I'm Still Here

Co-authored with JWMelmoth on tumblr.

After having survived a brutal gay bashing and the implosion of his engagement (Aftermath), Kurt tries to cope with the aftermath of a traumatizing attack as well as his former terrible taste in men. Now, Kurt finds himself with too many options, in theatre, school, music, and his love life.
Chapter 1

KURT

“Hey, twinkie. Heard you just lost 180 pounds of unsightly lard and hairgel!”

Kurt continued to set down several plates on the table he was serving as he glanced over his shoulder. “Santana! Hey! How was your summer vacation in Lesbos?”

Santana wrinkled her nose at the joke, then laughed and pumped her fist at her chest. “Oh, babygay. You’ve learned to shade over the summer. Mama so proud. Did you take a class?”

The customers laughed a little. Kurt was pretty sure this couple remembered Santana.

“I took some classes, but they were mostly micro-skill acting classes and music theory.” Kurt turned back to the customers. “How is everything? Do you need anything else?”

He finished up with them and then went to take an ‘intermission’ with Santana. After all the fighting with Rachel, Santana had elected to spend the summer doing a few acting jobs she’d lined up on the west coast while crashing with Mercedes, and then visiting her family back in Lima. Thus, they hadn’t seen one another in months, but Kurt had no doubt that L.A. had as much (if not more) lesbian content as the metaphorical implication of the Grecian island. Kurt thought it a little strange that she’d pop in on him here so soon, but maybe she’d been in town longer than he knew.

As they moved into the window light of the table by the door, Santana’s eyes widened and she fixed her gaze on him so completely that Kurt almost started checking his uniform for something wrong. Her lips parted slightly, and she raised one hand up and reached for Kurt. He almost pulled away, until he realized what she was staring at.

In the light of the diner, sometimes his lingering bruises from the attack weren’t as noticeable. Their regulars had stopped asking about it, anyway. In daylight, however, one was yellowing on his cheek, another on his chin. Above his eyebrow was a bit of a scar, and there was the ghost of one on his cheek. Santana’s soft fingertips brushed over these, proving what Kurt had long suspected. She might joke, and pretend not to care, but Santana had senses as sharp as her wit. She noticed things, and she had noticed these small changes in Kurt, and honed in on them for examination.

When her fingers brushed over the scar above his eyebrow, Kurt smiled. “I’m kind of proud of that. Do you think guys will think it’s sexy?”

Santana broke out of her revery and screwed her brows together. “You’re crazy. And bad ass.” She shook her head, started to say something, then pressed her lips together for a moment, biting whatever it was back. “And did you really kick Blaine to the curb? Dani told me you did. And that it was epic.”

“Epic. Nerve-wracking.” Kurt shrugged as they sat together and gave a “single ladies” flip of his left hand. “But I’m free of the ring, yes.”

Santana took the seat beside him, her body language considerably softer than he would’ve expected. Then again, she’d been softer to him in general since he’d taken her side in the Great Fanny Debacle of 2013. Maybe this was the inevitable arc of Santana’s sympathies, when she marked you as a friend. He remembered her acting as almost a caretaker for Rachel at times, before.

“Good riddance,” Santana spat after Kurt had finished the story. “I can’t believe we believed him.”
She rolled her eyes and shook her head. “I can’t believe you took him back in the first place.”

“You came to the proposal!”

“Yeah, but like, I was trying to be supporto-girl there.” She spread her hands. “Rachel said she’d help with our *Facts of Life* musical if I didn’t rip the Gelmet Sausage Boy a new one or imply your marriage would have the vigor and endurance of a Britney Spears Vegas affair.”

“See, that kind of well-placed eloquence would have really simplified my life.” Kurt sighed. “I probably wouldn’t have listened anyway. I had this image of us… It felt like us against the world, so often, and I didn’t realize that it was just me. Alone. Against the world and my fiancé.”

“Grim.”

“Accurate. Anyway. I need to get back to work.” Kurt rose. “Are you going to be coming back here?”

“Depends.”

“On Gunter?”

“Yep!”

“I’m going to check on my tables, but after…” Kurt touched her shoulder. “Do a song with me.”

“I haven’t sung in a while,” Santana breezed.

“Not like our audience is particularly discerning in the area of musical prowess. They just like to see the pretty people sing for them.” Kurt pointed at her and circled his finger around in a figure-eight. “Especially when they wear booty-hugging dresses that only come mid-thigh.”

“I don’t know. I already got booted from Broadway on Queen Diva Rachel’s order. I’m not sure I want to tank my rep any further.”

Kurt patted her back. “I promise-” He leaned in. “-having a rep would involve anyone knowing who you are. Beyond the Yeast-i-Stat girl.”

Santana smiled slightly. She looked over his face, and again, something on her lips remained unsaid. Kurt could see it on her face as she changed topics.

“Does she still work here?”

“Nope. She tried for a while, to keep her ‘cred,’ but she can’t handle the rehearsal schedule and go to NYADA at the same time. They’re going to open, soon. Something had to go, and she doesn’t really need the money.”

Santana made a noise with her tongue and rolled her eyes again as she got up. “Let’s do something by P!nk. In celebration of having that greasy, curly-haired growth removed.”

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It wasn’t terribly late when they left the diner, but it was dark. Santana was looking over her rehiring paperwork, and Kurt walked close by her side. Despite spending more time at NYADA’s gym since school had restarted, Kurt was still a slim gay man, and Santana was a nearly feral cat who thought she was twice her actual size. Her heels clipped against the sidewalk, and her short, tight dress accentuated a nearly perfect figure that even Kurt had to admire.
At the moment, New York street traffic was thick enough that an outright attack would be unlikely, but that didn’t do much to keep Kurt’s heart from racing. They were close to the area where Kitt had died, after all.

“What is it?” Santana asked as they neared the alley.

The plan was to go to the subway, of course, but Kurt couldn’t help but be aware of its proximity. Kurt shook his head, swallowed, and quickened his pace.

Santana looked around, then back to Kurt with a deep frown in her brow. “Maybe a cab, hm?”

“It’s not that far,” Kurt murmured. “We can-”

He broke off and grabbed her hand tightly, moving in front of her as a large man came in their direction-

and passed them without slowing down.

Kurt sighed and looked up at the sky. People behind them made noises and walked around with irritation. He started to let Santana’s hand go, but she wouldn’t release. Instead, she interlocked their arms even more and pulled him close.

“You okay?”

Kurt just shook his head and looked away. His ears burned slightly. It felt like he’d exposed himself, but at the same time, he had to remember that he wasn’t supposed to be playing that “I’m fine” game anymore. Even if he actually was feeling steady more and more often now.

“You know-” She squeezed his arm, almost protectively. “-half the reason I was so scared in high school… People were awful to you. I was, too. I may not have been leading the Kurt Hate Parade, but I was at least a bystander. I didn’t think I could be that brave, to deal with the death threats and getting shit on every day.”

“I’m sure that was the reason no one in Glee tried to get you to come out. It’s… It’s complicated. You dealt with it in senior year, though.”

“Brittany tried to get me to come out. But I wasn’t gonna. Not until I was ready, no matter how much I loved her.” She looked around and sighed. “You know, I figured, if you felt comfortable in New York, I would. Not that I didn’t wanna go, but I figured, everywhere is terrible; might as well get an education! College didn’t work out for me, though, and New York was like this gay paradise. You were always the survivor. If you felt safe here, I could give it a go. And I had no problem, before, no matter what happened out here on the street.” She rolled her eyes. “Men are dumb. Sometimes they do yell, or try to cop a feel, but it’s nothing I can’t handle. Nothing worse than Lima, and people here have a greater tolerance for some hollaback, y’know.”

“I think you’re minimizing your own fire and spit when we were in high school, but as Elliott says, this ain’t high school, gurl.”

Santana smiled and bowed her head toward him briefly. “Yeah, yeah, Ells. I don’t know how you do it. I don’t know that I could walk these streets every day and not feel safe. It’s not even people who want to grab and sleaze on you, but people who wanna kill you for something inside that you couldn’t change even if you wanted to… The worst threat I ever got was some guy who thought he could turn me, like I didn’t try on every guy who offered before I finally admitted who I am… Lucky I won’t have to live in this area.”
“It’s not every day for me, not anymore,” Kurt clarified. He slowed his pace and walked to the side of traffic. “It’s here. It took me a while to get back to work because this place was so close. I’m not scared that they’ll be there in that alley, I just… I remember what happened, how he died, and I can’t help but react. It’s not even a trick my mind plays on me; it’s my mind and body reacting with an instinct I may not be able to put away. I like it at the diner, but… The only reason I haven’t gotten another job is that I want to be able to give myself the chance to beat this.”

He shrugged. “If it were worse, I’d remove myself from the situation without question. But I’m better than I was. My first day back at Vogue… Did you hear about that one?”

Santana shook her head slowly. Kurt held his hands out to her. Santana frowned and grabbed one, then studied it closely, moving her fingertips over the little scars, like she was reading his palm.

“That happened at Vogue? I might have to reassess my judgmental judgment of your job.”

“That happened during a panic attack. Notice my practiced lack of flailing and screaming.” He said it with a smile, and that earned him a dubious look from Santana.

“Just now, you grabbed me, and you stood in front of me, like you intended to save me from that pedestrian.”

“I’m a walking contradiction.”

“You’re a superhero without the power.” Santana looked around. “Is that the alley where it happened?”

“Yes.” Kurt reached for her hand and when she reattached to him, he led her inside.

Nerves prickled in his hands and feet and down his back. He shouldn’t test himself like this. Walking past every day after work was bad enough. But sometimes, he just felt drawn to the alley.

He walked them over to the spot where Kitt had been when the police found them. Almost instinctively, he began to tell Santana about laying there with Kitt as he took his last breaths.

Santana let his arm go. It wasn’t cold, but she started to shake a little. She made a full turn, then grabbed his arm again and pulled him toward the opening back to the street. “You need to jump in some radioactive junk. You know that, right?”

“I know.”

“Stop doing that crap. What would your dad say about this?”

“That I’m weird.” Kurt snuggled into her arm and headed back in the direction of the subway. “And I am, I know. But at least I’m treading water now. Not being sucked under.”

Santana looked at him seriously for a moment, then shook her head. “I still don’t understand. But…” She went quiet for a moment, then said, almost angrily, “I’m glad you’re still here, okay?”

“I’m glad you’re back. Will you be okay if Dani comes over to Elliott’s while we’re there?”

“Should be, since I’m crashing at her place until I find an apartment.” Santana flipped her hair. “Dani’s new girl is hoooooot.”

Kurt shook his head.

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"Adam!" The two girls on Adam’s doorstep shouted in unison.

"Hey, girls," Adam replied smiling, opening the door and his arms wide. They both rushed in for a bearhug.

“It’s. Been. Ages,” Monica stated, clinging to his arm.

“Eternity,” Clementine agreed.

“Come on now, I’ve only been gone for a month. It was hardly all summer,” Adam replied, but squeezing them back just so anyway. After his time in the UK, their absolute disregard for his personal space reminded him that he was back in the States alright.

“All summah-” Monica echoed and grinned. “Oh how I missed hearing your cute British accent! You sound like David Beckham…”

“But David’s from- Oh, nevermind. Just come in already, will you? I want to hear all about the Apples.”

The girls came in and immediately started filling him in on the new relationship status of two couples in Adam’s old musical theatre group. Adam listened to their ramblings with a fond smile on his lips. He had asked, after all.

“…and now they keep suggesting we do these love songs, Adam, it’s disgusting, they have no respect for singles, you simply have to come back and lead us again!” Clementine finished in one breath.

“Actually, you know, the whole point of graduation is sort of… leaving school,” Adam replied. “I was hoping to find a job here soon. I’ve been sending out applications like crazy, even from England, but I haven’t heard back from any of them yet.”

“Bummer.”

“Quite.”

“How will you be able to afford your place then?” Monica asked curiously. “Not much room for subletting…”

“I guess he could always rent out the couch-“

“Tea, anyone?” Adam got up and walked to his small kitchen. As much as he appreciated Monica and Clementine’s concern, his mother and sister in Essex had been grilling him about getting a job
for weeks, and he didn’t really fancy going over it all again. Even though performing arts graduates weren’t really sought after, he was confident he’d find something soon, even if it was something temporary. He wanted to stay in New York, even if in Essex he could have saved money by moving in with his mom.

"Hey, where’s your frog?"

"Pardon?" Adam turned back to the couch, kettle in hand.

"That huge plush amphibian that lived on your couch. He was a great pillow," Clementine said, squirming a little to make herself comfortable with her short legs dangling far above the ground.

Adam froze for a moment, trying to figure out what she meant, and then knew.

"Oh! You mean Mr Oppy. He was Kurt’s. That is, I got him for Kurt, and I finally got to give it to him a few weeks ago."

“Awww…” cooed the girls.

“You were such a cute couple,” Monica sighed.

Adam beamed. “Well, I wasn’t going to make a big announcement, but actually, Kurt and I have kind of started seeing each other again.”

Clementine sat up. “Really? I thought he was with that other guy.”

“Yeah, me too,” Monica agreed.

“What other guy?” Adam asked. He had been away for a few weeks, and they hadn’t really made anything official yet, but he’d assumed from their last conversations that they’d been heading in that direction. Kurt had seemed to want that, in any case.

“With the black hair?” Clementine added, gesturing at her own dark dreads.

“Short, lots of gel?” Adam asked, feeling his stomach sink a little. He didn’t really think Kurt would take Blaine back, but then, he had before.

“No, tall. Hugely tall. And with guyliner?” Monica said. “I think he goes to NYU.” She sighed. “Seriously, sometimes I think everyone in New York who is hot is either gay, taken, or both. It’s just not fair.”

The penny dropped. “Oh, you mean Elliott!” Adam let out, feeling relieved. “No, they’re just good friends.”
“Are you sure? I heard they were living together,” Clementine said. “Theodor said so.”

“Well, yes, but only until Blaine moved out of the loft,” Adam assured them. “They are not a couple.”

“Really? Because, I don’t know, I only saw them once when Elliott was picking him up after his summer class with Professor Robillard, but they seemed awfully couple-y…”

Monica nodded. “I saw it too, Kurt kissed him on the cheek when he saw him and they shared a bagel and everything.” She sighed.

“That’s not so bad,” Adam mumbled, though he did pull the lid off his cookie tin with a little more force than necessary. They really were just friends, right? He let his eyes wander over the kitchen surface as he tried to remember if Kurt had ever kissed his cheek when they met each other in the halls of NYADA. Then he saw the cream-coloured envelope pinned to his memo board, and smiled, his confidence returning.

“Well, Kurt did invite me to a dinner party he is having to celebrate his callback for the lead in Samael,” he said happily. “I’m fairly sure that Elliott will be there amusing everyone with the stories of his summer conquests. The guy has serious groupies.”

“So does Kurt,” Clementine replied drily, giving Adam a knowing look. Adam smiled. It was true. He was Kurt’s number one fan, and he wasn’t ashamed of that.

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Elliott

“No, no, man. Come on over.” Elliott skimmed through the sheet music and bobbed his head to the guitars jamming in the background. “It’s echo-y over there now. How am I supposed to live my life without someone from Lima crashing at my place?”

He was joking, but to be perfectly honest with himself, he missed having Kurt there. A lot of guys in New York, well. Club guys. They just wanted to hook up. And that was fine… it just didn’t tend to result in having someone to spend your day with. It got lonely. Elliott had never been much of a wallflower back in Jersey, but he was dubious about New York. They had better schools for drama and arts, but he wondered about the people, sometimes.

But having Kurt in his apartment, even for a short time, meant someone to hang with in between NYU and the work thing. It meant Kurt wandering around in a tank top and pajama bottoms, with his lean, sinewy arm muscles exposed, and some green gunk on his face. And then, it meant them eating ice cream together on the couch while talking about old bands or watching movies.

Elliott didn’t have much guilt about monopolizing Kurt’s time away from Rachel and Santana before, and he had less now. Kurt smiled a lot more around him, after he’d started believing that Elliott, in fact, would not throw him away the moment something better came along, or step on his neck to take opportunity away from him.

“Okay, so how do you feel about Hellraiser?”

“Is this a serious question?” Kurt replied dryly.
Elliott’s efforts to get Kurt into horror movies were failing pretty spectacularly. But it was fun to watch Kurt’s face at what he saw.

“Or we could watch *Twilight,*” Elliott joked. “They’re pretty much the same gross out factor.”

“No.” Kurt said immediately. He sighed. “Those movies remind me of Blaine.”

“Dude, I can so see that. Edward is a major creeper. Possessive, manipulative, controlling—”

“I was always on Team Jacob,” Kurt said almost smugly.

“Ummm, Jacob wasn’t a prize either. I never read it or anything, but my girl Valerie wrote an English paper on *Twilight* and I remember large chunks of description where Jacob forces her to kiss him, and then blames her when she gets hurt for fighting back.”

Kurt was quiet for a moment.

“Then he’s all, ‘I know you were into it’ and—” Elliott paused. “You okay? I’m sensin’ not so good vibes.”

“No, I’m just remembering the sheer extent to which my romantic life has been fucked up. I’ll tell you about it some time. He wasn’t quite like Jacob, but he was kind of furry. Well, he wore a gorilla suit, once, and he did the grabby kiss thing.”

Elliott frowned.

“Come to think of it…” Kurt mused. “Blaine was kind of a grabby kisser, too… He never slammed me into anything, though…”

Elliott didn’t want to fall into the rebound savior guy role, but he also sometimes kind of wanted to wrap Kurt up in a blanket and loom by his side to protect him. Being around Kurt brought out weird impulses in him. Normally, it was hard to break his calm, but he’d left his yoga class twice in the last few weeks because it was failing to settle his head.

“Anyway, not tonight. I’m preparing for the party tomorrow,” Kurt said.

“Yeah? Maybe I could come help. Scrub floors. Hang crepe paper or something.”

“Dani’s really busy with Fara, isn’t she?”

“Why can’t you believe that I just wanna spend time with you? I’d rather clean with you than sit around in my apartment alone.”

Elliott imagined them dusting and sweating and laughing together. Collapsing exhausted together on the sofa and lying bonelessly against one another.

“I appreciate the offer, but…”

“Oh, c’mon, dude. It’s your party. You shouldn’t have to put everything together.”

“I kind of like putting everything together by myself. You should see me with a last minute, low budget wedding.” Kurt paused for a moment. “Okay, give me an hour, distraction free, and then you can come over. But no Hell, with razors or otherwise.”

“Yes!” Elliott pumped his fist. “If you need me to bring anything, text me. I can pop by the store.”
“Oh, what would I do without you, Starchild.”

Elliott set his music selections on the counter with a big dopey grin on his face.

