up the appetite.”

“You’re pretty healthy looking. Is that how you do it?” Kurt looked back. Since he didn’t protest at the touch, Adam stayed where he was.

“That’s some of it. I also use those cans of nutritional shakes, and V8, when nothing else will do.”

Kurt wrinkled his nose.

“Eat some fruit, then? And later we can have cookies,” Adam wheedled.

“Okay. I’ll try.” Kurt sighed and slipped out of Adam’s arms. He returned to the table and doled some cut fruit onto his plate. “So what are we watching?”

“Rent!” Rachel growled.

Kurt rolled his eyes. “Fine, but I pick the next one. Santana has a tragedy boner today.”

Adam frowned and picked up Pedro. The cover read: Celebrity. Activist. Icon. Adam felt the color draining from his face as he read the back. He hadn’t been all that aware of American media in 1994, of course. But what these movies all had in common became strikingly clear.

“Do we have a theme this morning?” Adam asked quietly.

Santana just smiled, shooting a smug look at Kurt, who only appeared more ruffled. Could she know? How was that even possible? Adam had only met her a week ago.

“Apparently it’s a big gay movie marathon,” Kurt said dryly. “But I have more cheerful movies, Santana. Even ones which have lesbians. We’re watching Better than Chocolate next.”

“Oh! But I’m a Cheerleader!” Rachel suggested.

“If I’d known, I would’ve brought over Get Real,” Adam said.

“We can also watch Bound...” Kurt trailed off and narrowed his eyes. “All the LGBT films I own with happy endings are about lesbians... in the ones with gay men and trans folk they all get sick and die.”

Santana, who had been starting to look like she wanted to risk running out into the blizzard, raised her brows. “Well, that’s weird.”

Kurt stood, snatched Rent from her side of the table, and headed to the entertainment system.
“Let’s rip this Rent bandaid off, shall we?”

“What’s going on?” Rachel asked Santana.

“Ask him,” Santana pointed to Kurt as she whispered.

“I guess dwelling on something like that isn’t comfortable for him,” Rachel whispered back. “My dads loooove Rent, though.”

“Ask him.” Santana glanced up at Adam and gave him a ‘you are dismissed’ look. “Sorry. This is a family thing.”

Adam arched one brow. So she didn’t know. That was more likely, anyway; she had no way of getting that information, as Kurt and Rachel didn’t know, and Aude wouldn’t tell if they’d run into one another. Adam picked up Kurt’s plate and brought it over to the coffee table. He couldn’t discern what Santana was trying to do, exactly, just that it had made Kurt more than lose his appetite.

***

Live in my house! I’ll be your shelter. Just pay me back, with one thousand kisses!
Be my lover! And I’ll cover yooo-oou!

“Kurt, are you crying?”

Kurt turned to Adam, his eyes clearly wet, and took a shaky breath to deny he was crying at all. Some nonsense spilled out about contact lenses. Adam didn’t look like he bought it, but he leaned over to his bag anyway to get some eye drops.

Kurt wasn’t sure how Adam had known he was crying at all. He, Adam, and Rachel had all been slumped together in a warm pile on the couch, watching Angel and Collins fall in love under grim and unlikely circumstances. Kurt was sitting between them, with Rachel cuddled into his shoulder, and Adam on his other side, head resting on the back of the couch. Neither were in line of sight of his puffy eyes.

“Are you sure it’s not the song?” Santana pressed “Because I remember you and the Blanderdouche sang that to each other in the ladies’ room once.”

“Shut up, Santana,” Kurt hissed. Then he threw his head back. “Ugh, God, I forgot about that. We were so embarrassing.”

“Why the ladies’?” Adam asked.

“He was trying to cheer me up.” Kurt shrugged. “I’d just gotten an ice cold slushy to the face. The last one I ever got, I think.”

“What?” Adam took the remote and paused the movie. “Someone threw a slushy at you? Like the ice drink? Why would they do that?”

“Standard bullying practices back at McKinley,” Rachel said.

“I’d gotten in trouble with Mr. Schue, our choir director,” Kurt clarified. “Because I have a big, and occasionally foul, mouth. And when I left the office, I met up with Blaine... and then slushy to the face. We went to get cleaned off, and we sang a little, until Coach Sylvester came and told us to shut up.”
Kurt laughed softly.

“Doesn’t sound like a memory that would result in sadness,” Adam said softly.

Kurt shook his head. “Only from the sheer humiliation at what a dork I was. I’d totally forgotten about it, though.”

“How are you any less of a dork now?” Santana asked. “After the display this morning, I’m sure you’ve reached at least the stage of spontaneous musical theatre.”

“My dear hellbeast, I don’t know what makes you think that I’m ever not at that stage,” Kurt drawled.

“Okay, I’ve had enough of the nonsense.” Santana stood and paused the video. “Kurt, please sit down.”

Kurt looked in confusion at Rachel and Adam, since none of them were standing.

“I have tried to keep this to myself, but I will be silent no longer.”

Kurt felt his pulse speeding up. The pile of LOOK LOOK AIDS movie selections hadn’t been entirely subtle. Kurt didn’t know if she actually knew or if she just suspected because of course a gay man couldn’t get sick without assuming he was dying.

“Do we really have to do this? It’s almost to ‘La Vie Boheme.’ That song is a cure all,” Kurt said.

“Yes, we do,” Santana said.

Rachel snuggled into Kurt’s side. “What is it?”

Santana took a deep breath.

“That Brody character is a freakin’ psycho,” Santana said with conviction.

Kurt felt his shoulders relax. “Go on.”

“Heeere we go,” Rachel muttered, closing her eyes.

What followed was a somewhat long, oddly dialogic oratory of Santana’s discovery of how weird Brody was, with Adam, Kurt, and Rachel occasionally piping in to see where this was going.

“When I was rooting through the closets and drawers in the apartment—”

“Wait, what?” Rachel objected.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” Kurt shot up.

“Santana! You went through all of our stuff?” Rachel sat up as well, sound equally weary and annoyed.

“Yeah,” Santana replied casually. “That’s a thing I do.”

“That’s completely unacceptable,” Kurt said, nearly losing the power to speak as the thoughts raced through his mind of what Santana could find.

Had he remembered to hide his meds after he’d gotten back from the doctor? Had he hid them soon
enough?

She knew. He stared up at her in disbelief.

“Okay, I like how you guys pretend to be all accepting and everything, but when your friend suddenly shows up in your home, moves in, and-”

Kurt rose and breezed past her.

“-goes through all your stuff, you’re offended? Hey! Where are you going?” Santana demanded.

“I’m tired!” Kurt shouted. It was a mistake. He threw his privacy curtain shut and immediately started coughing like a croaking consumptive prostitute. He could hear Santana and Rachel arguing out in the loft, and he paced back and forth. He held his arms close to his chest and tried to catch his breath.

She knew. Didn’t she? She had to know. What would he do if she knew? What would she do? Santana was a wildcard, at best. She had gone out of her way to help him before, but dishonesty, even to protect oneself, was her nemesis. She might tell anyone.

Adam poked his head into the curtain. “Kurt, are you all right? I think they’ve calmed, now.”

“I don’t know. I don’t know what to do,” Kurt blurted.

Adam’s brow furrowed, and he came up to Kurt and put his hands on Kurt’s shoulders. “You could come out with us and watch ‘La Vie Boheme.’ You could take a nap. We could bake those cookies.”

Kurt hung his head a little, and just let Adam’s calm, wonderful voice wash over him.

“We could vote Santana off the island. Toss her out in the snow.”

This last part was spoken with the same ease and gentleness as the other options, causing Kurt to look up in disbelief. Adam smiled and waggled his brows.

“Don’t tempt me!” Kurt drew in a deep breath. He let out a huff of a sigh, and leaned into Adam. There was no place in the world more comforting. Resting against Adam’s strong chest, letting Adam curl up in his own arms. It felt too perfect.

It made Kurt wonder. If Santana decided to spill everything today, would he lose this? Would he lose the person who made him happiest, in spite of their worst days? Or would it be a relief? Would Adam be okay with it, whether he wanted Kurt in that way or not?

So much at stake.

Adam draped his arm around Kurt’s shoulders and coaxed him back into the living room. Aside from ‘La Vie Boheme,” Kurt couldn’t focus much on the movie.

***

That night, Adam came to realize exactly what he was missing. The past two years had been hard. But slowly, very slowly, he’d learned to get by. He found work-arounds for his health. He’d learned to get his vaccines, to get to the gym regularly, to find the foods his stomach could handle, to balanced work, medical bills, and school. Adam was healthy. He was surviving. But he wasn’t happy.
Most of their snow day had been taken up with movies, and alternatively, Kurt stealing him away to spend time away from Rachel and Santana. Kurt had ended up not taking that nap. Instead, he’d fallen asleep on Adam after lunch as they watched But I’m a Cheerleader (which had entertained Santana enough to end the random outbursts of drama for a little while).

That night, Kurt had come past the privacy curtain, the candlelight flickering shadows over the space cut out by the privacy curtain and cheeks pink from the shower, and crawled onto the bed. Adam understood then what had been true for some time. Maybe since the Winter Showcase. He was a hopeless man, given over to Kurt’s whims and wishes, even if Kurt didn’t realize the power he had over him. Like a force of nature, Adam felt that he could sooner defy the laws of gravity than not love Kurt.

“Is this okay?” Kurt curled his pajama sleeve over his fingers and scooted closer to Adam on the bed.

“It’s perfect. You must be utterly exhausted.”

“We didn’t do anything today,” Kurt protested. His eyelids were heavy, slowly lowering and raising. But his gaze remained on Adam.

“Oh, that’s not true,” Adam whispered. “We played a cannibalistic couple from Sondheim. We baked. We rocked out to ‘La Vie Boheme’ -- oh, and I do feel bad, but Madam July was right about Rachel’s dancing-”

Kurt gave a high chuckle behind his hand.

“We fended off attacks from an angry lesbian...” Adam added.

“That’s not Santana angry. We would be trading blows, if she were angry.”

Adam watched the growing discomfort on Kurt’s face and remembered Santana’s words.

I have to be exactly this aggressive.

“I think she believes she’s helping you.”

Kurt shrugged and snuggled closer to Adam. Adam, in return, wrapped his arms around Kurt. They’d laid on each other before. Slept on each other in the middle of show marathons. Provided hugs, kisses to the forehead. This felt different. Adam wasn’t sure why.

“I’m sure she thinks that,” Kurt replied after a while. “But Santana isn’t always right.”

Adam nodded and rubbed his hand over Kurt’s back. “No worrying about her, then. I’m sure your judgment will be good enough for whatever she wants you to do.”

“I don’t know about that.” Kurt sighed heavily.

Adam pressed his lips together. Kurt leaned his head forward to touch against Adam’s.

“I know I’m being- Adam, you’re the best thing that’s happened to me in years.”

A soft laugh of disbelief escaped from Adam. “Even NYADA?”

“I worked hard to get NYADA. You... You just showed up in my life. And it’s this amazing, breath-giving relationship that I’m not even sure I deserve.”
“You deserve everything. You’re such a good person. Why would you think you’re the person here who doesn’t deserve happiness?”

“Maybe it’s just my turn,” Kurt joked.

Adam screwed his lips to the side. He didn’t get as soppy and self-hating as he had last week often. “As long as you know I’m still here, no matter what?”

“I’ll try to be, too.” Kurt carded his fingers through the back of Adam’s hair.

They watched one another, quietly. Contentedly. Kurt started to doze.

On instinct, Adam leaned in and kissed Kurt’s nose. Kurt’s eyes fluttered, slightly, and then he just smiled. A smirky little smile. And then he yawned and closed his eyes again.

At some point in the night, Adam woke, entangled by Kurt’s legs and arms. Their hands, somehow were together, interlocked. Adam laid his head back down on Kurt’s arm. His heart was thudding powerfully in his chest, but although the loft was chilly around them, their bed was warm.

They’d slept on and near each other before. Even though they never removed clothing, never touched one another in that way...

This was intimate.

***

The next evening, Adam felt compelled to evacuate the loft, with Kurt’s encouragement. He would have stayed another night to support Kurt against Santana’s veiled attacks, but Kurt assured him that he would be fine, and Adam did have things to do. He hadn’t made it to the gym in three days, and he should really make an effort before his classes in the morning.

Tonight, he dropped his bag by the couch and just stared, his eyes focusing on nothing for a moment. He had taken the subway here, but it was as though he was tethered back to something in the loft. It kept tugging at the core of him, making him want to spring back in the other direction.

Pooka came trotting into the room, purring thunderously as she wove her furry body around his legs.

“Did you get left alone, darling? Aww.” He scooped the small cat up into his arms and scratched her head as he went into the kitchen. Indeed, it looked like Pooka had knocked over items on the counter prowling around for food.

“Poor dear.”

Pooka meowed up at him demandingly.

“I know,” Adam said gently. He let her down and reached for the little tins of cat food in their cupboard. Pooka continued to butt her head against his shins.

After he’d dished her up and she had turned to her bowl to eat frantically, now ignoring him, Adam lowered himself onto the floor and scratched over the curve of her back gently. Her tail lifted a little, but she was too preoccupied to choose between food and pets.

“I’m certain your Mama thought she could get back sooner, Pook. She wouldn’t leave you on your own for that long if she could help it.”
Adam closed his eyes, remembering Kurt’s touch, the way their fingers had intertwined, the way Adam leaned into him naturally, the feel of their bodies pressing together as they danced.

Part of him, a needy and sopplily romantic part, wanted to pull out his phone and call Kurt right now, but for the life of him, he couldn’t manage to find a reason for a call like that. He could say he wanted to check in on Kurt’s health, but he had seemed to be improving in everything but the cough. They’d only been separated, at most, for half an hour.

Adam rested his hand on his stomach, knowing that he would have to dig around in the fridge for something to eat, soon. Food had become such a hassle. It didn’t used to be that way. Once upon a time, Adam didn’t think of it much, other than to watch his figure. He hadn’t been overweight, or under. No chubby and no twinkie. He was just himself, an average sized bloke at an average weight.

The diagnosis had changed quite a lot about his life. Even if it hadn’t done so all at once, eventually it had. He never went to the gym regularly before, but building lean muscle mass, avoiding too much weight loss, it had been a necessity. Wasting was a danger, although not as much as it once had been, in the community.

Marcus had been trim, but turned his nose up at ‘gym bunnies.’ He hadn’t exactly been thrilled that Adam wanted to go every other day, and most of the time hadn’t come with him. Sometimes he’d asked who Adam was bulking up for.

“Passive aggression, Pooka, is not an attractive trait,” Adam informed her. She looked up from her dish, stared forward as though thinking, and then went back to her food. Adam smiled.

It would be too easy, though, to villainize Marcus. Adam knew that if there was a potential villain in that situation, it would be himself. Marcus could be bitchy (often in a fun way), superior, and passive aggressive. But Adam was passive. Too passive, in a situation that required him to be active, and brave, and tell his boyfriend right away that he’d just found out he was positive.

As it had turned out, Marcus hadn’t actually gone to press charges against Adam for not disclosing, no matter what he’d said. And Marcus could have done so. Men had gotten 25 years for having sex (with a condom) but not disclosing HIV status. Adam didn’t even have to transmit the virus, necessarily, to open himself up to prosecution.

So Adam had to count himself lucky. He should have told Kurt by now, though, if he wanted something more than friendship with him. He wasn’t sure he’d survive another someone he loved hurling things at his head and insults on his moral character. Even if they were true.

And something like that from Kurt might kill him. Adam had to admit that he was much, much more in love with Kurt right now than he had been with Marcus.

At that moment, Adam heard his phone ringing with “Bad Romance.” He pushed himself off the floor and darted back into the living room to grab his phone.

“Kurt?”

“Heeey.” Kurt sounded like he was cringing.

“Is everything all right?”

“Yeah. Yeah, it’s fine. I just wanted to check... that you made it okay. Lots of snow out there. New York drivers. Muggers. Gay bashers- um, not that they’d probably know on sight. Usually that happens when they see a couple together... Anyway.”
“Oh. Oh, well, I’m fine. No bumps. Though Pooka didn’t get fed yesterday. I’m sure she’ll be all over me tonight.”

“There’s a dirty joke in there somewhere.”

Adam laughed and picked up his bag to take it into his room. “I think I’m a bit chuffed.”

“Is that charming British slang for pregnant?”

Adam howled loud enough to cause Pooka to dart into Jinx’s room.

“Is that it? Am I gonna to have to get my shotgun an’ make some boy do right by you?” Kurt had suddenly slipped into this gruff sounding accent, and it only made Adam laugh harder.

It took Adam a few minutes to calm. He was sitting on his twin mattress and wiping his eyes. Finally, he managed, “No, no. It means I’m pleased. It’s nice to have someone worry about you.”

“Ah, well, um...” Kurt muttered. “I guess you have your own mom...”

Adam bit his lip, smiling. “I do. And I call her once a week to check in on her. I can’t say she’s called how to ask how I’m going in the blizzard, or even if she knows there’s a blizzard to worry about. She did call after Irene, though.”

“My dad started demanding that I get out of the city while it was still drizzling. I um... didn’t. Not even close.”

The next several hours passed by quickly. Adam even managed to make himself a sandwich as he listened to a story about Kurt and his brother and Lady Gaga. And Adam shared a few more stories of boarding school, complete with as many Harry Potter jokes as he could think of. He just loved Kurt’s bright little laugh.

***

Kurt returned from his shift the diner tired, cranky, and stewing from a few of the worst customers that he had ever served there. Customers at Kellos were generally better than those at other places Kurt had worked, but they’d gotten a lovely flock of hipsters trying out the new hot spot.

Shockingly, the apartment seemed empty, until he heard the shower running. So Kurt set his bag in his room and took a moment to check that his pill organizer was set up for the week before locking it in the trunk under the bed once again.

Then he rose, slowly, and moved over to his rack of clothing. His thoughts drifted to Cassandra July’s dance class that week. She’d shooed him over to the side and made him watch. Two days of watching. But he didn’t want to just watch. He wanted to do the moves with everyone else.

Then, Kurt had headed into the main hall, tired of this stupid cough, aggravated by Cassandra protecting him (even if he was at the same time grateful), and tired to the bone of people looking... and wondering.

So he’d walked up to the auditions board, where people posted all their notices for upcoming plays, musicals, and other opportunities. He knew there would be one that he needed. Because there always was. Someone did a senior project like that every year, and there were community plays, too. Kurt scanned his eyes over the board, reading the brief synopses of the plays available before he spotted the the project he wanted. He’d heard of it already, through the NYADA grapevine, and a few of the Apples knew the senior writing the play, Neil Garber. He’d hoped the auditions hadn’t
slipped by yet.

There were four different projects up with characters dying of cancer, but Kurt only signed up for Neil’s. There had been some buzz, and thankfully, it was theatre, and not a student film. Kurt would feel more comfortable on the stage, and since people had heard of this one, the pieces would fall into place in people’s minds more easily.

And so, that afternoon, before going in to work at the diner, he’d gone to the south side auditorium and created a new rumor, as he spilled his blood and guts into Neil’s character. Neil had stood up, amazed, and asked him to read a few more scenes. The crowd hanging around to watch the auditions had buzzed quietly at Kurt’s portrayal.

Kurt slipped off his shirt. He shivered, slightly. Their loft was cold today. The others auditioning for the part had oversold it. They had made the character only about this one issue in his life, and had failed to make him a person.

After they’d seen Kurt Hummel take on the part? There would be only one word on people’s lips about Kurt Hummel after this audition, whether or not he got the part (and he thought that he might): Method.

Granted, most student actors didn’t actively lose weight for roles unless the director told them they were too fat. But if Anne Hathaway could do it for Les Mis, Kurt Hummel could pretend that he had for Neil Garber’s masterpiece.

Kurt settled on a soft sweater. It was a little billowy on him, but he had some time, now, to build back his weight without further risk of people questioning his place in the program, or so he hoped. He might take Adam up on the offer to start hitting the gym together. Kurt had never been much of one for that. Working out with the boys at McKinley had always been a dodgy proposition, mostly because he didn’t want to shower with them. He didn’t trust them, and he didn’t want them looking at his soft, awkward body. Adam had assured him that his gym was theatre-boy friendly, and Kurt would have nothing to worry about there.

Kurt gave a tug on his jeans as he heard the door open and heels clipping inside. Santana or Rachel? Kurt peered out into the loft, and there was Santana, in a fabulous dress, casually pawing through the bag left on the couch. Probably Brody’s.

“Rachel would aggressively dislike your doing that,” Kurt announced.

“Like I care about her precious fee-fees.” Santana straightened up and raked her eyes over Kurt.

He went into the kitchen to start some tea.

“Where are the inseparable heterosexuals?” she asked.

“One of them is in the shower. Unless a burglar came in and decided to spiff up.” Kurt filled the kettle with water.

“Maybe they’re both in the shower, procreating.”

Kurt turned to her and wrinkled his nose.

“Aw, straight people,” Santana sighed.

“They’d better not be, after all the warnings I’ve given Rachel about safe sex,” Kurt muttered. He set the kettle on and opened the cupboard to pull out some lemon cookies.
“And you’re the authority on safe sex here, huh? You taken your mountain of pills today yet, biohazard?”

Kurt slammed the container on the counter, and before he could think about what he was doing, his finger was up, in her face, and he shouted, “That’s none of your business, Santana!”

She pulled her head back, arching her brows, but didn’t step back. “Wow. Okay. I was just checking up on your-” She put up air quotes. “-‘flu’, but if you’re gonna get all hormonal on me, whatever.”

Kurt licked his lips slowly. “You had no right to go through my things. No right, whatsoever. And you have no right to walk around here hinting that you’re going to out me, either!”

“It’s not like coming out,” she said with a laugh.

“Yes, it is. Only it-it’s worse. Because in New York, I have spaces where being gay isn’t a big deal and I can live and breathe and just be, but this? I lost a job because of this! I could get kicked out of my program at NYADA! I could be alienated from the little scrap of community that I’ve been allowed to find! So I would consider it a favor if you could shut your fucking mouth for once and take your judgment and pack it in your ass on your way back to Lima.” Kurt turned back to the counter and pulled out a plate.

“I’m not gonna tell them,” Santana shot back. “I wouldn’t do that. Anyway, Rachel and Brody are cut from the same plastic shower curtains. I’m not surprised that neither one of them noticed. But you need to just say it, Kurt. You’re sick, and you’re miserable. And you know what?” She came up from behind him. “If you don’t start dealing with this, you’re gonna kill that little British crumpet boyfriend of yours.”

Kurt looked over his shoulder and glared at her. “Adam is not my boyfriend. I don’t even know if I want a relationship right now. And I certainly wouldn’t try without telling him first! But that might mean he’ll look at me like- like I’m poison, and I can’t handle that right now, okay? I’m just trying not to die!”

Kurt face crumpled as he turned from her once again, but then he felt her slender arms reaching around him from the side.

“Hey! Hey, Kurt, it’s okay.” Santana’s voice had softened so much that it barely sounded like her. “It’s okay.”

“It’s not okay.” Kurt pinched his eyes closed.

“I’m your friend, y’know. You can talk to me about this.” She bent him over with a gentle touch and rubbed his back.

“What can I possibly say that you didn’t find out when you looked through my things?” For some reason, he let her hold him. It felt so strange. She was so small, really, and so prickly most of the time.

“You could start by telling me. Out loud.”

Kurt rolled his eyes and shook his head. “Fine. I’m- I-I’m...” It was harder than he’d imagined. Aude was the only person he talked to about these things. “I’m positive,” he managed, in a whisper.

Kurt pulled back to see her eyes shining with tears. He covered his own and tried to get a hold of himself. “You can’t tell Rachel. Please, Santana. If she knows, Brody could find out, and if it gets out at school- I-I’ve already gotten warnings about my health. They’ll find reason to get me out of there.”

“I won’t,” she promised. “Are people really like that about this stuff?”

“Aren’t they? Aren’t you?” Kurt lifted the kettle off the burner as it started to whistle. “What was that crack about safe sex, hm? You think I didn’t use a condom? You think I didn’t believe we were being safe? Do you think I’m a slut?”

“Oh, my God, slow down!” She held up her hands.

“There’s nothing you can say to me that I haven’t said about myself, only ten times worse. You should know that.” Kurt poured his tea and shook his head. “When they found out at my last job, people physically shrank from my touch. One of the cooks wouldn’t let me back in the kitchen. They called me ‘nasty.’ There is so much more information out there about this now, but no one bothers to know it. People are just ignorant, panicky animals.”

For once, Santana didn’t have much to say. There was fear in her eyes, and a little anger. She turned her head at the sound of the shower stopping. “Let’s talk somewhere. Yeah? Not in front of them. Though, if we can unload the plastic man, you should probably consider telling Rachel at some point. How about your family?”

“I haven’t.” Kurt pressed a hand to his cheek, and looked at her seriously. “How can I? Talking about this with my dad?”

“Yeah. The olds might not understand.” She crossed her arms. “How about Finn?”

Kurt creased his brow and thought for a moment. His eyes darted to the bathroom, but no one emerged yet.

“Because I might have invited him up here,” she continued.

Kurt’s head snapped back. “What? You invited... Finn’s coming?” He wished his voice hadn’t sounded so little-boyish on that last bit.

“Look.” Santana shrugged. “You don’t gotta tell him. I think you should, but you don’t have to. But he’ll be here. Watching you sweat it out on your own this past week, I thought you could use the support.”

“I have support.”

“Oh, come on. The British Invasion doesn’t even know what’s going on.”

“He took me to the doctor, Santana. We take care of each other.”

She frowned dubiously.

“Finn will be here,” Kurt repeated to himself. He opened the container on the counter and nibbled on a cookie nervously.

Brody emerged from the bathroom with a towel around his hips, and gave them a wave.

“You’d better put that man-dangle away before I decide to get my pinking sheers out to trim it.”
Santana looked over her shoulder and smiled evilly.

“You’re so pleasant.” Brody disappeared behind the curtain.

Santana shook her head and turned back to Kurt. “C’mon. Let’s go get food. You can tell me what happened?”

Kurt was still unsure, but she jerked her head to the side, indicating the door. Then she did it again. And once more.

“Okay, okay.”

“It’s cold out.” Santana took his tea and went to the cupboard to grab a thermos. “Get a coat. And not one of those stylish ones with the warmth of tissue paper.”

“Yes, Auntie Tana.”

The two of them went down to the street and headed out with the snow crunching underneath their boots. Santana shivered, and Kurt took her arm and held her close. She laid her head against Kurt’s shoulder as they walked, so she could hear what he said, describing the short, long story about his diagnosis. Santana was surprisingly quiet during, with only a question or two, prompting him to give more information.

He was trusting her quite a lot. But to her credit, for once, Santana dropped the jokes. When they passed a diner, she pulled his arm, and they went inside together to warm up. Kurt ordered a burger, and Santana smiled and leaned on her hand.

“What?” Kurt asked after a moment. He folded his napkin carefully.

“I just had a great one about shoving meat in your mouth,” Santana said, almost smug.

Kurt smiled and looked down at the table. “I’m sure you did.”

The waiter came over with their drinks and a big basket of fries. Santana unwrapped her straw and poked it up and down in her drink.

“Okay. I’m gonna release the mouth now. Brace yourself, baby face.”

Kurt took a fry and sat back, his expression flat. “Knock yourself out.”

“I was the school slut at McKinley. Everybody knew it. Brittany and I tried on every guy in that damn school.” Santana shifted her shoulders uncomfortably. “I’m not like, ashamed about it, but... do I wish that I had been able to come out sooner? Of course. And Brittany wasn’t always careful. We were way more worried about staying unpregnant than getting diseases. This could be me. Easy.”

“But it’s not,” Kurt replied in a quiet, measured voice.

“Nope. That joy is all yours. My abuela would say, God only gives us the trials we can handle.” She licked her lips and rolled her eyes. “It is the only reason I continue to hope that she’ll ever talk to me again. Because I’m her trial. I’m a trial of forgiveness and acceptance, and putting family and love over personal pride, and she knows it. But she’s just not there yet. I can only hope that she gets there while we’re both still in this world.”

Kurt tilted his head to the side. He was pretty sure he’d never heard her spill about her life like this
before. Not around the girls, not around anyone. Though sometimes, he was sure that Santana was whispering things like this to Brittany.

“My point is: I know you don’t believe in God.” She uncrossed her arms and shrugged. “But I believe in you. You’re the strongest, bravest person I know. Hell, I looked up to you in high school. How you were able to come back to McKinley? How you went through it all and still forgave everyone?” She was almost sneering now, in her disbelief. “I couldn’t even believe anyone would want to do that. But you did. You didn’t even want to land the weasel face in prison after he tried to blind you and nailed your philandering hobbit of a boyfriend instead.”