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**Kurt**

Kurt looked over the loft one more time and smiled, pleased with what he saw. With Blaine’s piano out of the way, there was just enough space to fit in an extra table to seat everyone he had invited. It also made it a lot easier for Artie to navigate his chair around the bookcase without chafing his knuckles on the rough wall. Instead of the peculiar fruity smell that had clung to the couch pillows when Blaine still lived in the loft, the place now smelled of freshly cut herbs and basmati rice. Kurt grinned. He hoped Elliott would be pleased with the Hummelised version of his curry, tweaked to make it a little less heavy on the stomach to leave room for a fabulous cheesecake dessert.

There was knocking at the sliding door, and with one glance at the mirror by the door to make sure the rice fumes hadn’t flattened his hair, Kurt went to open it. His stomach fluttered a little. Although he was looking forward to seeing all of his friends, there was one in particular who made his heart beat just a little bit faster.

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**Adam**

Adam walked up to the door of the loft, glancing at his watch once more before he knocked. He was a little early, but he had found himself sitting at his apartment unable to wait any longer. Monica and Clementine had been right after all— it did feel like he had been away for an eternity. He knocked and waited, his smile growing in anticipation of seeing Kurt. He hoped Kurt liked the souvenirs he had brought from the UK.

*Pull yourself together, Crawford, he told himself sternly. You’re not sixteen anymore. You’re supposed to be the suave older guy here.*

The door slid open and despite his internal admonitions, Adam smiled even brighter and started off with a rambling apology.

“Hi Kurt! I know— I’m a little early, but there were only two buses in this direction and the other one would have made me late and I didn’t want to upset your dinner plans so I figured I’d better take the first. You can always put me to use in the kitchen or I can just sit somewhere quietly while you get ready—”

“I’m so glad you’re here, Adam,” Kurt cut him off, smiling and wrapping his arms around him for a tight hug. “And it’s okay, Elliott’s already here, too. He just helped me set up the finishing touches.”

Adam returned the hug, squeezing him back and breathing in his scent. When Kurt started to let go, Adam’s arms lingered around Kurt for a moment longer. He knew he had been the one who said they should take it slow, but holding Kurt felt like they had never broken up at all. Then Adam realized what Kurt had said, and that they weren’t alone.

“Hey, man, long time no see,” Elliott chimed in from the couch, waving at Adam.

“Um. Hello,” Adam said, feeling a little awkward. But then Kurt was smiling at him and leading him into the room and asking him questions about his trip and his family, and Adam found himself unable to focus on Elliott and what his presence at the loft might say about his and Kurt’s relationship. It
wasn’t important for now; he just wanted to talk to Kurt and make him smile at him like that some more.

Adam filled his friends in on everything he had been doing, livening up his account by imitating his sisters and their incessant questions about the U.S. (‘Can you really get free refills of everything all day long?’) and his American friends (‘Is it true that they all have guns?’) and answering Kurt’s questions in return (‘Did you see anyone famous while you were in London?’, ‘What were people wearing? Are beanies really still a thing over there?’). Every now and then Elliott would ask something too, sounding genuinely interested in what Adam had to say, and by the time Adam finished his story and reached into his bag to give Kurt the things he had brought, he had completely forgotten about Monica and Clementine’s insinuations. Kurt loved the Prince George commemorative plate and the little solar-powered waving Queen figurine Adam had brought him (Adam had feared they might be a bit on the tacky side, but the gleam in Kurt’s eyes told him they were just right). Elliott immediately demanded copies of Pippa’s food column from the Waitrose Kitchen magazine Adam had nicked from his mother just before he left.

Soon afterward Santana arrived with Dani, looking like she’d walked out of a fashion magazine. As soon as the door slid open for them, Dani came forward and hopped up to give Adam a hug. Santana wrinkled her nose and looked around.

“Is that curry, or have you three been gettin’ your sweat up in great big man-tangle in here? Hm? Hm?”

“Groooss,” Dani laughed.

“Think we’re gonna be the only ones at this shindig that wouldn’t appreciate that image?” Santana put her hands on her hips and strolled over to take a look at the little waving Queen. “Maybe we should up the hotness factor a little. We could get some good cash from this if we swapped out Chubs the Space Vampire over there for Rough Trade Santa.” She fanned herself. “Now that guy had abs.”

“Hey,” Elliott protested, his eyes widening a little as he adjusted his shirt uncomfortably. Then he crossed his arms over himself.

Kurt stepped over to Elliott and wrapped an arm around his back defensively. “I love you, Santana, but I do have duct tape if you keep being mean to my main man.”

“Yeah.” Dani moved to Elliott’s other side. “Don’t mess with the OTH, babe.”


“Wait, did you just say ‘Rough Trade’ Santa?” Elliott asked as Santana settled into a seat on the couch.

“Oh, oh, yes.” Her eyes sparkled wickedly. “Please let me tell this one, Kurt!”

That Santana had asked should’ve been a clue that this story was further on the side of risque than Adam was prepared to hear in a story about Kurt. Santana’s telling was lighthearted, and Kurt was laughing, but it didn’t make the reality of Kurt being tied up and robbed in his own home any less lurid. Adam’s eyes kept drifting to Kurt. Elliott was now hugging him around the shoulders, clearly sharing similar thoughts to Adam.

Adam might’ve gone over as well, but the band seemed an impenetrable unit when together. He
knew he should be pleased that Kurt had found such good friends while he was out of the picture, but he’d be lying if he said he wasn’t a little jealous. He didn’t have long to ponder that sentiment, though.

When the next buzzer sounded, Kurt went over to the sound of a low male voice asking for help getting someone up the stairs, so Adam found himself recruited to head back down to the entrance. There he met Sam, Artie, and Mercedes, and then took the other side of Artie’s wheelchair to heft it up the narrow staircase of the six floor walk-up.

“Dude, you must be ripped under that shirt,” Sam said. “Do you ever do modeling?”

Adam laughed. “Oh, no.”

“If you’re as chiseled under there as your forearms are, you could probably walk onto some shoots now. Oil up. Get some grass, y’know?”

“Grass?” Adam furrowed his brow, assuming Sam meant weed, and shook his head. “I don’t know about that.”

Sam made a huffing sound and repositioned his hand on the arm of Artie’s chair.

“No problem guys, just talk over my head,” Artie said.

“Oh, I’m sorry!” Adam said.

“Kidding. Thanks for the lift,” Artie joked. “And don’t mind Sam, he’s always trying to get his friends into modeling. He actually convinced me to join the photoshoot for the Men of McKinley calendar to raise money for Regionals.”

“I knew you looked familiar,” Adam replied, suddenly connecting the dots. “Kurt still has that up in his part of the loft, you know.”

“Which month?” Sam asked eagerly.

“Oh, I suppose it changes,” Adam dodged, not sure if Kurt wanted the boys to know, “but I remember he said it was very tastefully done and he appreciated that you all signed it for him.”

“I still got mine too,” Mercedes said, smiling and glancing at Sam from the side. “Just as a keepsake, of course. And Artie’s signature will be worth a lotta cash when his first blockbuster comes out.”

“Damn right,” Artie agreed.

They reached the top floor and put Artie’s chair down. Both Sam and Adam were breathing hard from the effort, and Adam realized how lucky he was to be able to get everywhere on his own. He didn’t think it’d be polite to ask Artie directly—not having only just met him—but it couldn’t be easy having to navigate around New York in a wheelchair.

Kurt greeted each of his friends when they entered the loft, offering a hug to Mercedes and touching Artie’s shoulder lightly. Mercedes took a moment to run her fingers over a lingering bruise on Kurt’s face, and give it a kiss. Then Kurt showed off his scars with a little too much glee. Some of Kurt’s friends, Adam knew, had more recently moved to New York, and the conversation reflected their settling in, finding things in their neighborhoods, and what restaurants they should try together.

Adam sat back and listened, enjoying the sight of Kurt interacting with his friends in a carefree way. Without his ex-boyfriend (or Rachel) overshadowing him and dominating almost every conversation,
Kurt was free to catch up with his friends and share his own experiences of the city without being brushed off in favour of ‘bowtie & Broadway’ talk.

Then, the conversations were interrupted by the sound of “I’m a diva! I’m a-I’m a diva! N-n-now diva is the female version of a hustler!” coming from Kurt’s pocket. “It’s Rachel,” Kurt explained, and Adam smirked a little. With that ringtone, who else would it have been?

Kurt reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone, his shoulders sagging a little when he read the message.

“I guess that means we can get started,” he announced. “Rachel will be late. Apparently there’s an emergency costume fitting directly after their rehearsal.”

Santana snorted. “They probably need to let out her dress to make room for her huge, inflated ego.” She mimed her sides growing bigger and bigger with her arms and filling her cheeks with air.

“Santana…” Kurt said sternly, but the corners of his mouth twitched a little. “I’ll go and heat the rice.”

“I’ll help-”

“I can help-” both Elliott and Adam said at once, and then they looked at each other sheepishly.

Kurt smirked. “I think I can manage,” he replied.

Adam blushed, purposefully avoiding Santana’s knowing look. Seeing as how Elliott decided to take Kurt’s word for it and continued his conversation with Dani, Adam got up and followed Kurt to the kitchen.

“Is everything okay?” he asked carefully. “You seemed a little…”

“Disappointed that my so-called best friend can’t be bothered to show up on time to celebrate my first professional success since I came to New York?” Kurt finished, and shrugged. “I guess I am, though I really don’t know why I am still surprised. We sort of made up after the way she behaved when I had just gotten out of the hospital, but nothing really changed. Fanny comes first.”

Adam nodded. He didn’t know Rachel very well, but he personally thought she’d been that way even before she got the lead in a Broadway show. Back then, she had just been all about her then-boyfriend Brody. He wondered if there had ever been a time she hadn’t put herself above Kurt’s needs.

“It doesn’t matter. You are all here,” Kurt quickly said, brushing it off and smiling. He handed Adam a potholder. “Can you take out the vegetables?”

Adam did as he was told, and the two of them busied themselves with getting the table ready. In the larger living space, he could see people mingling. Mercedes was talking energetically with Santana, who was smiling more brightly than perhaps Adam ever had seen her. She even reached over and gave Artie’s hair a muss. (He immediately smoothed it down again, but didn’t seem to mind very much). Sam leaned casually against the back of the couch and was nodding along to something Elliott was saying, a very chill interchange with a lot of squinting on both sides.

When everything was on the table, Kurt lifted a glass and tapped on it with a spoon, summoning everyone over.

“I’d like to thank all of you for coming tonight,” he said, then hesitated. “I know it’s just a callback. I might not get the part. But I feel that it’s an honor even to be considered for an important role like
this, and it’s… really the first concrete bit of success that I’ve found here in New York when it
comes to theatre and performing.” He shrugged. “I just wanted to share that with all of my closest
friends, and what better way to bring the stray new New Yorkers together than food and wine?”

There was some chuckling around the table, and then Kurt made a motion ushering them to sit down
and passed the dish of rice around first, making sure everyone was informed that the recipe was
originally Elliott’s and that they should be sure to leave some room for cheesecake later.

Although Kurt’s friends thoughtfully tried to engage Adam into their conversations at the dinner
table, there were a few moments where their jokes and shared memories went over his head. Adam
didn’t mind. The food was delicious, and he was fine just listening to their stories. Whenever that
happened, Adam’s eyes were drawn to Kurt. His reactions to what was said, whether they were
smiles or pensive looks, told Adam how to interpret to stories (and the credibility of the narrator). But
as he watched him, Adam couldn’t help but remember what Clementine and Monica had told him
about Kurt and Elliott. If he didn’t know any better…

Kurt and Elliott were seated next to each other, and as they ate, Kurt’s fork and Elliott’s chopsticks
would occasionally wander, picking something off the other’s plate. Kurt made a neat row of olives
on the side of his rice and left them there without comment for Elliott to take. In turn, as the salad
was handed around, Kurt deftly speared Elliott’s tomatoes onto his fork and transferred them to his
own plate. Elliott refilled Kurt’s glass as soon it went empty, and Kurt handed Elliott the basket of
naan without him having to ask for it. It was like a well-choreographed dance.

Well, they did live together, Adam reminded himself. It doesn’t mean anything. Still, he could
understand why outsiders would assume they were a couple. But they weren’t, were they? Kurt
would have told him, wouldn’t he?

“So, Artie, how’s the Brooklyn Film Academy?” Mercedes asked, rousing Adam from his thoughts.

“It’s. Amazing,” Artie said with a big grin. “I’m learning so much, and we get to use all of the
school’s equipment and because everything’s digital now, no one cares if you take hours of
experimental shots–”

“Yeah, it’s not like you’re wasting celluloid anymore,” Mercedes commented.

“Exactly,” Artie agreed, “and becoming a successful director is like becoming a pilot, you know?
You gotta put in the flight hours.”

“Tower, this is Ghost Rider requesting a flyby. Negative, Ghost Rider, the pattern is full,” Sam
quoted in two voices, imitating the crackle of radio static and jet fighters whizzing by. “Come
on. Top Gun?” He explained to the table of blank looks. “I feel the need…?”

“The need for speed!” Elliott replied, and laughed. “Man, it’s been ages since I saw that.”

Sam looked a little relieved.

“What about the ladies, Artie?” Mercedes prodded a little, her eyes glinting with a very different
need— the need for juicy gossip.

Artie sat up straight. “It’s so different from high school. At McKinley, no one wanted anything to do
with me because I was a nerd in a wheelchair who tucked my sweaters into my pleated khakis, but
here, I do exactly the same thing, and everyone thinks it’s cool. In high school I had to beg girls to go
out with me. Here, I’m lady bait. I’m actually kind of dating three girls right now…”

“Alright, Artie!” Sam let out, holding up his hand for Artie to high five. But Mercedes was having
none of that. She frowned a little.

“Wait, how can you date three girls? Are they down with that?”

“Well, not at the same time,” Artie explained, squirming a little under the heavily judgemental look his friend gave him. “I’m just not really really to commit yet. They are all so different. There’s this girl Vanessa, who is totally into French new wave and who really liked my short film about about Rags the homeless clown. She’s nice and really hot, but I’m never really sure when she’s having a good time because everything she says kind of sounds the same… and then there’s Jess, she’s a bit of a goth with blue and purple hair and she has all these piercings and tattoos—”

Dani made an appreciative sound in the back of her throat.

“-but the third girl, Julie, is the girl I really kind of got my eye on. She has a wonderful voice and she’s doing my narration for Bags in the Wind, and she has the most amazing deep brown eyes—”

“So if you like that one best, why would you keep stringing the other two along?” Mercedes asked.

Artie shrugged awkwardly. “I just like all of them. I’m not exactly the most experienced when it comes to dating, you know? Apart from making sure I have enough condoms to get through the week, I don’t really know what I’m doing. All I know is that I don’t want to settle too soon and end up regretting my choice.”

Adam had been following the conversation quietly up until now, but couldn’t hold back any longer. “If you don’t mind me saying,” he started carefully, “I think you should let, ah… Vanessa and Jess? Know where they stand and let them make their own choice. It hardly seems fair if you keep your options open when they think you are exclusive. If you really care about them, I imagine you wouldn’t want them to get hurt.”

Mercedes nodded approvingly. Adam saw Kurt shift in his seat from the corner of his eye, and immediately felt a little guilty. He hadn’t meant it as a covert dig to their previous relationship, even if it had probably come out that way.

“Also,” Kurt added hesitantly, after a moment, selecting his words carefully, “you know, be prepared for their reaction. Being rejected hurts, no matter how you do it. Unless they’re not invested to begin with. Even if you do tell them that you’re being casual, you want to be… honorable about it, and accept that they may not like being your second choice. And… they might have some anger about that. Because you know that you could easily be just as hurt if Julie chooses someone else.”

“In other words, be prepared for bitches to get crazy,” Santana said.

“That is not what I’m saying!” Kurt protested. “I’m just saying… Fine, whatever.”

Santana spread her hands and leaned over slightly. “Just think about the sitch between Quinn, Finn, and Rachel in high school. Any time Finn pulled away from Rachel, she came at us singing angry songs to publicly embarrass him and frenched Puck. After Finn dumped Quinn at Coach Sylvester’s sister’s funeral, Quinn tried to get Kurt and Rachel suspended—”

“Wait, what?” Kurt said.

“-for frolicking around New York unsupervised on our Nationals trip, and then she chopped all her hair off, got a tattoo, and then she joined a girl gang and dyed her hair pink.”

“I’m sorry, but this all sounds incredibly hot,” Dani said. “Do that, Artie, and make girls go all punk and cute, okay?”
The group erupted in laughter. Kurt turned his head away from them, sipping his glass of wine slowly. Adam wondered if they needed to talk. Kurt’s words hadn’t seemed bitter or vindictive, but Adam worried that his warning to Artie seemed to implicate Kurt in less than ‘honorable’ behavior. They hadn’t been exclusive, until they were, and Adam knew that Kurt had been struggling to get over his ex when Adam had decided, perhaps too quickly, that they should go out and start making their own memories. Deciding to cool things down had been, of course, Kurt’s decision, but Adam had still been floored when Kurt came back from a trip to visit his father engaged.

And he had been the one to kick Kurt out of the Apples and avoid him afterward. Santana might be right about ‘bitches getting crazy.’ Granted, the extended silence between them was more Blaine’s fault than either Adam or Kurt, since he’d been the one to block Adam’s number in Kurt’s phone. Kurt clearly had never meant to just throw Adam away. But it still hadn’t been a pleasant resolution to their first attempt at dating.

“Okay, I get it,” Artie said after the laughter had died down. “But that’s exactly the problem. I really like hanging out with them. If I pick one, I’m inevitably going to upset the other two. It’s like Santana says, they might go crazy.”

“Don’t listen to her,” Dani said. “Santana and I bumped ladies and we’re still friends. She’s staying at my place.”

“Because your new girlfriend is fucking gorgeous,” Santana said with a laugh.

“I do bring in the hot ones.” Dani bobbed her head and ground her hips a little. “Seriously, though. Exes can be friends. It doesn’t have to be high drama all the time.”

“Don’t let her fool you, dyke drama can be a fine art,” Santana argued. “We’re not all hemp, flowers, and sisterhood.”

Artie laughed. “I'll keep that in mind. I think Jess does hang with her ex a lot.”

Kurt wrinkled his nose. “Sometimes exes can’t be friends, though.”

The group grew a little quieter and Kurt rolled his eyes.

“I’m talking about he who apparently shall not be named. There was no being friends after our first break up. It wasn’t enough for him, and I always felt pressured to get back together with him. It was like a persistently recurring affliction.”

“You talk about him like he’s a yeast infection,” Mercedes said, shaking her head.

“Doesn’t Kurt lack the parts for that?” Artie joked.

“Anyone can get a yeast infection. I know more about that than I’d like, thanks to Yeast-A-Stat,” Santana commented, and pretended to shudder.

“I think a yeast infection is putting it too mildly. I would go with malignant tumor…” Elliott added with a casual tone.

Sam frowned, but didn’t argue with them. Adam wondered if Sam still hung out with Blaine sometimes. They had been best friends after all, and it was Kurt who broke up with Blaine, not Sam; though as far as he understood, the two of them did have a fight when Sam moved out.

“Okay, so, some exes can be friends, like me and Mercedes, and some can’t, and be honest with your partners, but be prepared for drama,” Sam summarized, clearly wanting to close the topic and
“And always wear a raincoat,” Kurt deadpanned. “In case of yeast.”

Artie laughed hard and covered his mouth.

“Not all of us wear a raincoat,” Santana shot back.

“Well, I’ve got some saran wrap in the kitchen—” Kurt offered, just before Santana reached over Adam’s lap to shove Kurt’s shoulder hard.

“Stop!”

*

Kurt

Aside from a few tense moments, everything seemed to be going just fine with the party, and Kurt was pleased that all of his friends seemed able to get along. Really, the outlier had been Rachel and Santana, and since Rachel had never shown up, he didn’t have to worry about them fighting again. Santana had promised to be cool, but she had difficulties keeping her temper in check, and truthfully, Kurt knew that Santana was still hurt by how Rachel had been behaving before Santana left for the summer.

It was a lingering wound. Kurt knew from repeated rides on the merry-go-round that was his relationship with Rachel how it felt to be discarded. He also knew by now that she wasn’t going to change, any more than Blaine would, and he had to evaluate whether the good things about their relationship were worth saving.

Kurt genuinely hoped that Adam didn’t really feel that way. He knew that he’d behaved badly in their relationship. He’d hidden things longer than he should have, he’d been sporadically too cheerful when he was really upset (forcing Adam to pry his feelings out of him), and worst of all, he’d been a poor judge at knowing his own heart. Getting back together with Blaine hadn’t been a blip on the radar when he went home, but it had happened anyway, like being carried off by a tidal wave of sentiment shared by all of his family, and friends, and some enemies, too.

Of course, Kurt was getting too broody, because Elliott came over to him, sat right next to him on the couch the way they did during sleepovers, and refilled his wine glass. Kurt drank gratefully and rested his head on Elliott’s shoulder. It was a comfort cuddle. Kurt fit perfectly against Elliott, and though he wasn’t always interested in being physically comforted, he never minded Elliott’s arm around him. He was tempted to purr a little, and make Elliott laugh.

Then his phone rang, and though it was an unfamiliar number, Kurt hoped it would be Rachel calling from somewhere, promising to be there for the tail end of their celebration.

“Hello?”

“Hello, is this Mr. Kurt Hummel? This is Officer Reynolds. I’m calling from the 83rd Precinct station. I’m sorry to disturb your evening.”

Kurt went completely still for a moment, but his insides felt fluttery and unsettled. “What can I help you with, Officer?”

Annoyingly, his voice had jumped about an octave in nervousness. Elliott had noticed and began rubbing his shoulders.
“We’ve collected a few suspects in the case of the Allan murder case.”

Kurt listened, bobbing his head as he numbly grabbed a notepad from the coffee table and took in the information given. “Y-yeah, I can do that. When?”

Kurt could hear his friends growing quiet around him. He continued the call with Officer Reynolds, getting the details he needed, and then thanking him for his call.

“Thank you. You’re our only witness, Mr. Hummel. We need your help.”

“Well, I’m happy to give it. Anything for Kitt. And to get those guys off the street.”

When the call was over, Kurt looked up and bit his lower lip.

“What is it?” Adam said gently. “Are you alright, Kurt?”

Kurt gave him a half-hearted smile and took a breath. “They found suspects for Kitt’s murder investigation. I need to go in for a line up.”
Chapter Two

Elliott stuck around after the party to help clean up. Adam had to get up early for a job interview, so he’d been conscripted early to carry Artie back down the stairs. Most of the other guests had to get going for one reason or the other, and it didn’t look like Rachel would be making it home anytime soon.

That left Elliott to shoo the lesbian cohort off, with a hug and a kiss to Dani. Thankfully Santana had settled on Sweet Cheeks instead of Chubs for a nickname (for which Elliott was tremendously grateful). On their way out, Mercedes and Santana were talking intensely about songs they could collaborate on, so Elliott suspected a new group blooming. He’d heard that evening about how Mercedes had been dropped from her label, and it was clear that she and Santana were close. Much closer than he’d seen Santana with Rachel. There had always been this buzzing tension between them, even before the Battle of Broadway, with fake smiles from Rachel and earnest efforts not to speak as harshly from Santana. During their first rehearsal as Pamela Lansbury, Elliott would have guessed that Santana would be the one to break Rachel’s heart, but it hadn’t gone down that way.

And honestly, he couldn’t say it was a bad thing that there didn’t seem to be any peace being made between them. Elliott was a proponent of forgiveness, but didn’t believe forgiveness was something one was owed. And there were also moments when it was vitally important to assess whether someone’s presence in your life is truly good for you. He kind of hoped Santana had done that and realized she could find better friends than Rachel—such as Mercedes.

With the others gone, he washed dishes while Kurt hummed numbers from The Sound of Music, straightening up the rest of the apartment. Elliott felt another stab of gratitude to whatever higher power had given Kurt the strength to cut himself off from Blaine completely. He wasn’t entirely certain, though, that Kurt was completely cognizant of how he deserved to be treated by friends and romantic partners.

“So, did you…” Elliott drew in a deep breath and rinsed off a plate. “You ever see Santa again?”

Kurt looked up from the couch with a little frown. “Santa…? Oh. His name was Cody…at least he said so. He could’ve been lying about that, like everything else.”

“Did you?” Elliott pressed again.

“I saw him. Once. We didn’t really talk. Don’t tell Adam. It was after we’d met… but before we’d gone on any dates.”
Kurt fussed with a couple of pillows, and Elliott watched him as the water continued to run.

“He gave me this grin,” Kurt continued after a moment. “And he came toward me. And he said, ‘I figured those rosy cheeks were just part of the costume.’”

He paused, looking up and rolling his tongue in his cheek.

“Did you call the cops?” Elliott asked. He started to rinse out the wine glasses.

“Um. No.” Kurt scrunched up his nose and shook his head. “I didn’t.”

“Well, that’s okay.” Elliott hadn’t exactly been expecting any new information about Santa, but Kurt was talking. That was good. “That must’ve been scary, seeing him again, after what he did to you. I know you and Santana were laughing, but…”

“It was a little funny… and a little scary.” Kurt shrugged and walked over, holding his arms. “But I didn’t run.”

“Course not.” Elliott turned off the sink and smiled at him. “You’re the bravest guy I know.”

“I let him kiss me.”

Elliott’s brows shot up. “He… You? Honey.”

“It didn’t go any farther than that,” Kurt said, his cheeks starting to go pink, “but… Elliott, he’s so gorgeous.”

“He let you think you were going to have sex, and then tied you up and stole from you.” Elliott dried his hands on a towel and walked over, slowly. “You know I don’t try to judge, but that’s just, y’know. That’s just being a great big assface.”

Now Kurt looked humiliated, averting his gaze and holding his fingers anxiously, and Elliott felt that he’d come on too strong. He had just wanted to talk to Kurt about this string of abusive men in his
life. He should have realized broaching a subject like that wouldn’t leave things open for an easy, relaxed discussion. These men had hurt Kurt. They made him feel like he deserved what he was getting, or at least Blaine had.

And what Elliott forgot sometimes was that Kurt was only nineteen. He wasn’t yet the fully-formed adult that he pretended to be, and these awful, awful relationships…

“Man, don’t feel bad, okay? I’m your friend. I don’t like being around judgy people, and I don’t want to be one. I’m just worried.” Elliott shrugged his shoulders and touched Kurt’s arm gently. “I want you to be okay. Hearing that story tonight was kinda spooky, you know? I mean, you were basically assaulted, and you and Santana were making light of it… But I don’t know that it’s funny. Especially since, well, like you told me the other day, you’ve had guys who grabbed you, and hurt you. Not to mention you ended up in the hospital not that long ago.”

“Cody didn’t put me in the hospital,” Kurt argued. “He just… He looked at me, and his eyes… He moved in to kiss me, and I wasn’t sure if I wanted him to stop, so I let him. That’s all that happened.”

“If… If he’d wanted to head to a motel…?”

Kurt’s face grew redder, and he looked down.

“I am not trying to shame you.”

“You’re just worried,” Kurt repeated in a near whisper.

He was upset. That was clear. But his body language hadn’t closed off completely, so Elliott opened his arms and folded Kurt into a big hug. Kurt leaned into him and sighed softly.

“I don’t like stories where guys treat you badly.”

“He didn’t force me to do anything, Ell. When Cody tied me up-- He could have, but he didn’t.”

“I don’t think he gets bonus points for not raping you. I think, no matter how gorgeous this motherfucker is, listening when you say no is the bare minimum for being consider a human being.”
Kurt made a noise in his throat, and Elliott rubbed a hand over his back. He didn’t know whether to push on this point or not. Kurt had gotten used to a lot of bullshit from people.

“You’re an amazing guy, Kurt. I knew that the moment we met. Even when you criticized my outfit, I knew you were something special. You should never doubt that you are. Don’t let these guys get away with hurting you, or making you unhappy, or making you feel like you don’t matter.”

Kurt hooked his chin over Elliott’s shoulder and relaxed into him. “You sound like my dad.”

Geez. That wasn’t exactly the role Elliott wanted in Kurt’s life. “Good. At least he has that much down.”

Kurt gave Elliott a squeeze and then pulled back to look at him. “I know you don’t approve-”

“It’s not about my approval.”

“Yeah, well. Anyway, I’m not going to see him again. I don’t know why I’m so attracted to a guy who’s basically Leonardo DiCaprio from Catch Me While You Can! But with better abs. I’ve been around really attractive guys before, and you know, not let them paw all over me.”

“Well. Your first few relationships… They kind of set the tone for what you expect from future relationships. They set the bar for what’s normal.”

Kurt hugged his arms again and sucked in his lower lip as he listened.

Elliott spread his hands. “I think… If you have guys who manhandle you, who don’t listen when you say no, who manipulate you and put you down, then that starts to feel normal… Maybe it even becomes something you associate as romantic or hot, or just what you think you deserve.”

“I don’t know. I mean, how am I supposed to know what a guy’s going to really be like in a relationship? Blaine was a lot more accepting of all my freakishness before we started dating. At least with a guy who comes straight out and plays me, I know where he’s coming from. The guy who pretends to be nice… What do I do with that? What will it be like when he finds out more about me?”
Kurt’s eyes were wide, and genuine, and begging for an answer. Elliott didn’t have one. He wished he did.

“I-I think I had that once,” Kurt rubbed his temple and blinked several times. “Someone nice. Maybe. But… Elliott, that’s over. I left him and broke his heart for a guy who put me down and cheated on me. Adam was so good to me that I was always afraid he wouldn’t want to be with me anymore when he found out how weird and messed up I really am, or that at some point he’d stop being so nice… And I wasn’t wrong, not about the first part. Not that I blame him. All of this is a lot to put up with, and I’m truly grateful that he still wants to be friends, even if… he doesn’t want me anymore.”

Kurt shrugged and swallowed forcefully. “I’m just not good at relationships. I don’t even know how to tell if a guy likes me. When I had a crush on Finn, before we were brothers, sometimes he was kind, and I thought, he just can’t admit it. None of the other guys were kind. But I was wrong, and that really blew up… And then with Blaine, at first I thought he liked me, and then it was like he couldn’t date everyone around me fast enough. Even Rachel. He dated Rachel.”

Elliott screwed his brows together and let his mouth fall open. He shut it and shook his head. There really was no basement in hell for that kid’s behavior. It was one thing to not like someone, make that clear, and then date other people, but dating someone’s friends like that… and really, Rachel as a choice would be questionable anyway. She and Blaine were so alike; it would be impossible to get what they needed from a relationship with each other.

Elliott held his hands up. “Okay, can we just agree that any guy who starts acting like Blaine should be crossed off the possibilities list, immediately? I can’t even wrap my head around the dude. He’s just beyond the pale messed up.”

Kurt bobbed his head in enthusiastic agreement. His eyes grew sad. “And then there was this other guy… I didn’t think he liked me, not really, but… He was kind of harassing me, threatening me, and it turned out that he had feelings for me. We’ve worked things out, but…”

“Well. Maybe with that guy-- and maybe Blaine too-- that isn’t something you need to figure out. Maybe those guys just need some therapy,” Elliott suggested. “I’m not throwing shade. I mean it. People get all kinds of messed up, and then they transfer that behavior onto people around them. You know? But that’s not your fault.”

“Dave is in therapy now,” Kurt said. “He, um, he’s the one who threatened me. We’re kind of friends. When I visit Lima, and via email, anyway. He deleted his Facebook after the kids at his school convinced him to try to commit suicide.”
Tears stung Elliott’s eyes as an instinctive reaction. “Glad he’s talking to someone, then.”

Kurt nodded again. Then he smiled, a little mischievously. “And you just wanted the dirt on Santa.”

“Man, I’ve gotta get you in the room when I’m songwriting, because your teenage years are *all kinds of fucked up.*”

Kurt chuckled softly and dipped his head.

Elliott ruffled the back of his hair. “I dunno. I wanna protect you, but I also don’t wanna be that guy who’s like, controlling people, you know? I just asked because I felt like maybe you needed to talk to someone about this. Someone who wouldn’t laugh or make it about them.”

“Santana kept that secret for a long time,” Kurt said seriously. “I asked her not to tell anyone, and… she really held onto that for me. But it happened almost nine months ago, and she wouldn’t have said anything if I hadn’t joked with her about it already. I started the laughing. It’s kind of how I cope, sometimes. Dave and I still joke about him stalking me around the school in a gorilla suit, though at the time, when I found out it was him, I was a little creeped out.”

Elliott smiled.

“If I need to talk, you’ll be the first person I come to, okay?” Kurt reached over and took Elliott’s hand. “You’re one of the best listeners I’ve ever met. You’re one of the only people I can trust to be wholeheartedly on my side, and still tell me exactly what you think.”

“Yeah?” Elliott swung their hands between them, like little boys. “You want me to stay tonight? Rachel’s not getting back any time soon. And I know going to the police station tomorrow isn’t going to make sleeping easy.”

“Sure.” Kurt rolled his eyes. “I’m going to have to get another roommate. It’s like I live by myself here.”

“This is a sweet place. It wouldn’t be that bad having it to yourself.”
“I don’t really like to be alone.”

Elliott lifted Kurt’s hand and kissed it. “You’ve got me and Dani. And Adam, too, I bet. Don’t be afraid to ask, okay? We’re still here for you, even if the bruises have gone away.”

Kurt’s eye narrowed slightly, and he looked up at Elliott so seriously that Elliott felt maybe he should have said something different. Was it too insensitive? Too embarrassing to need them?

“Save that one for your songwriting,” Kurt teased.

Elliott clicked his tongue. “Pfft. You just wait. I’ll put it in the next one, in your range, and you’ll have to sing it.”

“Joke’s on you.” Kurt snapped his fingers. “I love solos.”

He let Elliott’s hand go. “Do you want to go get some stuff from your place? We can go get it now, and then finish cleaning up when we get back.”

“I’ll get it when we’re done. Give you time for a quick shower before I get back.”

“It’s late. You’re not walking alone.”

Elliott started to protest, but Kurt’s tone had been so firm that he knew there would be no argument.

“Okay.” Elliott rubbed a hand over Kurt’s back and went to collect a few stray plates.

*  

Kurt
"Don't worry, Hummel. We got this."

"I'm not worried."

Kurt's voice was low and flat, and to anyone else, he might have sounded confident, maybe even a little bored. But as Santana reached for his hand and squeezed it, Kurt knew she hadn't bought it at all. He squeezed back.

_I did not wear my man-killin' boots for nothing, Porcelain. I'm coming with you._ Santana hadn't asked for permission. She had simply shown up at the loft just as Kurt was about to leave (Kurt suspected she had badgered Elliott into telling her when he was going) wearing thigh-high stiletto boots and looking very fierce. Kurt smiled—he had also laced himself into his highest Doc Marten's and a zippered leather jacket; both their attires screaming 'don't mess with me'. As they stood and waited for the identification process to start, Kurt wondered how it had taken him so long to realize how much they had in common.

He was happy she had come along to the precinct. Kurt wanted Kitt's killers caught and brought to trial. But at the same time, the possibility of seeing them again made his stomach turn with nausea. It was enough that their hateful faces returned in his nightmares. He really didn't want to see them again in real life. At the same time, he was also anxious that they might not be at the line-up. If the police were at a dead end with their investigation and had rounded up the wrong guys, the real killers were still out there. Kurt wanted them brought to justice; not just to get them off the streets, but for Kitt.

The door opened, and he let go of Santana’s hand and brushed his sweaty palms down his jeans. This was it. Officer Reynolds had explained to them that they had made three arrests; the other three men in the line-up were volunteers of similar physical descriptions. It felt a bit like a test, but Officer Reynolds had assured them this was necessary to make the identification admissible in court. There would be absolutely no repercussions if Kurt accidentally 'accused' one of the volunteers. Reynolds had said that memories often blurred after traumatic events, and remembering physical details weeks afterwards was hard for everyone.

"Are you ready, Mr. Hummel?" a female officer asked him, and Kurt nodded. She led the two of them into a small, dimly lit room. Officer Reynolds and a representative of the State Attorney's office were present to witness Kurt's identification. After reassuring him that the men in the adjoining room could not see him, officer Reynolds pressed a button on a control board in front of them, and the light went on to reveal six men. Kurt breathed in sharply. His heart started to pound so loudly it was like it drained all of the other sounds from the room. _Do you think you're a fucking ninja or something?_ Kurt stared at the face of the man who had tried to choke him to death, who had succeeded in taking Kitt’s life, and felt like the man's hand was around his throat again.

"Num- number four," he croaked, clearing his throat.
"Are you sure?" officer Reynolds asked.

"Yes," Kurt confirmed. "Can you… Can you please make him leave?" Kurt could not bear to see him, and he felt like he was seconds away from a panic attack.

"Of course." Officer Reynolds used the intercom to tell the man to leave the room. The man frowned at what to him would be a darkened mirror, and Kurt involuntarily took a small step back. He felt Santana's hand brush over his shoulder and then close firmly. She had a stronger grip than her delicate hands suggested. His eyes closed, as he focused on her touch and tried to calm himself. He waited for the man to go before looking at the others. His heart sank a little. One of them didn't even come close to his descriptions, another had the same build but very different features. The fifth kept shifting his weight from one foot to the other. The sixth man just looked bored. Kurt watched the nervous man the longest. He _looked_ guilty, but was it really him?