Santana leaned forward. “This is a trial you can handle. You gots this! I could see that from the past week, but I know it from the years we’ve been around each other. You’re Kurt Fuckin’ Hummel. And if any prejudiced assholes want to read you, they’d best look to the Western sky.” She flipped one hand in the air, pointing aggressively. “Ain’t nobody gonna bring you down.”

Kurt’s laugh was not unlike a cackle. He shook his head. “Did you just paraphrase Wicked? For me?! New York is turning you.”

“It is not. I’ve heard you divas belting that song around the choir room enough that it haunts me in my dreams.”

“Keep complaining.” Kurt teased in a soft voice.

That evening was possibly the longest Kurt and Santana had ever sat down and just talked to one another. Of course, he was still full of fear. But it was impossible, between Santana and Adam, and the inbound Finn, not to feel the love in his life as well.
Chapter Eleven

Chapter Notes

Finn's Song: "Permanent," by David Cook

New York might be the ‘Big Apple,’ but Finn had decided it wasn’t actually all that big. The sidewalks were too narrow, and he ran into people so much that he’d been pushed to the side of foot traffic three times before he made it to the subway. Store aisles were narrow, too, and the doorways looked low, like he would bonk his head on them.

Then, of course, he got lost while trying to make his way into Manhattan. He should’ve taken a cab, or something, but getting around had been a lot easier when the Glee club had come up to New York... probably because they had all been together, and Mike and Tina and Mercedes were good with directions, so no one had actually been in danger of getting lost.

Now he was on his own and ended up in a creepy looking stretch of buildings. He apparently looked so disoriented that an old guy (or older... his face didn’t look all that old, but his fuzzy hair was almost all white, except for some peppered places) came up to him and told him this wasn’t a good neighborhood for a ‘fella like him’ to be in, and directed him back to the subway.

When Finn had eventually found the entrance, he’d stopped to give Kurt a call, and Kurt told him which line to switch onto.

Which meant more time stumbling around like a dog in the back of a truck as the subway car rushed forward, then stopped, then rushed forward again. People stared at him trying to hang onto a poll for dear life. He apologized to everyone he ran into, but it just seemed to make them madder.

God, New York was weird.

He finally made it to Vogue with a hapless expression and a deep and seriously demanding hunger that might cause him to eat the floral arrangement in the lobby. He waited, though, since Kurt would’ve had to delay his lunch break so he could hang out with Finn and was probably jonesing for some salad about now. Unconsciously, Finn began drumming on his knee with one hand, and then the other, until he noticed the secretary at the front desk glaring at him.
“Uh, sorry.”

He spent the next few torturous minutes trying with all of his might to stay still. It wasn’t every day a former nemesis turned bro (Santana) called you up and hinted weirdly that you should come visit your brother before something “dire” happened. It was kind of freaking him out. But Kurt had sounded positive whenever he was on the phone, so Finn only let his worries overtake his mind sporadically.

“Finn!” Kurt’s voice launched sprightly into the air.

Finn grinned and rose to his feet at once. Then his smile faded.

Santana had hinted, hinted hard, that something was wrong, but wouldn’t specify what it was. And yeah, she’d said that Kurt had the flu, but... He looked really kinda scrawny. Not ‘twinkie’ like Kurt sometimes looked, but more like Marley before she’d collapsed. His cheeks were rosy, though, so maybe he was getting better?

“Hey, little brother!” Finn came over and hugged Kurt carefully, like he might get crack and break under Finn’s strength like a bundle of sticks.

“I’m really glad you came,” Kurt said. He hugged Finn back tightly, tight enough that Finn relaxed a little. If Kurt had that much strength in him, he might be okay.

“Yeah, well, my turn, huh?” Finn pulled back and frowned as he looked over Kurt’s face. “You came for, um, Grease, and Christmas, so... I can come for...”

“Lunch?” Kurt started toward the door.

“Yeah!” Finn laughed and followed him.

“Sorry, I only have so long before I have to be back, though my friend Aude promised to cover for me while we’re out.” Kurt started to pull on his coat, and Finn took his bag so Kurt could snuggle up in the long, knee-length blue coat and a fluffy scarf.
“It’s kinda cold up here!” Finn said. It was unnecessary, but Kurt nodded and laughed.

“It is. You’d think since it’s almost March, it might warm up a tick, but no, no, not at all!” Kurt took his bag again and pulled it over his head so that it was hanging across his body and resting on his hip. “How is everyone back in Lima? I’m almost excited to go back and see people.”

Finn took the invitation to fill Kurt in. Puck had come back from LA to help out his mom and Jake’s family. Mr. Schue had returned, to teaching, anyway, but the Glee club still met in their warehouse, bought out by Sugar’s dad. The seniors had sent out their applications and were now awaiting their acceptance or rejection letters.

“Uh, I think Blaine ended up not applying to schools in New York,” Finn ventured, cautiously.

Kurt nodded and flung himself out into the street, waving. “HEY!!”

“Whoa!” Finn grabbed Kurt around the waist and jerked him back onto the curb. “Dude, what the hell is wrong with you?!”

A cab pulled over to the curb. “Where you headed?”

“Can you get us to Shake Shack in less than fifteen minutes? I want to take my brother to the best burger in town while he’s here,” Kurt said.

The cabbie leaned over and screwed his furry brows together at the two of them. Finn realized that he was still holding Kurt close to him and let go.

“Get in,” the cabbie said. “We’ll make it.”

Kurt waved him on and opened the door. “Normally I’d walk, but time is of the essence. And I’m kind of beat today.”

“Yeah? Well, I walked all over the place trying to get here, so I’m okay, y’know, not doing that again.” Finn scooted in behind him and closed the door.
The cabbie took off.

“Are you, y’know... Are you okay? You had the flu, right?”

“I did. It was bad for about a week. I’m almost over the cough now- No, no, no!” Kurt turned and leaned forward. “We don’t want to go that way. Take the-”

Kurt rattled off a string of instructions that made Finn’s head spin. When he was done he sat back and gave Finn a curious look. “What? Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Dude. You’re a New Yorker.”

Kurt winked and pointed his fingers at Finn like guns.

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“Oh my God, dude!” Finn stared at Kurt in disbelief.

“One of these days, Finn, you’re going to realize I know all.” Kurt circled a french fry around, then dipped it in his shake and ate it.

“They don’t even have burgers this good in Ohio.”

“New York has the best food. Accept no substitutes.” Kurt took another bite of his bacon cheeseburger, and wiped his mouth. “I thought about taking you to the Corner Bistro, but it’s kind of out of the way, and pricey.”

“This is pretty damn good.” Finn shook his head. “Just surprised to see you so into burgers.”

“Sometimes, sometimes. My friend Adam showed me this place one day when we were both tired of V8 and protein drinks.”
Finn frowned. “Different friend from Odd? Do I get to meet them?”

“Aude. And yes, very different. And... maybe. If we have time.” Kurt put his burger down and wiped his fingers. “So, how do you like New York? Other than getting lost. That happens to the best of us.”

“I dunno. I mean, people were kind of rude, but the people I met in the scary looking neighborhood were okay. This old black dude helped me find the subway.”

“You’d be surprised. Lima doesn’t give you good instincts for who to trust up here.” Kurt flattened his lips and sighed. “So I’ll be heading back to work after this, but I can see you after? I’m at school tomorrow, but I’ll try to squeeze you in. I knocked off a shift at the diner so we could spend more time bouncing around New York together. And I won’t tell Rachel, if you don’t want me to.”

Finn shrugged. “I hadn’t thought too much about it. We didn’t leave each other on great terms, y’know, and now she has Brody.”

“Ah, yes, the amazing naked man.” Kurt rolled his eyes.

Finn furrowed one brow and tilted his head to the side. “What?”

“He has the tendency to walk around the apartment starkers. As in naked. And sit his bare ass against my furniture.”

Finn looked down at the table, and then up again, grimacing. “That’s unsanitary.”

“Exactly. I mean, he’s not bad. He cracks a lot of jokes, but he’s the opposite of homophobic... with me, anyway.”

Finn grinned and lifted his burger. “So you’re saying you’ve roomed with worse.” He took a big bite and enjoyed the look on Kurt’s face.

“At least sophomore year I didn’t have to watch your and Rachel’s mating rituals.” Kurt sipped his shake. “Santana can’t stand him.”
“You don’t have to hate on the guy for me.” Not that he minded hearing it.

Kurt shrugged. “I don’t know how I feel about him. Since the blizzard, when he was mysteriously absent for several days, he and Rachel have been thick as thieves. I can’t tell whether they’ve rededicated themselves to their relationship or if Rachel’s jealous that I’m spending more time with Santana.”

“Hm.” Finn sighed. “So you and Rachel... Did you guys work things out?”

“Not... really. She got bumped back down to my dance class, and I told her off and moved back in... but we haven’t resolved anything because she was busy being nice to me while I was sick, and now she’s busy being with Brody while he’s shirtless again.”

Finn shrugged. “You know how she is.”

“I do.” Kurt moved his straw up and down in his shake. “But to be honest, I haven’t had the energy for it.”

“Well, you gotta take care of yourself.” Finn pinched his lips to the side, raked his eyes over Kurt again, and paused for a moment. “Are you?”

Kurt’s smile grew tight and tense.

“I mean, like, you were sick at Christmas, and you got sick again like a week ago...” Finn watched Kurt’s features carefully. He wasn’t responding, or giving anything away.

Finally, Kurt said in a wry tone, “It’s been a hell of a flu season, huh?”

“C’mon, little bro. I’m not that smart. What does that mean?”

“You’re plenty smart. But...” Kurt drew in a deep breath and then shook his head. “It means that it’s complicated, and I don’t want to talk about it right now. Later?”
Finn’s brows rose high. “Um. Okay.”

Kurt started frenetically wiping his fingers with his napkin, his gaze cast downward at the table. He looked five years younger, somehow.

“Um, you don’t have to talk if you don’t want to,” Finn said. “But... I came up here because Santana made it sound like you needed me.”

“I, um. Maybe I do.” Kurt set the napkin down and swallowed. “And I do want to tell you. I only felt relief when Santana said she’d gotten you to come up.”

“I would’a come, if you’d asked.”

“Well, it’s not that simple. With Rachel around?”

“Rachel doesn’t run our lives, no matter what she thinks.”

Kurt almost smiled. He looked up at Finn and seemed to struggle to breathe for a moment. Then he glanced around their booth cautiously and started speaking.

For the first part of Kurt’s explanation, Finn screwed his brows up, not quite understanding... Then he was completely understanding, and he thought he was gonna puke. His heart pounded, practically in his throat, and his body tightened so much that he felt a sharp pain in his shoulders.

Kurt had been in the middle of a babble about the guy who had done this to him, but stopped abruptly and reached over to take Finn’s hand. “Hey, it’s okay. I’m-”

“Don’t you dare say you’re okay!” Finn shouted.

Kurt’s cheeks turned pink, and he slipped his hand back to his side of the table. Finn dragged a hand over his mouth and shook his head several times, trying to calm down. Kurt’s eyes darted to the other people having lunch, then back to Finn.
“Sorry,” Finn said. “I just- You’re not okay. This is not okay.”

“You don’t really have to tell me. It’s my life,” Kurt nearly whispered. He hugged his arms over his chest, then rose suddenly. “I need air.”

Finn’s brain screamed at him to react, and he did, getting up and taking Kurt’s arm. “Don’t go.”

Kurt’s breaths were a little shakier now, and he didn’t seem to want to look up at Finn.

“Kiss him!” someone yelled.

Finn let go and looked around for the person who had yelled, but there were too many people. Apparently he and Kurt looked coupley in New York. Though to some people, they’d looked coupley in Lima. They’d always had the tendency to be close, even when they’d fought it for one reason or another.

When Finn looked back, Kurt was on his way outside. Finn grabbed Kurt’s bag and coat and followed him with large, blundering strides, running into at least two people on his way out the door.

“Hey! Kurt, I’m sorry!”

A little white puff of air exited Kurt’s mouth. “It’s not your fault. It’s a shocker. Believe me, I’ve been there.”

Finn cringed. That wasn’t wrong. Kurt was the one going through this. Kurt was the one who had to live with it, or not.

“I’m sorry you’re upset, Finn. This is just... hard.”

“Harder for you, I guess.”

“That would be a good guess.” Kurt drew in a deep breath and sucked in his lower lip.
“Have you told Burt? No... No, you haven’t, have you?”

Kurt shook his head. “No. I can’t.”

Finn shoved the coat at Kurt, but he didn’t take it. “You should. He’d wanna know.”

“Do you have any idea what this would do to him? A lot of awful shit has happened to me in my life.” Kurt looked up at Finn seriously. “This might end up being the worst. How is he supposed to cope with that? He’s going to be so hurt and so scared. He lost my mom. Losing me is not an option.”

“So you’re... You are sick?”

“Complex question. But I feel a lot better. The flu was scary. It was a flu. Just a flu. And it knocked me on my ass for a little while.”

Finn felt a hot trickle down his cheek and jerked his face in the other direction. “But you made it.”

“I made it. And while I was making it, Santana figured it out.”

Finn scratched the back of his head. His chest was burning from heaving the cold air in and out. “Yeah, her warnings seem less weird now... Should you be out in the cold like this? Please take your coat?”

Kurt gave Finn a withering look and took his coat.

“Dude, I don’t know how to do this. I’m sorry if I suck at it.” Finn came over and grabbed the other arm of Kurt’s coat to help him into it.

“I don’t know how either,” Kurt admitted after a moment. Then he shrugged and shook his head. “I haven’t told that many people.”

“I’m glad you told me. That would be, like, awful... just having that inside all the time.”
“Yep. Pretty much all the time, pretty much forever. Until they find a cure,” Kurt replied bitterly.

Finn paused, working out the dark joke Kurt was making, then handed him his bag. “I meant, keeping the secret.”

“I know.”

“I’m gonna get our leftovers. Stay here, okay?” Finn hurried inside to get take out containers and scoop up the remains of their burgers and fries. As good as the shakes had been, cold custard was probably not the best thing to be drinking out in that weather, so he left them and went back outside, where Kurt was fussing with his gloves and walking back and forth.

“Sorry,” Kurt muttered. “I should’ve waited. I was going to wait, maybe until right before you were about to leave, so we could at least have this trip, together. To remember. The Hudmel bros take New York...”

“I would be so pissed if you’d done that.” Finn tucked the take out box in Kurt’s bag, and then wrapped an arm around Kurt’s shoulders. “I’m your brother. Sometimes you have to let me be that for you.”

Kurt looked back at him. “What exactly does that mean?”

“I dunno. Let me carry you. You’d do things for me. You made sure Rachel told me what to get her for Christmas, when all the guys’ suggestions sucked, so I didn’t get in trouble. You gave me college pamphlets when everyone else assumed that just wasn’t gonna happen. You helped me when everyone was making fun of me for getting fat.”

“You were never fat,” Kurt protested.

“Whatever. You made salads not suck for me. You pushed me think about myself as more than Rachel’s purse holder. I wish you’d let me help you, too.”

“I wasn’t sure how you’d react. I’m not sure how anyone will...” Kurt grew quiet for a moment. “It’s not always good.”
“Was mine bad?”

“I don’t consider yours over, yet. Please don’t tell anyone?”

Finn rolled his eyes. “I’m not that dumb. I won’t.” Then something occurred to him. “Did you get this from Blaine?”

“N-no. Blaine’s negative. Remember, I said we got tested at the Lima clinic? It was a different guy.”

“I want to rip his balls off,” Finn grumbled.

“Now you sound like dad.”

“He’s gonna want to rip this guy’s balls off, too.”

Kurt smiled and dipped his head.

“But...” Finn felt himself flushing with the millions of questions running through his head. “When you said you’re okay, that means... You’re really skinny. Are you really okay?”

“I’m working on that. It’s the meds. They make me feel sick and not want to eat. I started hitting the gym with a friend of mine. Hopefully it’ll help to build up some muscle.” Kurt seemed to relax a little under Finn’s arm. “When I say I’m okay, I mean I don’t have any opportunistic infections, and the flu didn’t progress into pneumonia.”

“Huh. Well. T-that’s good.” Finn wasn’t sure he could take this medical talk. It sounded like things doctors bandied about around people who were dying. He’d just gotten Kurt as a brother a few years ago. No way was he ready to lose Kurt yet.

“I’m surviving,” Kurt insisted. He looked into Finn’s eyes and leaned his head forward. “Not thriving, but... Dr. Saunders says that she’s pleased with how well I’m doing, considering how bad
Finn pressed his lips together. He was angry at the guy who had done this. He was a little angry at Kurt for sitting on it and suffering alone for months. But he was also sad, and terrified, and wanting to just move up here and look after his brother, even though he knew he couldn’t do that and Kurt probably wouldn’t let him.

And that was just what he’d been feeling after knowing for maybe five minutes.

“Good...” Finn managed.

Unable to think of anything more to say, Finn just walked alongside his brother and wished there was something, anything, he could do to make this better.

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Despite the difficult conversation at lunch, and a few weird moments when Kurt took Finn out after work to a club to see a band, the two of them didn’t spend much time discussing Kurt’s confession. Kurt was fine with that, actually. It might take some time for Finn to process the information he’d gotten that afternoon. Kurt understood that well enough and was just grateful to spend time with his brother.

He also wondered, more than ever, how his father would react, and how Adam would, and how long it would take them to come to terms with it. Or if Adam would be around to come to terms with it.

The next day, Kurt brought breakfast to Finn’s hotel, and together they went over the spring plans for New Directions together. Afterward, Kurt laid out a few things they could do together in New York. It was all very calm, brotherly, and pleasant.

Kurt went to Vogue for a few hours, then to his classes at NYADA, which were likewise, mostly uneventful, except for a few moments with Rachel during dance class. She was acting extra friendly and sweet, and Kurt wasn’t sure if she wanted something or had done something abominable.

Either way, she kept trailing behind him despite his repeated efforts to shake her. Thus, Rachel was
right by his side as Kurt strolled to the edge of campus, trying to shoot Finn a look of warning. If only Kurt was better at texting and walking.

Finn’s open, friendly expression closed as his brows drew together and his lips slipped into a crooked grimace. Kurt shrugged and made a motion as though to push Rachel to the side, then waved at him to indicate that he should get out of sight.

He didn’t. Instead, Finn came right up to them and gave Kurt a big hug. Kurt didn’t feel capable of rejecting these right now, so he melted into Finn’s warmth once again. Finn gave his back a few pats.

“Hey, Rachel,” Finn said casually. He pulled back and squeezed his hands over Kurt’s shoulders before letting go.

“I- I, uh... Finn...” Rachel’s mouth hung open, and she shook her head slowly. “I didn’t know you were in town.”

“Yeah, just came up to see my baby brother.” Finn patted Kurt’s shoulder again.

“I’m not even a full year younger than you,” Kurt drawled.

“Santana made it sound like he was dying,” Finn added.

“He was pretty sick.” Rachel held her notebook close to her chest. “I just thought... If you were in town, someone would say something.”

“It’s not like I moved here or anything. I just got in yesterday afternoon,” Finn replied, a little irritably.

Kurt took Finn’s hand and gave it a tug. He could see old feelings rising to niggle at Finn’s nerves, and defensiveness accompanying it.

“You could’ve met me at the apartment. I need to shower before we do... What are we doing tonight?” Kurt asked, leading the way to the subway.
The rest of the afternoon was more awkward. Rachel snaked the shower first, and then when Kurt was in himself, he could hear a fight breaking out between Finn and Rachel. He wasn’t egotistical enough to assume the fight had anything to do with him, since they’d seemed to break up every few months even in high school, but he did feel a stab of guilt for not mitigating this problem earlier.

After he got out of the shower, Kurt had meant to start getting ready, but he sat on the couch with Finn, intending to stay only a minute, and then started to doze. Finn’s arm wrapped around Kurt and he was down for a few hours, half-aware of the TV playing in the background, although the fighting had stopped.

He woke again as Santana squeezed him from behind.

“Awaken, Sleeping Cutie! We gots mischiefs to do.” She looked at Finn, and then dropped a comb into Kurt’s lap.

“Sorry,” Kurt muttered, rubbing his eyes. Having the two of them right there, two people who knew, made his nerves dance. He took a deep breath and started to comb his hair.

“Rachel says that we should go to the pretentious karaoke bar,” Santana said.

“Piano bar,” Rachel said with irritation.

“Oh yeah, I remember that place.” Finn grinned and laughed softly.

“What?” Rachel demanded.

“I’m just remembering something Blaine said,” Finn explained. “He was gonna apply to NYADA? But he checked out the discussion boards you looked at while applying. Anyway, uh, Santana, you weren’t here, but when I came back from washing outta training, Blaine came up, too, and we went to the piano bar, and he sang this weird acoustic... thing of ‘Teenage Dream’. And it was like, super bad secondary embarrassment. Anyway, apparently the people on the NYADA boards have been talking about it ever since, and they call him the ‘Tone Deaf Weepy Teenager’ and ‘Gelmet’ and other stuff. Makin’ fun of his voice.”
“That’s... awesome...” Santana said, barely able to control her joy.

Kurt laughed and leaned forward. “Are you serious? Do they really? I told you singing there could ruin my career, Rachel!”

“Oh, no it couldn’t.” Rachel rolled her eyes. “You’d never sing something that tragic, even as a message to someone. And you’re better at singing through tears than any of us.”

“I’ve had a lot of practice,” Kurt joked. He pushed himself up from the couch and stretched. “Okay, I’m going to get ready. Are we going to see Brody finally?”

“Maybe,” Rachel said. “Are we going to see Adam?”

Kurt pressed his lips together. “Maybe not tonight.”

“Did you two have a fight?” Santana asked in a measured tone.

He turned slightly and saw the look in her eyes. “No. It’s just getting harder not to be with him and not... be with him.”

“Wait, there’s a guy?” Finn rose. “I wanna meet the guy.”

“You will. We just need some time apart. We need to have a talk about our relationship.” Kurt shrugged.

Finn seemed perplexed for a moment, then his brows raised, and then he just looked upset.

“Okay. I need to change into something slutty,” Santana announced.

She walked over to her clothing racks to select something, and Finn followed Kurt behind his privacy curtain.
“You always seemed to think these would help us living together,” Finn said, feeling the fabric of the curtain.

“A privacy screen is a thing. Look it up. And they’re not as easy to pull aside as curtains,” Kurt informed him. “I don’t know why you thought I’d peek at you. I never did in the locker room.”

“Yeah, I didn’t remember that you used to wear a big fluffy robe in the locker room until after I’d screamed about it.” Finn sat on the bed. “That week kinda sucked ass for me. Karofsky and Azimio were giving me crap about living with a gay guy, and they didn’t even know we were sharing a room.”

Kurt turned from his mirror and scowled. “You never told me that.”

“It didn’t matter. There was no reason to take it out on you.”

“I wasn’t exactly subtle. Even if I was trying to be,” Kurt muttered. He dabbed some hair wax on his fingers and started to style. “I’m sorry you were going through that.”

“Yeah. And if I’d told you, maybe things would’ve been easier.”

Kurt turned around again and took in Finn’s expression and posture. His lips sloped into a half-smile and his brows rose.

“Point taken.”

“I thought about it a lot last night. Y’know, in my room. I get why you didn’t say anything sooner about your dia-”

“Finn,” Kurt said sharply.

Finn’s brows lowered again.

“Those?” Kurt gestured to the curtain as he whispered, “Don’t block sound.”
“Ohhh...” Finn flattened his lips. “Sorry. God, like not even a day, huh? I swear I’m not gonna spill to mom and Burt the second I get home.” He looked at his hands for a moment then lifted his eyes upward. “I just wanted to say, I was kinda mad that you didn’t tell me, at first. I feel like we’ve gotten closer over the past couple of years, but especially... especially since your break up. And at Christmas, I really felt like we’re brothers. We’re like, a team.” He laughed softly. “A few weeks ago, we were talking about doing numbers for Mr. Schue’s wedding, and Burt and mom’s wedding came up, and the new kids were surprised that you and I weren’t really blood.”

Kurt smiled softly. “Wish I could’ve been there for that. I’m sorry I couldn’t get here any faster-”

“No, dude. I don’t want you to carry any more baggage around about this. I get that you needed to, y’know, sit on it awhile. I don’t even know how I’d handle it.” Finn stood and came over to clap his hand against Kurt’s back. “Just tryin’ to figure out where I am. No matter what, though, you have me. No matter how bad it gets. Even if you don’t ever tell our parents.”

Kurt felt his eyes stinging and bowed his face over to cover the flush on his cheeks.

“It just never ends,” Kurt said quietly.

Finn hung his arm around Kurt’s shoulders. “You know, when they say ‘It Gets Better’ they probably mean it takes a couple of years.”

“When they say that-” Kurt looked up at his towering brother, “they aren’t really thinking about all the things that can happen out there. Even with this? I’m pretty lucky. There’s been a rise of gay bashings recently. Not everyone gets into their dream school. New York has a lot of homeless gay and trans kids. Not everyone has a pack of friends surrounding them. I could have it a lot worse.”

“Don’t do that,” Finn scolded.

“What? What am I doing?”

“You’re trying to make me feel better. I’m not gonna to give out on you just because you’re not smiling about this.” Finn stepped away and ran his hands through his hair. “I don’t want that. I want us to be able to be there for each other, and not always have to be like, lying, about being happy and cool with everything. I like it better when you tell me you feel like you’re gonna die.”
Kurt’s eyes widened, and he took a step back.

“I mean, with Blaine. I like it better when you *tell me* when you’re that low. I like it when you’re honest. Because I don’t always know what to do, and maybe I can’t do anything, but I can’t help at all, if you keep telling me that you’re fine, and things are fine, and everything will be fine. How am I supposed to call you after a break-up and share what we’re both going through if you don’t tell me you feel like you’re gonna die? That helped both me *and* you. How am I supposed to be there after, you know, if you just come home and lock yourself in your room and don’t say why you’re miserable?” Finn shoved his hands in his pockets and shrugged. “It kills me that you’ve been suffering, dude, and I had no friggin’ idea!”

Kurt looked in the direction of their living area, then rubbed his lips and walked towards his dresser to get the lint roller. “I know, Finn. I’m just not good at this part. It’s easier for me when you guys, my family, need *me*. I’m used to that. You wouldn’t believe the crazy things I’ve been doing, trying to play the role of the one in control, the one who fixes other people’s lives again.”

“I believe it,” Finn sighed. “Kurt, I love you. Do you know how hard that is for me to say? ...Not as much as it used to be, but still. I do.”

Kurt set the lint roller down and drew a deep breath in and out before turning to face his brother. “I don’t know what you want me to say. You know I love you. You know I’d do anything for you.”

“Then try to let me be one of the people you don’t have to be an actor with all the time.”

Kurt licked his lips and looked around his room, not knowing what to say, or do, to make his brother feel better about this. Maybe he couldn’t. Finn was already handling it better than Kurt had thought, and maybe that was because Finn was handling it for *Kurt*.

“I’ll try.”

***

Santana started them off at Callbacks with “Back to Black,” making sure to flirt with everyone in the bar. At one point, Rachel crossed her arms and started rolling her eyes.
“Lay off her,” Kurt said quietly. “You go back to him and I go back to black”? She misses Brittany. Let her try to catch a sapphic leaning lady.”

“Gosh, I forgot about that. She’s been so... combative,” Rachel said.

“C’mon, is that really news?” Finn asked.

They shared a smile.

After Santana had finished her number, she stayed at the table for a little while before being lured over to a table with a blue-haired woman with a bright smile. Kurt wished a little bit that he’d given Adam a call... but Adam did work tonight. He couldn’t have come.

That was when Kurt remember that Callbacks, this very table, was where he and Adam had first spoken.

“I just wanted to tell you that I thought your song was absolutely lovely! You’re a phenomenal singer!”

Kurt could see Adam’s joy-filled smile now.

Finn bumped Kurt’s shoulder and grinned down at him. “How about a duet? For old time’s sake.”

“You two never did duets in Glee,” Rachel said, sounding a bit miffed.

“We sang a line together in ‘Pure Imagination’, Kurt pointed out.

“’Cause I couldn’t hit the high note.” Finn smiled. “Maybe we could sing ‘A House is Not a Home-’”

“Brody, honey!” Rachel leapt up and launched herself toward him.
Kurt shook his head and turned back to Finn. “Sorry.”

“I coulda backed off when I saw you two coming.” Finn shrugged. “It’s better, like this. I don’t want her thinking I’m avoiding her.”

“You were fighting this afternoon.”

“I don’t even know what about. It’s weird going from friends, to forever, to exes.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Plus, she likes to talk about how she’s grown up now, and I’m still a little boy. That insult is her fav and it just pisses me off. So I’m not gonna be really great to talk to in any conversation like that.”

“She likes to tell me to grow up, too, which... honestly.” Kurt threw his hands up. “She’s not even employed. I have to keep myself from laughing at that kind of assertion.”