"Do you want someone to step forward?" Officer Reynolds offered.

Kurt asked him to make the nervous man walk up the mirror, and as he did, it became clear it wasn't him. It was hard to explain, but Kurt was sure. Whatever the man had on his conscience, it had nothing to do with Kitt. He was about to dismiss all of them when the sixth man caught his eye again.

"Can he step forward too?" Kurt asked.

The man did so. As he reached the mirror, he looked up and stared straight into Kurt's eyes, his lips twisting into a small smile. Kurt felt a chill roll down his spine, and then anger heating up his cheeks. "Yes. That's the man I kicked in the face." He felt like kicking him again now, for looking at him like that.

Kurt confirmed his identification again, and Officer Reynolds switched off the light in the other room and told them someone would take them to the reception area until some paperwork was drawn up for Kurt to sign.

"Are you okay?" Santana asked.

"They didn't get the third guy," Kurt said, ignoring her. Memories of the attack flooded his senses. "There was another guy, short, with big shoulders, he grabbed my arms after I-"
"Kurt. Are you okay?" Santana repeated. The edge in her tone made it clear she wouldn't let him dodge the question again and was prepared to slap him to get her answer.

Kurt forced himself to return to the present. "Yeah. I'm fine," he said.

"Then please let go of my arm before you cut off all circulation and my hand falls off," she said drily. Kurt looked down and noticed he had a death grip on her elbow. He quickly let go and mumbled an apology.

"That's alright, baby gay. What are a few bruises among friends, right?" Santana said lightly, patting his hand, and walking him out of the room.

To Kurt's surprise, they weren't the only ones headed to the reception area.

"Blaine?" Kurt said, almost not recognizing his ex-fiancé in the ill-fitting suede jacket he was wearing.

"Kurt!" Blaine replied, giving him a grateful look as he quickly walked up to them.

“Well, well, well! If it isn’t the hipster sausage man of Ohio,” Santana drawled.

Blaine frowned at Santana, and Kurt could tell he was a little hurt. If Kurt was honest though, it really wasn’t the best look on him. A different colour maybe. Or a larger size, at least. For a moment, they all just stood there. It felt awkward not to have Blaine come up and kiss his cheek, or even hug him. He had taken a small step forward but a forbidding look from Santana had stopped him in his tracks. It would have been too weird to shake hands, so they just sort of waited for the other to start a conversation.

“So, uh... I guess you were just in there?” Blaine finally said, nodding at the corridor that lead back to the identification room. “I was in over an hour ago. They had me waiting ever since. I don’t even know why because I didn’t identify anyone…” He trailed off and rolled his eyes.

Kurt narrowed his eyes. “They were there. Two of them were there. You didn’t recognize them?”
“Well, I…” Blaine started, and his eyes shot to a corner of the room, somewhere high over Kurt’s left shoulder. “I didn’t actually see much that night, so… I mean, it was dark, and… it all went so fast…”

“Mmm…” Kurt let out, forcing a sympathetic smile onto his lips. It hadn’t gone fast at all. He wanted to remind his ex-fiancé that when time is measured in pain, seconds can feel like hours—but what would be the point? He could never understand. Kurt hoped he would never need to understand.

“That guy, Officer Reynolds? He kept asking me if I was sure. Like I didn’t want to help them catch those guys who hurt you, you know?” Blaine offered.

“It’s okay,” Kurt said. “I know you want to help. And you did. I mean, you called the ambulance that eventually ran them off.” It had taken a lot of late-night tea and talks with Elliott for Kurt to stop blaming Blaine, but in the end, he had come to realize that Blaine’s cowardice was the norm and his own interference exceptional, not the other way around.

“Yeah,” Blaine agreed, smiling a little again. “Hey, you wanna get some coffee after this? Just to talk, I mean. This is some heavy stuff, I guess.”

“I… don’t think that’s a good idea, Blaine,” Kurt said carefully.

“Yeah, if Kurt needs someone to make today all about themselves and eat all his Milanos, he still has Rachel,” Santana breezed. “As is, I think we’re just gonna go ensconce him with his real friends for a few hours.”

Santana looked at Kurt and pointed at him. “Don’t even argue, gelfling. I’m taking your shift at the diner. It’ll encourage our doucheboss to think about rehiring me anyway, and I already called Adam.”

Kurt looked at her in surprise, but before he could say anything, Blaine did.

“Adam? Are you seeing him again?” he asked. He somehow managed to look crestfallen and angry at the same time.

Kurt pulled his shoulders back and lifted his chin. “That stopped being your business when we broke up, Blaine,” he said, with as much dignity as he could muster. Blaine didn’t have to know Adam was just a friend. Thankfully they were spared further discussion as an officer called them to the desk to
sign some final paperwork. As they signed, Blaine kept looking at him from the side as if he was brooding on something.

“Goodbye, Blaine,” Kurt said, not wanting to hear it. Santana looped her arm around his elbow and they left, for all the world looking like the fiercest power couple on the block.

*

Adam

Kurt greeted Adam at the door to the loft with a warm smile and the most elaborate outfit Adam had ever seen him wear. It appeared he had only just come home, because he was still zipping himself out of several layers.

“It’s very sweet of you to come,” Kurt said as he put his jacket away, “though you really didn’t have to.”

“Oh, I had to,” Adam assured him. “Santana made it quite clear what would happen to my hindquarters if I didn’t. Tell me, was she always this intimidating or did it intensify over summer?”

Kurt chuckled and shook his head a little. “Both, I guess. But I meant: I don’t need a babysitter anymore. Elliott stayed the night, Santana escorted me to the station, and now here you are. I suppose Dani got the evening shift later? I appreciate it, but I’m a big boy, you know?”

“Of course you are, Kurt,” Adam replied, smiling a little to mask his insecurity. “Elliott stayed the night?” he added lightly.

“He wanted to make sure I wasn’t alone in case the upcoming line-up gave me nightmares,” Kurt explained. “I told him I had Mr ‘Oppy for that, but he insisted.”

“Right. Mr ‘Oppy. How is he? Still refusing to eat anything but imported French flies, I imagine?” Adam sat down on the couch, wondering why he hadn’t insisted, too.

Kurt laughed. “He’s a gourmet, like me. Only the best for Mr ‘Oppy.” He sat down next to Adam
and glanced at his clothes. “So how did your job interview go?”

Adam looked down and followed Kurt’s eyes to his slim black tie. “Oh. Good, I think. It feels silly to dress up like this, but I wanted to make a good impression, you know? It’s just an assistant’s job, but...”

“It suits you,” Kurt said, brushing his hand over Adam’s arm. “Very professional.” His hand lingered for a moment before he let it drop to play with one of the couch’s buttons. “So what would you do on this job?”

Adam shrugged a little, his eyes on Kurt’s slim fingers. “Pretty much anything the stage manager won’t have time to do, I suppose. Help set up the prompt book, type out the rehearsal report, find props, manage catering for the crew... I suppose a large part will probably just be me driving back and forth to Starbucks to keep the lattes flowing.” Adam smiled a little. “But it would be a start, and you never know, if the stage manager cracks under the pressure, I’d have to step up. It’s like an understudy. And I’d get to see new plays before anyone else.”

Kurt returned his smile. “It seems very… organizational,” he offered carefully.

Adam nodded. “Of course I’d rather be on the stage myself,” he admitted, “But I think I have to accept that I might have more chances as a behind-the-scenes man. You know, unnoticed but indispensable?” He winked at Kurt. “I did take a few management classes before I graduated so I’d have that on my resumé just in case. I won’t stop auditioning for parts, but a callback like yours seems a little unlikely for me.”

“Don’t say that,” Kurt replied. “You have talent! And you know I won’t get that part anyway, I’ll probably land in the chorus. Which is fine, I mean, it’s more than I dared hope for...”

Adam shook his head. “I’m not bad, but I’m not you. You are exceptional, Kurt. Which is why you will get that part, and be amazing in it.”

“Thanks,” Kurt said.

“Anytime. Just make sure you remember me when you’re famous. I’ll be an expert latte-boy by then, you could hire me as your PA.”
They both laughed. As they slowly came down from it, Adam realized he’d only been talking about himself so far—Kurt had a way of turning the conversation back on you. But he had actually come to support Kurt, even if their conversation so far had been fun. “So… how did it go today?” he asked gently. “If you want to talk about it, that is.”

“I do,” Kurt said after a few moments. Adam could tell he had made that decision consciously—it showed in the way Kurt held himself, his hands suddenly ceasing the fiddling with the couch buttons, his whole pose becoming more calm and determined. “I was able to identify two of the three men who attacked Kitt and me. The one I had kicked and—” he paused for a moment and briefly closed his eyes. “The one who killed Kitt and tried to kill me.”

Adam bit his lip. He knew what had happened, more or less, and he knew how serious it had been, but being reminded of how close he had come to losing Kurt completely—not just as a boyfriend or as a friend, but as a person in his life—almost physically hurt.

“What was it like… seeing him again?” he asked. Before Adam left for England, Kurt seemed to be doing better than in those first weeks, when small things could trigger panic attacks. Seeing your almost-killer wasn’t exactly a small thing, though.

Kurt pulled up a corner of his mouth. “I probably would have run if it hadn’t been for Santana.” He paused. “It was scary.” He sighed. “But I’m glad I went. Whether they find the third man or not, these two will go on trial and pay for what they did to Kitt, I will make sure of that.”

“Well, and if they have two, they might get the name of the third from one of them. You never know.” Adam reached over and rubbed Kurt’s back.

Kurt closed his eyes and let his head droop forward. He looked drained. The upcoming events surrounding the trial would be rough on him, for sure.

“They were killing us,” Adam assured Kurt. “I enjoy being with you. It’s no burden to spend time with you when you don’t want to be alone.”

Kurt dropped his head back against the couch and looked at Adam with big eyes and slightly parted lips. Then, “I really appreciate that. I enjoy being around you, too.”

“Good.” Adam clapped his hands together. “So, I thought we could start off our evening with a little
cookie baking… if that’s alright with you.”

“Am I ever gonna say no to cookies?”
Chapter Three

Chapter Summary

Thanks to glorfindel-m for the analysis of Kurt/Chris's vocal range.

Kurt

“Hey Kurt, some of us are going for sushi at that place on 45th, are you coming?”

Kurt looked up and saw Chase smiling at him. It had taken a while for Kurt to stop feeling awkward around the other man after he had witnessed Kurt’s break-down at the photoshoot, but after a few weeks of being back at Vogue.com without any incidents, Kurt had slowly regained his confidence. He was about to accept when he saw a familiar bright red peacoat in the corner of his eye… its wearer looking very determined to be let past the reception to get to his desk. He sighed.

“I wish I could,” he said honestly. “I really wish I could. But I think I have a Broadway emergency coming my way.” He nodded towards Rachel, who was flipping her hair and gesturing animatedly at the bored-looking receptionist.

Chase followed his eyes and winced sympathetically. “Again?”

Kurt let out another deep sigh. “It appears so.” Rachel, who hadn’t bothered to come home on the night of his party until after midnight, had already barged into Vogue during his lunch break a few times since he had started working again, always expecting help or a last-minute makeover with clothes from Vogue’s vault for ‘important PR meetings for Fanny’… Kurt secretly wished he had never shown her where his office was.

“Do you want us to bring you back anything?” Chase offered.

“I would be eternally grateful,” Kurt replied. His stomach was already growling, and it didn’t seem likely that he’d be able to get rid of Rachel in time to get some lunch.

“Grateful enough to reconsider my offer?” Chase said, waggling his eyebrows a little.
Kurt tssked and rolled his eyes, but smiled good-naturedly at his colleague. Chase had been asking him out ever since he had started at Vogue.com last year, and although Kurt always said no (not wanting to start anything at his workplace), every once in a while Chase gave it another shot. It was kind of reassuring to know he still wanted to date Kurt even after having seen him lose it.

“Hey, it was worth a try,” Chase said cheerfully, not discouraged in the least. “See you later, Kurt.”

“Bon appetit!” Kurt held up his hand and waved at the receptionist, signaling her to let Rachel through. Nearly hitting Chase on his way out with another flip of her hair, Rachel stalked towards Kurt’s desk.

“You won’t believe what Rupert Campion has just told me,” she announced dramatically.

Kurt pressed his lips together in a thin smile of resignation. Yep, this would probably take his entire lunchbreak. “Let’s go in here; Isabelle is out today,” he offered, wanting to spare his colleagues the high and low pitches of Rachel’s outburst, and led her into Isabelle’s office.

“So, what did he say?” Kurt asked, sitting down on the chair opposite Isabelle’s desk.

"Oh, he’s all upset about the feedback from our workshopping upstate, and he’s taking it out on me. It’s so unfair. After some horrible comments on my dancing—which I totally suspect Cassandra July emailing him because it sounded just like her and you know she has always been jealous of me—he said it was-” She made quotation marks in the air with her fingers. “’time to stop playing Barbra playing Fanny, and to start actually being Fanny.’"

Kurt took a moment to take it all in. Unlikable as she could be, he found it unlikely that Ms. July would go as far as to contact the show’s director to sabotage Rachel. It was far more probable that Mr. Campion had a trained eye for choreography and noticed the same things Ms. July had. Knowing he’d never win that argument, Kurt decided to focus on the second part of Rachel’s complaint.

"What did he mean by that?” he asked, knowing she was going to tell him if he wanted her to or not.

Rachel rolled her eyes. "Apparently I remind him too much of Barbra when I sing. How ridiculous is that? Of course I do! Barbra is Fanny, Fanny is Barbra! There’s no other way to sing her songs.”
Kurt bit his lip and nodded sympathetically. He could tell her about his audition for Tony with “Greatest Star” (and remind her that Barbra never climbed scaffoldings or whirled sai swords), but then she’d only throw it back in his face that he didn’t get the part. When Rachel had made up her mind to play the victim, nothing could convince her that the world wasn’t out to get her.

“Maybe they just want a fresh take on it, you know, like those directors who put on Shakespeare in the nude?”

“Then why did they take me?” Rachel complained. “Campion was there when I read with Paolo at my audition; they knew what they were getting. If they don’t want me to do it like Barbra, why did they choose me at all?”

“Is that what you said to Mr. Campion?” Kurt asked, repressing a wince. Rachel had never been very good with criticism, but this was her career on the line.

“I did,” Rachel confirmed, and Kurt’s heart sank.

“And?” he asked.

“He told me to take the rest of the day off to ‘think about it’ and that we’d ‘discuss it further tomorrow.’” Rachel used quotation marks again (twice) and rolled her eyes. “You know, I’m the star. I’m the Fanny here! Without me, there is no Fanny. If I walk-”

“Your understudy gets the part,” Kurt interjected in a near scolding tone. “Rachel, listen. His giving you, and probably himself, time to cool off? This is a good thing. He could have just fired you on the spot-”

“He wouldn’t do that-”

“And he didn’t,” Kurt continued more gently, “Lucky for you. He still wants you to play Fanny, Rachel. But he’s the director. He gets to call the shots. So if he wants you to do it differently…”

“Sydney calls the shots. And he likes what I do. I told Rupert to talk to him about it.”
“Okay, Rachel, just stop,” Kurt said, raising his hands as if he physically had to stop her. “Do you have any idea what you are doing right now? You’re risking everything. Just because you got this part doesn’t mean they can’t take it away from you. Broadway is a business, not a Glee club, where you can just… storm out like a diva and turn up the next day with a plate of cookies and expect everything to be okay again. Mr. Campion, he’s…” Kurt waved one of his hands in a helpless gesture as he felt he was reaching the end of his arguments, “He’s not your teacher, or your friend—he’s not even your enemy. He’s your boss. And if you refuse to do your job, there are plenty of other.”

“Oh my God, Kurt, is that what you really think I should do?” Rachel cut him off. “Do my job even if it compromises my artistic integrity and Barbra’s legacy? Really?”

“I didn’t say that-” Kurt started, but Rachel shook her head.

“You know, I came to get some comfort and understanding from my best friend, and all you do is take their side!”

“I’m not. I just don’t want you to throw away your lifetime dream just because you don’t like people telling you what to do.”

“That is not what I’m doing!” Rachel huffed.

“Yes, it is!” Kurt shot up and crossed his arms at her. “Honey! You came to me for advice! I think you know you need perspective and not just someone who agrees with you, or you’d call your dads. Dial down the diva, and just listen. I love you, Rachel, but there’s a time and place for you to fight for your… ‘artistic integrity’ and your right to do a very, very loud imitation of Barbra-”

“How did you know what the critics said?”

“-and that time is not weeks before Opening Night. Just… listen to what Campion has to say tomorrow. Maybe it’s not so bad. He wants this musical to be a hit, too, you know. That’s his job. He’s not criticizing you to sabotage you.”

Rachel took a deep breath. “I know,” she admitted. She pressed a palm to her reddened cheek and took another slow breath. “And I know you’re just trying to protect me.”
Kurt let out a silent prayer of gratitude to whoever was listening up there. Lord Bowie, maybe. “Thank you,” he said. “I am.”

“Do you want to go out and get a bagel?” Rachel offered.

Kurt checked his watch. “I can’t. Isabelle will be back soon. And Chase is bringing me sushi.”

“Oh...is he?” Rachel cooed.

“It’s not what you think,” Kurt said immediately. “He’s just a colleague. It feels like I only just broke up with Blaine-”

“It’s been more than a month!”

“-so I’m really not ready to start dating again.” Kurt finished, ignoring Rachel’s interruption. It was true. He’d been with Blaine for such a long time that he was only still getting used to not being with Blaine; it felt weird, and he could really do without the added weirdness of a new romance. And to make matters even weirder, there were these butterflies he had to deal with every time he saw Adam or something that reminded Kurt of him. Which was really unfortunate because, as he had already told Elliott, he had ruined his chances with Adam.

“Well, if you say so...” Rachel teased.

Kurt shook his head and started to shoo her out of Isabelle’s office. If she left now, he’d still have a few minutes of his lunch break left to go through the song he had chosen for his callback.

“Oh, there’s one more thing...” Rachel started, turning around to face Kurt. Kurt saw his hopes of time to himself dwindle.

“What?”

“Could you cover for me at Professor Keely’s class? I told Rupert I’d be there tomorrow at 10 am.” Rachel put on her version of puppy eyes and blinked at Kurt hopefully.
Kurt ran his tongue over his teeth as he decided what to say. Saying yes would get her out of his office more quickly. “Fine. I’ll tell him you had an urgent doctor’s appointment. He’s not allowed to ask any details on that, but if he does, I’ll imply lady issues.” He rolled his eyes.

Rachel squeaked happily. “You’re the best!” she let out, and hugged him.

“I know,” Kurt mumbled. “Now go. I have work to do.”

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Five steps out of the Conde Nast building and the skies opened on Kurt, proving that today he indeed had a dark cloud following him. Clearly his audition tonight was going to go just as well. Pressed with the choice to protect himself or his bag with his laptop full of notes and documents, Kurt tucked his bag under his jacket and bent over slightly. The rain pounded down on him, and he scurried down into the subway.

It was a short respite. The rain had stopped for a few minutes when Kurt emerged, lifting his hopes… Then the deluge came again, even harder.

“How did you follow me?” Kurt shouted at the sky.

Of course, he knew that if the storm was traveling south, he was going in the same direction, and therefore, it was his fault and not the storm’s. But he didn’t care. Yelling at something helped his mood and scared less experienced New Yorkers out of his path.

Kurt was up the stairs of the familiar building before he acknowledged that he really needed to stop showing up like this. It wasn’t that much farther to his apartment, but Kurt could barely see in front of him, and his laptop was in danger. He pressed on the buzzer and hoped that someone was home.

“Whoa!” Elliott spotted Kurt as he descended, and then began to hurry down. “Hang on, man.”

Kurt hurried inside as Elliott opened the door and gave a full-bodied shudder.
“Damn. I’m glad I got home early. Why didn’t you stop somewhere?”

“I dunno. I was just trying to get back. I need to practice my callback piece and then put an appropriate ensemble together.” Kurt went up the stairs with him, Elliott’s warm arm over his drenched shoulders.

When they reached the apartment, Elliott went to get some towels, and came back with a pair of sweatpants and a black band t-shirt that read in pink letters, “Pansy Division.” He dropped the clothes on the sofa came over to rustle the towel over Kurt’s wet hair.

“Awwww, my hair’s gonna be so crazy by the time I get there,” Kurt whined.

“What time is it?” Elliott asked, calm as ever.

“Seven.”

“Pfft. Kurt, you have hours. Let’s get you dried off, first, and then you can practice with me.”

“I guess.” Kurt pulled away from the toweling and shook his head. His hair was sticking up at weird angles, thanks to the now sodden hair wax that he used to style without weighing his hair down.

“Thanks for taking in this wet cat.”

“Aww. Well, he’s a cute one. And he lets me ride his coattails to some of the hottest venues in the city. I can’t resist.” He patted a second towel down Kurt’s shoulders, smiling gently. “We should get you changed. At least for now, and when you’ve dried off, we can take you to the loft, or… Actually, you know what? Lemme call Dani. I think she’s free right now, and she could pick up your audition outfit.”

“I was wearing it.”

Elliott shrugged easily and tossed the clothes at him. “I’m sure you have at least a dozen amazing outfits in your closet. If she answers, you can tell her what to bring, and you can choose from there. I’m pretty sure I have some of your hair and face stuff over here, still. But if you need something else she could bring it, too.”
Kurt raised a brow and went into the bedroom to change. “You’re always so calm. You’re like my gay Yoda.”

“What makes you think Yoda wasn’t gay? What woman did you ever see him with?” Elliott contorted his voice into a bizarre croak. “Skirt-chaser not am I! Dick I love!”

“Oh, my God! Stop!”

Kurt pulled the Pansy Division shirt over his head and padded back out into the living room. Somehow he liked wearing Elliott’s clothes, even though he’d only done it a few times, and they were always too big (because Elliott was a giant next to Kurt). They made Kurt feel surrounded and warm. Of course, anything would have been warm after the fall rain pelting him out there.

“Well, I don’t know why you can’t just wear that to the audition.” Elliott gestured toward Kurt.

Kurt rolled his eyes. “Suddenly you’re afraid, and you don’t know what you’re afraid of.”

Elliott frowned and tilted his head to the side. “What?”

“Nothing. It’s from a movie. I need my outfit. And definitely bright, positive colors! I don’t know what pink means, but black on a wet cat isn’t good!” Kurt walked over to the couch and pulled up the sweats, which were slipping down his hips. A few birds of his newest tattoo had escaped and were visible, flying just above his hipbone.

“Okay. So, I call.” Elliott held up his phone. “You tea? You don’t want anything to happen to those golden pipes before you become… king of the underworld, or… whatever it is you’re doing in that play. The call sheet confused me.”

“The premise is a little out there.” Kurt went into the kitchen and put the kettle under the faucet. “But it’s not that uncommon a story arc: A boy whose family tries to push him into the family business rejects his upbringing when he falls in love.” Kurt shrugged. “It’s your typical coming-of-age story, only that… you know, the family business is contract killing, and his family are all demons—as in his family isn’t just from the underworld in a godfather kind of sense, but from the actual Underworld.” He grinned. A year ago, Kurt wouldn’t have imagined even auditioning for such a part, but when he saw the callsheet a few weeks ago, he knew he wanted to try. And demon assassin or not, in the end, it was a musical about love conquering all things—and after everything that had happened, that was actually just the kind of thing he wanted to sing about.
Elliott shrugged and dialed. Kurt looked through the tea cabinet for the Darjeeling… then pulled out some chai for Elliott. He would probably like a cup as well, given the weather. His hands moved automatically to find the spoons and the sugar and the cups and set them out in a neat row.

“Thanks, man. I’ll get him on.” Elliott handed the phone to Kurt.

“Hey.”

“Hey, sweetie! I hear you’ve gotten yourself in a pinch.”

“It’s not the worst pinch in the world, but to be fair, this day hasn’t been my best… actually not my worst either. I’ve had some extremes,” Kurt said. He leaned back against the counter and pulled on his sweatpants again. “You like rooibos, right? More than chai?”

Dani giggled. “Yes, especially Elliott’s nasty gingery chai. Rooibos me up!”

“We’ll have it waiting for you!”

“Thanks, babe. What do you need me to pick up? I’m on my way over, with, you know, that brilliant invention called the umbrella!”

Kurt stayed on the phone with Dani for another minute telling her which items to pull.

“She’ll be here in a few.” Kurt stepped over towards the couch where Elliott was sitting and his sweats slipped again. Kurt caught them, and flushed. “And here I thought my big booty would keep these up.”

Elliott grinned. “You know you gotta tie the drawstring, right?”

“It’s stuck!” Kurt protested.
Elliott rose and came over to Kurt, putting his hands on Kurt’s hips and giving the sweats a little jerk. Suddenly, Kurt wasn’t just comfortably, fuzzy warm. His cheeks were burning and his heart sped up. Elliott pulled the end of the drawstring out of the waistband where it had been hiding, and then started to tie them together.

“Th-thanks.” Kurt swallowed and looked determinedly at Elliott’s guitar.

“What is it?”

One of Elliott’s large hands was still on Kurt’s hip, and Kurt didn’t know what he should say. They’d never had a problem curling up together, walking around in towels or in the middle of dressing. But suddenly…

The kettle blew. Kurt turned around swiftly to take it off the burner.


“Nothing. No, it’s um…” Kurt shook his head and poured hot water into two of the mugs. “I’m just, um, being weird.”

“Weird?”

Elliott came to stand by his side, and Kurt looked up at him. Elliott raised both of his brows, in that way that he did, skeptical that the whole truth was being given.

“You didn’t do anything wrong.” Kurt stirred some sugar into his cup and slowly put the spoon down.

“Oh. I figured I got a little too touchy, and it made you uncomfortable.”

“Well, not bad uncomfortable.”

“Not bad?” Elliott bobbed his head from side to side. “As in good?”
“I don’t know.”

Elliott sucked his lips in, then reached over to brush his hand over Kurt’s destroyed hair. “So… This okay?”

“That’s fine.”

“How about…” Elliott moved his hand down slowly to Kurt’s shoulder.

Kurt felt his cheeks getting hot again. Not that his shoulders were an erogenous zone, but now he was thinking about being handled delicately, in a state of undress, and holy god, had it been a long time.

Elliott’s lips cracked into a big smile, and he touched Kurt’s side gently, this time over the shirt, and higher than his hip. Kurt felt himself moving closer to Elliott’s warm chest. He didn’t know why he would react like this… other than the fact that Elliott was obviously a good-looking man, and it had been too long, and Elliott wasn’t saying no…

Kurt lifted his chin. He could see the delight sparkling in Elliott’s eyes just before their lips met, briefly, in a wisp of a kiss. Then Kurt stepped back and looked at Elliott seriously.

“I don’t know…”

“That’s okay.”

“It’s too soon. Not for uh, us. For me. With anyone, I think.” Kurt rubbed a hand over his forehead and shook his head in frustration. What was he doing? He’d just told Rachel he wasn’t going to be dating anytime soon!

“Kurt, it’s okay. You just seemed like you might want to.”

Had he? Well, he had been the one to initiate. Elliott had lingered in the kiss, waiting on Kurt’s
response. Kurt furrowed his brow deeply as he looked into Elliott’s face. Elliott wasn’t angry, or even looking like he might push for more.

“How long have you-? Was that just... the rain, and the tea, and my irresistible outfit?” Kurt asked. Things would make more sense if this was a spur of the moment thing, with Elliott feeling in the mood and Kurt being conveniently there. It happened like that, didn’t it? Like when Blaine kissed him after Pavarotti died, or Cody feeling frisky in the middle of a job.

“You have no idea what a catch you are, do you?” Elliott shrugged his shoulders. “Since forever. Since I met you. I mean, it wasn’t love at first sight or anything, but you’re mad attractive—even in sweats—and I was drawn to you pretty much from the start. I’m glad we got to be friends, because you’ve got this awesome creative brain, and I like you and we get along really well. I’d be more than okay with building on our friendship and taking the next step.”

“I just didn’t know. I didn’t ever think about it- Not that you’re not attractive!” The words left Kurt’s mouth and he suddenly realized how it must have sounded. But when he’d first met Elliott, he had been engaged—and later, when they had become friends, he had been too occupied enjoying the easy camaraderie of Elliott’s company to consider falling for him.

Elliott let out a booming laugh. “Dude, it’s fine. You don’t have to suddenly declare marriage. I’m not like that. You’ve got this audition today, and you said you’re not ready. Just... Y’know, you could think about it. I thought I’d wait a little longer before suggesting it anyway, but that little blush made me wonder...”

He shook his head and picked up Kurt’s tea to hand to him. “Just relax, man. We’re fine, and I’m not going to push you.”

“I never thought you would.” Kurt wrapped his fingers around the warm mug and breathed in the scent of the tea. Hot and sweet. “You’ve never been anything but this strong, calm influence in my life. I’ve really needed someone grounded like you around. But... I’m not good at relationships. I don’t ever want to hurt you. I think I’m a little unnerved that I could.”

Elliott made a scoffing sound as he took his own tea, and then he took a big sip, without sugar and without blowing on it. “I know your entire romantic history. And you practically know mine. If you hurt me, it’s not exactly going to be your fault only. I’m not walking in blind. But I don’t think you’ve ever done anything that awful, and as long as we’re honest about how we feel about things, it should be okay.” He took another drink and set the cup aside. “You know it’ll be fine either way, right? I’m down, but if you’re not, a relationship takes two people’s wills to become a whole.”
“So two become one? Like the Spice Girls song?”

Elliott grinned.

Kurt looked down at his tea. He was perfectly toasty now. He drank it quietly, and Elliott came over and rubbed his back.

“If I were giving Rachel or one of the girls advice,” Kurt said. “I’d tell them that sometimes you can have a reaction to someone, but it doesn’t mean that it’s meant to be.” Kurt let out a slow breath. “And I still think this is too soon after Blaine really to have a relationship with anyone. Even though I don’t like being alone.”

“Yeah, I know you don’t. And so it’s important that you not leap into anything just to avoid that. You have me as a friend either way. You might change how you feel about being single, though. After you’ve been swinging free for a while, you start to like the feeling. The problem is that you’ve never really done it. You barely had the chance after Blaine the first time.”

Kurt nodded. He set his tea down and reached over to touch Elliott’s chest. Elliott raised a brow and moved his hand over Kurt’s.

“I’m just curious…” Kurt muttered. Elliott gave a soft nod. “It’s weird to me that you’d be interested, but… not want me to lock it down and give you an answer right now.”

“It’s ‘cause I’m not a psycho. And because I know exactly how crazy the last two months- well, the last year has been for you.” Elliott moved his hand tentatively over the back of Kurt’s head. “I don’t want to lock you down or lock you up. I want you to be by my side. I want you to be happy with me.”

Kurt closed his eyes for a moment and sighed at the feel of Elliott’s fingers delicately mussing the back of his hair.

“Kiss me, one more time?” he asked.

“Okay. Tasting the milk, I get it. Just let me know if it’s too much?”
Elliott moved his hand down Kurt’s back and rested it halfway down. His other hand caressed the side of Kurt’s cheek, and for a moment, Kurt fought the urge to pull back, but Elliott’s hands remained soft and didn’t try to hold Kurt still. Instead, Elliott drew his fingers along Kurt’s jaw, first on the outside, and then under his chin, causing him to angle his head back. The touch was tender, almost worshipful. Kurt almost purred.

Then their lips met, more firmly this time, and Kurt tasted the spices on Elliott’s breath. The same feeling as earlier overtook him. This was nice, familiar and new at the same time. It was so unlike kissing Blaine, who had had the tendency to push and control, holding Kurt into place—and also quite unlike kissing Cody (drunk or sober), which had been wild and exciting, but just a bit scary. Elliott was both undemanding and inviting; their kiss an exchange between equals. Kurt had only felt like that with one other person before (and the taste of tea on Elliott’s lips matched that memory perfectly, aside from the flavor). He didn’t realize until now just how much he had missed kissing someone like this. He never wanted it to stop... but it eventually had to, because the doorbell rang.

“I’d better let Dani in,” Elliott mumbled against Kurt’s lips.

“Mmm. Yes. I do need my stuff,” Kurt agreed reluctantly, kissing Elliott once more before pulling away. Elliott was looking a little glowy, and he knew he was probably a bit flushed himself.

“Okay?” Elliott asked, gesturing at the door.

Kurt quickly ran a hand through his messy hair and nodded. Whew. Well, that was definitely something to think about.

* *

Two hours later, Kurt arrived at the small Broadway theatre with his hair freshly washed and styled and wearing his second outfit of choice. Both Dani and Elliott had reassured him he looked great (and somehow, Elliott’s eyes on him—and his approval—had felt just a little bit sexier than usual). Kurt hoped they hadn’t been too awkward around Dani, but he thought they had managed quite well.

As it turned out, he was sharing his callback with two other men and three women. They were all called to the stage at the same time. The director Alison Shaughnessy, who hadn’t been present at the first round, briefly introduced herself, and then announced that in order to cast the leading roles for Samael, the men and women would first sing a solo of their choice, and then, based on their performance, be paired up together to test their chemistry. Kurt glanced at the other men and felt his self-confidence wane. The two other men, Marco and Paul, were both strapping men with long...
dancer’s bodies and guns a’packing. Was this going to be like auditioning for Tony all over again? The words of Miss Pillsbury, Artie, and Coach Beiste echoed in his mind. *Toothpick arms?* Well, not anymore due to NYADA’s stage combat classes and his hours at the gym. But compared to the other two men, Kurt still looked less buff, less masculine - more ‘like a lady.’

He gritted his teeth. Suddenly, determination flooded his system. He hadn't started auditioning for roles with his face busted up for nothing. He was a survivor, and his life had never been easy, but he could definitely do this. And once he got the part, he’d be sure to invite all of them, to make them see that he was an artist, capable of slipping into any role; even that of the romantic leading man. Well, leading *demon*, anyway.

After singing his solo—Kurt had chosen to reprise his success with “Bring Him Home,” figuring that a song he had beaten Rachel Berry with would bring him luck—he was paired with a young woman who introduced herself as Sofia, a third year student of music and theatre from New Jersey. They got half an hour to prepare a duet.

“I was hoping I’d be paired up with you,” Sofia admitted, glancing at Kurt from the side as they made their way to a quiet part of the theatre to rehearse.

“Oh?” Kurt replied, not sure what to make of that, or why she was blushing.

“Your song was so beautiful, and… um… so are you.” Sofia blushed. “I’d probably die if we got cast as Rosalinde and Samael.”

“Um...Thanks. I liked yours, too,” Kurt said, feeling a little awkward. “So, what song do you want to sing?”

“Well, they want chemistry, so… it should be something romantic,” Sofia replied eagerly.

Together, they went through a few options, both wanting to find a song that would showcase their own voice as well as give them the opportunity to do some acting. The more they talked, the more Kurt suspected Sofia wouldn't even have to act that much. She seemed to genuinely be attracted to him and was showing it the way Kurt knew from the movies he used to watch with Rachel and Mercedes at movie night: She was smiling a lot, laughed at every little joke he made, twirled strands of hair around her finger, and at some point complained about the 'stifling air' in the theatre and took off her blouse to continue singing in her tank top. It was a little unnerving. The last time a girl had been interested in him, he had ended up with a smashed in windshield. Girls could be unpredictable and a little crazy when in love. Still, anything that might help his audition was a good thing, right?
They ended up performing “Sun and Moon” from Miss Saigon, a song they both knew well (though Kurt admittedly was more familiar with Kim’s part as Blaine always insisted on singing Chris’ lines—it was a welcome change to have someone else tackle the high notes for once). As they circled each other and sang of passion and wonderment of a new love, Kurt thought about the way Finn used to look at Rachel when they sang, with that honest expression that seemed to say "this is all I got, it's not much but it's all yours." For the duration of the song, he was Sofia's, and she was his. They hadn't practiced the kiss at the end, but it happened spontaneously as they came into their final pose, hands clasped and faces close together. Despite her enthusiasm during rehearsal, Kurt half-expected Sofia to laugh or pull away, but instead she closed her eyes and leaned in. So he kissed her, and cheated a little by letting his mind skip to that afternoon in Elliott's flat.

The small group of people in the theatre applauded, even their competitors. Kurt and Sofia beamed from ear to ear as they got off the stage. “We so got this,” Sofia whispered, squeezing his hand and planting a kiss on his cheek before letting go.

Kurt felt pretty confident too. He knew he had done well in his lower register, and no one had cracked up or booed them off the stage. Of course they hadn’t, he reminded himself—these were professionals. He knew for a fact he wasn’t the first gay man to play a heterosexual part on Broadway. Still, it was hard shaking off all of his Lima baggage and negative expectations at will. That he had auditioned at all was a step in the right direction.