Finn chuckled. “It’ll be okay. But we don’t have to be here, if you don’t wanna be. We could just go hang back at the loft. I don’t need to be entertained.”

“No, no... It’s fine. We can stay here for a little longer.” Kurt looked up as Brody settled in front of them with drinks for himself and Rachel.

“You want something?” Brody asked. “Or are the cold meds an alcohol no-go?”

“I’m too sleepy for a drink,” Kurt said, then looked to Finn. “You?”

“Nah. I don’t drink when I’m out. I can’t look out for people if I’m buzzed.”

“That’s chivalrous.” Brody perched in his seat and narrowed his eyes. “Not too much need for designated drivers in New York, though.”
“Yeah, I guess. But there’s plenty to look out for. I’m good. But thanks, man.” Finn bobbed his head.

Rachel seemed a little disappointed by the civil exchange, then rose and started chattering to Brody about duets that they could do. Within moments, they were heading to the stage.

“I only understood her angle about half the time when we were dating,” Finn looked at Kurt. “What’s up with her?”

“Who knows. I don’t have the energy to care about her drama.” Kurt slumped over and rested his chin on his hands.

Finn rubbed Kurt’s back and let out a sigh. “We really can go back, y’know. I’m here for you, not to have a blast in NYC. I’ve never been a city boy.”

“Born and raised in south Detroit?”

“If we did Journey, I think Rachel might die.”

“It’s possible.” Kurt sipped his water and sucked in his lower lip, trying to focus on the Rachel/Brody performance in front of them.

“Dude, c’mon,” Finn said after a minute.

“What?” Kurt looked up with a frown.

“What do you mean, what? You look really sad right now.”

“Oh.” Kurt rubbed his fingers around the condensation of his water glass. “I wasn’t really thinking about anything.”
Finn’s brows furrowed, and he sighed.

Kurt scoured his brain for some kind of explanation. Having a reason for looking sad was probably better than just having an aura of misery for no reason.

“I guess maybe it has something to do with Adam, a little. We met here.”

“He the guy?”

“Yeah. It was right after the Winter Showcase, and he came up to tell me how much he liked my performance...” Kurt remembered Adam’s flustered expression. “Poor guy. Rachel thought he was talking to her, and so did I, actually. And he was too polite to correct her. He told me about it later.”

Finn sat back in his chair and crossed his arms. “Well, it’s not the guy making you sad.” He pointed to Kurt. “Cause talking about him is putting a smile on your face.”

“He’s an amazing guy,” Kurt replied with a shrug.

“And you’re gonna have The Talk soon.”

“Yep.”

“You think he’s gonna be okay? With...?”

“I dunno. I mean, I really- I care about him. I won’t make him stay if he’s uncomfortable. I don’t want to hurt anyone, especially someone like Adam.” Kurt shook his head. “I didn’t really want to think about dating for a while, but here he is, and this is how I feel, and I have to face the fact that some guys just aren’t interested in being with someone positive.”

Kurt felt his heart sinking, the more he thought about it. “If I’m really honest with myself? I probably wouldn’t have been before this happened, either... I wish I were a better person. Why would Gio tell me he had it? It would just mean he’d be spending the night alone.”

Finn whistled. “So you wouldn’t tell-?”
“I think I’ll always tell, if I try to do the dating thing. I have to. I need Adam to know, and be able to back out. Even if it means taking a vow of celibacy, I need to give people the choice I wasn’t given.” Kurt pressed his lips together tightly and turned his head, because his eyes were starting to shine at the idea that Adam might be out of his life.

“Lonely,” Finn said after a moment.

“Kind of.”

Brody and Rachel returned, looking triumphant.

“See? They can try to bring you down all they want, give you crap about your dancing and acting classes, but they can’t keep up with you vocally,” Brody assured her. He looked to Kurt, then back at Rachel and raised his brows, pursing his lips.

“I guess you’re right,” she said. “But...”

“NYADA’s teachers giving you crap?” Finn asked.

“Always.” She raised one hand and shook her head as though in pain.

“Yeah, well. Don’t let them get you down. Remember, Barbra didn’t even do college. She just went to the club scene and belted it for gay guys,” Finn said. “She did a lot of work before she ever really hit Broadway big time. Think like, NYADA is where you pick up your skills before taking the big parts that’ll launch your career.”

Brody leaned forward. “You know an awful lot about Streisand.”

“T dated that one off and on for three years.” Finn pointed at Rachel with a smirk. “Do you know how many times I’ve seen Funny Girl?”

Rachel laughed softly.
Santana returned with the girl she’d picked up (Eris), and the six of them listened to the singers and chatted amiably for almost an hour. Occasionally, Kurt caught Finn watching him with that same tight expression that said, *You look sad.*

Eventually, there was a lull in the singers, and Finn flashed everyone a grin and waggled his brows.

“I’m headin’ up. Hope I don’t end up on the NYADA gossip boards.”

“What are you going to sing?” Rachel asked.

Finn just smiled, then tapped Kurt’s arm lightly. He walked up to the piano and bent over to talk to the guy.

“Geez, you think Finn’s gonna do an ole’ timey Glee tell-off song?” Santana curved her lips in a wicked smirk and looked at Rachel.

“He seems perfectly calm,” Rachel said. Still, she smiled a little, probably at the thought of Finn dedicating something to her.


“Jesse...” Brody’s brows drew together, then he looked at Rachel. “St. James?”

“How did you know?” Rachel asked.

“I’ll tell you the stories we have about St. James, sometime.”

The piano began to play, slow and pensive. Finn stood up in front, set his feet part, and began to sing, his voice rough and low.
“Is this the moment where I look you in the eye?” He looked right at their table. “Forgive my broken promise that you'll never see me cry.”

“Awww,” Rachel said, touching her chest.

“And everything, it will surely change even if I tell you I won't go away today!” Finn’s voice grew richer with every note. His delivery of the words seemed like a promise. “Will you think that you're all alone when no one's there to hold your hand? And all you know seems so far away and everything is temporary rest your head. I'm permanent.”

Kurt sat there, his fingers folded together tightly and his back straight, arrested by Finn’s performance... Though calling it a performance didn’t do Finn justice. The last time Kurt remembered Finn singing quite like this, it was “Losing My Religion” or maybe “I’ll Stand by You.” Let Rachel assume it was for her, and not Finn grieving for his brother in a way she couldn’t really understand anyway.

Kurt was really proud of Finn, to tell the truth. And at the same time, he wished he didn’t hear the strain in Finn’s voice, and the shine of his eyes. He wished in a way that he could spare his family from going through this with him, even if Finn was right. They would want to know.

“I know he's living in hell every single day-” Finn shook his head and looked Kurt in the eye. “-and so I ask, oh God is there some way for me to take his place? And when they say it's all touch and go I wish I could make it go away! But still you say, will you think that you're all alone when no one's there to hold your hand? When all you know seems so far away and everything is temporary, rest your head...”

Santana took Kurt’s hand and rested her head on his shoulder. Eris looked at the two of them a little worriedly, and Kurt ignored them all and stared forward at Finn.

“I'm permanent,” Finn sang. “I'm permanent.” He took a deep breath. “Is the moment where I look you in the eye? Forgive my promise that you'll never see me cry.”

“Are you okay?” Eris peeped.

Kurt fanned his face. “It was just... That’s a very moving song.”
He cast a glance at the others. Brody looked uncomfortable. Rachel’s cheeks were flushed, and she stared intently at the table. Santana just held onto him, almost possessively.

As Finn returned, there was light applause, and he did indeed have some wetness around his eyes, though not as much as Kurt had. He took Kurt’s other hand and gave him a lopsided smile.

“Excellent. You haven’t lost it,” Kurt managed, with a bit of a rasp in his voice.

“Thanks, man.” Finn squeezed Kurt’s fingers. “Hey, you guys mind if we get outta here? I need to turn in early. Leaving tomorrow. But you can stick around. Callbacks was waaay better this time,” he added with a laugh.

“Yeah.” Brody bobbed his head over and over. “No problem. Take it easy.”

Santana met Kurt’s eye. “You want me to come?”

“We’ll be fine. You guys have fun,” Kurt said lightly.

“We will,” Rachel said in a high, tight voice.

Kurt rose with Finn and headed out the door. “Interesting choice,” he said after the cold night air hit them.

“Yeah, well. You know how it is, getting your thoughts out in song.”

“I’m not all alone.”

“Yeah, you are. Are you telling me Santana’s a frigging awesome source of support?”

“She might be. I don’t know yet.”

“I guess,” Finn said. “Well. Um. Maybe that’s enough. Y’know, I hear it isn’t a death sentence
Kurt made a noise in his throat before he could stop himself.

Finn tilted his head to the side.

“It’s fine. You’re fine,” Kurt muttered.

“Dude, I told you. You don’t have to be all positive for my sake. I’m not here for you to coddle me.” Finn shook Kurt’s shoulders. “If I say something dumb, tell me.”

“It’s not dumb, it’s just...” Kurt spread his hands. “No, it’s not a death sentence, necessarily. But it’s a life sentence! It changed my life. And I...” He lost words momentarily, then looked out at the street as though disoriented. “I didn’t want it changed.”

“That makes sense.” Finn draped his arm around Kurt’s shoulders.

Kurt sighed heavily, but let himself relax into Finn’s protective warmth.

“Have you ever thought about, like, um... talking to someone?” Finn stumbling over his words, but Kurt knew what he was talking about.

“My friend Aude thinks I should go to group therapy with him... or ‘talk to someone’... And I’m thinking about it. But money’s tight. I can hardly swing my meds, let alone a shrink and bonus antidepressants.”

Finn took Kurt’s hand and kept him close as they walked. Never in his memory had Finn been so tactile, and yet, here in New York, both times Finn had come up, he was offering hugs and holding Kurt’s hand.

“But you’ve got Aude, right? He a good friend?”

“Yes, he is. The best. And we have the same doctor.” Kurt resisted the urge to tell Finn once again
that he would be okay. Clearly, that wasn’t the most useful information right now. “That means he knows who to call if something happens. I won’t say that it won’t, but I will remind you that despite the skinniness, I’m doing well right now.”

“And I’m gonna remind you that you need to call me, and be honest about how you’re doing.”

Kurt nodded.

“And you call, and let me know how it goes with that Adam guy.”

“Do you want to meet him? He’s off work in an hour or so. We could go by the cafe.”

“I’m not sure I want to know him, if he’s not okay with you.”

Kurt shook his head and patted Finn’s chest. “That wouldn’t make him a bad person.”

“I don’t care. Maybe that makes me a bad person.”

“No, Finn. That makes you my brother.”

***

“Do you think... if you’d stayed in Lima until you got into NYADA, this would’ve happened?” Finn asked. The thought had been floating around in his mind for almost twenty-four hours, having come to him when he couldn’t sleep the night before.

Kurt was sprawled over the second bed in the hotel room on his back. His legs dangled off and kicked half-heartedly. “If you mean, could I manage to find someone infected in Lima, probably. HIV isn’t exclusive to big cities. It’s just not the case. But if I’d stayed in Lima... Blaine might not have cheated. He might have, but he also might not. And I wouldn’t be ‘exploring’ with other guys if I had a boyfriend. Then again, we might have broken up for other reasons. The longer I’m not with him, the longer I wonder how we ever made it work, even as friends. I think we were just lonely.”
“It’s kinda unfair that you have to deal with this, and not him.” Finn sipped his cider, the compromise they’d settled on getting before returning to his room.

“If you think HIV is a punishment... And you know, I don’t, even if I blame myself for getting it about half the time.” He propped himself up on his elbows and took a drink. “It’s just random. The guy I met, being single when I met him, the condom not working-- and that had to happen, because I don’t think he was the kind of guy to poke holes. I don’t think. I know he used one.”

“It’s hard to accept something like this just as a fluke. It feels like...” Finn shook his head.

“You want someone to blame. I could blame Blaine, for cheating. I could blame Gio, for giving it to me. I could blame the condom brand for not holding up to gay sex.”

Finn laughed suddenly. “Is that a thing?”

“I don’t know. The condom could’ve been old. Also, sometimes the type of lube degrades the condom, but I don’t really remember if he used the kind I have in my nightstand or something he had with him. We were kind of in the moment.” Kurt scratched the back of his head. “He definitely used lube. I would know the feeling if he hadn’t... Gay sex is complicated!”

Finn stared at Kurt, fascinated and a little weirded out by the turn of this conversation. “Yeah, I bet. I can’t even guess how complicated.”

“Ask dad. He has pamphlets.”

Finn made noise and closed his eyes tightly. “No way.”

“Yep.”

Finn let the silence reign for a long stretch. Then, “What lube should I avoid with condoms? I don’t want any more pregnancy scares.”
“Oil-based with latex,” Kurt answered immediately. “Like petroleum jelly.”

“Dude, I cannot handle how you have, like, this whole section of knowledge that I never even have to think about.”

“That was always true,” Kurt replied. “Dude.”

Finn chuckled. “Yeah, I guess. Girl’s kinda lube themselves.”

“But some girls might appreciate lube, too. Especially if you don’t fool around enough before hand to make her happy in her pants.”

Finn’s eyes widened. “And that’s also a thing?”

“You need to stop taking sex tips from your gay brother, but it is a thing, and you should be aware of it.” Kurt rolled his shoulders back. “Girls aren’t clingy after sex because they want to cuddle. They’re on you because they’re not done, and you’re already getting ready to go to sleep.”

Finn shook his head. “No, no, that’s not how I am with girls. Rachel never complained.”

“Did you take care of her first?”

“I’m not sure what you mean by that, but she usually came?”

Kurt nodded, then slowly shook his head. “I don’t want to talk about your sexcapades with Rachel. Or Santana. Please. Thanks.”

“I can’t say how I took care of Santana. She didn’t seem too happy after. She wanted me to get her a burger.”

“Well, it’s the least you can do!”
Finn laughed and went over to the bed where Kurt was lying. “I missed you.”

“I missed you, too.” Kurt sucked both of his lips in as he set his bottle down and flopped back on the bed, looking at Finn intensely.

“I can stay longer, if you want me to.”

“I can’t ask that.”

“I guess not, but I’m offering.” God, his brother was such a stubborn twerp.

“What about work at the shop?” Kurt pointed out. “What about your classes? You can’t just skip them.”

“It’s almost the weekend. I can email my professors and tell them when I’ll be back. I know how many absences I get in all of my classes. Most of the teachers are pretty cool, if you’re straight with them.”

“Heeey, Dr. Keane, can you tell me what we did in class last week?” Kurt said in his most ‘bro’ voice, complete with frowning, bobbing his head, and squinting. “I decided to stick around in New York to take care of my pathetic brother with HIV!”

“You’re not pathetic.”

“What about hotel costs?”

“Kurt! I’ll figure it out. I could sleep on your couch, or something, or find one of those youth hostels... But not the ones with serial killers.”

“Yes, let’s avoid that.” Kurt looked up at the ceiling and furrowed his brow. “If you do leave tomorrow, you shouldn’t worry about me.”

Finn bit back a sigh. “Maybe I’m not ready to leave you yet.”
Kurt was quiet for a moment, then, “I’ll ask Santana if she minds sharing a bed with me now that I’m not fluish and snotty, so you can have the couch for a little while.”

Finn reached over and ran his fingers through Kurt’s hair. He knew they’d smell vaguely fragrant afterwards, but he enjoyed the way Kurt’s eyes closed, and his body seemed to relax a little. It might have been a few months since Kurt got his diagnosis, but he was obviously still struggling, just in different ways than he had back in December. And Finn could spare a few more days. He could be there for Kurt, just a little longer. Physically first, and then maybe Kurt would get in the habit of letting Finn in. Then they would have spring break, and Kurt would come back to Lima, and to his family. That would have to be enough care to start him thriving again, for now.
Adam smiled over at Kurt who walked alongside him. There had only been a few days light on Kurt interaction since the snowstorm, and of course, those days had been the result of Kurt’s brother being in town. Adam missed seeing him and talking every few hours anyway. He was developing an addiction, clearly.

The day was strikingly warm for late February. Gloves were tucked away in jackets left half open, and for the first time in a while, Kurt wasn’t swaddled in a large, fluffy scarf. Adam felt his gaze drawing closer to Kurt’s slender neck, his bobbing adams apple as he swallowed, and the hint of collar bone.

“Uuunnn, God, this popcorn is insane!” Kurt groaned. He licked his lips, smiling and taking in a deep breath.

“I told you. Popcorn has come a long way since Redenbaucher.”

“If that popcorn place were down the street from my apartment, I’d be popping out of my diner uniform,” Kurt said. Then followed with little laugh.

Adam looked at him skeptically for a moment, then chuckled as well. “I don’t think I believe you. There’s a nice bakery on your street. You’ve got no excuse for not plumping up with your freshman fifteen by now.”

“You got me. I’ll work harder.”

Kurt seemed relaxed, and amused. Which was good, because he had seemed a bit nervous when he’s picked Adam up from work. So far they had just taken advantage of the nice day and strolled around the neighborhood surrounding NYADA, dropping into a few shops, then picking up some gourmet popcorn. Adam didn’t really need an excuse to spend time with Kurt, so their ending destination hardly mattered.

“How is your caramel apple?” Kurt asked.

Adam held up some green and brown candy-coated popcorn. “Accurate.”
“Try some of the coconut curry.” Kurt took a few pieces and held them out to Adam’s mouth.

Certain that his cheeks were flushing, Adam allowed himself to be fed from Kurt’s hand. He was also sure a few people might be looking, but though in this neighborhood, they ought to be more worried about gossip than intolerance. His brief concern disappeared as the distinct, spicy flavor of curry filled his mouth.

“Wow.” Adam licked his lips. “That... That is uncanny. Curry with a crunch.”

“Mmm hmm.” Kurt pressed his lips together as he smirked. “I went with Finn the other day. They let us sample a bunch. He got a big bag of macaroni and cheese flavor.”

Adam chuckled. “I bet it’s a guilty pleasure in the extreme.”

“Eerily the cheesiest.” Kurt looked down at his phone.

“If you need to get back to your brother-”

“No, no. I was just checking the time. We could... go see a movie?” Kurt offered, somewhat hesitantly. “I’ve been thinking, since our delightful snow-in that I need to create better memories around the movies in my life. And have fewer movies around where people die in the end. Do you want to see something?”

“What are you in the mood for?”

“Something romantic.” Kurt scrolled down the screen on his phone. “There’s a dollar theatre nearby.”

Adam lifted his head, fighting a smile at the thought of seeing a romantic movie with Kurt.

“They have the new Spiderman movie.”
“Is that romantic?” Adam asked.

“There are probably some straight teenagers slobbering on each other.”

Adam chuckled. “Sounds very romantic. And possibly a carrier of mono.”

“Yeees... Also Les Mis.” Kurt scrunched his nose up. “I love it, but... very sad. Probably more sad than I can handle, unless we’re going to stop off for a couple of boxes of Kleenex. Or um, Warm Bodies. Love and zombies.”

“We could watch The Hobbit and appreciate the understated very special relationship between Bilbo and Thorin.” Adam checked to see if Kurt was smiling, then continued. “I suppose it must be a feather in Martin Freeman’s cap that everyone thinks his characters afford a queer sensibility.”

Kurt raised his brows and pressed his lips together politely. “I don’t really know who that is?”

“Oh, shame.” Adam shook his head and sighed. “He’s only co-staring in the most thrilling recreation of Britain’s most iconic figure of all time.”

Kurt frowned. “He plays Doctor Who?”

“No!” Adam laughed. “I think I need to educate you.”

“I thought that guy from the fourth Harry Potter movie was the Doctor.”

“Not anymore! There’s a new one now...!” Adam stopped and frowned at Kurt, who just pinched his lips together in a smirk. “You’re messing with me! Ohhh... I need to make you pay for that...”

Kurt’s laugh sounded from deep in his throat, both merry and wicked.

Adam sighed and shook his head. “Fine, fine.”
“We can go see Martin Short if you want.”

“Martin Freeman.”

“I didn’t do that one on purpose, I promise!”

“You’ve wounded me. Deeply. I hope you’re happy.”

Kurt was quiet for a moment. Then he sang, “I hope you’re happy, too. I hope you’re proud how you would grovel in submission! To feed your own ambition!”

Adam dipped his head, shook it once, and then looked up to join Kurt: “Though I can’t imagine how, I hope you’re happy, right now!”

A few people turned their heads momentarily. It shouldn’t be that strange in the neighborhood surrounding NYADA to see students bursting into showtunes, but Kurt was a hell of an Elphaba.

When it got to the belting parts, Kurt stood still and almost literally defied gravity. Adam stood and watched him. One guy grumbled for them to get out of the way, but a few people laughed and clapped. Adam was blown away, by Kurt’s pipes and his everything else. He stood there, elongating his neck as he sang, looking so perfectly graceful that he could be a piece of artwork sculpted from a beautiful marble.

“It honestly shocking that you’re not on Broadway already,” Adam said when Kurt finished the verse.

“Oh, c’mon,” Kurt scoffed.

“Are we back to this? Hey, Kurt. It’s honestly shocking that—”

“No, no.” Kurt said, waving a hand. “This isn’t lack of confidence; it’s reality. I’m at the beginning of my career. I’m still training, and I value what my professors have to teach me. It’s not like I’ve really had the chance to get this kind of feedback before.”
Adam nodded. “Some of them are really gifted teachers... some not so much.”

Kurt chuckled.

“But I suppose I should say that it’s shocking you’re not landing parts left and right.”

“I landed a leading role in Neil Garber’s senior project.”

“Did you? That’s fantastic!” Adam rubbed his hand over Kurt’s back. “No wonder you’re singing in the streets.”

“No, that’s not...” Kurt looked around them and blinked a few times before ducking out of the flow of traffic. “It’s not the part.”

Adam furrowed his brow and followed Kurt to a weathered bench. “It isn’t?”

“No. I mean I’m happy about the role, but that’s not what has me smiling and singing. Remember... how Santana said I was clearly in the spontaneous musical theatre stage? And I said I’m always at that stage, but that, um, that’s not really true.”

Adam tilted his head to the side and sat next to Kurt. “What do you mean?”

“It’s just that I’m happy. When I’m with you... I’m genuinely happy.” Kurt let out a soft laugh. “It’s almost impossible not to sing.”

“I, um. Oh.”

Adam’s heart leapt into his throat. He reached over and took Kurt’s hand between his own.

“You make me happy, too. Happier than I have been in years.”
Kurt nodded, then looked down and took a deep breath. “There’s something we need to talk about.”

“We’re not talking?”

“No, it’s something I should’ve talked to you about sooner. I know I should have, but I was afraid—”

Adam rubbed Kurt’s hand. “It scares me, too. I haven’t been with anyone in a long time, and I’m not exactly free of baggage either.”

“No, Adam. Please, just...” Kurt pulled back and started to turn away, then pressed his hands together, pointing them towards Adam, almost like he was praying. “I have to get through this or I won’t be able to say it at all.”

“Alright,” Adam agreed quietly. “I’m listening, Kurt.”

He wasn’t sure where this was all coming from. He cared about Kurt so much that he ached of it. Adam truly hoped this wasn’t an admission of feelings that would end with a ‘let’s be friends’ speech.

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“I-I do like you,” Kurt stammered, trying to force himself to just do this. He cared about Adam too much to keep putting this off. And Finn was right. That morning, he’d told Kurt to think about how much better it would feel, not having this hanging over him.

He looked into Adam’s pale blue eyes. They reminded him of this sparkling lake his father had taken him to, once, after his mother had died... Where was it? Had it been in Lima? It had been beautiful, but Kurt had refused to kill the fish, so his father had thrown them back, and they’d eaten beans and apple slices that night.

“Kurt?” Adam prompted, gently.
Kurt nodded. Enough stalling. “I like you. I might even be on my way to loving you, and that wasn’t something that I’d planned. I didn’t plan to do the like-love thing again for a very long time, if ever, but... I have to be honest.”

Kurt heard his voice breaking and smiled a little in spite of himself. “This is worse than coming out of the closet. I um...” He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. One more deep breath, and then he met Adam’s patient eyes again and licked his lips. “I’m HIV positive.”

The reaction was immediate. But not quite what Kurt had expected. Adam’s eyes widened; his body leaned forward, then pulled back; his lips parted with something unspoken. No disgust registered. Nothing like that.

“You’re positive?” Adam echoed, looking undone, and vaguely grieving.

“I am. I’m positive that I’m positive.” Kurt let out a nervous, forced laugh. “And I’m trying to be positive about it!”

Adam blinked slowly.

“I’m sorry, that was terrible.” Kurt covered his eyes and rubbed his fingers over his brow at the stupidity of that joke. “Bad jokes are a genetic disorder of mine. You should’ve heard my dad when I came out.”

When Adam didn’t say anything, Kurt started to curl his arms around himself. “You don’t have to stay. I understand. Believe me, I—I’m just—”

“No, no! Kurt, I’m just surprised. I’m not angry. I—I’m not... God, Kurt.”

Adam reached over and took Kurt’s hand again. His hands were so big. He wrapped his fingers around a few of Kurt’s. Kurt smiled, genuinely now. God, he loved this man. Such a good man, who was so beyond prejudice. Kurt felt his eyes beginning to sting.

“I’m positive,” Adam said.
Kurt’s mouth fell open. “Get out.”

Adam laughed then, deep in his throat.

“I’m sorry, is that strange? Are you really? What is this, *Rent*? Isn’t that super unlikely for us both to be?” Kurt asked.

Adam laughed again. “We’re gay men in New York, Kurt. It’s not like we both contracted the flesh eating virus.” He paused. “Was that a bit too flip? I’m just so shocked... You know, Aude *told* me that I should tell you. I don’t know why I don’t listen to her. I was so afraid.”

Adam looked up at the sky. “T-that’s not the first thing I wanted to say to you about this, it’s not... I did want to tell you, too-”

“Yeah, yeah. I was so scared.” Kurt covered his mouth with his free hand and squeezed Adam’s fingers with his other. “I’ve hardly told anyone. I just found out this December, and the first people who found out were at work, and it was just a catastrophe...” He shook his head in a rapid motion. “I didn’t want- I couldn’t lose you, but I wasn’t sure how to keep going on like this without telling you. I care so much about you, Adam.”

“I’m glad. I’m glad you’re so much braver than me.” Adam let out a thick, unsteady laugh. “I don’t think I could’ve ever done it. No matter how I felt. My last boyfriend, when I told him, he was so angry!” Adam paused, his buzzing joy grown quiet. “He called me a murderer.”

Kurt raised his brows. His shoulders had started to relax in relief, and now he began to tense again.

“That’s not what I wanted to tell you either. God, I shouldn’t’ve told you that.”

Kurt tried to unfreeze himself, and just listen. “Did you- Did you give it to him?”

“No.” Adam’s long flicked over his lips and his shook his head resolutely. “I didn’t know when we’d gotten together. I didn’t,” he repeated, as though Kurt might not believe him, “and I found out after we’d been dating a few months. We’d already had sex, and I... I hesitated. I was a little in denial, I- I should’ve told him right away, but... I didn’t. And when I finally did, he accused me of trying to murder him.”
Adam’s eyes started to grow wet. Kurt’s eyes fluttered around as he took in the cut of Adam’s cheek, the blue of his eye, the way he sat there, burdened but so strong.

“But he didn’t have it,” Kurt confirmed in a near whisper.

“No. He got tested every few months as a matter of course. He didn’t have it. Still didn’t, the last time I talked to one of our old friends, but.. it didn’t matter. He thought the worst of me. Broke a vase near my head. Might’ve come at me, if Aude hadn’t been there. And...” Adam shrugged his head to the side. “Everyone we knew, I no longer knew. I was the worst kind of monster to them.”

As Adam looked down, fat tears rolled down his cheeks.

Of course, Kurt understood that Adam should have spoken up right away. But Kurt also knew how out of his wits he’d been, first finding out. How he’d felt compelled to tell no one, even before it had gotten out at the diner. He’d also called Gio all kinds of harsh names on his voicemail. Kurt could feel both sides of this, but in the end...

He was more like Adam. Marcus had never lived what they’d lived. His anger was likely just more fear, but it was no excuse, none at all, for physically threatening Adam that way. Kurt wrapped his arms around Adam’s big shoulders and squeezed as tightly as he was able. The barrier of silence between them was gone. The fear, the worry, the feeling that Kurt couldn’t start a relationship with Adam, knowing full well how damaged he was... and not being able to stand it if Adam turned away from him, once he knew what was inside.

Gone gone gone.

“You’re not a monster, Adam,” Kurt whispered. “We’re the same. We’re just sick, and scared, and... You’re a wonderful person, who made an error in judgment. You shouldn’t have to live with that burden your whole life. Your ex is okay. He’s alive, and he’s healthy. He doesn’t get to hold that over you anymore.”

“That so?” Adam looked up and gave Kurt a watery smile.

Kurt swallowed hard. “Be with me.”

“I hadn’t planned on divulging my whole history,” Adam murmured. “I wanted... I wanted to say...”

Kurt lifted his brows as Adam moved forward and touched the side of Kurt’s face with an open palm. And Kurt suddenly felt very warm, and it wasn’t just the sun shining down on them. His heart surged in his chest, and then Adam’s lips were on his own, pressing gently. Slowly.

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They didn’t go to the movies. Adam was far more interested in hearing Kurt talk about all the things he’d been holding back, and in return, Adam found that it had never been easier for him to share about his own life, his loneliness. His life had been bearable, but at times it was like he wasn’t really, truly still alive.

And it wasn’t the virus, no. He’d gotten control of taking care of himself physically within a year. The rest of him was what had been broken, from guilt, and shame, and fear... and Marcus. If it hadn’t been love, Adam had been utterly attached, and when they’d split, parts of him had ripped away. Along with, of course, his social circle, and his sense of himself as a decent human being.

But no more. Kurt sat with Adam on his bed, combing his fingers through Adam’s hair and pressing gentle kisses to his skin. The talking died down, and their bodies twined together, just like they had not a week ago in the snowstorm. Adam thought about Kurt that night, still a bit flushed with fever, anxiety written all over his body and growing with every word Santana spilled.

“I wish I’d known sooner. I mean, I know you couldn’t get here any faster,” Adam assured Kurt. He moved his hand along Kurt’s slim waist. “But I wish I could’ve helped you more, especially when you were sick. It’s terrifying the first time.”

“It’s all terrifying.” Kurt cupped Adam’s cheek and kissed his forehead. “You helped, though. More than you know.”

“It’s not quite the same as having someone there who’s physically embodied what you’re going through.”
“You took me to the doctor. You probably kept me from having to go to the hospital.” Kurt kissed Adam’s nose. His lips curved deeply at the corners, making his face look at once wicked and angelic. Elfin.

“Oh, true.” Adam rested his hand against the small of Kurt’s back. “Don’t take chances like that, darling. Just don’t. Promise me you won’t?”

“I won’t.” Kurt shifted himself slightly and moved his face so close to Adam’s that their noses were touching. “You’re a beautiful man.”

“You’re changing the subject.”

“Hm, why would I want to talk about your gorgeousness instead of the stupid flu...?”

Adam bit back a laugh. “My gorgeousness?”

“Come on. You have to know.” Kurt’s hand glided over Adam’s chest, then one of his biceps. “This isn’t just part of the health regime, is it? It’s also because gay dudes dig the abs.”

“I’ve not been with anyone since Marcus!” Adam protested. “I’m not benching with intent.”

“Did you never think about dating another positive guy before?” Kurt rested his head back against Adam’s shoulder and tilted his head back to look at him.

“I won’t say it didn’t cross my mind. But I’ve not been... It’s taken me a while to feel... I don’t know. That everything wasn’t hopeless. That I wouldn’t be poison, always.”

Kurt nodded. “I get that. Not just because of... I’ve felt that way for a long time. Since my ex cheated... but even before that, actually.” He frowned pensively. “When I was rejected from NYADA. When someone I knew tried to kill himself. When I was being bullied and getting death threats. When my dad got sick.”

The pixieish smile faded slightly. “It’s been... this constant fight against total nihilism. And the whole world and Lady Gaga kept saying everything would be okay, eventually, but it didn’t feel like I could see that far into the future. I didn’t know if I could live with things being that horrible forever.”
Adam rubbed his hand up and down Kurt’s back, and he leaned forward to graze a butterfly’s kiss to his lips. That gave Kurt’s smile new life.

“Here we are, though. Still alive. And your father is good, yes?” Adam asked.

“He is. I don’t know how he’ll be when I tell him, but he’s healthy, for now. I ask whenever I call him. It bugs the hell out of him.”

Adam kissed the corner of Kurt’s mouth, then rested his head as well, looking directly into Kurt’s eyes—They held this undefinable shade made of blue, and pain, and spirit.

“I’m so glad you didn’t give up on NYADA,” Adam said softly. “How would I have ever managed myself without literally running into you?”

“You’re stronger than you give yourself credit for,” Kurt said. He lifted his hand and began stroking his thumb over Adam’s cheekbone, then his jawline. Adam closed his eyes while Kurt gently touched him, almost exploring. “You’re a lion,” Kurt muttered.

“Are you certain I’m not a wee little corgi?”

Kurt pulled forward again and kissed Adam, more forcefully this time. Possessively. Not jealously, but taking ownership of this moment. He lingered in the kiss, sucked on Adam’s lower lip, then sealed the kiss with another brief peck. His tongue teased along the edge of Adam’s upper lip, and when Adam opened his mouth wider, he slid his tongue against Kurt’s. He tasted the spicy remnants of the coconut curry. He shuddered, and he breathed in deep.

The scent of Kurt, and the light spring air.

They remained in this stance, kissing and retreating, tasting and exploring, for some time. Until they were both panting softly. Until the sound of boots and a slamming door in the other room interrupted them and brought Jinx to Adam’s open bedroom door.

“Adam, have you paid the- Holy fuck!”
Kurt looked up, his cheeks distinctively rosy, his lips plump and flushed. Adam grinned widely at him, loving the disheveled look.

“Well, not quite yet, but we’ll probably get there,” Kurt said dryly.

Lord, Kurt was killing Adam with these jokes today.

“Ohh, shit.” Jinx raised both of her palms. “Um... Good for you!” She shook her head, started to turn away, and then turned back around, hanging in the doorway. “Finally!”

“We know,” Adam said. He made a shooing motion to her.

“Fine, fine. Just one thing and I’ll get out of your hair for a few hours. Did you pay the electric bill?”

“Ahh, I did. Your amount is on the fridge.”

“Thanks! Have fun!”

“We will!” Kurt called back.

Adam pressed his lips together silently for a moment. They could clearly both hear Jinx moving around out in their small apartment.

“Suppose that secret’s out,” Adam said a bit apologetically.

“Yeah.” Kurt gave a terse nod. “You know back at my place, there’s likely to be four other people who can hear us through a curtain.”

“I’m going to need to start a fund for a hotel room.”
Kurt laughed high in his throat. “Can we play naughty games? I’m a no good conman on the run from the law, and you’re... um...”

“An unsuspecting housewife?”

Kurt covered his mouth and shook. Adam wrapped his arms around Kurt, pulling him close, and kissed his brow.

“Whatever, whenever, you want,” Adam promised.

***

_Dude where are you_

Kurt smiled at the text, thought for a moment, and then answered: _I’m at Adam’s place. We’ve been talking since this morning. Everything is great._

Adam whistled in the kitchen-- it sounded like the music that had been playing in that _Sherlock_ episode-- and Kurt looked up, biting his lower lip.

_Great? So you told? Did you tell?_

Kurt pinned his knees up against his body. _I told. It’s fine. I’ll tell you more later._

“Uuff! Ohhhh... bollocks!”

“Is everything okay in there?” Kurt stood and walked over to see Adam with his lips pooched out with an unexhaled breath. There was a splatter of egg over the stove. “What...?”

“I’m not a cook. I’m a baker. I _bake_,” Adam said with exasperation.
“Well.” Kurt took the pan off the burner and set it to the side. The smell of burned egg where the guts of the previous egg had spilled over the burner filled the kitchen. He wrinkled his nose, turned that burner off, and then looked at the materials laid out. Ambitious. “Baking is science. Cooking is art. You’re not obligated to have both skill sets.”

He picked up the circles of french bread Adam had cut. They were a little uneven.

Kurt turned and circled his arms around Adam’s waist. “Were you trying to make French toast and eggs?”

Adam gave a sullen nod.

“You’d need to get them on all at the same time. The eggs would cook faster.”

“This is a good point. I’m out of eggs, though.”

Kurt frowned at the mess on the stove. Adam had obviously tried to flip it in the pan.

“Well... you can’t do French toast without eggs.” Kurt gave him a squeeze. “Did you want to stay in?”

“I really just wanted to spend the day with you.”

“You have me.” Kurt drew in a shaky breath, then pressed his forehead to Adam’s arm.

“Are you alright? Maybe we should get some Febreeze...”

“I’m fine. You goof. Next time just ask me.”

“I wanted to impress you with my nonexistent skills!”
“I’m already impressed.” Kurt kissed Adam’s shoulder. “Lemme look around the kitchen.”

He let go and opened up the refrigerator. He huffed a sigh and tilted his head to the side. Behind him, Adam covered his face. There was an old onion there, a tub of margarine, some pickles, and three bottles of wine.

“Really?” Kurt laughed softly.

“There were eggs.”

“Not enough for French toast and omelets.” Kurt turned to the cupboard, which at least had peanut butter, along with the flour and sugar. At the bottom was a case of cat food.

“I know!”

“I forgot why I have to get groceries if I want to make you soup. How do you survive here?”

Adam shrugged. “It’s awful, I know. I can’t make anything beyond sandwiches anymore. I was lucky that we even had bread and eggs, before I screwed it up.”

“Well, that’s fine, but...” Kurt leaned over, trying to identify a box in the back. Off-brand hamburger helper. Which would require milk... and hamburger. Or they’d just be eating helper. “What do you do normally? Spoon peanut butter?”

“Jinx and I both have a dedication to takeout.” Adam shrugged and leaned against the wall of the tiny kitchen. There was barely room for two in here. “I don’t know her reasons, but I never have the energy, really, to cook properly, anymore.”

Kurt put his hands on his hips and sucked in his lips as he looked at Adam. After a minute, he said, “Well, don’t be embarrassed. I haven’t bothered cooking regularly for myself for months. It’s the magic combo of low energy, low appetite. As I’m sure you’re familiar.”
He screwed his brows together. “Do you want to meet my brother?”

“Your brother? Oh, um. Now?”

“Now-ish. He was wondering why I’d been gone so long. He can fend for himself, but if you want to meet him, we could go out to lunch.”

Adam raised his brows.

“Or if you’re not up to it, we can order in.” Kurt stepped back to Adam and touched his chest. “Or we can get some groceries, and I will cook, even if I’m tired after getting the groceries. I know you barely eat before going to work. So you’ve probably only had an apple and candy-coated popcorn all day.”

“You’re concerned about me, now? You haven’t had lunch either.”

“No, but making sure someone I love eats right is a lot more familiar to me than monitoring my own health.”

“Mm.” Adam slipped his arms through Kurt’s and touched his back.

Honestly, Kurt loved the feel of Adam’s arms encasing him in their strength, but there was an appeal to this, too. There was a gentleness in the way Adam tended to hold him, touch him. He could easily pull back, if he wanted, or accept the petting on his back and lean in.

“Is that because of your dad?” Adam asked.

“Yeah.”

Adam nodded quietly.

“So. Do I call or do you?”
Adam chuckled. “I can call. Is that alright? Did you want to see your brother today?”

“It’s fine. I’ll see him when I get back. I just... I’d like for him to know you. The only reason he hasn’t tried to meet you sooner is because he didn’t want to... if you weren’t okay with me.”

“Oh... Well, I suppose I’ve more than exceeded that expectation.” Adam reached over to the menus on the fridge and grabbed a few while still holding onto Kurt with one hand. “Don’t get your hopes up that he’ll be thrilled at the current situation, either.”

“Why wouldn’t he be? I mean... I kind of wish you didn’t have it, and while I’m wishing, I’ll wish that I didn’t either. But since we both do, why would he have a problem with it?”

“I’ve been to group therapy often enough-- not as much as Aude would like!-- but often enough to know that family tend to react in... erratic ways to this kind of news. If he’s protective of you, I don’t think he’ll be able to really articulate why he thinks this is a bad idea.”

“Finn’s not always openminded, but he’s from Ohio. He tries.” Kurt gave Adam a squeeze. “He’ll try for us, too.”

“I hope so.” Adam sighed softly.

“I don’t like that people have tried so hard to dim your shine. At this point, my family had better be nice to you. I have leverage now. Or... I will once they’re done being angry at me for not telling them sooner.”

Adam chuckled.

They spent the afternoon feeding each other spoonfuls of pho and seven spice tofu with vermicelli noodles and talking about all the things they wanted to do together that had seemed too much like a ‘date,’ when they were still trying to pretend that their union wasn’t inevitable.

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“Dude, where have you been?” Finn launched himself from the couch the moment he came through the door. “It’s past 2am!”

“Sorry!” Kurt shucked off his jacket and started to pull off his gloves. “I just... got caught up.”

“How’d it...” Finn trailed off as he took in how Kurt looked. His hair flopped wetly to the side. It looked like he’s taken a shower and changed his clothes into a loose-fitting v-necked sweater. And his cheeks were pink. “...go.”

“Good! Really good, um...” Kurt shook his head and then burst into a big grin. “Sorry I was gone all day, we were just... talking.”

Finn came over and jerked the door closed behind him. “Well, smiling’s good. So it went good? What’d he say? C’mon.”

“Give me a second!” Kurt laughed.

Laughing was good, too.

Kurt reached into the fridge and grabbed a block of cheese, then looked into the cabinets. “Is Santana asleep already?”

“Yeah. She conked out hours ago.” Finn stood beside Kurt awkwardly. “Sooo...”

Kurt started cutting the block into thin, even slices. “So I talked to him. I told him, that was...”

“And...”

“And he was fine with it.” Kurt bit a piece of cheese and looked at Finn. “And he said that, he has it, too.”

“He has... HIV?! Adam has HIV?” Finn sputtered. “Really?”
Kurt bobbed his head. Finn gaped for a moment.

“Well, it’s not like we both have necrotizing fasciitis. We’re both in the age demographic where rates are on the rise, we both live in a large urban area...”

“But... but is...” Finn looked down and touched the back of his head. His chest was getting a little tight, and it took him a moment to realize that he was worried.

“It means he accepts me, and he knows what I’m going through. It means we can be together. And get through this together. This is a good thing... relatively.” Kurt placed a slice of cheese on a cracker and nibbled on it.

Finn didn’t know how to feel.

“Okay,” he managed.

Kurt licked his lips, and then stroked Finn’s arm gently. “It will be okay.”

“Do you really think that, or are you just saying it so I won’t worry?” Finn smiled half-heartedly. “Cause I’m gonna do that no matter what.”

“I think we are going to be okay, or... better than we were, anyway. Better than I was before you came to visit and helped me do this. And I’m glad you pushed. I really appreciate it.”

Finn bent over slightly to hug Kurt. He wasn’t sure who needed one more right now, but Kurt didn’t tend to initiate them, so Finn had to.

Kurt patted Finn’s back and smiled up at him. “He’s a good guy, Finn. He’s a really good guy. I wish you’d had a chance to meet him, outside of all of this, but I’d like you to meet him anyway. He’s not so sure that you’ll like him.”

“Like, in comparison? He has to be better than your previous guys.” Finn rolled his eyes.
Kurt laughed softly. “Maybe after Adam you won’t have to worry about my taste in guys.”

“As in... Like?” Finn arched a brow and stole a piece of cheese. “Like, he’ll improve your taste in guys?”

“As in, like, after today I think he might be the last one,” Kurt said with a coy little shrug.

“The last one... as in The Guy? Really?” Finn frowned as he thought about that. “Yeah, but didn’t you think Blaine was? Didn’t you think I was?”

Kurt swatted him. “Leave me alone! I’m having butterflies over here. I didn’t think I’d ever feel this way again after what Blaine did. I thought all the romance in the world was gone. I thought it was a lie, or at least, I didn’t get to have it.”

Kurt shook his head. “But with Adam... None of it is forced. We don’t have to pretend anything. There’s no lies, no hiding, no guilt, no passive aggressive manipulation. We’re just two guys who are crazy about each other.”

“No hiding. Aside from hiding your diagnosis?”

Kurt looked sternly up at Finn. “Fine. Yes. Which we both did, but neither of us were about to start a relationship without revealing the truth. Aside from that. And now it’s out and... Of course, it won’t always be easy, and it won’t be this perfect fairytale-- not even our parents have that-- but right now, it just feels good.” His expression softened, almost pleaded. “Finn, please, try to understand.”

“I do.” Finn took a deep breath and pressed his lips together, looking seriously at his brother. His cheeks were still a little pink.

Finn still had his doubts. Like even if everything was perfect in Kurt’s love life, it wouldn’t make the world a better place for him, or cure him. But when Kurt had first gotten together with Blaine, it seem like his days got just a bit easier. And when Finn had first gotten together with Rachel, for real, it had been like the world itself had gotten brighter. Everything was so, so hard; Finn wanted things to get just a bit easier for Kurt. Any amount of easier would do at this point.
“So am I gonna get to meet him tomorrow?” Finn asked.

Kurt bobbed his head. “If you want to.”

“Um-hm. Yeah, I’m sure.” Finn took a few crackers and stuffed them in his mouth before reaching into the fridge for some juice.

“We should both have some time after practice,” Kurt suggested.

“Oh, the Apples?” Finn’s voice was muffled with crumbs, and he quickly took a swig of OJ from his glass. “Can I see a practice? I told Marley that you were in a show choir now, and she got all excited.”

“Yes. You can tell her that college show choirs exist.” Kurt grinned. “They’ve been grounded barring admin approval. And they’re not popular, so it’s been hard for Adam to get anyone to sign off on us doing a performance off campus.”

“That sucks.” Finn wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “At least I’ll have something to talk to him about.”

“Exactly.” Kurt yawned and started to put the leavings of their after hours snack away. “I need sleep.”

“Don’t let Santana kick you out of bed,” Finn told him.

Kurt turned and headed for his curtain. “She doesn’t. She steals covers, and she stealth cuddles, but she doesn’t kick me out.”

Finn smiled and watched his brother go. Hopefully, this Adam wouldn’t be another heartbreaker. Kurt deserved, for once, to have his hopes rewarded, and not destroyed.
Chapter Thirteen

Kurt woke to the pleasant sensation of arms curled around him. He took one of the slim hands in his own, and squeezed, causing a throaty, pleased noise from his bedmate. He looked behind him, then pinched his eyes closed. A few more minutes of sleep would not be unwanted, even if Santana was spooning him again.

Soon enough though, the alarm on his phone rang, and he had to slip away from Santana, who seemed semi-awake herself and grabbed the pillow to smush over her head. He stretched and made for the bathroom, but mid-step, he heard Rachel singing selections from her high school run in *West Side Story* and sighed. They had a morning policy regarding the bathroom, but she seldom followed it. He went to the door to try the handle, and sure enough, it was locked.

So Kurt put on his shoes and coat, grabbed his bag and wallet, and darted down the stairs and around the corner to the little store there. After using their bathroom, he picked up some coffee for Finn, Santana, and himself, and some doughnuts, making sure to grab one of the lemon-filled that Santana liked and a few of the shell-shaped sweet breads... He wasn’t exactly trying to butter her up, but she did have to give up the couch so that his support system could stay in New York for a few more days, so a couple of fifty cent pastries weren’t much to ask.

On his way back around the corner, Kurt spotted a face-- semi-familiar, olive-skinned with freckles and framed with thick black hair.

“Tandy?” Kurt said as he passed.

His former coworker was hopping up and down in the cold, burrowing his hands deep in his coat. “Oh! Hey, kiddo!”

“Hey! I didn’t know you lived around here.” Kurt paused for a moment to yawn once again.

“Don’t. Just picking someone up. You?”

“Yeah, just around the corner. The roommate is hogging the bathroom, so I thought I’d get breakfast for everyone not being rude.” Kurt smiled cheerfully.

“Well... you look good,” Tandy managed after an awkward moment.
“You lie, but thanks. How’s everyone at the bar?”

“Oh, I left for better tipping pastures. I was getting sick of Mavis’ never ending gossip mill. Ugh, cow. Anyways... I’m at the new club over by Cafe Neko. You should come visit. Club Knockturn. The coworkers and clientele are a lot less... narrow.” Tandy gestured by holding his palms closely together.

Kurt smiled softly. “Maybe. I don’t know how much the boyfriend likes clubbing, but I’d kind of like to see him shirtless and smeared with glitter. Sounds like a good opportunity.”

Tandy laughed. “You have a boyfriend? I knew it! I knew you looked different. Happy does look good on you.”

Kurt bit his lip, trying to hold back a grin. If happy looked good on him, all the more reason to wear it every day. He sent Adam a little morning text on the way back to the apartment, then set the coffee and doughnuts on the table. He could hear a series of raps on the bathroom door and divined that Santana had been forced to rise by a fierce need to pee.

“C’mon, Berry! It doesn’t matter how long you stay in there; you’re not gonna be able to scrub off your troll face!” she bellowed.

Finn lifted his head from the couch suddenly and looked around in confusion.

“I brought coffee,” Kurt told him as he walked over. He set it on the coffee table and pointed.

“What’s that noise...” Finn murmured. “Sounds like cats.”

“Probably Rachel doing her vocal exercises in the shower, then Santana demanding to get into the bathroom before she wets herself. There’s doughnuts, too.”

Finn stared another moment, then perked up and went for the doughnuts.
“Save the one with yellow frosting for Santana,” Kurt instructed.

“Mm,” Finn responded.

Kurt took a couple of hard boiled eggs out of the fridge and peeled them for his own breakfast. He had both regular classes and a shift at both jobs today. He’d be burning the candle at both ends, so he couldn’t just be running on just sugar.

He added a piece of wheat toast to his meal and sat at the table where Finn was slowly chewing on a doughnut, and sipping his coffee, with his eyes still closed. They ate quietly together for about a minute, before the bathroom door opened and Rachel snapped at Santana, who pushed past her so quickly it very nearly became a body-check and then slammed the bathroom door shut. Rachel shot an angry look in Kurt’s direction, held her towel tightly, and disappeared behind her curtain. Her hair had looked dry, which meant she’d stayed in there doing her hair while Santana waited. That wasn’t even the most efficient way to do it; it got so humid in the bathroom. She must’ve opened a window before using her hairdryer.

Kurt rolled his eyes. He dabbed his mouth with a napkin, then went to take care of his dishes. Santana left the bathroom, pulling her hair into a ponytail high on her head.

“Sup, cuddlebug?” Santana asked.

“There’s doughnuts,” Kurt replied simply. “Lemon, and some of the uh, conkas?”

“Conchas,” she corrected. Her eyes widened and she swooped past Finn to peer into the box of doughnuts. Kurt set a plate in front of her and pushed the coffee into place. She sat and raised a brow. “You’re in a good mood,” she accused.

“I am.” Kurt smirked at her. “And it’s not just from your sweet lovin’ last night.”

“I can’t help it if you’re bootylicious.” Santana tore part of her doughnut off and licked the oozing lemony filling. “My lady-loving unconscious was fooled.”

“Hm.” Kurt let it go and stood, sipping his coffee. He needed to get dressed and out the door pretty soon.
“Wait... You’re in a really good mood. How’d it go with Doctor Who?” Santana pressed.

“Very good. I’ll fill you in later.”

“I’m following you on the subway,” she said, pointing at him. “Not just for the gossip, though. I have an audition... then work at the diner from hell.”

She made a face.

“I can get you an interview at Kellos,” Kurt offered. “It’s usually not hell. Or maybe you could talk to a bartender I know at Knockturn. Gay club.”

“I’ll take it. I’ll interview for both. I’m not gonna sit on my fine ass and wait for someone to hand me a job or destiny.” Santana shrugged and delicately pulled off part of a concha with her fingertips. “Gotta get out there and grab life by the balls, right?”

She made a growling sound, and Finn flinched and laughed softly.

Rachel reappeared dressed in a shimmery black top and a plaid skirt that barely covered her backside, and then looked around the table where everyone was seated. She approached and reached for a doughnut.

Kurt swatted Rachel’s hand. “Breakfast treats are for people who don’t lock the door during their two hour long shower in an apartment with five people.”

“It wasn’t two hours!” Rachel protested.

“It was pretty friggin’ long,” Finn muttered. His eyes still weren’t open.

“Like you need it anyway. Your ass is hanging out of that skirt already,” Santana said with a laugh.
“At least my face isn’t the size of the moon,” Rachel snapped.

“Oh, oh!” Santana straightened up. “Do you wanna play, little girl? Cause I’ll play. I’ll play all day every day.”

“Shuuuut uuuup,” Finn groaned, just as Kurt was about to tell them to cool it.

Rachel seemed torn between getting angry and laughing.

Kurt pulled the box closer, took out a blueberry cake doughnut for himself, and then offered the box to her so she could select one. “Fine, have one. Just please respect the bladders of your roommates? I’m tired of going out in the freezing cold every morning just to pee. And I can’t get another flu right now.”

Santana tilted her head back and clicked her tongue. The gentle lecture had just made her angrier. She wanted to really lay into Rachel for her thoughtlessness this morning... That was probably a signal that they’d fought yesterday when Kurt had been gone, too.

“It wouldn’t be so bad if there weren’t so many people here,” Rachel said, licking some chocolate off her fingers.

“Well, there were supposed to be two,” Kurt pointed out. “I didn’t start adding the roommates. And anyway, Finn’s not even here permanently, but I’m not going to kick my brother out for you when you could just be a little more considerate. I’ve been asking you to do better for months now, Rachel-”

Just then, a flash of tanned muscles appeared in the corner of Kurt’s eye, and he turned his head to look before his better sense could warn him not to. “Oh, c’mon. Not again!”

Santana smacked the table with both palms, waking Finn fully, and he looked around groggily. Then he caught the full sight of Brody walking up to Rachel. Stark naked.

“Dude!” Finn’s eyes bulged out.
“This. This is my life.” Kurt threw his hands up. “Really, Brody? Really?”

“Like something you see?” Brody teased.

“No,” Kurt replied.

Santana looked to Kurt and shrugged. “I’m cutting it off.”

Kurt raised his hands and shook his head.

“Jesus, dude, put that away,” Finn said as he turned back to the table and covered his eyes.

“There’s nothing wrong with being proud of your body,” Brody said with a big stretch.

“Of being proud of your body, yeah, there is,” Santana drawled. Her eyes flitted down between Brody’s legs and just stared, unamused, scrunching her nose in disgust.

“Even if you midwesterners are so repressed you talk your friends out of perfectly good roles,” Brody continued. “I just think, sometimes you just gotta let your body breathe, you know?”

“Ah. Nude self-righteousness in the morning,” Kurt said. “If you’ll excuse me, I have to go vomit and brush my teeth. Keep him off the furniture, please.”

Outside of the bathroom, Santana, Rachel, and Brody’s voices rose in argument.

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“Hot damn,” Santana said. She leaned back in her subway seat and looked up at Kurt with raised brows. “That’s unexpected. Well, I guess it’s on then, with Doctor Who?”

“Oh, it definitely is.” Kurt smiled to himself. Adam’s return morning text had included lots of little
“Did you go right back to his place and have the freakiest, most no-holds-barred sex ever? That shit’s gotta be wild. Is that where you were all day? Stuffin’ the English muffin?”

“I- What?” Kurt frowned and shook his head. “We fooled around a little, yes, but we didn’t...” Kurt gestured forward. “Not yet. We just now agreed to be a couple. We were mostly talking, and kissing, and more talking, and holding each other-”

“You are so not meeting my gossipy entertainment requirements here,” Santana said. “Needs more gay. And not the lesbian cuddling that you two are apparently engaging in.”

He looked down at her to see that she was still smiling. Of course she had to give him a hard time.

“Anyway, what would make sex with Adam ‘freaky’?” he asked.

“You’re both the walking dead, Mr. Tight Pants. What’ve you got to lose?”

Kurt almost lost his grip on the bar as he boggled at what she’d said.

“Is the walking dead too harsh?” she said after a minute.

“No- Well, yes, that’s awful. Don’t call me that. Tight Pants is okay. But, alright, there are still things to lose. Adam and I are both healthy. I’m not about to screw that up by barebacking. Is that what you’re suggesting? Seriously?”

“Calm down. I just figured, it’s like, if one of you has the flu, no hanky panky. If both of you do, you feel like crap anyway. Go nuts! In your case, two sets of ‘em.”

“Honey. There are different strains of the flu. And there are different strains of HIV. If you don’t use protection, you can infect each other or become resistant to your meds.”

Santana wrinkled her nose. “That sucks. Don’t you get any perks?”
“From HIV? Um... I get... to have all my stories be automatically more poignant than yours.” He shrugged. “That’s what I get. Oh, and I get a musical.”

“Where you die.”

“Not if you’re straight,” Kurt muttered.

Santana let out a cackle. “Ohhh, burn! Not even Broadway gives you a break!”

“I know, right? Were are my big gaaay happy musicals? Positive and loving it!” Kurt frowned. “That might be taken the wrong way.”

“Yeah, sounds like a nice death ditty for bug chasers,” Santana agreed.

When she reached her stop, Santana gave him a kiss on the cheek.