After all three couples had sung, the director and her assistants took a small break to discuss the casting. Kurt and the others were left to themselves, and for a few awkward moments, everyone just rehydrated and checked their phones to seem occupied (Kurt had two messages, one from Elliott and one from Adam—both wishing him good luck, and a kissy-face emoticon from Elliott). Then one of the other men suddenly spoke.

“You go to NYADA, don’t you?” he asked Kurt. His name was Marco, and he had a deep baritone voice, sienna-colored skin, and full lips. He had auditioned with a piece from Don Giovanni, which had blown Kurt away, but his duet with Marissa, a thin-voiced girl with too much make-up on, had been bland and didn’t do his voice justice at all.

“Oh no, I didn’t get in,” Marco said quickly, “but I still follow the blogs and attend as many open classes as I can. I heard you won Midnight Madness last year.”

“I did, but that was just-” Kurt started.
“That was you?” Paul interrupted. “Man, I heard about that even at Wallburn’s.” At his introduction, he had told the director that he was still in school in Michigan but was looking at a fast track graduation and would definitely be available in New York by opening night. Apparently, Paul was some kind of child star and had already done a few singing parts on Broadway in his summer and Christmas holidays. Kurt was surprised a man that attractive hadn’t been picked up on a more mainstream show already.

“Really? I-” Kurt was about to deflect their admiration when he realized something. He had a right to be here, too. “I mean, yeah, I did.” He let out a breathy little laugh. “Someone was under the impression they could out-diva me,” he said, straightening his back a little and adding a confident smile. “That certainly backfired for the other party.”

The others laughed. After that, the ice was broken. Kurt told Marco that he had initially been rejected by NYADA too, and encouraged him to try again at the next round. Then Paul, whose résumé had seemed so impressive as he introduced himself, started listing all the schools and productions he had been rejected for, and suddenly Kurt didn’t feel as intimidated as before. All of them worked hard for their craft, and rejection and disappointment, it seemed, was part of their everyday life.

“I actually broke out in song in the middle of the supermarket when I heard I got this callback,” Marco confessed, shaking his head in mirth at the memory. “I may have frightened a few old ladies and their dogs.”


“Getting this far, with only two other guys? It’s good, you know,” Paul said. “I’ve been at callbacks where they handed out numbers to pin on your chest and you’d be, like, number 74. By the time they call you up, the director has already left for lunch and the assistant is texting his boyfriend all through your tap dance number.”

“I heard there was almost a fourth guy though,” Marco said, lowering his voice confidentially. “He just showed up without an invitation. Made quite a ruckus at the stage door, demanding to be let in. Very young, but claimed to have experience leading a school choir in Ohio and performing at local malls...”

“Ohio?” Kurt asked, suddenly feeling suspicious. “Was he... about this tall-” he gestured at his chin, “with a bowtie and very flat hair?”
Marco shrugged. “I didn’t see him, myself. I only heard about it on my way in. Apparently security kicked him out after checking back with the stage assistant. Can you believe he just tried to sneak in?”

“I think I can, actually,” Kurt said, grateful that it hadn’t worked. If it really were Blaine (and it did sound like something he’d do), Kurt would have had even less of a chance at getting this part.

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When the stage assistant Jamie called them all back to the stage, Alison was standing with a clipboard in hand, saying something to Romy Cartwright, one of the two writers, who was sitting with her booted feet propped on the seat in front of her and scratching a pen in her braided purple hair. Beside her sat the rest of the production team of *Samael*: Jasper Knipple, the other writer who had run a few scenes with Kurt, and Beltre Walker, who had given them additional choreography. The two women talked to each other for another moment, then Alison turned her leveling gaze to the stage.

“Thank you, everyone, for your work today. Marissa Maxwell, Jill Donovan, thank you, but we’ve decided to go in another direction.”

The two women’s faces fell. Marissa’s face began to turn scarlet, and she issued a squeaky “thank you,” before making an effort not to (totally) storm off the stage. She reminded Kurt of Rachel every time someone else in Glee club got a solo. Jill just nodded and asked if she could be emailed notes, and with a smile, Alison agreed. Kurt hoped he’d be level-headed enough to ask for feedback if he was rejected, too. The whole process of this auditioning business was to learn and do better next time, after all.

Sofia looked so ecstatic that she might levitate off the ground. She turned to Kurt and gave him two thumbs up. Romy fiddled with her pen and smiled kindly.

“We’re glad to have you with us, Sofia. Could you come down here for a moment? After we finish with the guys, we’ll need to talk to all of you and take your measurements for wardrobe, but it won’t be much longer, okay?”

“We’ve had to make some hard decisions in casting today,” Alison said to Kurt, Marco, and Paul. “Casting Samael is basically setting the tone for the entire production. It changes how our writers finish their edits on the screenplay, and Jasper’s final decisions on the songs. We began our process of seeking a lead wanting someone with an appeal that people hadn’t seen before, something unusual, but special, and I think each of you are remarkable talents. We had an inclination regarding
what we really wanted before today, but needed to see more interaction between the actors before making a firm decision.”

She paused and looked at her clipboard. Kurt drew in a deep breath and tried not to get dizzy from anticipation.

“Kurt Hummel…” Alison shook her head slowly.

His heart sank. Being mentioned first was the worst sign. Like Marissa and Jill, he’d have to slink off stage, though he was more practiced than Marissa, it seemed, at humility. Yet another part he’d be passed over for. They now needed to test the more masculine pair to audition against their Rosalinde. Kurt felt stupid now, for having let himself hope-

“You just _completely_ blew us away at every opportunity,” Alison continued.

Kurt leaned his head forward slightly and blinked in disbelief.

“I don’t even like _Les Mis_, and yet your solo had me near tears today. Your duet with Sofia was equally moving. I _believed_ you and Sofia, and I’m not a romantic. If I hadn’t just paired you up myself, I would have thought the two of you were a couple. These were just my impressions. Romy and Jasper are excited by the prospect of tailoring the songs to fit your more than impressive register.”

“How large is your range?” Jasper asked as he sat up in his chair. Beltre raised his eyebrows in interest.

“Oh! I can sing from A2 to Bb5… Uh, but sometimes I can hit C6,” Kurt added, a bit flustered.

“Hallelujah!” Jasper cried. Beltre chuckled and fanned him with one hand. Romy creased her brow at them, shaking her head slightly with a little smile, as she scribbled rapidly on her notepad.

Now Kurt’s cheeks were growing red for an entirely different reason. He couldn’t understand why they were praising him like this. Did he... _really_ have the part? Or were they just telling him what he’d done well before crushing him, like so many others had? That seemed to be the standard whenever he went for something, but the director hadn’t bothered with the other girls, and the writers hadn’t even spoken to them.
“There’s only one thing that didn’t really fit,” Alison said, and Kurt’s heart stopped. Here it came.

“When I originally wrote Samael, I had this, like, vision of a demon society,” Romy explained, gesturing broadly with her hands. “Now, seeing you, the way you move, the way you sing… we don’t see ‘demon’ anymore. We see elf.”

Kurt nodded in resignation, biting his lower lip. He was trying hard to keep his face neutral, but the rollercoaster of emotions they were putting him through made it hard.

“So I talked about it with Romy and Jasper,” Alison continued, “and they agreed to rewrite the part, the characters, the whole setting of the musical! From here on, Samael will be a dark elf. Kurt, I don’t want you to change anything about your performance. Move as you move, use your natural voice. I will tell make-up that I don’t want any prosthetics on you except maybe some pointy ears.”

“Now our biggest problem is figuring out how to get an understudy for you!” Romy added with a laugh. She pushed her glasses up. “We were thinking about trying Marco and Paul for it—”

“But I’m not writing three different scores of music,” Jasper said.

Understudy. For him. For Kurt. He was the lead. He was the lead they were working around, writing a score for, changing their original character designs to accommodate!

Suddenly, everything around him popped into vivid color as his heart surged with exhilaration.

“So we had another idea,” Alison picked up. Her thin lips curved into a slight smile. “And it’s why we’ve kept you two here.” She looked to Marco and Paul.

Kurt looked from side to side, his own eyes probably bulging ridiculously out of his head.

“We’d like to audition the two of you against Kurt. We’ve been thinking of giving Samael a second love interest to make the plot less predictable, and since Kurt seems to have chemistry with everyone he’s read with, including Jasper, we have decided to cast a man for this role,” Alison said.
“How do you feel about that, Kurt? Are you okay with this change?” Romy asked.

“I-I’m fine with it.” Kurt laughed and shook his head. “Am I really Samael?”

Romy beamed at him. “You totally are.”

“Then, it’s fine.” Kurt shrugged. “This is actually not a problem for me. At all.”

Romy bit her lower lip and bounced excitedly in her seat, then looked down to scribble more notes.

“Now,” Alison continued, “Marco and Paul, you have both already convinced us of your talent, and even though the part of Samael is taken, we’d still liked to consider you for our cast. If you’re interested, we’ll have both of you read with Kurt. Then we can decide if we’ll have Samael’s boyfriend cast today, or if we’ll have to do another round of auditions.”

Paul’s brows knit together. Marco’s lips parted slightly, and he looked to Kurt, pale green eyes curious for a moment, and then turned his head back to their audience.

“Yes! Yes?” Marco said with a flustered shake of the head. “I’d be fine reading opposite Kurt.”

Paul cast a quick glance to Kurt, ran the tip of his tongue along his lower lip, and then, finally, gave a brief nod. “Do we have something to read from?”

Romy hopped up with a few pages and handed them to the stage assistant, who ran up to give the copies to the three of them. “Um, guys, your part was originally a woman, so just, take a few minutes on your own and think about what you’d do with the character?”

Marco gave him a half-smile, but Paul was busy glaring determinedly at the script. Maybe he was a bit upset about not getting the lead? Kurt knew he would be upset…but he’d also probably be thrilled to get any part that wasn’t just in the chorus. Paul was different. He’d had his bit parts, and he’d been scrambling a long time to move forward from his Broadway baby origins and come into his own.

They only had a few moments to prepare, and Marco was asked to leave while Paul did his reading.
The scene was short, with Samael visiting through the new, unnamed character’s window and arguing with him about fairy factions. Now that Kurt thought about it, the change from demons to elves and fairies was probably a smart one, given so much of the background already came from Irish and Gaelic mythology. The original call had been titled Dúbhsláine, but by the time Kurt had come in for his first audition piece, they’d told him it had been retitled because someone had mispronounced the name as Dubshlong.

Paul was extremely... dominant in reading his unnamed part. Aggressive, almost. He didn’t seem to be happy that Samael had entered his window, and when they were supposed to be on the bed, discussing fairy politics in a playful exchange of lines that implied they were really talking about something else, Paul pulled away from him, and argued more snappishly. Kurt didn’t dwell on it in the scene; he was Samael, and Samael was entering the room of his lover. An apparently tense and annoyed lover. So Kurt kept it cool, confident, and a bit coy. When Paul barked, Samael teased more; when he pulled back, Samael inched closer.

And then, finally, when Paul seemed to be getting the picture that this was supposed to be a semi-romantic scene and reached for Samael, that portion of the script was over, and Kurt needed to head stage right. Deciding to make it part of Samael’s lovers’ quarrel, he hopped up and delicately glided away from Paul’s touch, back toward the window, and smiled as he told him how much he loved to see a pretentious courtesan fairy burn.

“Oh, how their bones snap and crack,” Samael muttered dreamily. “I’m away. Pity your loss of me tonight.”

“Oh, I pity,” Paul replied a bit irritably. “I pity every stray moment; I am riddled with regret. I don’t understand how you are not.”


Paul looked thrown when Kurt said that, although it was what had been scribbled in over ‘Morrigaine.’ He just stood there staring at Kurt, and then down at the stage. There were no more lines for them to read in the script. Kurt looked over at the edge of the stage, desperate to save what otherwise would be a very flat end to the scene. He hopped up on a ladder, putting his hand up to his brows as he squinted out over the stage, as though he was peering out the window. Very dramatically peering out the window. He couldn’t tell if Paul was picking up on it, but he could hear a few snorts from their small audience.

“Thank you,” Alison said. She was fighting a laugh.
“Romy, you couldn’t’ve put a name in there? Any name?” Jasper huffed a sigh.

“You edited out all my names!” she shot back. “What happened to Dúbhshláine and Sluaghadhán and Corraidhín?”

“Honey, no one could say them,” Beltre said.

“Like Beltre is an American apple-pie name,” Romy replied, only to blush as she realized they were having this exchange in front of their potential new cast. A little irritated with herself, she added: “Fine. Jasper. The suitor is named Jasper, since you read with Kurt first. Jasper the fucking fairy. Is that okay with you?”

“Suits me just fine,” Jasper replied cheekily.

Kurt arched a brow and looked to Paul. Paul just shook his head and blew a long breath out through his lips. His ears were a little red.

“Thank you again, Paul,” Alison called. She gave a dismissive gesture to the three on her right as if to say, Enough of this. “Jamie, could you get Marco back in here? I want to get this done today, and I’m sure these guys would love to know where they stand before going home.”

Kurt bowed his head and read over his lines a few more times. By the time Marco was back, Kurt more or less had them down. Years of having to memorize new lyrics and choreography every week had trained him to uptake quickly.

Marco came in, clearly already in character. He was slightly softer, somehow, and seemed smaller, even though he was roughly Kurt’s height. He gave a bit of a gentle nod to their small audience, and then went to the far side of the stage and pretended to groom his hair in a mirror, the hint of a smile on his lips.

Kurt set his script down and launched himself across the stage in a playful twirl.

“Allo, allo! Jasper!” he said cheerfully.
“Samael!” Marco said with a gasp of surprise.

He began to scold Samael for his sudden appearance in his bedroom, and soon they were flirting, and arguing, back and forth until Samael had cornered Jasper on the ‘bed’ (really the floor), where there was a little bit of wrestling with the political talk. Marco wasn’t off-book, but he still made sure to make eye contact with Kurt as often as possible, and once, in the middle of grappling with Kurt, he dropped it and looked panicked because it was his line. Just as he began to reach for it, Kurt swooped around him, picked the pages up, and then held him from behind, letting the pages rest in Marco’s lap.

Marco looked back at him with a ridiculously wide grin.

“You’re nothing but an imp,” he said softly.

“I’m everything but an imp.” Samael let him go.

“Nonsense,” Marco muttered. “Nonsense, nonsense.”

They wrapped up the political discussion, and then Kurt made his way back towards the ‘window’. Marco followed him, touching his hand, almost pleading at him with his eyes to stay.

“Oh, how their bones snap and crack,” Samael muttered dreamily. “I’m away. Pity your loss of me tonight.”

“Oh, I do pity.” Marco folded their fingers together and pressed his forehead against Kurt’s. “I pity every stray moment... I am riddled with regrets… I do not understand… how you are not?”

His voice sounded small, and wearied. He was a Jasper conflicted and worried, but begging answers of his lover, and wishing him to stay, and give him comfort. Samael, in return, lost his smirk, and caressed Marco’s face.

The room was dead silent as the scene ended. Kurt reluctantly let Marco go, and then bit his lip and gave him a grin.

“Pretty good, huh?” Marco whispered. “You are Samael.”

Kurt looked to the writers, director, and choreographer to see what they would say. Nothing, so far, which was curious. They’d seemed to be pretty chatty before.

“Well, I have my decision.” Romy looked to Jasper, the human. He nodded, as did Beltre.

The three of them turned to Alison, who leaned over to Romy to say a few things quietly. Kurt only heard the words ‘experience’ and ‘understudy.’

“All right. Thank you, guys. I think we have our Samael and Jasper right here,” Alison said.

Marco jumped in place and let out a low “WHOO!” Kurt laughed and clapped, as did Sofia in the back.

After Jamie left to inform Paul of their decision, Alison asked her new cast down from the stage and invited them to take seats around their table. She put her finger to her lips and looked at them, as if unsure how to formulate her next words. “I just want to be very clear… Marco, I think the way you played Jasper was good, but we don’t want this to play into any stereotypes.”

Marco nodded.

“Samael is about the choice between tradition and innovation, about breaking away from expectations and obligations. I don’t want this love triangle to distract from that. Our main character will have a male and a female lover in the course of the story, and both will contribute to the plot and his development. It won’t be an experiment, and it won’t be a contest to find out if Samael is really gay or straight. I want to make it clear that he isn’t indecisive or going through a phase. He just has lovers of varying gender. It does not define his identity.”

“I didn’t even think to change how I played it,” Kurt said. He wondered if that was a mistake. Samael wanted Jasper in that scene, and Rosalinde, when they were together. As far as he knew, those were different parts of the play.
“We can give you notes if it becomes unclear, but-” Romy shrugged. “I didn’t see a problem during this scene. I saw Samael and Jasper being way into each other and having a complex dynamic. That was the goal. They love each other, and all this, like, power play, faction, fairy stuff is going on around them, and Jasper is a little lost in all of it. I kind of prefer him as a guy, to be honest, now that I’ve seen it.”

Kurt nodded seriously.

“I can get the revisions done to the main script pretty quickly. Then we need to give Jasper actual time to score all the songs and work on edits-” Romy continued.

“And I want to write in a duet for you two,” Jasper added, pointing between Kurt and Marco. “Fair is fair. Rosalinde gets one.”

Marco beamed like he couldn’t believe his luck. If Kurt wasn’t already smiling from ear to ear, Marco’s infectious grin would have done the trick.

By the end of it all, Kurt felt like his head was stuffed full, and he walked to the dressing room feeling caught between parts of himself. He didn’t know how much confidence he’d put on merely as a show to get through the audition process and how much was real, regarding his own talents. He’d been nervous about reading with others, only to be told that he had chemistry with everyone. He’d been afraid they’d choose the most masculine and attractive, only to see Paul cut loose. So many unlikely events had turned out in his favor that he secretly wondered if he deserved it all.

Marco and Sofia were by his side as he collected his things and tried to tame his now, somehow wild, hair. Sofia was babbling to Marco about the parts she’d gotten before now. Chorus, bit parts as a best friend or minion and the like.

“Girl, I was prepared to rip out my still-beating heart for them to give me that part. I don’t even care that it’s not the lead! I’m just tired of losing.” Marco clapped Kurt’s shoulder. “You’re so amazing. It’s scary.”

“I um…” Kurt let out a little laugh and did a shimmy happily. “I’m still reeling!”

“You deserve it. I’m so… I just can’t wait!” Sofia said.
Their heads turned as the door opened, and Paul entered. He looked at them, furrowed a brow, and then licked over his lower lip. He grabbed his bag and then came over to Kurt.

“Look, I need to apologize.”