“I torture you a lot, but I’m happy for you. If anyone deserves a little bit of life not sucking it would be you.” She reached over and tapped his nose. “And I’m super jealous about it, too.”

“Oh really?” Kurt raised a brow as she stepped out of the subway car.

“What can I say! I’ve always gotten hung up on hot, smart blondes!” she called as the door started to close. “I want one!!”

Kurt shook his head. He couldn’t help the grin taking over his face.

After getting off at the stop near NYADA, Kurt took a moment to check his hair once more in a store window. It would be destroyed after dance class, of course, but he would be meeting Adam before that, so he had coiffed his hair up as high as it would go and let the bangs curl into a gradual cascade downward, leaving a few curls to hang over his forehead. He made a kissy face to himself, straightened the front of his corset vest, and hurried to Gideon Hall with a bit of a skip in his step.
Kurt made his way up the the stairway in front of the building and entered the large hall in the front. A few groups of people were clustered at intervals around the room. It would be just awful, if they had to interact with other people at the school.

Kurt spotted Adam by the announcements board and smiled, remembering Adam’s drive-by advertisement for the Apples. He was wearing one of his blue beanies, a weathered pair of jeans, and a tight red v-necked shirt with skinny navy blue stripes from the chest down. On top of that was a sort of fluffy olive colored cardigan that looked like it belonged more properly on a grandma than an utterly ripped and gorgeous actor.

With a fond grin, Kurt shook his head and approached him.

“Hello, lovah,” Kurt said boldly in his best imitation of Adam’s accent and tone.

Adam turned, frowning slightly, and then laughed when he saw it was Kurt. “Hullo. How’d you sleep?”

“No bad.” Kurt pulled his shoulders up, then reached into his messenger bag and pulled out a brown sack. “I brought you sweet bread and apple slices and a couple of hard boiled eggs.”

“Oh? What for?” Adam opened it and looked inside with a little sniff. “Mm.”

“For you, dumb dumb. For breakfast. Which you didn’t eat this morning because there is no food in your house,” Kurt said flatly. When Adam pouted just a little, Kurt slipped his arm around Adam’s back and leaned into him. “I missed you.”

“Good. Because I didn’t want to be the only one missing you during the six hours we’ve been apart.”

“No, not the only one. I wish I could’ve stayed over... but then I kind of doubt I would’ve gotten any sleep.” Kurt smirked.

“Ah... Well, if it’s that big a deterrent, I could sleep on the couch,” Adam offered.

“Nope. I’d end up coming out to lay on you.” Kurt reached up to comb Adam’s bangs out of his
eyes. “And then who would bring you breakfast? You’re surprisingly comfortable for someone who’s so ripped.”

“I’m not ripped.” Adam grinned and blushed a bit.

“You’re ripped like Jesus,” Kurt said firmly. “I wish I had abs like yours.”

“I’m more than a piece of meat, y’know!”

“Poor you,” Kurt teased in a sing-song voice. “Just so attractive. It must be such a burden.”

Adam shook his head. “What are you talking about? You’re the most handsome man on campus.”

“Okay, one, you’re a liar, and two, those two over there...” Kurt lifted his head slightly. “Rachel’s minions? They call me turtle face. One of the guys back in Lima calls me ‘gayface’. I was considered the lesser of a power couple in my last relationship, wherein he had quite the wandering eye. And apparently... penis. You don’t have to make up crap for me.”

“Your ex, much like mine, is a jackass,” Adam pronounced. He raised one hand to touch the line of Kurt’s jaw, and then Adam licked his lips slowly as he smiled. “Believe me when I say, you are the most beautiful man I’ve ever seen in real life.”

Kurt made a noise in his throat and sputtered, ducking his head a little.

“You are. Kurt, I wouldn’t lie to you. I honestly feel that way.” Adam waited until Kurt lifted his head again, and then smiled warmly. “It’s so easy for you to call me a Greek god, but you doubt it when I state bald facts. I don’t know what gayface means, but I assume it means that person is jealous over how handsome you are.”

“Maybe. I don’t really understand him that well.” Kurt took Adam’s free hand and interlocked their fingers, then pulled Adam’s hand closer to press a kiss to the back of it. “Let’s get you some tea so I can make sure you eat before I have to go to class.”

“I do have my own mother, you know,” Adam informed him as he led the way to the little cafe in
“Does she know you don’t eat breakfast? Because Suzanne Somers says that skipping breakfast is like suicide.”

“That is not true,” Adam scoffed.

“It is true!” Kurt held out one hand and started counting reasons on his fingers. “It lowers your cholesterol, it improves your energy and endurance throughout the day, it helps your concentration, it assists with weight control.”

“Conchas are going to help me control my weight?”

Kurt swatted his arm. Adam turned to press a kiss to Kurt’s cheek.

***

Kurt finally let go of Adam after they’d spent an hour and a half together. Kurt was due at Free Sing, and though Rachel and her minions were likely to monopolize the spots available, if they left the front for more than a minute, Kurt had a number of songs running through his head. They would drown in the sap of his new relationship.

“I want to skip.” Kurt stroked his fingers over Adam’s cheek. “Find some place quiet around here... Get not so quiet...”

“Oh, hush,” Adam muttered, blushing to his ears.

Kurt moved his palm over Adam’s chest. “Are you really not a Greek god? Not even a little bit?”

Adam licked his lower lip and smiled bashfully.

“I have to say, honey, I am constantly floored that you don’t know how absolutely sublime you are.”
“Sublime?”

Kurt leaned in for a tender kiss that stretched on for so long that he didn’t hear the laughs and the whispers behind them until Adam started to pull back.

“freakshow-”

“Do you think it hurts when The Turtle bites him?”

“A turtle and an old troll.”

“I think my eyes are going to vomit.”

Kurt stayed put a moment longer, taking the time to seal their moment tight with another peck on the lips. Then he whispered, as he weaved his fingers through the back of Adam’s hair, “I don’t care what they think. I absolutely don’t care. I have the most amazing man in this whole city, and it’s not something I dreamed I could have. So they don’t get to ruin it. Okay?”

Adam pressed his lips together and nodded, then swept Kurt into a tight embrace.

“Have a good day?” he said.

“The best. I’ll see you at lunch. Finn’s coming.”

“Meeting the family.” Adam raised both brows and shrugged. “Moving so fast.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t be forcing you to meet the rest of my family for a while. Finn’s way less scary than my dad.”

“And family’s in England... and Jersey. That’s a world away.”
Kurt laughed and awarded him one more kiss before accusing, “New Yorker,” and heading into the classroom. Rachel’s sycophants followed him in, looking smugly to one another.

“Whatever. He’s hotter than the both of you combined, as well as any guy either of you could get on your best day.” Kurt crossed his right leg over his left and settled into his seat.

“You realize that this is social suicide,” Ronnie told him, holding his right hand up by his face like Tim Gunn.

“I’ve been on the bottom before.” Kurt caught Ronnie smirking out of the corner of his eye, but ignored the innuendo. “And I’ve never been popular here. I didn’t come to the premier musical arts school in the country to be popular. I came to be great. So I’m going to focus on that, and if I get to be happy along the way, that’s even better. Why do you care about my social status, anyway?”

“Girl, we are just warning you,” Paul said, flipping his blond hair back.

“I am not a girl, Paul.” Kurt looked to the door as Rachel breezed in, past the other students, and set her bag down at the front of the room. “Looks like your mistress is here.”

Ronnie screwed his face up indignantly. Paul touched his shoulder.

“Do you have her music?” Paul asked.

“Shut up.” Ronnie stalked up to the piano.

Brody entered a moment later. Kurt supposed it was his turn to run Free Sing. The professors had better things to do, so normally the period would be run by one of the TAs. These were often populated by juniors, seniors, and grad students. More often the seniors, since the grad students got picked up by the professors for their needs. Grad students didn’t give a flying fuck about the social jockeying of the undergrads, and usually just slapped down a sign-up sheet.

Juniors and seniors either took over Free Sing themselves or promoted their new up-and-comers. No point wasting brain energy on who Brody would let take over the class.
Rachel started off the day with a passable version of “People,” then a “little something I’ve been working on” (aka, “Don’t Rain on My Parade”), and then she let Brody join her for “Somewhere”… which was the same version from the school play. After the first two, Kurt was getting a little bored, and he’d heard them all from her before, and he hadn’t gotten to bed at a decent hour at all. So midway through her West Side Glory, his chin dipped to his chest, and he started to snooze.

“Do you mind?”

Brody’s voice startled Kurt awake. The number was over. Kurt wiped his mouth and looked up at him with narrowed eyes.

“Pardon?”

“This is a class,” Brody said, crossing his arms and pinching his lips to the side. “You don’t get attendance for sleeping.”

Kurt felt his cheeks beginning to redden. A few people were laughing, but apparently he hadn’t been the only sleepy audience member, because he heard a yawn.

“Well, this is supposed to be a class where we all get to participate, and it’s your job to make sure that happens,” Kurt replied in his politest tone. “Not a ‘My Girlfriend, Live in Concert’ class.”

Paul turned from his seat in the front row. “She is fabulous! We could all learn from her!”

“I’m not casting aspersions on Rachel—” Kurt gestured to the front, where Rachel was giving him her ‘wounded outcast’ look. “—but if you set the class up as one Barbra number back to back, with no criticism or discussion in between, and no other people getting a chance to sing, it isn’t exactly pedagogically effective.”

“Actually, that last number was from West Side Story,” Rachel said, as though she was explaining to a very simple child.

Kurt rolled his eyes. “Oh, really? Is that where’s it’s from? Because it sounded just like your
“Barbra numbers.”

“How can you hate Barbra?” Ronnie argued.

“I... don’t, but I also happen to like Sondheim quite a bit. And Webber, and LuPone, and Gaga, Beyonce, and Madonna, and Coward, and Larson. There’s a lot of ways to sing.” Kurt shrugged and held his hands to the side. “Look, that arrangement of ‘Somewhere’ is a cop-out. The high notes are scored down into your power range so you can belt, but you’re not doing the emotional work demanded of the song, and worst of all, you’re not challenging yourself.”

“I can’t believe you would say that!” Rachel shook her head slowly. “You have never been supportive of me!”


Rachel stood with her hands on her hips, staring him down... then she looked to the floor for a moment, smiling bitterly and shaking her head. The tension continued to tick upward every second of silence that passed.

“Look, I’m not trying to be shady, and I’m sorry if that came off harshly. Criticism is part of this business, and you know, part of this class—”

“Do you really think you can do better than me? Hm?” Rachel shot a quick smirk to Brody. “You? The guy who got rejected from this school not once, but twice? Ha!”

Kurt leaned forward and narrowed his eyes. No matter what, he couldn’t believe that she’d just blurted that out to their entire class. He could, if he wanted, inform the whole class that he, unlike one solo-hogging diva here, could at least remember the lyrics to his own songs. But he couldn’t force himself to be that person.

“Carmen Tibideaux rejected me, and Carmen Tibideaux made the call to accept me,” Kurt said evenly, coming to his feet. “Just like she accepted all of you, under whatever circumstances you were auditioning. I can pretty much guarantee, though, that none of you were doing your audition in front of alums and professionals who could make or break your career if you happened to choke.”

Rachel’s cheeks went bright red.
“Well, there is a way to settle this,” Brody said.

He’d been watching them with a measured look, the same one that he got on his face whenever Rachel seemed angry at Kurt or Santana, and he now appeared to be assessing the situation.


Kurt froze, his heart racing in his chest in anger and his mouth hanging open in disbelief. Was she really so upset with him for asking her to be considerate of bathroom rules and not hog all the time in Free Sing? In the greater scheme of things, Midnight Madness was just as silly as the ‘diva-offs’ they used to have in high school, but no matter how little esteem his peers held for him currently, losing this to Rachel would make it much worse.

The class was now looking to him for an answer.

Brody clapped his hands together and rubbed them eagerly. “Well, well. Two rising NYADA stars. Kurt Hummel, Carmen Tibideaux’s darling and Neil Garber’s new star, versus Rachel Berry, the winner of the Winter Showcase. What do you say, Kurt?”

Carmen’s darling? Was Brody high? Kurt nearly burst into laughter at that assertion. She had always been very critical of him, especially when she thought he wasn’t emotionally investing in his work.

At that moment, though, it came together for him. Rachel’s social stock had dropped dramatically since she’d been sent back to Cassandra’s beginner class. Brody had been egging her to do something since the snowstorm, and she’d been holding back, probably because for the first time, she’d noticed how sick Kurt was.

He even remembered bits of their conversations.

“There are ways around the fallout here, if you want to take them.”

“I like being attached to the school’s premier stunning young ingenue.”
“See? They can try to bring you down all they want, give you crap about your dancing and acting classes, but they can’t keep up with you vocally.” Brody looked to Kurt, then back at Rachel and raised his brows, pursing his lips.

Now that Kurt was better, now that he seemed happy again for the first time in a long damn time, now that he was getting along better with Santana and Finn... Now it was okay to come at him for her personal gain.

Kurt was truly, truly done with this cut-throat, me-first attitude with her, though. He’d been done around the time of the stupid senior class president elections, and her endless whining and crying about having lost her chance to get into NYADA. How many times was he supposed to forgive her for stepping on his neck to get what she wanted?

“Fine. I accept.” Kurt picked up his bag and eyed the co-conspirators sharply. “And just to sweeten the deal? If I win? You and the Naked Man need to get out of my apartment.”

The look of shock on Rachel’s face was worth it. Because she couldn’t back out now, and she clearly hadn’t counted on Kurt deeming this an unacceptable move. Before she could say anything else, though, Brody answered for her:

“Sounds great. But when Rachel wins, you, the farm boy, and the psycho dyke have to move out.”

“Wonderful. Just let me know the time and place so I can take off work.” Kurt turned and strolled out of the room as casually as he could muster.

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Adam had really been hoping Kurt would make it to the restaurant first. He didn’t so much want to meet Kurt’s brother on his own. But it was nearing one o’clock and Adam continued to mill around outside.

After the text that morning about Midnight Madness, Adam felt he was more worried about this development than Kurt was. He was almost defiantly nonchalant about the whole matter, it seemed. If it had been Adam, he would’ve been worried-- he would’ve been shaking all over, googling every Broadway song in the past ten years like he was cramming for a final-- but Kurt was truly a better, more versatile singer than much of his class, and Adam had never really
appreciated Rachel’s niche style. So it was possible Kurt could just wing it and blow everyone away. More than possible. Even if he didn’t win, that much was likely.

Adam checked his phone one more time and looked around. The line right now wasn’t out the door... and that might change before Kurt and Finn got there. Adam did some mental math with the tip money he had in his wallet, then texted Kurt: Do you want me to go ahead and order for you? How long will you be?

A moment later: Just got out of class. 10-15 min? I think Finn is wandering around in the area by now.

Adam looked up and saw an extremely tall man who had walked past him five minutes ago ambling back that way. He wore a pair of scuffed up jeans and sneakers and an almost unnecessarily puffy coat.

Does he have a big puffy black and gray coat? Adam asked.

Yep :) Kurt replied.

Adam took a breath and started walking towards Finn (or he hoped it was). “Pardon! Hi. Are you Finn?”

“Oh, uh, yeah.” He blinked and circled his lips for half a moment in confusion. “Oh, are you Adam?”

“Yes! Kurt running a bit late. He has his acting class today, and they often run over.”

“Yeah. Huh. I don’t remember him saying you were a Brit. Did I just forget, or-” Finn shook his head and waved the thought off. “Whatever. We’re here. So, we just wait on him out here? Or is it too cold for you?”

“It is a bit colder in England. Do you know Sussex?”

“Sussex...” Finn narrowed his eyes and frowned deeply. Then suddenly: “They have those little
yellow birdies on their flag!”

“Oh! You *do* know it!”

Finn sort of rolled his eyes as he grinned. “I dunno even know how I knew that!”

Adam’s phone buzzed with another text from Kurt. *Everything bagel with scallion? Wheat. With cucumber. You can get in line if you find Finn!*

“Oh. C’mon in,” Adam said, gesturing for Finn to follow him. “We’re going to get on line before it gets long.”

“Cool.” Finn walked behind him and made big turns of his head as they entered. He smacked of tourism, so Adam hoped Finn hadn’t run into any trouble on the street.

Adam plucked up a menu for Finn as they joined the line and handed it to him.

“Do they really just have a bunch of bagels here?” Finn asked.

“They do indeed. Some other sandwiches, too, but mostly bagels.”

“What’s a knish?” Finn tilted his head to the side.

“It’s... sort of a dumpling, with different things in it.”

“Ohh. So, like, how do you order? Just like, hey, I’d like this kind of bagel with this kind of cream cheese? Do you have to get the fish?”

“No, you don’t.” Adam smiled at the face Finn was making over the fish. “And it’s more expensive if you do. If you want to try it out, they have a lox cream cheese, and it’s alright. If you get the sandwich, what they do is give you the bagel you choose with a thick layer of cream cheese inside, and you can add in tomatoes, capers, onion, whatever. Kurt and I have picked up bagels here before.” He peered over the menu. “We’ve liked... the scallion cream cheese, jalapeno-- Kurt
loves those-- and also the strawberry, sun-dried tomato, raisin walnut...”

“Okay, okay...” Finn pinched his lips to the side in an odd frown/smile as he looked over the options. “What are you getting?”

“Hm. I’ll probably go with the oat bagel, sun-dried tomato, red pepper. I think Kurt will be pressing me to eat a less sugar filled lunch than I did breakfast.”

“How would he know?”

“Because he made me eat it.”

Finn laughed. “Good. You shouldn’t skip breakfast, man.”

“So I’m told.”

When they reached the counter, Finn pulled out his wallet and took the lead, to Adam’s surprise. “I’ll try an everything bagel sandwich with lox cream cheese, aaand a poppy with strawberry, and two sides of potato salad... and whatever this guy wants.”

“You don’t have to pay-” Adam began.

“Nah, no problem. Just, say what you and Kurt need. And like, drinks, right? I’ve got a little left over for my trip budget because Kurt keeps trying to feed me healthy stuff.”

Adam didn’t want to protest too much, though an ease on his finances was never unwelcome. So he told the girl at the counter what he and Kurt wanted and watched as Finn forked over some cash for their meal for four. Adam wondered who the second bagel and side was for, but didn’t ask.

“Soooo, you and Kurt met at Callbacks?”

“Technically. I didn’t think he noticed me so much.”
Finn quirked his lips to the side and said softly, “He noticed.”

“I think he probably noticed more the second time. We collided into one another at NYADA.”

Finn grinned.

Adam felt very relieved. Finn was extremely easy to talk to, and not an iota of intimidation. Adam had anticipated more growling and ‘don’t hurt my brother.’ Instead, Finn asked him questions about NYADA, sort of tentatively, and then the two of them fell into talking about the challenges of leading a less than appreciated show choir.

By the time Kurt had walked in, twenty minutes had passed by, their food was already on the table waiting for them, and Finn had already eaten one and a half of his bagel sandwiches and put a dent in one of the sides of potato salad.

“Hi! Sorry!” Kurt exclaimed. He leaned over Adam and gave him a kiss before sitting down. “I thought I could get here sooner.”

“No problem. We’ve just been talking.” Finn pushed Kurt’s bagel and the second potato salad side toward him. “Eat.”

“Do you know how much fat is that potato salad?” Kurt frowned as he sat.

“Do you know how damn skinny you two are? Eat food.” Finn shook his head at Adam and crammed a big bite of his last sandwich into his mouth.

Kurt just chuckled and picked up half of his own sandwich before tearing off a piece to eat. “So what have you guys been talking about?”

“Glee. Apples,” Finn said with a full mouth.

Adam nodded and took a bite as well, but he sipped his tea and swallowed before speaking.
“Commiserating about our dearth of support.”

When Finn frowned, Kurt clarified, “Mutual bitching.”

“How was your day, darling? Are you stressed?” Adam asked.

“Why would Kurt be stressed? What happened?” Finn leaned forward.

Kurt shrugged, and then, in between bites of bagel and potato salad and sips of tea, recounted what had happened in his Free Sing class, answering questions as he went along.

“So... she challenged you to another diva-off?” Finn asked dubiously.

“Pretty much?” Kurt looked at Adam. “People are acting like this is a death match. How serious is it?”

“It....” Adam let out a tense breath. “Well, you’re not on the top of the social hierarchy as a result of in the Apples and... dating me. If you lose...” Adam bit his lip and tried to think of how to soften what he had to say.

“Adam...” Kurt urged softly.

“I wouldn’t expect any more seniors to pick you for their projects. There is also a slight chance that Neil might decide to cut you from his play, but I don’t know if Neil is the sort to do that. It’s happened in the past.”

Kurt nodded slowly. “Anything else?”

“Sometimes students find themselves edged out of selective classes, or passed over for opportunities, when other students run the committees for those opportunities. I’m not going to lie, the stakes do matter.” Adam wiped his mouth. “At the same time, if you continue to excel, and every indication is that you will, then the loss itself won’t matter so much in the long run.”
Kurt sipped his tea and sighed.

“Also... Kurt, I’m more worried about the living situation,” Adam said. “Do you have the money to find a new place? I mean, of course, you could stay on my couch, and Aude loves you, and any of the Apples would help you and Santana out, but housing is so expensive in New York.”

Kurt cringed. “Ye-ah, I’m hoping Santana isn’t going to be absolutely furious at me. But she and Rachel haven’t been getting along since she got here at all, so maybe she’ll be okay if we ease her into a location that doesn’t require daily doses of diva.”

“What the hell is wrong with her?” Finn asked suddenly. “I mean Rachel. She always says you’re her best friend, so what the hell is this?”

“She’s mad. She’s jealous. And Brody wants to ride her coattails to actually being socially relevant,” Kurt answered. He poked a bit of potato around on the plate. “It doesn’t matter now. It’s done, and I probably won’t win. The part about the apartment is my fault. I was just so mad. I wanted her to realize that this mattered.”

Adam blinked a few time in surprise. “Kurt, you’re at least as good as she is. Whatever song it is, I’m sure you’ll sing it well.”

“Yeah, but even if I do, I think people hate me more than they hate her. Her rep has taken a nosedive lately, but I’m the big gay Apple they think is ‘Carmen’s darling.’ Of course they want to take me down a peg,” Kurt reasoned.

“No.” Adam shook his head. “That’s not how it works. Maybe a few would be swayed, if... oh, I don’t know. It’s happened when we had a student taking part in the chorus of a Broadway show at the time of the M&M. She had the clout to intimidate people. But as a rule, people aren’t going to vote for whoever is more popular already. This ritual... it sort of cancels everything else out. People take pride in choosing who they truly believe did the better job, and there’s not a lot of patience for people who refuse to make their best assessment.”

Kurt leaned on his hand and looked up at Adam, rolling his tongue in his cheek.

“I’m saying that you could very well win.” Adam wiped his palms on his jeans, then took Kurt’s other hand. “We just need to be wary. If Brody’s in charge, he’ll see to it that the person on the piano plays in her key, and he might ‘by chance’ select a song that will favor her vocal style. But
honestly, Kurt, your range is larger than hers. They can’t select a song you wouldn’t be able to do.”

“What they pick one I don’t know?”

Adam shook his head again. “It won’t happen. This is a Broadway school. The songs come from Broadway shows and other musicals.”

“Which I know pretty well.”

“Yes. And, as challenger, Rachel will have to go first, so you can refresh your memory on the lyrics. But it’s the performance they’ll be evaluating, not your memory. When I was a fresher, Jack Allen won even though ninety percent of what he sang was abject nonsense.”

“What song?” Finn asked.

Adam touched his temple, thinking back. “It was something from Avenue Q.”

“Well, that fits. What if it’s...” Kurt’s eyes went back and forth. “Tick, Tick, Boom?What if it’s-”

“It never has been. I’m telling you, they’re fairly standard.” Adam squeezed Kurt’s hand.

“Dude, I don’t get it. Why’d you say yes if you didn’t think you could win?” Finn asked. “Why’d you up the stakes? I’m goin’ home, but you need a stable place to live. Moving cause a lot of stress, and you don’t need stress. You need like, a room full of fluffy pillows and kittens. Plus your meds.”

Kurt looked to Finn and tented his brows. “I’m tired of being pushed around. I’m tired of being pushed around by my friends. If I lose, and if I lose the competition and lose my home, Rachel’s going to have to rethink her behavior. If she wants to ever be friends again, if she wants to have any real friends left, she’s going to have to make some changes. I just can’t keep living like this.”

Kurt threw his hands in the air. “And if she doesn’t change, then I’d rather move. I just can’t with her anymore.”
“You shouldn’t have to put up with her,” Adam said. “She’s a nightmare. Even the night I met you, she was a bit much, so quick to accept your praise as her own. And truthfully, she’s been singing the same types of songs on repeat since the Showcase. If she doesn’t do something different soon, it won’t just be Kurt that she loses.”

“That was all I was saying. I wasn’t trying to embarrass her, or tear her down, but Rachel just doesn’t like criticism.” Kurt pushed his plate aside and slumped over onto his arms.

Adam frowned and rubbed Kurt’s back. As defiant as he seemed, Adam could tell that Kurt was more upset about the situation with Rachel failing to resolve than any of the consequences of the competition itself.

“I know you wouldn’t do that,” Finn said. “And she knows it, too, even if she was mad at the time.”

“Brody was just trying to initiate a fight, so that Rachel would finally do what he wanted of her,” Adam said. “It’ll be all right. No matter what happens, you’ll still have the Apples, and you’ll still have me, and Finn, and none of us will let anything happen to you or Santana.”

Kurt nodded against his hands. Adam bowed over and gave Kurt a kiss on the temple.

After lunch, the three of them walked Kurt to the subway, since he had to get to work. The subject changed to activities for Finn’s Glee kids back in Lima, and Kurt seemed in better spirits by the time he had to get in the car. He gave Adam a kiss goodbye, and promised Finn to make dinner (with a big salad) when he got home (so Finn wasn’t to order pizza).

After Kurt had gone, Adam went with Finn back up to the street. It was time for Adam to go to work now.

“I’m so glad you’re a cool guy,” Finn admitted out of the blue.

“O-oh? Thank you.” Adam tilted his head to the side, looking up at Finn. He was such a tall man. He made Adam feel like a wee elf.
“Kurt’s last guy... well, the last two guys. Even before that! Let’s just say, I’m really, really glad you’re a good guy. He has the weirdest judgment about guys. You’d think it’d be better, what with the whole musical romance thing, but he just picks jerks all the time, and guys who are straight out bad for him.”

“Oh.”

“He deserves a guy who listens, and who cares if he’s upset. I dunno if the two of you will work out, but—” Finn shrugged. “The way you two are together? You’re already miles past the last guy.”

Adam frowned as he thought on that. He hated the thought that Kurt might be settling for Adam. This thing, that he didn’t think he could have, or maybe didn’t think he deserved, could happen with Adam, because they were both positive... Adam had to chase the thought away. Kurt hadn’t even known about Adam’s diagnosis. It wasn’t a factor in the two of them falling for one another.

Adam shushed his doubts.

“I hope I live up to what he deserves.”

“Start by not cheating on him,” Finn said bluntly.

“I can’t even understand how anyone would. Kurt is... he’s beautiful. Yes, he’s a lovely person, brave, kind, ambitious, all that. But he’s also gorgeous. The idea that someone would go looking for something else when they had him is baffling, honestly.”

“I dunno. The more I heard Blaine whine about it, the more I started to feel like he did it to punish Kurt for not being at his beck and call.”

“Sort of hard to do in another state?”

“Yeah. Exactly. I kind of wanted to punch him in the balls, but technically, I’m their teacher, kind of. It wouldn’t be right.”

“No, I don’t suppose it would.” Adam smiled a little. “I was expecting a little more brotherly
“Huh? Oh. Well. If you’d dumped him when he told you, maybe I’d feel different. It’s just... It’s really, really great to see him happy. He gets depressed, and I know that part’s not over, but it’s been going on for years. Just a break from it, that’s something to be grateful for, you know?”

“That’s... That’s really true.”

“You know what I’m talking about.”

“I do. And I’m grateful that I do. It helps to understand what he’s going through. I’ve been through it. I wasn’t so brave, though. I’ve had visits from my sister, and I’ve never told her. None of my family.” Adam looked up the street and shook his head. “I’m not that brave.”

Finn shook his head. “To hear Kurt talk about it... I don’t know. Maybe you should, but you’re not obligated. I was mad at first that he didn’t tell me, but... you have to earn trust, and it’s hard for him to share things like this. He was pretty much getting bullied to death junior year, and he didn’t go out of his way to make us notice. We should’ve noticed, but he knew we didn’t, and he just kept the worst of it to himself. To tell people something like this, you have to trust that they’ll be able to handle it.”

Finn shoved his hands in his pockets. “You have to trust they won’t spill what you told, even by accident, or they won’t make it about them, or turn it to their advantage.”

“That’s a very difficult thing to do. Trust.”

Finn patted Adam’s shoulder. “You’re a good guy.”

“Thank you.” Adam dipped his head slightly.

After a moment, Finn continued, “I don’t think he’ll ever tell Rachel, now. Do you think, if I talked Rachel outta this thing...?”

“I don’t think she can afford to back out now. That would destroy her standing, and she’s already
walked out of a part in an independent film, been held back in dance, and created a rep of being a diva.”

Finn grew quiet. He looked very disconcerted.

“I wish she’d lost the Showcase,” he said after a long silence. “She’s awesome, y’know. She can be. But she gets a big head, and she cuts corners sometimes, and when she feels threatened, sometimes she gets just... batty. Once she sent a rival singer to a crack house.”

Adam’s eyes widened. He was going to have to keep a close eye on Kurt for the next few days. He wasn’t going to lose him now.

“But she can be better than this. It’s not just because we dated... or because I loved her. She really could be a good friend sometimes.” Finn shrugged and shook his head. “I don’t think I’ve ever been disappointed in somebody. And my first girlfriend lied about me getting her pregnant. At least she was trying to protect herself from her asshole parents, in a way.”

Adam didn’t feel inclined to defend Rachel. She’d not been the one to call Kurt’s brother or the one to force support on him when he was sick. He had a hard time understanding why Kurt would call her a friend. But at the same time, he did like Finn quite a lot.

“Jinx, my roommate, divides the social hierarchy at NYADA into two main factions,” Adam explained, picking his words thoughtfully. “There are the mainstreamers, or ‘cannibals’ as we so colorfully call them, and then there are the artists, aka, the risk takers and those who are in it for making something new and innovative. NYADA likes to think it caters only to artistry and innovation, but the reality is that often, they’re supporting students who don’t put that much thought into their craft. Kurt is an artist, through and through. Every performance, Finn. Every single one. Even the ones that don’t work out so well are thoughtful and poignant. They mean something more than simply reanimating someone else’s words that have been sung a million times by everyone else. It’s just in him. It’s how he relates to his art, his craft. And he cannot be any other way. It has to be meaningful, or he’s unhappy. He and I are alike in that way. I love playing around with music, but I don’t think I could slip into the mainstreamer way of thinking if I tried.”

He paused in front of the Crab Apple Cafe. He wasn’t late for work yet, and Finn was rapt with attention.

“Rachel entered NYADA with Carmen Tibideaux’s blessing,” Adam continued. “I saw her first performance in the Round Room, and it wasn’t bad. It had a lot more life in it than what she’s been
doing recently. But what happened was that she got a lot of praise, very quickly, and a lot of attention. She fell in with the mainstreamer crowd, and they value, above everything else, making connections and using one’s social status as leverage... and as a weapon. That’s what she learned in her first semester here. I’m not saying what she’s done is okay. It’s not, and I’m having a hard time understanding why Kurt would want to keep her around... but it is a result of her current company, and not just poor choices or arbitrary meanness.”

“I didn’t think you could fall into a ‘bad crowd’ at a musical theatre school,” Finn said.

“Talk to her if you think it’ll help. My guess is that she’ll just dig her heels in against Kurt at this point.” Adam shifted his weight and crossed his arms. “I don’t know if he’s right that she’ll show him sympathy if she wins.”

“Huh. Maybe. She kinda backs off after she gets what she wants.”

“I don’t think that’s going to be good enough for Kurt anymore.”

“No. You’re right. Even if I keep hoping for her to be better... I don’t think Kurt needs to keep...” Finn made a noise and looked up. “What’s that word? It’s... enable. He enables her. Because he’ll take care of her until he’s physically and mentally exhausted. But he just can’t do that anymore, and y’know, he shouldn’t have to. And it’s not good for her either, because she could take care of herself, and pick herself up if she fell, but she never will. Not if someone’s there to do it for her all the time.”

“True.” Adam sighed. “I have to get in. Want some coffee?”

“Sure, I’ll have a cup before I try to find my way back to the loft. I need to think about what I’m gonna say, anyway.”

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Santana tucked her notepad in her server’s apron pocket and pulled out her cell phone. Kurt was calling. When did Kurt ever call? Aside from the seven-way discussions between the Glee clubbers, Kurt usually stuck to texts. So when he’d said earlier that they needed to talk, she assumed a slew of texts coming her way, or another stealth subway chat.
For a brief moment, as she stepped away from the dining area, Santana felt a stab of worry. Something could’ve happened. Kurt could be in the hospital. Adam could be. Why else would he call?

“Speak,” she said.

“Hey! I’m glad I caught you. I wanted to talk to you before you got home, but I’ve been in between things all day. I’m so sorry.”

“I’m stepping out on my tables, so make it quick,” she replied gruffly, toying with the buttons on her work shirt. If he were sick, he’d have started off with that news. Probably? Definitely not sound that apologetic.

“Whew. Um. Well, you’re not gonna like this, but... it’s about staying in the apartment-”

“Okay, if that high maintenance daddies’ girl told you that she wants me out of the apartment, she’d better grow a pair and tell me herself!”

“No, no! That’s not... Not exactly. Look...”

Santana leaned back against the wall, pursing her lips as Kurt quickly related what had happened that day. Several emotions washed over her, one after the other: surprise that this had happened, anger first at Rachel, then at Kurt for accepting the challenge at those terms, then frustration that there was a challenge like this at all. She knew Rachel and Brody were up to something. Brody even more so, but Rachel didn’t see it, and she didn’t want to. Even worse, she was pulling the same shit she had in high school-- No, during sophomore and junior year before she’d become tolerable.

“I really am sorry that I got you caught up in this,” Kurt repeated. “I shouldn’t have accepted before talking to you-”

“She’s been dying to get rid of me since the day I got here,” Santana snapped. “Of course, she’s not gonna step in when Zoolander comes after me.”

“Whatever happens, where I go you go. Okay? You won’t be without a place to live.”
“Hummel, I have my mom’s savings. If I’ve got to crash at a cheesy hotel for a few days, I’ll be fine. I’d say I can’t believe Rachel would do this to you but it’s not even the first time she’s slotted her ambition over her ‘best gay.’”

Kurt made a noise at the term. Santana knew he hated it when Rachel said things like that.

“Anyway, you shouldn’t have to use that money, unless we end up getting another place together. My savings went into the deposit on the loft,” Kurt said.

“Doesn’t she have to give you back your deposit if you move out?”

“I’ll try to make sure that happens. I don’t want you to get stiffed here. This is Rachel and my mess-”

“Not really.” Santana sighed heavily. She wasn’t inclined to apologize, but desperate times... “I could’ve been nicer to the boyfriend. And I could’ve retracted the claws with Rachel.”

“She could’ve retracted them with you. Brody didn’t have to bring you into it. It really should’ve just been between me and them. I think it bothers him that you don’t like him. And frankly, I’m really bothered by what he called you. He’s never been like that before. Made jokes, yes, but he’s always acted like he was okay with people like us.”

“Guys like you,” she corrected. “Some guys aren’t so thrilled that lady loving ladies exist. Oh, they’re cool with bi gals, if that means they’ll have a threesome or let them watch. Straights are fucking gross. But overall, these guys are homophobic as hell.”

Kurt grew quiet for a moment, then: “You shouldn’t have to live like that. I can get Aude to take you for the night... or Adam. His roommate won’t mind. She’s lady-loving friendly.”

“You don’t- What does that mean?”

“She’s bi-ish.”
“What’s bi-ish?”

“Attracted to more than one gender but leaning towards feminine ones? I don’t know, that’s the word she used. Well. Bi-ish, pan, and... queermo?”

Santana bowed her head forward and shook her shoulders in laughter. How to confuse a Hummel. Women’s sexuality.

“Ye-ah. Thanks. But I’m not going anywhere. I paid rent this month, and she and her lesbophobic twatwaffle of a boyfriend are going to have to suck it up until we’ve officially lost. When is this thing?”

“Not until Thursday. I got a text from Rachel that they couldn’t be sure the campus would be deserted until then.”

Santana nodded her head to the left. “‘Kay. We’ll hold off on the apartment hunting until then.”

They talked for a moment more, but then Santana could see table nine’s food at the window, so she got off and went to earn her keep, such as it was. She’d never had to search for a place before. At Louisville, she’d stayed in the dorms (briefly), and when she’d come up to New York, she had (half-heartedly) made plans to look for her own place if Kurt and Rachel hadn’t been too welcoming...

But then Kurt hadn’t even been there, and Rachel hadn’t seemed particularly happy for Santana to be around at all. The situation had just escalated from there. Santana knew that she hadn’t been a model ‘houseguest’, but she was paying to stay there. Friends, like Finn, got to stay over without paying a cent. Friends got consideration, a bed to sleep in. Friends didn’t get repeated hints that they were in “our space.” Friends were listened to when they complained about a shady boyfriend walking around naked and making unwanted comments.

Santana set two plates of pasta down a bit heavily onto the table nine and turned away sharply before they could say a word. A moment later, she was out the back door, letting it close behind her, and spent the next ten minutes sobbing into her hand and cursing at herself for being so stupid as to let herself think of Rachel as a friend.

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“You are a cunt!” Santana exploded as she burst through the door.

Finn jumped to his feet just as Santana threw her bag on the couch and stormed toward Rachel in the kitchen.

“Excuse me?” Rachel jerked backward and ran into the counter.

“Who the hell do you think you are with this shit? Midnight Madness. You’re going to throw us out on our asses just because Kurt didn’t lick your ass during one of your vanity concerts?” Santana demanded.

Finn drew closer to them, just in case Santana needed to be restrained. While she was angry, though, he remembered what it looked like just before she slapped the living crap out of you. It wasn’t a sight a man forgot.

“It’s my right as a NYADA student to challenge-” Rachel began.

“Don’t give me that! He’s your fucking best friend! And you’ve been a fucking monster since I got here-- using up all the fucking hot water, demanding he make you fucking tea, and revolving the entire fucking world around yourself!”

“He’s gone out of his way to embarrass me over and over!” Rachel shouted back. “My professional reputation is on the line here, and he’s not innocent! He’s been picking fights since we got back from Christmas, and he threw a fit when Brody moved in!”

“Oh, wow, can’t imagine why that would be. Having to room with a watered-down Barbra knockoff and Magic Mike the Musical,” Santana sneered.

“This is my apartment, too! I can live with my boyfriend if I want to. I’ve never heard you complain about Adam coming over.” Rachel countered.

“Adam keeps his clothes on and doesn’t stare at my ass!”

“Maybe you should keep your ass covered!”
“Oh, whatever, I could see your cervix in the outfit you had on this morning!”

Finn’s head began to spin as the two of them shrieked back and forth, back and forth. From Rachel’s looks to Santana’s high school rep, from Rachel the spoiled brat to Santana the coldhearted backstabber. Should he step in? It was getting so heated; at any minute, it could really explode.

“It’s not my fault you weren’t able to go to a good school, Santana,” Rachel said in a sugary tone. “Maybe you should’ve put more focus on your studies than on getting in the pants of every boy in the school.”

“Including your boyfriend!” Santana replied in a chipper voice.

“And it’s not my fault my parents are successful and can afford to support me while I’m in college. That’s no reason to viciously attack me for not letting you mooch anymore.”

“It’s not my fault you treat all your friends like garbage.”

“I don’t-”

“Bottom line, Berry: I’m sorry you don’t have any talent or integrity, and the only way you can feel like a success is to try to destroy people you claim to love, but that’s no reason to join Brody in his clearly lucrative business as a prostitute.”

The crack of skin on skin sounded in the apartment, but it wasn’t what Finn had expected. Regardless, he slipped in between them and pushed Rachel away from Santana, who was holding a very red cheek.

“That’s enough,” Finn said.

“Get off me!” Rachel pushed against him.

Finn let her go and stared down at Rachel, blinking slowly. He hadn’t had a chance to talk to her. Now might do, but Santana turned and stormed into the bathroom, slamming the door. Finn walked
over to the refrigerator and pulled out the ice trays.

“That was ugly,” he said.

“I know,” Rachel said in a soft voice. “I can’t believe she came at me like that.”

Finn narrowed his eyes at her, then grabbed a dish towel. “You hit her. She yelled at you for being awful to Kurt, and you hit her for it.”

“She called me a hooker, Finn,” Rachel protested. “She called me... the C-word.”

“Well.” Finn shrugged as he arranged the ice in the towel. “It’s not my place to comment on that. But how hard is it to say that the challenge isn’t personal? Except it is. I had to tell Adam today that I was afraid of what you’re going to do to Kurt before the challenge actually happens. Don’t expect his friends to be totally okay with how you’re coming at him.”

“Friends,” she muttered.

“Yeah. Okay. Friends, and his brother.” Finn tied the cloth together tightly.

“You sang to him,” Rachel said.

Finn looked up and frowned. “What?”

“At Callbacks? And you’ve been with him every second.”

“... I don’t get it. He was sad. I sang to him. That’s how we Gleeks roll.” Finn shrugged. “Why does that make you mad?”

“But why that song? Why a song like that, with you and Kurt?”
Finn raised his brows, and looked over her curious face carefully. “If you’re jealous of what me and Kurt have... Are you? Don’t be weird, Rachel. What is with you New Yorkers? I’m finally in a city where it’s okay to hug my brother. Don’t make it weird. We don’t have that in Ohio.”

“Okay, fine.” She sulked for a second, then looked up at him. “But why that song? That song’s about cancer, you know that, right?”

“Is it?” Finn half-smiled as he half-shrugged and went to the bathroom to knock on the door. “Hey. Ice man come or something.”

The door cracked open, and he came in slowly. Santana was sitting on the edge of the bathtub with her hands over her face. Finn came over and sat beside her, offering the ice pack. Santana looked up and took it in her hands, letting her slender fingers feel over it before pressing it to her cheekbone. Her eyes were red. Not just-been-bitchslapped red. They were both red, like she’d been crying for a while.

Finn felt dumb for not hearing that in her voice, or seeing it, sooner.

“Thanks,” she said quietly.

“So. This is just getting more and more fun,” Finn said lightly. “Kinda like, an awesome sleepover.”

Santana gave him a withering look, or tried to. Then she laughed softly. “God.”

“I shoulda warned you guys about that time I tried to live with Rachel.”

“She and Kurt managed for months before I got here.”

“I don’t think this is your fault.”

“I’m the one in this bathroom most likely to have a shiner in the morning,” Santana pointed out. “I didn’t help anything. It’s not a shocker why I don’t have any friends.”
“You have me.”

Santana scowled.

“And Kurt. And Adam, wow. He’s like... this crazy ray of British sunshine. I bet he’d be your friend, if you let him.”

“I’m not good at letting people.” Her lip trembled, and she sucked it in to make it behave. “I should’ve just kept crashing with Quinn- No, I should’ve just gone home to Lima. Spare everyone the trouble.”

Finn watched her fingers pressing against her knee and her breath going in and out. It was hard to believe that he had such a rough history with her, too.

“No, you shouldn’t have,” Finn said, finally. “If you hadn’t, how would I know Kurt needed me? He sure as hell wouldn’t’ve told me. He didn’t tell anyone. He wouldn’t have come out. He wouldn’t’ve come out to Adam. He wouldn’t be happy, and he might’ve gotten worse. And Rachel probably would’ve done this eventually anyway... or Kurt would’ve challenged her just to get her to simmer down.”

He paused. Then he bumped her shoulder. “Hey, it’ll be okay.”

“Do you really believe that?” Santana eyed him skeptically.

“I dunno. But this thing with Rachel and Kurt... That will be. And you will be.”

“It’s just hard, because... Senior year, y’know, we had all these friends, and I went so far out of my way to be nice to her. I held back so much with her, after I came out, because I was thinking, you’re out now, so no reason to be a huge bitch all the time. Quinn and I even gave her prom queen because she was feeling shitty about herself. We were all a pack of lovey saps, and now?!”

She shrugged haplessly and threw her hands up. “Everyone’s scattered everywhere. Hardly anyone talks to each other. People don’t even all come to our ‘reunions.’ Kurt’s sick.” She quieted for a moment and pressed a few fingers over her lips before continuing. “Quinn’s dating this jerk-off married professor and just cannot or will not see that this asshole is going to hurt her just as bad as every douchebag she dated in high school. No offense. I haven’t talked to Brittany or Mercedes in weeks. It sucks. Life is horrible.”
Finn reached an uncertain hand around her shoulders, then rubbed her arm. She sighed heavily, and moved the pack away from her face to gingerly touch her swollen cheek.

“I can’t believe that happened,” he said.

“Don’t rag on Rachel too much for this. It’s not like I’ve never slapped a bitch. Quinn says, when she slapped her at junior prom, Rachel said she ‘appreciated the drama.’”

Finn’s mouth hung open.

“We bitches be crazy,” Santana said, almost proudly.

“Maybe you two should just try to avoid each other until Thursday.”

“I don’t think I can do that.” Santana pressed the pack back on her face. “Maybe I should take up Kurt on his offer to bunk me with a friend.”

“Yeah, don’t worry about us. I’ll look out for Kurt. Rachel listens to me more than you, anyway,” Finn said. “Take care of yourself. If you have to move.. you know they say it’s as much stress as death.”

“I think you mean having a death of a loved one, not actually dying.”

“Both would probably be pretty stressful?” Finn grinned.

Santana smiled and laid her head on Finn’s shoulder.

The next few days were sure to be full of stress, no matter how things played out. Thank God he’d stayed in town.
Rachel had been knocking, incessantly, on the bathroom door for five minutes straight. Kurt buttoned up his jeans and flung the door open, giving her a dark look.

“What happened to thoughtful roommates not locking the door?” she asked smugly.

“I think you need to talk to someone about your insatiable desire to watch other people pee.” Kurt breezed past her, but he was sure that she had her mouth hanging open. The door closed a second later, suggesting that she couldn’t wait either.

The past two days had been an exercise in avoidance. Kurt and Rachel did their best not to even talk to each other. Finn wouldn’t let them be alone in the apartment together, something that further irritated Rachel, because, she said, it made her feel like Finn didn’t trust her.

“Well, I don’t. I know you better than anyone,” he’d replied.

So mornings they practiced evasion, with Kurt getting up early to get himself ready while Rachel was in the bathroom, then slipping in once she was done if she didn’t take too long. That part was normal. The part where they didn’t talk, at all, was new, and it made Kurt feel incredibly lonesome. He hadn’t come to New York just to be Rachel’s roommate, but his heart had swelled, seeing his friend for the first time in months across the distance of the fountain. She’d been so happy to see him. So happy to have him there.

They’d ridden bikes around the loft, the first time she’d seen it (the bikes, she’d rented for the day so they could travel around the neighborhood, through the park). They’d painted this place together. He’d coaxed her into having pizza and wine, even though they hadn’t found a vegan pizza place yet.

And he remembered meeting Brody for the first time, and thinking he looked kind.

Kurt was beginning to realize that he wasn’t as good a judge of character as he’d thought. Dave was a better person than he’d originally imagined. Blaine? Gio? Brody? It seemed like his faith in guys continuously proved to be foolish.

After leaving the loft, he went over to Adam’s, with breakfast in hand, and fed his boyfriend and
Santana. Jinx would sit, blinking at them with coffee in hand and her mohawk sticking in more odd angles than usual. Then they’d split, to work and classes, and all meet up for lunch with Finn. Then split again, and settle together again for dinner.

Kurt found himself increasingly exhausted this week. In part because he’d never been an easy sleeper. In part due to anxiety, in part caught up wondering how far Rachel would go to win this thing.

He wondered off and on if he should have accepted at all. There would’ve been more social censure on Kurt if he’d let it go... but much less stress on himself, and on Adam, who seemed more worried for Kurt.

Kurt knew, though, that he could survive this, too.

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It was freezing. Finn woke because of the cold. Normally he slept pretty hard, and now wasn’t an exception. When Kurt wasn’t around, he was trying to keep up with the work in his classes, and that wore out his brain. Kurt was wrong about his teachers, though. With the exception of one, who had told him just to drop (and he had) the others were sympathetic to his explanation that he had a sick brother out of state, and he needed to be with him for a couple of weeks, to make sure everything was okay.

His writing teacher had given him really explicit instructions on when he needed to be back in order to pass the class. Like, really explicit. And she’d seemed surprised that he was turning in the work she asked for. Apparently when most people disappeared during a semester, they stayed disappeared until it was too late.

Anyway, it was cold. Finn sat up and looked around the dark apartment. The floor squeaked behind him, and he saw a small figure moving slowly across. It stilled, momentarily, and then continued.

“Rachel?”

She stopped and looked at him. “Shhh!”
Finn pushed himself up and started to ask what she was doing. That was when he noticed the window was open.

The window was open, and Kurt was sitting in it.

Rachel drew closer. What was she doing?! Was she going to push him out?!

Finn jumped up and lunged toward the window, but Rachel had too much of a lead.

She circled her arms around his waist and pulled him out of the window. “C’mon, little Nemo,” she said with a sigh.

Kurt stared in front of him, blinking slowly as Rachel guided him forward.

Finn blinked and held still. “Oh, man. Is he sleepwalking again?”

“I guess he’s a little stressed this week,” she muttered.

“Yeah. Maybe a little.” Finn slipped Kurt’s arm around him and shouldered Kurt’s weight. “I’ve got him.”

“It’s fine.”

“Rachel, leggo.” Finn frowned at her. She scowled up at him through the dark, then released Kurt. He shook his head. “You guys should get a lock for the window. There was one on his window, back at our house in Lima. I mean the one we moved into after Burt married mom. I’ll put one on before I go.”

He paused as Rachel pulled back the curtain to Kurt’s bedroom, and then he took him inside and set him on the bed.

“He used to do this back at home, too, y’know. It’s why his dad had him in the basement at their old house. ‘Cause Kurt was less likely to wander out of the house if he had to make it up the steps
first.”

“That’s terrifying!”

Finn chuckled. “Yeah, Burt thinks so.”

“Doesn’t it scare you?”

“Nah. He’s harmless. The worst he ever did was crawl into my bed and call me ‘mom.’”

Rachel covered her mouth and laughed softly.

“Yeah.” Finn urged Kurt to crawl into the bed. “C’mon, baby brother.”

“How did you eat all that macaroni?” Kurt muttered.

Finn turned his head and chuckled. He sat on the edge of the bed and rubbed Kurt’s back. “You should get some sleep, too.”

Rachel started to turn away, then looked back at him and bit her lip. “Are we ever going to be okay again?”

“If you leave my brother homeless? Probably not.”

“I can’t call off the challenge now, Finn.” Rachel crossed her arms and shifted her weight. “You don’t know what it’s like at NYADA.”

“No, I sure don’t.”

“It’s really unfair that you’re acting like this is all my fault.”
Finn rolled his eyes and sighed. “Let’s start with you acting like even a little bit of something is your fault. Remember when you sent Sunshine to the crackhouse and kept swearing that you did it for everyone else? I know you, Rachel. I know when you’re bullshitting. You do, too.”

“When I win this, I can fix everything!” Rachel insisted. “I can’t back down from Midnight Madness; it’s just not done! But I can get my reputation back, and I can save our friendship. No one’s going to say boo to the Midnight Mistress for showing mercy after the challenge is over!”

Finn knit his brows together and shook his head. “Really? Kurt was talking a month ago about how you ignore him for your NYADA worshippers. Do you really think things are gonna change when you’re on top again? Like people aren’t gonna warn you away from hanging out with the show choir guy?”

“Well, if Kurt would just quit the Apples!” she huffed.

Finn looked to see that Kurt was still asleep, but he was totally dead to the world. “C’mon, Rachel! He’s not gonna do that.”

“He should. He has an important role to work on for Neil Garber’s senior project. The Apples are a waste of time, and they are just the lowest of the low.” Rachel rolled her eyes.

“I can’t believe you,” Finn said with a bitter smile. “After all the crap we went through to be able to stay in Glee?”

“Stop acting like I’m doing something wrong by looking out for my career, and Kurt’s! One little club isn’t as important as our futures!”

“His boyfriend’s their leader. He’s not gonna bail on them.”

“His- Is he really? I thought people were just gossiping about that.” Rachel looked scandalized.

“Why is that a problem? Adam’s hot. And he’s a really cool guy. He’s really good to Kurt, too, which is kind of all I was hoping for in a new guy for my brother.”
“I’m sure he’s a perfectly fine guy, but he’s going to drag Kurt’s reputation into the gutter.

“I just don’t get why you suddenly care so much about your rep.”

“When my rep is directly related to what people think of my talent and employability, then yes, I care about my reputation.”

“I don’t know how who you date means anything for what you can do. What if your boyfriend was getting an education degree?”

Rachel frowned and said softly, “I don’t make the rules.”

“You’re not trying to change them, either. You got handed a lot of stuff, Rachel- Stop looking so scandalized, you know it’s true. You screwed up your audition, but got in anyway, and no one else gets those kinds of chances. You’re blessed, and you could make all this easier for him-”

“It is not that easy for me. My teachers are really tough on me.”

“Or you guys could make it easier on each other. You know Kurt would do anything to help you. But instead you’re acting like he’s your competition. Isn’t there anyone else you thought you could beat at Midnight Madness?”

Rachel tugged at a piece of her hair and almost looked a bit regretful. “No one’s going to be impressed if I challenge someone who isn’t amazing. Kurt doesn’t have great social standing, but he scared people at the Winter Showcase, and all of his teachers think the world of him. Even Carmen’s talked him up during Beginning Voice.” She shrugged. “It had to be Kurt. I don’t have a choice.”

“I’m sure you believe that, but there are tons of singers at that school.”

“When they find out they’ll kill me,” Kurt muttered.
Finn looked at him in surprise.

“That’s not even the weirdest thing I’ve heard him say,” Rachel said. “He’s never called me ‘mommy’ though.”

“I’ll be gone,” Kurt muttered, scowling deeply. “There’ll be nothing left of me.”

Finn rubbed his back. “It’s okay, man. You’ll be okay.”

Rachel shifted her weight and pressed her lips together. “Goodnight, Finn.”

“Goodnight, Ms. Berry. “

***

“Spread those legs!” Kurt barked cheerfully.

Adam laughed and did as he was told, as did the rest of the Apples. They couldn’t all do it in unison, but most of them were able to hop into the straddle-legged stance that Kurt was performing in front of them.

“And breathe!”

Everyone shook their shoulders as they rotated their shoulders and torso around in a circle. *Huff-huff huff-huff huff-huff huff-huff!*

Damien stopped huffing and shaking and just bowed over on himself laughing. He didn’t have great stamina, even though he was incredibly flexible for his size.

“There’s nothing funny about show choir!” Kurt yelled, in a slightly ironic tone.
Annabelle and Kiera laughed behind him. Kurt repositioned himself into his starting position.

“One more time!” Kurt called. “Spread!”

He leapt into the widened stance.

“And breathe!”

*Huff-huff huff-huff huff-huff huff-huff huff-huff!*

“Is this a rehearsal or Lamaze class?” Cassandra July called from the back of the auditorium.

Everyone froze and stared at her. Kurt just laughed and bobbed his head from side to side. “Little a’column ‘A’ little a’column ‘B’.”

“Oh...” Adam hurried to the front. “We’re still learning the choreography.”

“Yeah, I see that,” she said tersely. She put her hand in the air and circled her finger around. “Run it.”

Adam could feel the nerves buzzing through the whole group. There were other dance instructors at NYADA, but none as tough as Cassandra. That was the very reason she handled all the newbies. And frankly, not all of his Apples had passed her class, and some, the techies, had never even *taken* her class.

Kurt turned to the group and gave a few notes, then pointed to Meg to get her to play the chorus on the piano.

And then he just went for it. The Apples followed behind him, most of them still a half-step behind on choreography. Hector and Gavin locked in and performed every move together. Joey just fell over in the back.
Cassandra shook her head and let out a low whistle. “Slooooppy,” she said. She walked over to the side of the stage and climbed up.

“To what do we owe the honor?” Jinx asked, crossing her arms.

Cassandra strolled across the stage, looking at them critically. “Your fearless leader asked me a few weeks ago whether I’d be interested in signing off on one of your performances so you could bring joy to people outside our hallowed halls.” She gave jazz hands and a grimace. “And I had a few minutes, so I thought I’d inspect the goods myself.”

“What do you think?” Adam asked.

“Terrible.” Cassandra frowned and put her hands on her hips.

Adam sighed. He’d put out quite a few feelers, but none of the faculty had been interested so far. He hadn’t expected her to come at all, but now that she had, he sort of wished he’d put more pressure on the drama instructors to help them out.

“We just learned it,” My argued.

“Clearly.” Cassandra rolled her eyes. “And it’s slightly out of your league, the choreography. Mind if I make a few adjustments, fearless leader?”

She was looking at Adam expectantly. He felt embarrassed, suddenly.