“No, no, I don’t think—”

“I was extremely unprofessional. Even worse, my work up there was bad, and you had to try to play off of it. You made me look better than I was by playing along. I know. I’ve been working on the stage for a long time.” Paul looked up at the ceiling and sighed. “I was trying to make the ‘unnamed —just-created-this-moment—suitor’ a strong guy, you know. His own man. And I was just... disappointed. I didn’t get the part, and I was angry, and then I was thrown by the sudden script change, and then frustrated with myself for saying I’d try the change when I’m not sure I want to play a gay character at this point in my career.” He shook his head. “I don’t have a problem with it. It was just… hitting a bit too close to home.”

Kurt raised his brows in surprise as he suddenly understood what Paul meant. Before he could say anything, Paul spoke again.

“Look, I know who I am and I don’t want to hide it; I’m just not ready to come out, professionally. I don’t want to get stereotyped. Especially not for a small part like this that doesn’t even have any singing.”

Kurt nodded, grateful that Marco didn’t use this moment to share the happy news that his character would be getting a duet written especially for him. “I understand that. And it wasn’t that, uh, bad-”

“It was abysmal.” Paul shifted his bag onto his shoulder. “You never let personal problems show on the stage. You use it to form your understanding of character, but... It was just not acceptable, and I especially didn’t want you to think that... I don’t know, that I was trying to intimidate you, or that this had anything to do with you.”

“No, I get it. I was rejected from NYADA. I’ve lost a lot of parts. It happens, and it doesn’t really get easier.”

“I bet you didn’t throw any tantrums.”

“No... I’ve kicked a chair or two in my time, but... not on stage.”
Paul laughed. “Well. Congratulations, guys. Hopefully, I’ll be able to come back up and see you when Samael goes to stage.”

“Farewell, unnamed suitor,” Kurt said.

Marco covered his mouth and shook with laughter.

Paul chuckled as well. “And I hope to see you guys again when you’re back on the audition rounds after the show runs. Anyway, I need to get back to my hotel room and to pack for my flight back.”

“You can give us your newest batch of audition stories when we see you again,” Marco said.

“I’ll keep notes on those. Just for you.” Paul nodded to them and then headed out the door.

Sofia shook her head. “It was really bad,” she said after he’d gone. “But it was not the worst I’ve done when I’ve been messed up during an audition.”

“I think we’ve all experienced rejection enough to know you don’t always deal with it the way you want to.” Marco zipped up his bag and slung it over his shoulder. “I think I get what Paul was trying to say. But it’s different for me. Directors and producers don’t see gay when they look at me. They see ‘black guy, medium height and build.’ The type I’m gonna get cast is probably not the gay guy, you know? It’s probably a drug dealer, or the guy who carries a basketball everywhere. About 90% of directors have asked me what sport I play. It’s stage combat, by the way, not basketball. And I’m not gay. This play is all acting for me, and that’s awesome. Acting is what I want to do. So this? It’s a pretty sweet gig for me. The worst that can happen is my Nana being confused as to what this play’s about.”

Sofia nodded slowly. She twisted the ring on her left hand. “I suppose sometimes people need to play a part in real life as well,” she said softly.

Kurt pressed his lips together. “I’ve thought about that. But... I’m not good at being someone I’m not.”

Sofia tilted her head to the side. “Yes, you are. I just saw you. That’s what got you the part.”
“I mean, off-stage. I am gay. I can’t hide, and I don’t want to. I had to decide that before I even got to New York.”

“Wait… you’re *actually* gay?” Sofia asked, staring at him. “But… when you kissed me-” Her shoulders slumped a little. “Are you sure?”

Kurt smirked. “Pretty sure, yes.” He glanced at Marco, who was trying very hard not to laugh. Kurt cleared his throat. “Anyway, I’m not about to take or reject parts based on the orientation of the lead character. I’m an actor; I should be able to play opposite anyone.”

Marco nodded. It seemed like they were definitely on the same wavelength here, which was great, because the situation did have the potential to be very awkward if their characters were supposed to get very intimate.

“This part was a great one before they made this change, and I feel like… maybe this makes it even a little better,” Kurt said. “I’m pretty sure demons and dark elves don’t even *have* closets. And if this means I’ll get typecast in the future, so be it. I’ll make my career in spite of people’s attitudes.”

Kurt slipped his hand into his pocket and felt over his phone, thinking about Elliott and Adam’s messages of encouragement. He couldn’t imagine what their reactions would be… what everyone’s reactions would be. Kurt Hummel finally had his turn.

“And maybe we’ll get to play a small part in changing those attitudes. That’s how I always thought about it in high school when people gave me crap about liking theatre.” Marco smiled. “Hey, are you guys hungry? I’m always starving after performing. Let’s go do dinner.”
Chapter Four

Elliott

The club was already packed by the time they arrived. A wall of bodies writhed to the bright, celebratory music. Colored lights flashed down, illuminating random parts, different faces, movements of revelry. In some ways, it was not unique, but Elliott liked this place. It was one he and Adam had agreed on when the group of them had decided that they needed a real night of celebration. One that didn’t involve Kurt having to cook and play host to his friends. Kurt had been a little dubious, but both Adam and Elliott had been here before (though not together), and it was a decent place. Not too exclusive a venue. Not specifically leather or drag, gay or lesbian. Elliott wasn’t all that fond of clubs that excluded women, as a rule. If it meant he couldn’t bring his girls along, wherever they fell on the Kinsey scale, Elliott didn’t want to be there.

Kurt was looking a bit sulkily at the back of his hand, where a big glow-in-the-dark stamp of a smiley face winked up at him.

“Doesn’t matter!” Elliott assured him. “You’re not buying tonight anyway!”

“I’m not?” Kurt looked up at him.

Elliott grinned. Before they’d left, Kurt had let him apply some eyeliner and gloss, something Elliot knew Kurt had avoided for a couple of years. Ohio and his friends had really done a number on Kurt’s sense of experimentation.

But now, hair standing up, posture arched with the heeled boots, and his eyes done up with a black color liner… Elliott could buy Kurt as a demon prince… or faerie assassin… or whatever his part ended up being. There was a dark edge there, under the sugar sweet, underaged, newly single twinkie. There were multitudes there, and Elliott couldn’t wait to explore them.

Dani slipped through the crowd and claimed a table near the DJ booth, then pointed with both hands toward the bar. This was a signal to Elliott to pick up some drinks, so he let Kurt know what he was doing and sent him, Sam, and Santana to the table. Adam followed Elliott, unasked.

“Split the round, or shall I carry and get the next one?” Adam touched Elliott’s shoulder as they edged closer to the bartender.
“Let’s take turns. Between you, me, and Dani, we should have the little ones covered.” Elliott chuckled, wondering how much tiny Santana could actually hold. “And I don’t drink anyway, so…”

“You don’t?”

“Nah. It’s not a problem. I’m not in a program; I’m a Buddhist. We need one sober head in the group just in case, right? Anyway, this is for Kurt. I don’t want him to have to pay for it, you know?”

Adam bobbed his head in agreement. “If we let him, he’d buy us presents for his birthday.”

Elliott laughed and waved at the shirtless bartender.

The two of them returned holding a slew of drinks. They set down a few champagne cocktails for everyone, plus some bottles of IPA for the more experienced drinkers, and ginger ale with a slice of orange for Elliott. Elliott suspected Kurt wouldn’t want the beer, and sure enough, Kurt fished the cherry out of his drink right away and sucked on it.

“The guys here are all really built!” Sam said.

“Got your eye on one?” Santana smelled the cocktail and lifted it up. “To free booze!”

“To one hell of a role!” Dani said. “Long live the fairies!”

“Oh, good god!” Adam laughed. “How appropriate! You know, where I’m from, you might see one or two of them running about.”

“I’m pretty sure I see some right now,” Santana said.

“Yes, but I mean the winged kind who might clean up your house or steal your baby,” Adam countered.
Santana stretched up to look around. “If I see a baby-stealing guy wearing wings tonight, you owe me 20 bucks.”

“We might see the writers around here,” Kurt said, looking from side to side.

Elliott lifted his glass. “Dani’s right. Let’s start this evening off proper. To Kurt: An amazing vocalist, a hell of a band leader, and a one of the most deserving Broadway hopefuls out there. This opportunity has been a long time coming. You deserve it.”

Glasses clinked around, and they all took a drink. Adam leaned in and encouraged Kurt to explain what was going on with the musical and how it had gone from a one-woman demon to a bisexual elven assassin.

After the first round of cocktails, Santana stood and started to groove next to Dani’s chair. With a laugh, Dani took Santana’s hand, then held her other arm in the air and danced up against her.

“We always did have a lotta musical chemistry, huh?” Dani said.

“Too bad that was it.” Santana draped her arms around Dani’s shoulders and wiggled her ass.

Adam picked up his bottle and smiled at Kurt. “So, Marco? How is it working with him?”

“Yeah. Should I be jealous?” Elliott asked.

“Do you even do jealous? You’re the most zen guy I know.” Kurt circled his finger around the rim of his glass and shook his head, smiling slightly.

“I could turn down my zen a couple of notches, ramp up some jealous. It is your night.”

“He’s straight anyway. But gorgeous.” Kurt launched into a description of their scene together, but stopped as he saw Santana snap her fingers in Sam’s face. Apparently she had caught him staring at her and Dani dancing.
“Hey! Not for you. Got it?” She let out a huff. “Keep your eyes to yourself.”

“Sorry, I just…” Sam shrugged. “Got caught up. I’ve never been to a real gay bar before.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t have come,” Santana said. She grabbed Dani’s beer and took a swig.

Dani petted Santana’s hair. “Don’t worry. It won’t happen again. Let’s hit the floor. The ‘mos out there aren’t gonna be looking at us, for sure.”

“Well, maybe…” Kurt arched a brow, then looked tentatively out at the dance floor.

“You’ve never been to a real gay bar, either, huh?” Elliott pushed his chair back and offered Kurt his hand. “C’mon. Let’s dance. The girls love it when we dance on each other during gigs.”

“That’s gigs. You’ve seen the pictures they post of the three of us on the Facebook group, right?”

Elliott licked his lips and grinned. Kurt looked out to the sea of dancing men (mostly men) and took a breath.

“Sure, let’s dance.”

*

**Adam**

Adam watched them go, losing himself in the vision of Kurt’s long leather-clad legs before realizing he’d better get up to join them or end up sitting in the booth by himself. Santana and Dani had already gone up ahead and Sam had followed the guys, looking determined not to get caught staring at lady couples again. Adam quickly downed his drink and hurried to the dance floor, where a classic David Bowie song had just started playing.

The crowd was cheering and singing along. The music seemed to be made for Kurt, especially with his glammed up look, and Adam felt like he was already seeing Kurt’s new elfin stage persona come
out. Adam subconsciously closed the small circle around him that consisted of Elliott, Sam and himself, instinctively wanting to shield him from the many hungry eyes that had tuned in around them. Elliott might be too zen for jealousy-- Adam wasn’t.

After several songs, Sam (who had really gotten into the spirit and had taken off his shirt some time during his dancing) caught Adam’s eye, mimed taking a drink and pointed at the bar. Adam nodded. Kurt and Elliott were dancing and air-guitaring wildly in a routine that looked too in synch to be spontaneous, and Adam suspected this was a song from One Three Hill’s repertoire. Not wanting to disturb them, he joined Sam alone.

“You’re a really good dancer,” he said to Sam, leaning over to make himself heard over the music.

Sam shrugged. “Yeah, picked up a few moves when I worked at Stallionz. Different audience though.”

“Fewer… gentlemen?” Adam suggested.

Sam nodded. “You’d think it’d be the guys who are more rude, right? But those old ladies? You don’t wanna know how grabby they can get.”

Adam mimed an exaggerated shudder. Kurt had told him a little about Sam’s past job, and it was definitely not for everyone. At the time, Adam had been outraged to hear that a place like that would hire underage dancers, even if Sam was doing it to support his family. It was a relief to hear Sam had managed to get back into school and finish his education. Sam seemed okay talking about it now though, so Adam didn’t want to make it awkward for him by expressing his sympathy further. He ordered the both of them drinks and turned to look at Kurt and Elliott while they waited.

“He looks different, doesn’t he?” Adam mused. “I mean, it’s not just the eyeliner…”

Sam followed his eyes and smiled fondly. “I don’t know. To me, he looks just like the guy who sang a duet with himself in Glee club.”

Adam grinned. “I wish I could have seen that.” Sam had known Kurt for a lot longer, when they were both still in school, which according to the stories had been a whole different Kurt from the self-effacing, reticent young man he had met at NYADA. Maybe it was an after-effect of the attack, or just being untethered from a clingy, immature fiancé… or maybe it was something else. Or someone else.

Adam watched Elliott fall dramatically to his knees in front of Kurt as the song ended, his face level with Kurt’s crotch. Kurt stared down triumphantly, reaching down to brush his fingers over the short
hair in the nape of Elliott’s neck. It was hard to say if this was part of their stage act or not, but Adam suddenly understood what they had meant earlier about their audience assuming they were an item.

Adam was beginning to feel like a third wheel whenever Kurt and Elliott were near one another. Adam had known Kurt first, but Elliott knew him best. Elliott was the one he ran to in a crisis, the one he spent the most time with. Not that Kurt shunned Adam, but Adam also couldn’t imagine Kurt coming out for a dirty dance with him… Even then, it might not even be a result of Adam being the third wheel, but the sixth. Here, anyway. Among Kurt’s friends and bandmates.

As the music thundered around them, Kurt’s stamina increased, and his hips seemed to detach, rolling and thrusting with almost preternatural fluidity. Insecurity about his dancing skills seemed truly ridiculous. More and more eyes were drawn to his svelte, confident figure. Kurt closed his eyes and mouthed along to the raspy-voiced pop singer:

*Never put my love on the line! Never said “Yes” to the right guy! Never had trouble getting what I want! But when it comes to you, I’m never good enough!*

And Elliott, not quite so limber, but just as energetic, moved with him as though they’d been cut together from the same magnificent cloth.

*You make me glow, but I cover up. Won’t let it show so I’m puttin’ my defenses up ‘cause I don’t wanna fall in love. If I ever did that, I think I’d have a heart attack!*

Adam swallowed with some difficulty. He could tell himself that Kurt and Elliott were just friends, he could write what he saw off as jealousy… but he wasn’t that obtuse. Elliott cupped the back of Kurt’s neck as they danced with a fondness and care that was more than telling. The flush on Kurt’s cheek was more than just the heat of the club, surely.

If they weren’t together now, they were just a heartbeat away.

Adam truly wanted to leave, but bailing on Kurt’s victory party for his own bruised ego seemed too callous. And too much like what some of Kurt’s friends would have done. Kurt deserved better, and Adam wondered if he ought to have made a firmer promise to him than “not now.” Those words slipped so easily in the mind to “not interested,” and Kurt was used to flash, and romantic gestures, and glamor and glitter. It had taken so much the first time for Kurt to even believe Adam actually wanted him.
And now, well. Did he step in and take his chance? Did he play along and put up a chase? Elliott was *such* a good man. So even-tempered, and kind, and Kurt had *chosen* him. Furthermore, Kurt seemed happy, and even more importantly, he seemed to be *healing*. It would be so *selfish* to disrupt that now, wouldn’t it?

“Dude, are you okay?” Sam asked. He set down his drink and looked at Adam with a frown.

“Fine. Kurt and Elliott certainly dance well together, don’t they? No wonder the One-Three fans love to see them together. Aside, of course, from the fact that they’re both utterly amazing performers.”

Sam grinned and nodded.

Adam watched Kurt and Elliott a moment more, then set his drink down and joined them on the dance floor, but this time not as close. It helped if he wasn’t just *staring at them*. There was a line between generosity and masochism. Fortunately, not a minute had passed before a tall, dark-skinned man danced up to him smiling with interest. However he handled his feelings for Kurt, he wouldn’t be making a scene tonight.

*

**Kurt**

Dancing at a gay bar (a real one, not a dingy shack full of old pervs like Scandals, Ohio) was intoxicating. For the very first time, Kurt didn’t feel like he had to hide who he was and what he wanted. He could roll his hips without anyone feeling personally offended by it, and he could mouth lyrics to another guy without having to pretend he was actually thinking about girls. It also helped that the guys around him were doing the same thing. No one was telling him to tone it down, or that his dance moves were ‘distracting’. In fact, quite a few men around him seemed to actually *like* what he was doing. Every now and then he’d dodge some grabby hands or twirl away from bodies sidling up too close; it was enough to make him feel wanted and not so much he felt bothered. It was a heady feeling knowing the effect he had on the people around him.

And the best part of it was sharing it with Elliott. He was his mirror, wingman and partner at the same time; silly and over the top when Kurt went crazy too, inventing ridiculous dance moves on the spot that had them both double up with laughter, but very receptive for Kurt’s more seductive moves as well. He longed where Kurt teased. Advanced where Kurt gave him slack. It was a give and take of personal space. They circled each other on the dance floor, each song bringing them closer together until their bodies were almost touching and Kurt could feel Elliott’s breath on his face. They
had stopped dancing by now, and just stood there swaying a little.

“Do you want to take a break?” Elliott asked, leaning in to speak directly into Kurt’s ear over the music. Kurt nodded.

They wound their way through the crowd back to their booth. When they found it empty, Kurt decided he didn’t really want a break after all. He wanted to continue what they had started on the dance floor.

He sat down and pulled Elliott down with him, hooking his fingers in the collar of Elliott’s shirt to reel him in closer. He looked into his friend’s eyes for a moment, and upon seeing only wonderment and desire there, kissed him. After their dancing warm-up, their kiss was more heated and urgent than their first. Elliott wrapped his arms around Kurt’s back to hold him closer. Kurt swung one leg over Elliott’s knees and shifted against him, needing more contact. Realizing what he wanted, Elliott put his hands on Kurt’s waist and pulled him into his lap. Kurt sighed against Elliott’s lips, undulating his hips like he had on the dance floor—but this time without any space between them. Elliott’s hands slid lower and tightened, pressing them firmly together as he let his lips wander to Kurt’s throat.

Someone coughed politely next to them.

“Uh, dudes- I’m gonna head home. I have a shoot tomorrow and I kinda need to look alive for it,” Sam said, addressing the drinks on the table rather than his friends directly. “So...thanks for the drinks, and... uh... have a good time?”

Kurt, who had reluctantly (but instantly) pulled away from Elliott’s kiss as Sam had started speaking, nodded and forced a smile on his lips. “Yeah. Of course. Thanks, Sam. Sleep well.”

Sam gave them an awkward wave and left.

Kurt chuckled a little and hung his head, dropping it down on Elliott’s shoulder. “Oh god,” he sighed. “First Dani and Santana, now us... no wonder Sam wanted to leave.”

“Sam’s pretty cool,” Elliott said. “I don’t think he’ll be weird about it.” He hesitated a little. “Are you... weird about this?” he asked carefully.