“I’ve no problem with it... Um, Kurt?” he looked at Kurt, who just smiled.

Cassandra threw her hands up. “Of course, that’s your choreography! Why do you have to make things so hard for yourself?”

“I wanna learn! I want to be better,” Kurt protested.
“I bet you’ve performed with broken bones.” She shook her head. “This won’t help. Okay, kiddos. Watch me close, because I’m gonna make some changes.” She held her leg out. “You’re positioning your leg here just before the turn. You can’t do that. You’ll get turned ankles, and half of you will be out of time. Place it this way-” She repositioned her foot, then gave Kurt a firm glance.

Kurt came up to the front with her, and Adam followed quickly.

The next thirty minutes consisted of Cassandra demonstrating, watching, and barking as they banged out a modified version of the choreography for the chorus. Adam was dripping with sweat by the end.

“Give me thirty minutes of practice once a week, Crawford, and I’ll sign your papers,” Cassandra said, stretching her arm over her head. “I’ll trust you two songbirds to work out the vocals.”

“That’s what Carmen trashed last time,” Gavin said. “Our singing.”

“Of course, she did. Because the abortion you guys were doing publicly as choreography doesn’t reflect on this school at all... just singing. Only singing. Only ever singing.” Cassandra rolled her eyes. “People will need to be able to follow choreography on Broadway, for fuck’s sake.”

Gavin smirked.

“That’s fucking right,” Jinx said, pumping her fist.

Cassandra’s lips thinned as she looked at Jinx. Almost as though she wanted to smile. “All right. I’ve got work to do.” She pointed at them and moved her finger over the group so that everyone felt her glare. “Keep practicing.”

She began to leave, then beckoned Kurt and Adam with one finger. Kurt cast Adam a curious look before heading with her to the hall. Once there, she crossed her arms and looked up at them critically. Her tongue rolled in her cheek for a moment before she began to speak.

“I hear you and Berry are going head to head tomorrow night.”
Kurt leaned forward in surprise, then nodded. “Yes. She challenged me on Monday.”

“Hm.”

“I didn’t think the professors got involved in things like this.”

Adam touched Kurt’s shoulder then looked to see what Cassandra would say.

“We don’t. But we hear about it.” She sighed. “How are you feeling about this, Adam? None of your group has ever won one of these. If Kurt trounces the little Barbra-clone, you guys will be doing a lot better in the pecking order.”

“I’ve not really been thinking about it that way,” Adam admitted. “I was just hoping to get through this week.”

“I bet.” She lifted her chin.

“It’s just been very stressful for Kurt and his other friend living with her,” Adam said.

“I’m not that worried,” Kurt said. When Cassandra looked at him, he shrugged. “Adam and the other Apples have told me everything they know about past Madnesses. I’ve been drinking tea this week. I made sure I’m off work tomorrow. Now I just have to go and do my thing. There was more pressure at the Winter Showcase.”

“And you were truly spectacular then, Kurt. You really were,” Adam added. Kurt’s attitude hadn’t changed too much, and Adam was glad that Kurt didn’t have extra stress over the performance, given that he had more than enough to cope with in other areas.

“And Princess ‘All I Need is My Voice’?” Cassandra pressed.

“I’m staying with Adam tonight in case she gets any schemes,” Kurt said.

Cassandra frowned and tilted her head to the side. “That’s not really what I meant, but do you think she’d do something to sabotage you?”
“Yes,” Kurt said bluntly. “I think she might not be putting together a huge plot, but if she sees an opportunity, she’ll take it. So I won’t be there, and there won’t be an opportunity. And...” Kurt narrowed his eyes and pursed his lips. “She’s probably feeling a little over-confident. The last time we went head to head, I threw the competition.”

Cassandra rubbed her mouth and nodded slowly. “Okay. And otherwise... You’re feeling... okay?”

Adam felt a pang of anxiety. Had Kurt talked to her about his diagnosis?

“As well as can be expected. Better than at the beginning of the semester,” Kurt answered. “By a lot.”

Cassandra had never been particularly antagonistic toward Adam and his ‘pack.’ Though until today, she’d never been particularly interested in them. The idea that she was moving toward them to help out had seemed foreign until now. She was doing it because of an affinity for Kurt. That made sense, of course; it was more unlikely that Kurt’s teachers would dislike him. He was honest, respectful, and committed to honing his craft.

Kurt and Cassandra continued to talk for a few more minutes, never explicitly voicing what was under the surface, and soon she moved from voicing to concern about Kurt’s health to advice for dealing with ‘Schwimmer’ on the Madness stage and off.

After she’d left, Kurt moved to reenter the auditorium, but Adam took his hand.

“What is it?” Kurt asked.

“Does she know?”

“No. I mean, not really. I think she guessed, back when I was having trouble keeping food down. But we haven’t really talked about it.” Kurt squeezed Adam’s hand. “She’s just given me some generalized legal advice about what to do if the administration has questions about my health.”

“I’m not sure what to think about her as an ally.”
“I’ll be careful. And of course, I won’t say anything about you.”

Adam made a noise and shook his head. “It won’t matter for me. They’re more concerned about the fact that I’m behind on my program.”

“You. If they’re mad at you about the program, I don’t want them to have any excuse to push you out.” Kurt wrapped his other arm around Adam’s and rested his head on his shoulder. “We’ll get you through this, Adam. With everyone in the Apples, we can find a way. And if no one wants to be in your senior project because you’re a pariah, I’ll be a pariah with you, and I’ll call up my little Glee-babies from Ohio to film with you.”

“I appreciate your faith in me.” Adam smiled and accepted a kiss on the cheek from Kurt. “And I’m glad you’re staying over. I’ve missed you in my bed.”

“I do have to get sleep, you know.” Kurt paused as they walked down the aisle of the auditorium. “But, um... I’m told I’ve been sleepwalking this week. You might have to tie me down.”

“Kinky!” Jinx called from the stage.

***

Santana heard that there were to be ropes involved that night, but sadly, all the sickly gay boys wanted to do was cuddle. Kurt kept taking sudden, deep breaths and letting them out slowly, and that would cause Adam to attach himself, rubbing Kurt’s shoulder or back, even if Kurt lied and said he was fine.

He was starting to get nervous.

Santana had told him that she didn’t give a rat’s ass if they had to move anymore. She cared, a little, but not about the place. It was more about the failed friendship and having been snowed into believing Rachel Berry. Santana didn’t like opening herself up to begin with, let alone having that openness rewarded with being treated like garbage.

Rationally, she’d worked out that Rachel had wanted Santana gone because she made Brody
uncomfortable, and Brody was the boyfriend. Santana didn’t think he’d be around for that much longer, if Rachel didn’t win, and Santana didn’t really trust him. But it wasn’t like Rachel had ever intended to listen to Santana on that one.

Even if Kurt snapped back, even if he disagreed, he listened. He tended to. He listened to pretty much everything you told him, and if you weren’t careful (and it had taken Santana bit to figure this part out), he took it to heart, without a word.

So between the two of them, Kurt was making the big sighs, and Santana was on edge, and neither of them were relaxed and happy.

When she got out of the shower, Santana pulled her long, wet hair into pigtails to keep it from getting tangled up, and then scooted up next to Kurt. A minute later, Finn returned from the kitchen to see that Santana had stolen his seat, and was sticking her tongue out at him.

“You’re like a cat,” he accused, bowl in hand.

“I took your warm spot,” she said proudly.

“Yeah. So move.”

“Nope.”

“I’ll give you popcorn.”

“Noooope.”

“C’moon!”

Kurt flopped his head over onto Santana’s should. “Sweeties? Could you just... shut up?”

Adam laughed and petted the back of Kurt’s head. Finn set the popcorn down on the coffee table and leaned over and grabbed Santana.
“Aaahh! No! Stop!” she squealed, kicking and wriggling.

“Ohhh, my God,” Kurt complained, flopping his head over to Adam’s shoulder.

Santana could’ve popped Finn one, but she’d just showered and didn’t need blood all over her jammies. He hoisted her into the air, plopped down himself, and pulled her into his lap.

“Huh. Well. I guess I’m okay with this. You’re pretty warm.” Santana leaned forward and grabbed the popcorn bowl and then leaned back into Finn like he was an oversized cushion.

“Perfect,” Finn said as he reached around to get some popcorn from the bowl in her lap.

“I wish I could say this was the largest number of people who’ve been on this couch...” Adam said.

Santana rolled her eyes. “We don’t wanna hear about your kinky sex life before you settled down to platonic old people cuddles with Kurt.”

“There’s nothing wrong with taking it slow,” Kurt objected.

Santana mocked a snore.

“We got together all of four days ago,” Adam added.

“Just as the family representative here...” Finn raised a hand. “Can we not talk about my brother’s sex life?”

“Thank you.” Kurt poked Santana’s leg with a toe. “Don’t pick on me tonight.”

“I’m just trying to make dirty jokes,” she replied.
“Fine,” Adam supplied. “I can help with that. Entirely not enough pussy on this couch.”

Kurt’s eyes morphed into saucers, but Adam just made a clicking noise with his tongue. Into the room bounded Jinx’s little black kitty cat.

“Awww!” Santana cheered and reached toward Pooka, who preemptively purred at the prospect of attention and pettings. “Look at that gorgeous pussy!”

Kurt covered his eyes and shook with laughter.

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Kurt grew more and more tense as the night drew on, and by the time Adam had him in bed, his shoulders were practically rigid. So Adam coaxed him into laying down, took some moisturizer, and began working over his shoulders, neck and back. Up and down, up and down, in long strokes, stopping to work the tension out of Kurt’s shoulder and neck muscles with his thumbs.

“Unnnn,” Kurt groaned.

“You like it?”

“Don’t ever, ever stop,” Kurt ordered.

Adam laughed and paused just a moment to get a little more lotion on his hands. “Massages are good for all sorts of things. I can’t afford to go get them regularly, but my doctor once suggested that I get one, therapeutically. It makes you feel as though you’ve lifted a hundred books from your shoulders. I thought afterward that my neck was actually longer.”

“If it’s therapy, maybe your insurance could cover it,” Kurt suggested.

“I fight with them enough as it is. Most of my money goes to insurance, and what they don’t cover,” Adam muttered.
“I’m lucky Isabelle gave me a promotion.”

Adam shrugged. “What else can you do?”

“I think you could probably provide professional massages.”

Adam rubbed the base of Kurt’s skull, right at the rise of his hair. “With a happy ending,” he joked.

“I’d prefer to be the only one who gets happy endings from you, thank you very much.” Kurt turned his head and looked back at Adam. “Come lay down.”

Adam obeyed, curling up beside Kurt, who only wore his pajama bottoms thanks to the massage.

“Maybe you can teach me how to do the massage thing, so I can help you, too.” Kurt took one of Adam’s hands, inspecting each finger with interest. “But your hands are so big. I don’t think I could do as good a job.”

He held their palms together. He was watching their hands, almost marveling at the sight together. However, Adam was watching him.

It was, in a way, reverential, and pensive. His lips parted slightly. His breath came slowly through the flushed lips. How he’d ever ended up with such a beautiful man, Adam wasn’t quite sure. He folded their fingers together and kissed Kurt’s knuckles.

“You don’t mind if we don’t...?” Kurt asked quietly.

“What- Oh. No. No, I said I didn’t.”

“I just thought... The massage...” Kurt shrugged.

Adam quirked his lips to the side. “I didn’t do it as payment for sex, if that’s what you were thinking.”
Kurt sucked in his lower lip and smiled anxiously. Adam stroked his fingers around Kurt’s cheek and kissed his forehead.

“I suppose we could have a few dates, first,” Adam said lightly.

“I guess I’m not sure what to expect from this point. I mean, from us. With Blaine, it was seven months before going from kissing to anything else. With Gio, it happened right away and then... We were nothing.” Kurt reached over and smoothed his palm over Adam’s chest. “I don’t want us to be like it has been in the past. Not any of it.”

“I can understand that. There are certainly aspects of my former relationships that I’d really rather not repeat.”

“I promise not to call the police afterward.”

His words were light, but Adam’s chest tightened anyway. What a promise. What a thing to have to promise. Adam had never considered, not even as a lad when he’d been lectured on safe sex and STDs that the authorities could get involved in the minutiae of your relationship, things said or unsaid.

“He never did,” Adam muttered. “It was just a threat.”

“Well you know that part won’t happen, at least.”

“True. And I suppose I quite literally can’t do to you what Gio did.”

Kurt let out a bitter laugh. “No, I guess not.”

“And a man would have to be utterly mental to cheat on someone like you.”

“Unfortunately, I get insecure about that kind of thing. If I get a little crazy on you...”
“I’ll just do my best not to make you jealous in the first place.”

“Anything else to avoid?” Kurt asked.

Adam creased his brow slightly. “My first boyfriend was rather dementedly in the closet.”

“I was never really good at that,” Kurt said dryly. “Mine was sort of a glass closet. And my flames set it on fire from within.”

Adam chuckled and leaned in to kiss his neck. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Kurt arched his neck back and made an appreciative noise. His fingers found their way down Adam’s side. In turn, Adam reached around Kurt and pulled him close.

“I guess there is one other thing I’d like to avoid... If I ever... I mean, when we get to it... I don’t really want to wait seven months...”

“No day but today,” Adam joked. “Although not right today, but some day before that much time has passed.”

Kurt smiled tightly.

“What is it, love?” Adam trailed his fingers up and down the middle of Kurt’s back.

“If I say, not now, or not yet, or no... I’m not asking to be convinced.” His brows screwed together. “I mean, I don’t need any other safe word than that. I’d really prefer if I say it, you just stop.”

Adam pulled back slightly. The request seemed to be something that once again, really ought to have been a given... It hurt Adam’s chest to imagine why Kurt felt that he had to ask for such a thing.

Kurt’s cheeks were turning red, and he looked down a little, but took nothing back. Adam moved closer again.
“Hey,” he said, and then waited for Kurt to look up. “I promise that I respect you that much. If you say no, or I say no, that’s enough.”

Kurt smiled in what looked like relief, but Adam felt disturbed. He kissed Kurt’s forehead.

“I at the same time want to know where that request came from, and don’t want to know. I feel like I ought to tell you more about the way Closeted Steve treated me, if I’m going to demand more information about Blaine.”

“Blaine, and others. But not tonight.” Kurt sighed wearily. “Maybe when the apartment isn’t packed full of people, and we’re alone.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“Can we...?” Kurt folded up against Adam like they were made to fit alongside one another, resting his head on Adam’s shoulder and wrapping his arm around his waist.

“I know I like this part. The very first part of it,” Adam whispered. “The part where everything is new and thrilling, and we can just hold one another, and it feels like a triumph.”

“Yeah,” Kurt breathed.

Adam pressed another kiss to Kurt’s hair and rubbed his back. “Get some sleep. Tomorrow is a long day.”

***

The walk down the dark, empty hallway seemed to take a long time. Kurt took deep breaths, and Adam held his hand unabashedly. Finn had wanted to come, but of course, it was NYADA students only. And truthfully, it wouldn’t matter either way. Kurt was ready, or he wasn’t, and he would find out very, very soon.
Kiera and My gave Kurt smiles as they filed into the room at the end of the hall quietly. They had to be careful not to get too rowdy and alert the campus security. But apparently they had the security rotation worked out, and would be meeting during the time the officers were on another side of campus.

The expressions from the others were not all quite so friendly. Some were smug, some were uneasy, and some just stared past Kurt to cast Adam a judging glance. Kurt rolled his tongue in his cheek and felt annoyance override his nerves. Who were these people? To waste what had been given them, to take the most elite dramatic arts school in the country and just squander the opportunity to work with all these other creative types who had just been waiting, just longing for a chance like this.

For some of them, Kurt was sure, they didn’t see this as an incredible opportunity. They saw it as one in a line of expected opportunities. They saw it as their due.

He lifted his chin and walked past them with Adam, who seemed surprised by Kurt’s sudden burst of speed. But Kurt wasn’t having it. All these people, artists once, who were here to watch Rachel and Kurt sing to one-up each other rather than using their abilities for creation.

They could all soak in his distain. They could live every day, jocking for position. He didn’t have the time to waste, he and Adam.

They all sat in rows along the floor, since they couldn’t disturb the furniture. A few people walked around with candles, lighting up the wicks in street light props create a ghostly atmosphere to the room. Supposedly, it would make it intimate, but Kurt felt as though this room were haunted. How many careers and dreams had died in this room? He’d heard at least one story of someone who had killed himself the semester after losing, but people blamed the student himself for it, and the loss of his scholarship.

Kurt drew air into his lungs shakily and felt Adam’s strong hand on his back. Kurt looked to him with gratitude and adoration in his eyes. He felt lucky to have found this amazing man, and to have him in his life in any capacity. Let alone getting to keep him for his own.

Then Brody stood up front and began, welcoming everyone, going over the rules, and how to vote and show appreciation with silent applause.

“This is not a performance,” he warned gravely, looking over them all. “This is a blood sport.”
Blood sport. At arts school. Kurt sighed again, and Adam leaned over to whisper, almost inaudibly, “You’ll blow them away.”

No matter what, win or lose, Kurt intended to.

“First up, Rachel Berry versus Kurt Hummel.”

Kurt gave Adam one more look, and Rachel gave her sycophants a dainty high five on either side of her before walking stiffly to the center of the circle where Brody stood. He dug around in a black bag and pulled out a song.

“Now, the song you will be competing with is “I Dreamed a Dream,” from Les Mis.”

Kurt’s mind began to rapidly run through that number. He knew it well. He knew every song from Les Mis well, as did Rachel.

“You guys know it?” Brody checked. They both nodded. Rachel’s face was no longer smug, but remained neutral, as Kurt hoped his own was. Kurt knew that her nerves were starting to get to her, though. “Per Midnight Madness protocol,” Brody continued, “since Rachel challenged Kurt, she will be going first.”

Kurt moved back to his spot to watch as Rachel took center stage, smoothed her dress, took a moment to center herself, and then gave a nod to the orchestra. The music began very prettily, beautiful strings, notes floating up through the air effortlessly. Kurt recognized the key quickly, and noted that Rachel would be well within her comfort range singing here.

Rachel lifted one hand, closed her eyes and began to sing, “I dreamed a dream in time gone by, when hope was high and life worth living! I dreamed that love would never die! I dreamed that God would be forgiving!”

She looked upward at ‘God.’ She let her notes begin softly and then swell. She looked out at the audience defiantly, shaking her hair when she reached the dramatic parts. Toward the end, it seemed unlikely that anyone walking by outside would have a doubt of what they were doing, but Cassandra had intimated the teachers knew, so they probably did alert the security staff. Little kids, playing at being rebellious.
At some point, Kurt began to tune Rachel out. Going second, he had time to think, to get into character. Fantine was at the lowest point in her life. She had lost her child. Lost her dreams, been shamed by the man she loved and abandoned. She was abjectly miserable, hopeless, and dying.

Kurt blinked a few times and looked up to Rachel once more. Her Fantine was Barbra, demanding her dreams from the world. When she finished, the other students waved their hands in silent applause. Kurt turned to Adam, touched his cheek gently, and took the spotlight.

As the orchestra began again, he knew at once that they hadn’t changed the key for him. Luckily, he could sing in her key, if he had to. The thought only occupied a moment of his time, because now he was Fantine. Now, all the abject miseries and humiliations of his life bubbled to the surface, and when he began to sing, he stripped away every pretense.

“I dreamed a dream in time gone by....” he sang with clear, pure notes looking at an unfixed point at the back of the room. The atmosphere changed around him, from the buzzing energy left by Rachel’s powerful, booming rendition. “When hope was high and life worth living.” He shook his head. “I dreamed that love would never die... I dreamed that God would be, heh, forgiving!”

Where Rachel’s Fantine celebrated, Kurt’s mourned. Where Rachel’s Fantine was loud and confident, Kurt’s was quietly bitter. Through it all, he tried his hardest to sing each note beautifully, to keep the emotion welling up in his throat from closing and making it sound as ugly as the pain this song was invoking for him.

“But the tigers come at night... with their voices soft as thunder... as they tear your hope apart. As they turn your dream to sha-aaa-aaa-aaame!” He scaled the note up and up and up.

It was all about controlling the notes, so much more than he ever had, singing any other song, because the more he inhabited this space, the more he just wanted to collapse against the floor, give up, and curl into a sobbing ball.

“He slept a summer by my side... He filled my days with endless wonder.” Kurt smiled as he sang to them confessionally, as though telling them about those men who came before, the boys who had seemed so sweet before breaking him into pieces with an easy grin on their lips. Then he burst out, suddenly through the lower notes, “He took my childhood in his stride! But he was gone when autumn came!”

He covered his mouth for a moment with a shaking hand, but had to drop it to keep singing. “And still I dream he’ll come to me. That we’ll live the years together.” His lips twitched in a broken smile. “But there are dreams that cannot be! And there are storms we cannot weather.”
Fat tears streamed down his cheeks, and he shook his head rapidly. “I had a dream my life would be... so different than the Hell I’m living! So different now than what it seemed...”

His voice grew quiet again and he looked out at them, cheeks shamefully wet, and sang, almost pleadingly to the rapt faces, “Now life has killed the dream... I dreamed...”

As the music faded, Kurt crossed his arms over himself, feeling raw and throbbing all over. He’d thought he’d moved past this anger and fear, but clearly, it was just waiting there to be channeled the moment he was playing someone dying.

Then his head jerked up as someone forgot themselves and began to clap. It stopped almost immediately, but people were looking around amid the silent waving applause. Brody rose from the window he’d been leaning on, and Rachel pushed herself up from the floor. Kurt had deliberately not looked to her during the performance. He’d been lost in it, to tell the truth. Not necessarily a sign of the good, since it meant he couldn’t gage their reactions.

As he sniffed ungracefully and moved over to his side, he caught the unguarded, almost alarmed look on Rachel’s face. Was she worried? Had it been that good?

“Good job,” Kurt managed, quietly, to Rachel.

“T-thank you.”

She reached across the line, almost as though she meant to touch him, and Kurt drew back.

“All right,” Brody said. “Make your choice.”

People began to rise, moving from one side to the other. The Apples stayed put, no surprise there. But then Ronnie rose, looked Rachel in the eye as he pursed his lips and shrugged, both hands poised in the air, as though mid-gestured, and stood behind Kurt.

Kurt looked back to him involuntarily, and Ronnie mouthed, “Fab. Bu. Lous.”
Rachel’s mouth dropped open. Kurt sniffed again, and watched as the rest chose their side. And Kurt stared. His head was too fuzzy to count, but visually, it looked like... three more walked over to his side. Kurt turned to Brody, who was dutifully counting, although the answer was obvious.

“There we have it. The winner, by no small margin, is Kurt Hummel.”

More silent applause. Kurt leaned forward, opening his mouth in a silent gape of disbelief and laughter. He’d won. He’d won.

Adam came up behind him, offering a tissue, probably borrow from someone with a purse, and Kurt beamed and mouthed a thank you before wiping his eyes with it. He laughed at himself and leaned into Adam’s arms.

“Method,” Ronnie said seriously. “This man is method. In the next free sing, you’re going to have to teach us all how to completely lose it during a song and keep our notes so light and beautiful.”

“My recommendation is to... have a lot of practice... crying. My advice is to do a lot of auditions for homophobic assholes,” Kurt said to him quietly.

Adam covered his mouth as he shook in laughter. Brody was up front calling the next names to do their head to head, and everyone needed to get quiet so those now on the chopping block could get into the right mindset.

So Kurt leaned back against Adam and fanned his face. The tears didn’t want to go away, but they couldn’t leave, so he just took deep breaths, and let Adam rub his shoulders and try to calm him down. Ronnie reached over from where he’d settled near them and patted Kurt’s knee.

When the Madness was over, Kurt rose and went with Adam towards the Apples, who were still bouncing giddily. Before they could say a word, Brody was at his side.

“I hope you’ll give us a few days to find a place.”

“I think...” Kurt swallowed, and looked back at where Rachel was standing by herself, pretending to be busy before she walked straight for the doorway. Of course, she wouldn’t want to talk directly afterward. She’d been staring at him enough during the other pairs, though. “Rachel’s dads can probably put you up in a hotel for a few nights, but until then, I can just stay at Adam’s.”
Adam bobbed his head.

“I might be able to get back in my old apartment. I never broke the lease, just got someone else to pay my part of the rent. So that’s an option. I just have to check it out,” Brody explained.

Of course, he’d expected Rachel to win. He wouldn’t have pushed her to do this, if he hadn’t.

“You didn’t do her any favors, you know,” Kurt said tersely. A few people behind him were listening, but Kurt didn’t care. “Pushing her to do that part in the nude? Pushing her to do this? I heard you talking to her about it. You might want to rethink the way you ‘support’ your stunning ingenues. Because she has to have a career after you’re gone, y’know.”

“I-”

Kurt turned from him and breezed out of the room just as determinedly as Rachel had.

“That was... wow.” Kiera said.

“That was even better than the Showcase,” Joey said.

“Too bad it doesn’t come with a cash prize.” Kurt got out his phone and quickly texted Santana, We won!

“Don’t worry about it.” Jinx waved them forward. “We’re going out, and you two aren’t paying a cent.”

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The next day, Kurt entered the apartment after classes and before working at the diner. If he was going to give Rachel and Brody a week to move out, he was going to need some more clothes, and the books for his classes earlier in the week.
First he picked up a few books from the shelves, and then dropped by the kitchen to get a few bags of tea, and a package of cookies he’d been wanting. They went in the bag. Then, he went behind his curtain to fetch some outfits. He could come back later, of course, but he didn’t want to have to think about it for a day or two.

As he was pawing through sweaters, he heard some guttural, snotty sounding sobs from the other side of the apartment, and knew Rachel was having an in between class pity party. He bore it for a few more minutes, and then when he’d packed everything up, he took a moment to think.

Was she making the noise so Brody would come in and give her a coddle? She didn’t have any way of knowing it was Kurt, although she might’ve heard him going over to this side of the apartment. He hoped Brody never came over this way.

With a decisive turn, he went over to pull aside Rachel’s curtain. She was standing by the window in cream-colored sweater that came down her thighs.

He set his bag and suitcase on the floor and announced, “Shiva is officially over.”

Rachel turned and wiped her eyes. “Kurt. Are you back?”

“Nope. Just picking up some clothes.” He gestured to the suitcase. “Brody did tell you that you have some time, right? But I’d like to be back in my apartment by next week. If you still haven’t found a place by then, I’d appreciate it if you could find the alternative lodgings, and I’ll make sure Santana doesn’t deface your stuff until you can move it in somewhere permanent.”

Rachel gave a slow nod, then turned back toward the window. “I guess I was hoping you’d still want me around.”

Kurt sighed. “Honestly? I’ve been thinking about it.”

She looked back hopefully.

“I’m just really burned out on you, Rachel. I put a lot of effort into our friendship. I found this place, I’ve supported you, I’ve listened, and for you to turn your back on me-”
“Brody said you knew he’d put me up to Midnight Madness.”

“Before that. Although I wasn’t thrilled to hear that you don’t think I’ve ever helped you,” Kurt continued tersely. “I just want to be treated better.”

“I can do that,” she said softly.

Kurt swallowed. “I don’t really believe you.”

Rachel blinked in surprise. “Oh.”

“If you really want to keep trying... maybe? But I need a break from you. I need a comfortable place to call my home. I need away from this mess and stress.” Kurt held his hands out as though trying to handle the palpable piling up of nonsense. “I think you should move out. I think we shouldn’t be roommates anymore.”

Rachel lowered her head, sniffed, and nodded.

“We’ll see each other at the wedding, and around school. If you really want to be friends? Give me some time-- and not Blaine ‘time’ as in stalking me 24/7 and sending me random DVD boxsets time-- and then we can try?”

“That... That sounds better than what I expected.”

“Anyway, I came over to tell you that there are still some open slots for the Funny Girl call. You should jump on that, if you want to try out.”

“I’m not trying out.” She walked over toward the bed and started to ensconce herself in it.

“Why? Because I won Midnight Madness? Rachel, it doesn’t mean anything.”

“You didn’t just win. You shredded me. You embarrassed me up there.”
“What was I supposed to do? Let you win it? You challenged me!”

“I know!” Rachel shook her head. “I was so arrogant. You told me the exact corrections I should have made to win, but I didn’t even consider listening. Let’s say by some crazy, extraordinary chance that I get the role of Fanny Brice. Then what? I become even more of a diva nightmare than I already am now? I can’t handle the pressures of stardom, not without losing my best friend and making every single person hate me.”

Kurt put his hands in his pocket. He shook his head, and shrugged. “Well. It’s up to you. It’s your call whether you want to try out or not, but you’re not going to get very far, if you don’t try. And it’s really up to you whether you act the way you have since December. You’re in control of that, Rachel. You can choose not to do it.”

“I don’t know if I can.”

“Then get some therapy. Aude tells me it does wonders.”

“I’m really sorry.”

Kurt nodded, taking it in. He didn’t know quite what to say in return. ‘It’s okay,’ wasn’t true, nor was ‘We’ll be fine,’ or ‘I know.’ Finally, he just said, “I gotta go. The hipsters won’t pour their own coffee.”

Rachel smiled half-heartedly. When he picked up his suitcase again, she said, “Kurt?”

He looked at her.

“Are you... okay?”

Kurt looked down and sighed.

“I know you’ve been stressed a lot lately, but... you were sick for a while, and... I know you’re a
“good actor, but that performance was so... raw and... *real?* Is there something wrong?”

He glanced over at her, leaning forward on the bed, wrapped up her large, snuggly cashmere sweater.

“Rachel, if there were? I wouldn’t tell you.”

He hitched his back on his shoulder, and left the apartment.
“It’s so empty in here,” Kurt muttered to himself.

Aude came up behind him and put his hand on Kurt’s shoulder. “Looks pretty full to me. Lot easier to have a kiki in here without all the stuff in the way of the people.”

He handed Kurt a large glass of pink champagne, lifted onto his toes to kiss Kurt’s cheek, and went over to sit with Q on the pile of pillows on the floor. His thick, muscular arms wrapped around Aude’s tiny frame as he tucked his legs underneath himself. Santana was nibbling on the appetizers in the kitchen. Thankfully, Kurt had paid for the stove itself, so he could at least make everything that he’d brought home that day. Rachel had taken the futon and most of the chairs (except for the vintage kitchen chairs and the one he’d made himself from the seat from a Mercedes Benz), along with everything in her corner of the apartment and most of the food. Kurt would have to go get a new refrigerator sometime this week.

However, his guests had brought by a lot of shelf-stable items, a large cooler, and a mounting pile of gift cards for Macy’s, Barney’s, and some home stores in the area. So while there wasn’t much furniture, there was plenty of food, wine, and people enjoying themselves. The Apples were there, and Aude and some of his friends; Isabelle might even drop by. It was like the housewarming Kurt had never gotten when he’d first moved to New York.

“Ohh my god,” Santana said. She sucked on her spoon and then licked her lips. “What is this bougie shit?”

“Sweetened berries and goat cheese,” Kurt told her. He leaned back on the table and looked around his bare apartment. It hardly seemed like the home he’d carved out with Rachel roughly six months ago.

But it wasn’t, was it? It was his and Santana’s now. Life had changed, again.

Kurt took a long sip of his champagne. Then, a warm, strong pair of arms slipped around Kurt’s waist, and he looked behind him.

Oh, right. The perfect boyfriend. Part of all these big changes.
“Hey.”

Adam bowed over and rested his chin on Kurt’s shoulder. “This is quite the party.”

“Yeah. Better than the last one, even.”

“Was it fun?”

Kurt wrapped his arms around Adam’s. “It’s where I met Aude. His dress tonight looks less flimsy, though. And he’s less drunk.”

“And you?”

“I’m less drunk, too.”

Adam chuckled.

“Clearly not what you meant.” Kurt shrugged and looked around at the people enjoying themselves in the spacious loft. Wesley was sitting with Kiera and Annabelle on the floor (though Kurt was surprised to see their bespectacled ginger at a party at all). Jinx was perched on the Mercedes chair and flirting with a towering drag queen... Tifa, if Kurt remembered her name. “I kinda miss Finn already. I think this party would’ve been too much for him, though. Plus, he had to get back to classes or fail.”

“I’m glad I got to meet him. He’s a good guy.”

“That’s the first step. Finn’s the easy part.”

“Is Santana the hard part?” Adam asked.

Santana laughed behind them, then gave them a wink as she took a glass of wine and walked over to Jinx.
“No. The rest of my family. My nosy friends back home.”

Adam straightened up and lifted his chin proudly. “I am unafraid. Besides, you still have to meet my mum, sisters, and the amazing shouting man.”

“Shouting man?” Kurt raised a brow.

“My father. He’s... loud.”

“Does he shout at you?”

Adam patted Kurt’s shoulder. “He shouts at everyone. It’s not personal. That’s... a bit of the problem.”

“Oh.” Kurt pouted and wrapped his arms around Adam’s waist. “Well, when you meet my parents, you can get properly adopted.”

“You think so?”

“My dad’s kinda famous for it. Everyone wants him to be their dad. Only Finn got to get taken in officially, though.”

Adam tented his brows and rolled his shoulders in an anxious gesture. “You really think he’ll like me?”

“Why wouldn’t he? You’re amazing.” Kurt pressed his hand over Adam’s mouth to keep him from protesting, which caused Adam to chuckle a little. “You’re generous and polite and thoughtful and hardworking. You’re like parent catnip.”

“Sweetheart!”

Isabelle swept across the room, and Kurt lit up. He hadn’t expected her to make it, but here she was. He gave her a big hug, and she patted his back, then rubbed gently.
“I’m so glad you’re home again. No place like, hm?” she said sympathetically. Kurt had told her some of it when he’d invited her, but not all. “And who’s this?”

Isabelle looked up at Adam with a bright smile.

“This is Adam Crawford. He’s my new boyfriend.” Kurt smirked at Adam, who smiled back and stepped forward.

“I’ve heard good things,” Adam said, clasping her tiny hand in his own large, strong hands. Adam was no taller than Kurt, but he was big and broad-shouldered, and next to him, Isabelle looked like a pixie. “From both Kurt and Aude.”

“Have you! Are you into fashion, too?” Isabelle asked.

Kurt snorted and looked away.

“Not really,” Adam chuckled. “But one time, Kurt and I went around the thrift stores and dressed each other up.”

“Oh, that sounds like fun!” Isabelle clapped her hands together. “I want to see the outfit he put on you, big guy.”

Kurt grinned. He hadn’t thought about that day for a while.

“Ah, well.” Adam narrowed his eyes. “I think we have the hats over here. Let me check.”

Adam went behind the curtain to look for their hats, and Kurt turned to Isabelle, who was simply beaming.

“He’s cute,” she said simply.
“He’s more than just cute. He’s...” Kurt shrugged. “He’s good, and brave, and open-hearted. I wasn’t looking for someone so soon, but he’s just such a beautiful person.”

Isabelle rubbed her hand up and down Kurt’s arm. “I’m glad. I know the past couple of months have been rough on you.”

“Yeah.” Kurt’s throat tightened. Break-up, diagnosis, new school, lost job, lost friend... “Kind of.”

Isabelle leaned over to kiss his cheek and cupped the other side of his face gently. “Hang in there, doll. Spring break is just around the corner.”

She opened her clutch and pulled out a card. “Here, you go.”

“Oh.” Kurt sighed and smiled at her. “Thank you. You didn’t have to give me a card. This party wasn’t meant for that.”

“Ohhh, I know. But everyone heard that you lost your roommate, and we weren’t exactly sure what to get you to help out.” Isabelle shrugged and waved her hand. “Go. Open.”

“Okay.” Kurt looked down and untucked the flap that Isabelle had folded into the envelope. The card itself shimmered with glitter, which caused Kurt to smile.

Looking on the man you are today with so much pride, the outside cover read. Then he opened it. You are a truly amazing person, and I wish the absolute best of everything for you. Love, your fairy godmother.

Kurt’s eyes widened as he saw the slip of paper peeking out of a pocket inside the card.

“Yes, you can,” Isabelle said firmly.

Kurt raised his brows. “What?”

“You’re going to say you can’t take it. I’m just cutting you off before you even start in with that
nonsense. And no, it’s not too much.”

“I- but...” Kurt blinked rapidly, then opened up the folded check.

It was written out for $2,000.

“Isabelle!”

She hugged him with one arm. “Use half of it to help out with your house and bills right now, and stick half of it in a savings account. I know how hard it is to jumpstart a responsible fiscal plan, especially when you’re starting out in a city that is both as wonderful and utterly unforgiving as New York.”

Kurt nodded dumbly. He did have a savings account still, but it was looking mighty weak after the move, and thanks to the cost of school expenses, medication, and doctor’s visits.

“Isabelle,” he said quietly. “I cannot thank you enough... Can you afford this?”

“Honey, I get paid a lot more than you do, and I have investments, and thanks to you-” She tapped the end of his nose. “-and your incisive critiques on my sketches over the past few months, I’ve gotten a financier for my next line. If anything, honey, you earned that by keeping me on my feet until I could make a comeback.”

Kurt bit his lip and looked at her uncertainly. He wanted to say that he couldn’t take it, but she’d already rejected that idea.

“When you’re older, you’ll realize how much that amount is not.” She patted Kurt’s back. “That was what I could spare. Consider it a late Christmas gift and an early birthday present.”

“Well, for me, right now... this is a lot.” Kurt drew in a deep breath. “It’s impossibly generous. Thank you.” He quirked his lips to the side, and felt oddly bad that he hadn’t divulged every part of his disastrous life to Isabelle. “Thank you thank you thank you thank you.”

Isabelle reached up and pinched his cheek. Kurt touched her hand, then caught sight of a red pork-
pie hat coming their way.

“Oh my God! Look how cuuute you are!” Isabelle exclaimed as she spotted Adam, dressed in the posh outfit Kurt had picked out for him.

Kurt hadn’t realized that Adam had brought it over... Though, he had to have several outfits with him, since they’d all promised to give Jinx the apartment to herself for a few days.

“Aha!” Adam came up to them and placed the pageboy hat on Kurt’s head.

“You are both so gorgeous,” she said. “I should steal you for a photoshoot.”

“Well, for this one, anyway.” Adam stroked a finger along Kurt’s cheek.

Kurt laughed. “Stop.”

---

The night wore on as people chatted, danced, drank, and at one point, sang along to the Les Mis soundtrack from the new movie, loudly and defiantly. There was no small ragging on Russell Crowe’s performance.

And at the end, the place might have been a mess, but Kurt found himself feeling much better than he had that morning. Or even the past few weeks, trying to deal with the fallout of his and Rachel’s ‘break-up.’ He still had to see her in dance class, but she’d gone from tearful and hopeful in her bed, to cold as ice whenever they saw one another in the hallway. He wasn’t the one who was alone, though.

He’d met a lot of good people in New York after all.

When they’d cleaned up enough to satisfy Kurt until morning, Santana made a nest out of the pillows on the floor and declared she was commandeering some of the gift cards to get herself a mattress. Kurt wouldn’t deny it to her, since they’d both be infinitely better off, if Santana was well rested and not cranky.
It was even *quiet* after Kurt got out of the shower. It was almost eerie. Santana was dead asleep in the television area. Kurt could even hear cars passing on the street.

His wet bangs fell over his eyes as he almost shyly approached his curtain. He’d let Adam shower first, knowing that he wasn’t ready for that level of intimacy, even if they’d been testing the limits of epically long cuddling sessions.

But they *had* been long sessions. Long cuddling, long talking. Long walks and long kisses. Kurt’s cheeks flushed as he thought about all of it. Circling as close to one another as they could, without going further.

It scared Kurt a little, the idea of taking this next step. Adam wasn’t pushing him in any way, though. He seemed perfectly happy to spend ridiculous amounts of time playing with one another’s hair, giving each other massages, and talking about their past relationships. It had only been a couple of weeks since they’d gotten together, after all.

No. It was Kurt who wanted more. Who needed to hold himself back when he was lying next to his perfect, gorgeous boyfriend. He wanted to pull that curtain back and jump on top of Adam. He wanted to grab Adam and pull him into the shower with him.

Wet. Slippery.

But it was too soon. Too soon had *never* worked out well for Kurt.

He let out a slow breath and approached the curtain. Adam was already in the bed, with the light on, reading a book with a pink and black boarder and a naked woman adorned with vines and apples. Kurt creased a brow as he closed the curtain and approached the bed.

Adam smiled and put his book down.

“Light reading?”

“Light homework. For my Gender and Sexuality in the Dramatic Arts class. Lots of saucy plays.” Adam held the cover up so Kurt could read it: *Clit Notes.*

Adam smiled at him as he crawled into the bed. “I think you’d like the class. Dr. Kohl and Madam Delange alternate on the subject matter, and now that I’ve taken them both, I can safely say, you’d enjoy it either way.”

“And were does this fall in your required credits?” Kurt slipped under the covers and snuggled in next to Adam.

“It... does not...” Adam looked upward, as though looking for an excuse. “Er. Not the second time, anyway. But you are allowed to retake it when subject matter changes.”

“Mm hm.” Kurt narrowed his eyes at Adam and stared at him for a long moment.

“Yes, I know, I’m wasting my time.” Adam set the book down and shook his head. “I’m a terrible student.”

“I don’t think you’re a terrible student. I’m just wondering how much you’ve got left of your degree.” Kurt slipped his arm across Adam’s chest and rested his head on Adam’s shoulder. “Not that school is really the prime issue I want to address when we’re all cuddly in bed.”

Adam grinned and shifted slightly to rest his head back and still look Kurt in the eye. “To be perfectly honest, I get some... dark periods. So I tend to take one or two classes each semester to keep myself motivated. In addition to running The Apples. Both of which constitute a good intermediate plan for coping, in the short term, I suppose.”

He grimaced and shrugged. “In the long term, I have one more year of funding from my scholarship, and I don’t think I can finish.”

“Can’t one of the Applettes take over the club for you? So you can enjoy it but not have to run everything?”

“I don’t know that it’s really so much of an option. Other than the reality that you are now arranging and composing for us.”
“I- Oh.” Kurt lifted his head. “I didn’t mean to take over!”

“It’s good that you have. Well, for me. I don’t want you to get behind.”

“I don’t plan to. I have a lot of living to do.” Kurt scooted up a little so he could reach the curls on the back of Adam’s head. “But if I could take some of your responsibilities... And maybe we could both take classes this summer.”

“Maybe. I usually work in the summer, though. My finances aren’t so good.”

Kurt pressed his lips together. “Mine are looking better. But... Could you get an independent study with one of the professors who likes you? Something that could stand in for one of the credits you need? And then you could work, and meet with that professor once a week, or every two weeks?”

“Maybe.” Adam brushed his fingers over Kurt’s cheek.

“And in between that and work, I’ll try to keep you cheered and motivated.”

“It’s not really your job to do that for me,” Adam said quietly.

“No. But... If you can give me complements all day every day, trying to keep my pitiful self-esteem up, I can try to keep you on track to graduate.”

Adam’s lips parted slightly and his brows tented. Kurt looked down.

“I don’t really think about the complements, Kurt. You’re just perfectly amazing. All I’m doing is commenting on the facts.”

Kurt nuzzled his head into Adam’s shoulder. “Mmm. Like that.”

“I find it sad that it’s so hard to get you to believe me.”
“The last few years have been hard on my confidence, I guess. I had it, for a while, but it’s like I got knocked back to that short, timid gay kid telling his best friend by the lockers why he couldn’t come out of the closet.”

Adam pressed a kiss to the top of Kurt’s head, then reached down to rub his back. “Well, if you don’t tire of them, I can certainly keep them up. You gave me quite the talking up today, anyway.”

“I can’t help it. I’m happy. It’s crazy. I don’t think I’ve ever completely felt this way since... Maybe since I was a kid.”

“I don’t think it’s been that long for me, but I know what you mean, in general. There are things about the adult world that I don’t feel prepared for, even now.”

Kurt yawned, and Adam petted the back of his head. He leaned over to turn out the light and folded himself around Kurt.

This was the moment when Kurt wanted to ravage Adam, after the sweetness and support and cuddling. Instead, he curled into him and pressed little kisses to Adam neck and jaw.

A few moments later, Adam whispered, “I’m very glad you’re happy.”

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Adam dropped Kurt off at Free Sing with a lingering kiss. Now that Kurt was the winner of Midnight Madness, more people felt the need to keep their distain of Adam quiet, so they went undisturbed. It may have had something to do with Kurt telling Ronnie and Jasper off shortly after the event itself, and that particular showdown making the gossip rounds in itself. The Adam’s Apples were not to be mocked.

So as Adam released Kurt, he gave a wave to Patrice inside who was running Free Sing this week, pressed another kiss to Kurt’s cheek, and made his way back down the hallway. He had his own work to do, after all, and after the drama that Kurt had faced down, Adam felt energized enough to do it.
He spent an hour in the library, doing research for his senior project, then, when he was good and properly stiff, got up and went for a stroll through the commons area. There he peered at the bulletin board, where the Apples poster was pinned. There were never any names, but it was habit. Sometimes Adam spotted folks considering it, and he’d try to encourage them to join. Of course, that had only ever worked with Kurt... and he’d been the only person they’d auditioned for.

Today, though, Adam froze during his walk by. There were names. Real names!

Serafina Blue
Adrien Elder
Ronald Luther Watkins
Lakisha Hernandez-Ortiz
Callista

Adam raised a brow at the gigantic name in the middle. This had literally never happened before. Kurt’s stardom had apparently exerted a gravitational effect on the student body.

Adam took a picture of the sign-up sheet and walked slowly through the crowd. He was heading into the courtyard before he realized that he hadn’t run into anyone, had to duck around anyone, or heard any whispering around him.

He stopped by the large fountain with the intertwined gender-ambiguous statues and sat heavily down on the edge.

“How many more ways can you improve my life, darling?” he muttered.

His thumb moved over the sides of his phone as he enumerated the little ways that his time on campus had improved since Kurt had put his foot down. His heart fluttered anxiously. It seemed almost too good to be true. He wondered if this sudden shift in public opinion could mean that, should he get his plans together quickly enough, he could begin getting people on board for his senior project. Maybe he could begin in earnest next semester, if he could get Kohl’s to sign off on something before summer.

Adam had never been very calculating, but he knew that Kurt wanted to see him succeed. He didn’t guilt Adam about his wayward status as a student, but he was interested in helping, if he could, and Adam had no doubt that Kurt would be there for him, if he failed. Kurt would probably pull any
number of connections to make Adam’s dreams come true. Part of that Manic Pixie Whatever, that urge of Kurt’s to take care of other people. Now that Rachel was, effectively, out of Kurt’s life for the time being, he might feel he needed someone to take care of.

With a little frown, Adam sent Kurt a little heart text. He couldn’t let that happen, of course. Adam would never let Kurt focus on him to the detriment of Kurt’s career or health. And that meant... Adam needed to start making arrangements. Do something to help himself get it together. If Kurt was to be a part of that, fine. But he wouldn’t be the whole of it.

His phone buzzed again with Kurt’s reply.

*hey, sweetcheeks ;)*

His lungs slowly began to fill with air, and he realized what he’d be doing with Kurt on their next free evening.

---

The air was cold, but Kurt felt nothing but a toasty warmth and pressed himself into it almost smugly.

“Are you quite comfortable?” Adam asked with a chuckle.

“Yes.” Kurt nuzzled his nose into Adam’s shoulder, careful not to trip on the sidewalk as they kept up with New York’s midday foot traffic.

“Ah. Good.” Adam pressed a kiss to Kurt’s crown.

“Something about a cuddly walk along the streets of New York makes me feel like I’m in *Rent.*”

“I’ll pass on that, thank you. I have the feeling I’d be the one knocked off to make the audience cry,” Adam said dryly.
“Hm. Oh well. Poor John Larson.”

“I live a *Tick, Tick... Boom!* appreciation life.”

Kurt straightened up and raised his brows. “Really? I’ve never seen it. I mean, I’ve heard some of the songs, of course, but no onstage.”

“Gasp! A gap in your encyclopedia knowledge of musical theatre?”

“I’m serious. Why do you like it more?”

Adam shrugged. “Because I’m a loser.”

Kurt patted Adam’s chest. “Nope. You’re amazing. Liking one musical over another isn’t going to destroy your status in my eyes. Unless you tell me that you hate *Wicked* and prefer the 1992 opera-musical disaster *Which Witch*.”

Adam’s laugh was deep-throated and pleasant. Kurt reached up and tugged on Adam’s red porkpie hat. He was starting to love it. It was like an iconic piece of Adam’s style, now.

“Why do you like *Tick* better?” Kurt prodded. “Is it because the script for *Rent* is bi-shamey?”

“It is, but that’s not it. It isn’t what *Rent* lacks, but what *Tick, Tick... Boom!* has.” Adam touched his hat, then took Kurt’s hand and led him onto the patio of a cafe on the corner. “It was meta before meta was a thing, see.”

Kurt took a seat next to him and lined their fingers up together.

“And there’s something about the story...” Adam continued. “It appeals in a way, to see someone struggling to *become* something, and knowing with all of their being that they only have so much time. That’s the tick tick, by the way. The clock can be an incredible motivator.”

“Sounds like Mark Cohen when he’s old,” Kurt said. “I didn’t know you felt like you had a deadline- Well. Nevermind. I guess, obviously.”
“I’m not saying that I think I’m going to die tomorrow, or that I’m all washed up at the ripe old age of 22, but...” Adam shrugged and slumped over, leaning on his free hand. “I wouldn’t’ve started The Apples if I didn’t know what it was like to be on the bottom. Often. And not in a hot and wriggly kinda way.”

Kurt pinched his lips together. The image, though, gave him all the warmth he needed. Mostly around his neck and cheeks.

Adam gave a soft smile, then sighed. “I find it comforting to see that struggle. Put to music, even. You know? Watch someone who’s not sure if they’ll ever succeed, someone who is living the same struggle you are, and then... and then all their hard work fucking pays off in a tremendous way.”

“That sounds pretty good to me, too.” Kurt stroked Adam’s hand with his fingers. “I’ve always been a bit of a loser myself... in case you forgot.”

“I only ever saw a star,” Adam said.

“Oh.” Kurt looked down at the table. “Shut up.”

“I just find it terribly sad that anyone could stand before you, hearing and seeing what you do, and not know how truly special you are.” Adam shook his head. “So us losers. Quite the pair, hm?”

Kurt kissed Adam’s knuckles and stroked his fingers over the golden curls escaping from his hat.

“I think we’re some of the luckiest losers on the planet, myself.”

“Well, I won’t disagree with you there, darling.” Adam kissed his cheek.

“Is this where we’re stopping tonight?” Kurt looked around the cafe. Oddly enough, Kurt didn’t tend to spend his time around the edge of campus. He was too busy darting back and forth between classes and work.
“No, I just wanted to get out of the flow of traffic for a moment. But we could get a bite to eat.” Adam lifted his chin and narrowed his eyes at the door.

“No, just wanted to get out of the flow of traffic for a moment. But we could get a bite to eat.” He rubbed his hand over Adam’s.

“No really hungry yet.”

“Maybe coffee then? And we’ll walk over.”

---

“It’s not like it is in Rent right?”

Adam chuckled and pulled Kurt closer. “Well, we won’t hold hands and sing, if that’s what you mean.” He frowned for a moment. “Probably.”

“Good, because when they were singing ‘Without You’ and the people in the circle started disappearing, I just completely lost it.”

Adam smiled down at Kurt. He was both grateful to get Kurt to come here, and to have him by his side. Kurt seemed a little nervous, but didn’t balk once. He just looked around curiously as Adam led the way, and held his arm tightly.

As they approached the entrance of the building with the windows blocked for privacy by music and movie posters, Adam realized that he hadn’t come here in over a month. Literally not since the very beginning of the semester. From the perspective of the other members, he’d been the one to just fade away.

“What?” Kurt looked at him with probing eyes.

“Just thinking.”

“About?” Kurt stuck his chin forward and blinked a few times.

Adam took another few seconds, then stopped in front of the group therapy centre. “I haven’t gone
“Do you not want to go? If you don’t, we don’t have to.” Kurt twisted his lips to the side. “I should probably find a therapist anyway... My insurance has a program where I can try a few therapists out for ten bucks a pop before I commit and have to make the full copay.”

“Oh. I didn’t know you where considering that.” Adam reached over and brushed his fingertips along Kurt’s jawline.

“Dr. Saunders suggested it. Actually, the doctor I talked to right after I was diagnosed wanted to refer me to a psychiatrist, but I didn’t listen. Then I dropped about twenty pounds.” Kurt raised both brows. “So that was a positive life choice.”

Adam smiled and leaned forward to press a kiss to Kurt’s cold lips. “Let’s go. It can’t do any harm.”

Kurt gave him a peck in return, and together, the two of them walked inside the building.

Adam felt himself straighten, like a string had been pulled along his spine, when he saw the inside of the centre. They’d painted the place, for starters. Instead of stark white, it was a cool blue. There was a sofa and a few chairs in a lounge area on one side of the room, and the standard circle of chairs on the other side. A number of spiky, green potted plants stood near both sections, and the stairwell leading up to the what Adam knew to be the “office” of whomever was on duty was still sparkling with tiny, white Christmas lights.

A little blue and white Scottish fold jumped down from the table near the door and came up to sniff at them. Adam was stunned momentarily. Kurt stood by him, taking it all in, and then knelt down to scratch behind the cat’s ears.

“Hey!” Aude hopped up from the sofa area and hurried over to give the both a hug. “Oh, honey! I didn’t know you were coming!”

“They’ve really spiffed up the place,” Adam said.

“Life Lines-” Aude looked to Kurt. “-that’s the group that owns the place-- Anyway, they’re finally getting a little more stable. The money came in for the alcohol and drug addiction programs,
but we have this place on Tuesdays and Thursdays, so we all benefit.”

Kurt nodded. “So do we go to the chairs or do the-” He pointed at the circle, then the sofa, then the stairwell.

Aude took his arm. “Over here, first. It’ll be a few minutes before the meeting starts. Hon, I’m so glad you came. I can’t believe how well this turned out! And I was just trying to get you two to date each other!”

On the sofa, Cora laughed. Adam gave her a wave, but he could tell from her expression that she didn’t recognize him.

The three of them settled in and made introductions. The cat came over to wedge itself between Aude and a girl named Sara Anne. There were some snacks on the table, and Adam leaned over for a cookie. He felt a little awkward, but Kurt seemed alert and eager, and... oh.

That was the corniest joke Adam had ever heard in his life. Kurt was more nervous than he seemed. Adam took his hand and threaded their fingers together.

“We don’t often get partners in here,” Cora said. “I don’t know if Dana usually lets the partners in here?”

“I don’t think she’ll care,” Sara Anne said. “It’s like, part of the ‘support’ we should be building, right?”

She smiled warmly at Adam. Now he was sure that he’d never met this one before.

“Oh, I’m not just his partner,” Kurt said. “I mean, I’m also- I have, um...”

Adam squeezed Kurt’s hand and grinned as he watched Kurt’s wide, anxious eyes. “You should’ve heard him when he came out-- about being pos, I mean.” He laughed softly. “He’s *positive* that he’s positive.”

Kurt ducked his head in embarrassment.
“And trying to be positive about it!” Adam continued.

Kurt shook in laughter and leaned into Adam, who bit his lip as he grinned and grinned.

“Oh, my God, Kurt, that’s terrible!” Aude shook his head.

Adam hugged Kurt close to him and pressed a kiss to his cheek. He’d been worried about this move, but if Kurt was by his side, Adam might feel comfortable enough to come to group every week. In nothing else, Kurt would make him smile when things got too raw.

Soon, more people began to trickle in. Maybe it was the new paint. Or the plants, or the furniture, or the little cat (who he learned was named Blueberry) that hopped up to greet people the moment the door opened. This whole place felt warmer. The people seemed friendlier. Had it really been so bleak here before?

Or had it just been him?

Adam didn’t have time to dwell on the possibility of his former bad attitude. Dana and Cory came down the staircase together and started ushering people over to the circle.

“Adam?” Dana came over and forced a hug on him. “Oh, God, I thought we’d lost you!”

“Oh, no, no, I’m fine!”

“Well, not like that, hon. I did ask Aude if you were well.”

“Huh. I suppose I ought to have thought about that.” Adam looked at Kurt, who had taken a seat with Aude, but looked back for Adam. He went to sit on Kurt’s other side and put his arm around the back of his chair.

“They can’t tell anyone, right?” Kurt whispered.
“No, sweetheart. No one’s going to tell.”

Kurt nodded, solemnly. As Cory and Dana started the meeting, he listened and watched with such big eyes, that Adam wanted to steal him away from the circle and give him a long kiss so hot it would leave scorch marks on that trim, dashing vest of his... But he wouldn’t. Because Kurt was admitting, in coming, and being so open to this, that he need the ‘support building’ just as much as Adam did.

“So we have a new face today, as well as one I haven’t seen in a very long time,” Dana continued.

Adam bowed his head forward in recognition. “Hullo. I’m Adam. Some of you don’t know me, but I’ve... not had the best attendance record. The last time I was here, well. I told you’d I’d met a guy.”

He tilted his head in Kurt’s direction. “Here he is.”

“Hi,” Kurt said breathlessly. He gave a little wave, wiggling his fingers. “I’m Kurt. I’m... here for him, but... also for me.”

It was rewarding to see Kurt’s nervousness beginning to melt as the group members welcomed him formally.

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