Kurt looked at him and let himself slide off Elliott’s legs. It was a bit hard to have a conversation
sitting on his friend’s lap. “No,” he said. “No, I’m not. This is… really hot, and I-” He looked towards the direction Sam had just left in, and then back at the dance floor. Santana and Dani were sandwiching an attractive red-headed woman between them, and Adam was dancing with a man in a very well-cut shirt. Kurt immediately disliked the guy. Did he have to be so tall?

“Kurt?”

“Yeah.” Kurt shook himself from his thoughts and focused on Elliott again. “I just think maybe we should cool off a little,” he finished. It was not what he really wanted (definitely not what his body wanted, in any case), but seeing Adam with someone else had effectively killed his mood.

“Okay,” Elliott agreed, giving Kurt a bit more space on the couch. “Shall I get us another drink?”

“That would be great.”

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The next week absolutely flew by for Kurt. Between work, and the band, and classes, Kurt would’ve been busy enough, but now he had meetings for the play as they began to get the rewrites of the script done. Oh, and therapy. He couldn’t forget that. Because he very nearly had forgotten it, and had only remembered when he was already fifteen minutes late and rushing out of the diner to go visit Elliott.

In between it all, he kept thinking back to their night at the club. And every time, he heard the songs playing that night. Saw again Dani and Santana gaming all the girls in the club (even the straight ones there for a laugh), and Adam rolling his hips and transforming on the dance floor into a gay bar superstar. Remembered the feel of the bodies around him, of Elliott pressed against him.

Kurt wore a light smile on his lips as he returned home after rehearsal. For once, for a moment, maybe more, things were starting to look up.

To his surprise, Rachel was actually home when he opened the door. She clapped her hands together and then gestured to the large bags on the kitchen table.

“I was hoping you’d be home soon! I’m so sorry I wasn’t able to come to your little celebration the other day!”
“Last week, actually…” Kurt set his bag down and stared. “Is that from Balthazar?”

“Yes! I know you’ve never been! Aren’t I the best roommate ever?” Rachel scrunched up her nose and her shoulders and picked a bottle of Chardonnay. “And I brought wii-iine!”

“That’s amazing…” Kurt slipped off her jacket and draped it over the chair. “Thank you, Rachel. And here I wondered if I’d see you again before opening night.”

“You would! We live together.”

“In theory.”

Rachel set the Chardonnay down and reached into the bag. “Now, do you want the pan roasted organic salmon with asparagus, morels, new potatoes, and ramp beurre blanc, OR do you want the duck confit with Yukon gold potatoes, wild mushrooms, and frisee salad? They’re both completely delicious.”

“Oh, um.” Kurt shrugged. “The salmon, I guess. But does that mean you’re having the duck?”

“Oh, of course not. I have the risotto and a salad. It’s absolutely wonderful.” Rachel set the take out dishes down. “Let’s get the good plates.”

Kurt walked over to the kitchen cabinet to help set the table. “How was your first week back at NYADA?”

“I don’t really want to talk about school. It’s so hard to think about that kind of thing when you’re on Broadway,” Rachel breezed as she poured two glasses of wine.

“I know. I mean, I don’t know.” Kurt set the plates down. “It’s not Broadway, but having this part… I almost can’t breathe, sometimes; it’s so amazing. Every day I wonder if it’s really happening. You never think you’re going to go in for a part and have the writers change their script to suit you better.”

“Oh?” Rachel looked up at him from arranging his salmon on a plate. “They changed the role for
“I guess I haven’t seen you enough to really get into it. It feels like I’ve been talking the ears off everyone who would listen.” Kurt smiled and launched into a brief version of his final audition while they finished setting the table. “Today Beltre—he’s our choreographer—said he was ‘inspired by my form.’ Can you believe that?”

“Hm. Yeah, no. Who says that?” Rachel took her seat and unfolded her napkin.

Kurt frowned slightly. “Beltre, I guess.”

“He might be trying to get into those overly tight trousers of yours.”

Kurt pressed his lips together. “Anyway, they’re almost done with the script—”

“You don’t even have a script?” Rachel pressed her hand to her chest. “Kurt, take it from a professional. You don’t want to jump at every opportunity that comes down the pipe. When you look back at this role in a year, will you still be proud that you did it?”

“We have a script. They’re just making changes to it, because, like I said, they made some pretty drastic changes to the main character, aka, me.”

“I would make sure to get their plans in writing,” Rachel advised.

“I already have. We all signed our contracts already. You’re getting worked up over nothing.” For the first time all week, Kurt felt his spirits dipping a bit. He hoped that people outside of his circle of friends thought this was a legitimate production.

Rachel sipped her wine and shook her head. “I know how you feel about changes, though. Rupert just has so many changes and corrections, and we have to get them all done ‘yesterday’ he says. It seems like there are more and more with every rehearsal. Plus I’m working with…”

Kurt was balancing his vegetables on his fork, but he looked up as she trailed off. “Working with… a surfeit of flamingos?”
Rachel screwed her brows together, then laughed. “No! An acting coach.”

“Ohh. Well, that makes sense.”

“Thank you, very much!” Rachel huffed.

“Well, wasn’t his problem that your Fanny was too close to Barbra’s? Seems like the quickest, most logical solution to the problem, if you don’t want to fire the actress and replace her. You want the actress, but you want her to change her entire approach in a few weeks... acting coach, right?”

“I suppose. I never thought of it that way before. It’s just embarrassing. And you should see how my new understudy gloats every time the coach and I are working together. She’s always hovering around.” Rachel stabbed her salad. “And her acting is just ridiculous for the part.”

“Maybe they want her to watch. Two for the price of one.” Kurt took a bite of the salmon. He closed his eyes at the bliss that washed over him. New York had an amazing menu, but Kurt’s budget hadn’t allowed for expensive wine and forty dollar entrees. It was, though, the best damn salmon he’d ever tasted.

“It’s just hard to put my best Fanny forward, when everyone around me isn’t giving the performance their all. I mean, I keep myself, and my instrument, as pure as it can be, but does that mean Robert and Clover are willing to go vegan for the show? No! Of course not. I’m the only one who has to make sacrifices here.”

“Who are Robert and Clover?” Kurt asked.

“My co-star and my understudy. You should see this one, Kurt. It’s absolutely ridiculous to have even hired her. She’s tall and gangly. More like a scarecrow than a proper Fanny. Or maybe the wicked witch, without the green skin. She’s more yellow and sickly, and she always wears jeans and these weird printed t-shirts that don’t make any sense.”

Kurt leaned his cheek on his knuckle. “And why should they be going vegan? Shouldn’t you avoid huge lifestyle changes before a performance?”
“I told you! I’m keeping myself pure-”

“Well, I know you’re not a virgin-”

“Kurt!”

“And what Robert and Clover eat has nothing to do with you.”

“I have to pretend to kiss him! You don’t think that affects me?”

“It shouldn’t.” Kurt shrugged. “And you’re not kissing Clover, so why does it matter what she eats?”

“It matters!”

“Okay. Answer me these questions three: Do you really think Fanny Brice was a vegan? Does ordering the other actors to go vegan help your Fanny really, or do you just want control? AND, how the hell did they make that risotto without butter?”

Rachel lowered her fork down onto her plate and glared at him. "Why are you always like this?" she asked angrily. "Why do you always have to point your finger at the things I do wrong?" She pushed away her plate.

Kurt opened his mouth to speak, but couldn’t think of a single thing to say.

"You have no idea what kind of pressure I’m under," Rachel continued. "Madame Tibideaux keeps sending me the most impolite reminders about my attendance record at NYADA, even though Ms. July totally promised to cover for me, and now I have to take acting lessons on top of rehearsal! I’m on my feet 24 hours a day, and the one evening I clear out of my schedule to celebrate with my best friend, all you do is nag."

Kurt thought about his own attendance record at NYADA (he hadn’t missed a single class since he had gotten back after his recovery and took some extra courses to make up for the time he had lost), his two jobs, his band, the therapy sessions and the play. Making a list in his head of everything he had to do tomorrow and how he’d get it all done kept him from throwing his plate at Rachel’s head. It would have been a waste of good food.

"I understand you're very busy, Rachel," he said slowly, wanting to savor the last of his salmon before she said anything else and completely ruined his appetite. "I just meant you should think about the effect your demands may have on your colleagues. You'll be working with them really closely.
You don't want Robert to, I don't know, eat garlic and onions on opening night just to spite you.”

Rachel bit her lip and looked longingly at her risotto before getting up and taking another helping of the salad. "He wouldn't do that," she mumbled. "He's a professional."

More professional than you, Kurt thought. He wondered when they had grown so far apart. He sort of divided his life in before and after the bashing. It was probably before. As happy as she had been when he moved in with her in New York, things had been tense ever since her fling with Brody. Competing against her at Midnight Madness (and winning) hadn't really helped. In that, Kurt felt culpable, but he'd known at the time that there would be no bringing her back from the diva-bender she'd been on without forcing her to acknowledge other people were as good as her. That had been the only thing to work, back in high school, and Kurt had known that even if he lost, she would be assessing his performance in comparison to her own. Just like when she'd ‘won’ Maria, she would know she'd been beaten, whether the votes went his way or not.

In the end, the actual win, though, had brought her back down to Earth only temporarily, but still managed to permanently embitter her to Kurt. Rachel wouldn't even be in Funny Girl if he hadn't signed her up for auditions, and yet she lorded her part over him like it proved once and for all that she was better than him. It stung. But at least Kurt now had his own part to build his resume with, and it wasn't even chorus.

But Rachel's behavior stopped him from sharing his new life with her. Before Fanny, he would have probably told her about kissing Elliott. She might have rejoiced with him and pressed for juicy details. But now? She'd probably wouldn't understand why they hadn't slept together yet, and he lacked the energy to defend his choices.

So he kept quiet and listened to her resume her litany of why-Rachel-Berry-was-better-than-all-of-her-peers while occasionally humming and nodding to show he was paying attention while he thought of Elliott.

Elliott. Kurt still couldn't really wrap his head around it. Why was his friend so calm, so patient-even when he had really left him hanging after (what Kurt thought) had been a pretty heavy make-out session? Elliott hadn't even mentioned it when Kurt saw him this week. They had just hung out, going over possible new songs for the band and eating Belgian waffles (After his time with Blaine, Kurt was sort of conditioned to bring sugary snacks whenever he felt he should be apologizing, but instead of accepting it as something he deserved, Elliott had seemed pleasantly surprised). It was nice, that Elliott wasn’t pressuring him. And making out with him had been that too: nice (and yeah, kind of hot, as well). But Kurt couldn’t help wondering if it was enough. Elliott was his best friend, but was he in love? Shouldn’t he be, if he was going to start a new relationship? And what about Elliott? If he really cared about Kurt, shouldn’t he be insisting on spending more time with him, going on actual dates, maybe doing more than kiss?

“-and then he even said I was doing the nose thing on purpose. My nose, Kurt! How is it my fault
“Yeah. Yeah, wow, that’s really unfair,” Kurt agreed quickly, and wondered if there was someone he might talk to—other than Rachel—about this thing with Elliott.

*

Adam

Adam took his jeans from the laundromat and shook them out. He frowned. Little flecks of white were stuck to the fabric, and it seemed to originate from one of the front pockets.

“Great. Left a hanky in there again,” he mumbled to himself, plucking the soggy bits of paper off his jeans. He reached inside the pocket and pulled out a wad of napkins. The logo of the bar they were taken from was still visible, and there were smears of blue ink on the tissues. Oh, right.

Adam had left Kurt’s celebration party with several phone numbers tucked into his jeans. It was quite telling that he’d promptly forgotten about them again and thrown his clothes in the wash without any further thought. He hadn’t really asked for them, but the attention had distracted him from Kurt and Elliott, so it hadn’t been unwelcome. It had seemed rude to refuse the exchange of numbers when he left.

He squeezed the water from the napkins and dumped them in the trash. Adam didn’t feel ready to date again—not after spending his summer thinking he and Kurt were getting back together. But maybe he should? He knew Kurt had made his choice and had moved on. It was time he did, too.

He straightened his shoulders and pushed his jeans into the dryer. Tomorrow was a new start anyway. His first day as an assistant stage manager of the English Theatre. Who knew what kind of new adventures (and possibly interesting co-workers?) awaited him there.

Of one thing he was certain: No adventures awaited him tonight. Only laundry and take-away from his standard noodle place. Adam checked his phone for the time. He had already called in his order and ought to have enough time to jot down the street, pick up his Vietnamese food, and be back before Mrs. Eriksen shoved all his clothes on top of the dryer. He returned to his apartment for a pair of sandals, then hurried down the stairs.
The summer hadn’t quite yet turned to fall, but the night air was getting a bit cooler, and Adam appreciated it. He tended to be a bit warm, even when other New Yorkers were cold. Kurt had once said it was because he brought the sunshine with him wherever he went.

Adam smiled at the thought. Though part of him ached for more, Adam did value having Kurt as a friend. He was attentive, protective, and endlessly generous with his time and resources. Perhaps more than he ought to be for his own good. Adam had more than once considered asking Kurt to rejoin the Apples, to give them a bit of direction in Adam’s absence… but he had rethought the matter. Kurt already had too much on his plate, and if Adam asked, Kurt would probably bleed just to make sure it happened.

After a brisk walk, Adam ducked into Now! Noodles! and looked around to see if anyone was dining in. It concerned him, sometimes, that the place always seemed deserted. Maybe it was because New Yorkers were so dedicated to their take-away.

“Hey, you!”

Adam looked up to the register, where a tall man with dark eyes and deep dimples was just walking up to the kitchen. He recognized the man immediately, even though he hadn’t seen him at Now! Noodles! before. NYADA? No… some place else. Then it struck him. One of the men he’d danced with the other night… and a fairly good dancer, too. And strong. He’d lifted Adam up, once. What was his name again?

“Hey… uh…”

The man smirked and leaned on the counter.

“I just did my laundry,” Adam fumbled. “I didn’t know you worked here. I mean, not that I wouldn’t have come if I did, it’s nice to see you, but-”

Dark eyebrows rose in amusement.

“What I mean to say is, er…”

“You washed my number? Lucky you were craving something tasty tonight.” His tongue peeked out through his lips as he grinned at his own innuendo.
“Uh… Erm…”

*Fabulously articulate, Crawford. No wonder you’ve such a knack of getting the men to fancy you.*

“I’m just teasing.” He turned as a kitchen worker him handed him a large brown bag. He read the name. “So… Seven Spices Tofu v-bowl, chicken pho…? Tofu and chicken? Got a veggie boyfriend at home?”

“No. I just like different kinds of noodles. And I don’t like to cook much, for myself.” Adam pressed his lips together and shrugged. “How’d you know it was mine?”

“It has your name on it. And I already knew who you were when you gave me your number last week. I saw you for the first time during one of NYADA’s stage performances. Very impressive. I asked around a little.” He set the bag on the counter and leaned forward on his elbows.

“Really? You go to NYADA? I’m sorry, I-” Adam tried, really wishing he’d at least remember the guy’s name and not just the feel of those strong arms around him. The way the guy was leaning forward wasn’t really jogging his memory in the right ways either.


“Right. Nikolas. Of course. Funny how I haven’t seen you there before.” Adam approached the counter.

“Not that funny,” Nikolas spread his hands. “I’m two years behind you, stage acting, so I don’t think we ever had a hope of our classes lining up.”

He straightened up and punched in Adam’s order. “Anyway, I can let you go. Don’t avoid us just ‘cause I’m here.”

“I’m not avoiding you,” Adam protested, getting out his wallet.
“Mm-hm.”

“I really am doing laundry. I threw in the jeans with your number in them without checking the pockets.” When Nikolas just continued to smile, Adam pulled on his shirt. “I smell like fabric softener!”

“I bet you do.” Nikolas shook his head and gave Adam back his card and receipt. “It’s okay if you just tossed it. Some nights you just… Wanna dance.”

“No, I… I’d invite you back for some noodles, but I’m starting a new job tomorrow.”

“Congrats. And I’d go with you, but I’m here until midnight.”

“Rough.” Adam pocketed his wallet and picked up his bag. “I could meet you for coffee sometime, though?”

Nikolas’s big smile bloomed again.

Kurt

Shifting his messenger bag on his shoulder, Kurt looked at his phone for the time, then hurried down the main sidewalk to exit NYADA’s campus. He had just enough time to grab something for lunch, and then be on his way to his therapy session before rehearsal.

At that moment, a message came through his phone: You busy? Come hang!

It was Mercedes. Kurt stopped by a large fountain to think about it. They’d been meaning to get together again since the group dinner, but Kurt had been busy. He was always busy, and still trying to make room for some volunteering. He felt guilty that he hadn’t managed to squeeze in time for Mercedes and underprivileged children yet.

But he couldn’t cut rehearsal… Though maybe missing one therapy session wouldn’t hurt too much.
He was getting tired of them, to be honest. Now that he was functioning well enough day-to-day, going to therapy to be reminded of the bashing and his failed engagement just brought him down.

*Where are you?* he texted back.

Within a few minutes, he was hustling along the sidewalk on his way to the deli where Mercedes was waiting. He made a quick call to the front office of his therapist to make sure they knew he wouldn’t be coming. When asked if he’d like to reschedule, Kurt faltered; he didn’t have another space for it in his week, but he felt bad just cancelling, so he told the secretary that he’d call them back.

Before he could reflect on that, Santana appeared beside him wearing a form-fitting short blue dress.

“Hey, dancing queen!” She raised her arms and did a little wiggle. “Last week was the best, huh?”

“Where did you just come from?” Kurt looked around, as though she must have been dropped off by a spaceship.

“Mercy just said you’d be joining us from NYADA, so I took the streets that swing by this way.”

“Oh, okay. I didn’t know you were coming.”

“Is that a problem? Am I going to interfere with your girl talk over diet salads?”

“If you think Mercedes is gonna suffer through a salad, I’m pretty sure you haven’t met her.”

Santana grinned. “Nah. You and I can suffer through the salads. And I’ll steal her french fries. You and Elliott last Friday night, huh? And I thought Dani and I were the spicy ones.”

She waggled her brows.

“Uhh… Yeah, I guess we were a little spicy.” Kurt ducked his head slightly.
“A little? I thought the two of you were gonna mate on the dance floor. So did anything happen after? Didja grab his truck butt?”

“There’s nothing wrong with his butt. There are a lot of things… right. About his butt. And other parts of him.” Kurt felt his face growing warm. “Like his arms. And his chest.”

“And his wang?”

Kurt rolled his eyes at her.

“What? I may not be into that, but he’s a big guy, and it seems, from the bulge in his pants, to be an admirable size.”

“Can you just stop? I haven’t seen it. At best, what you saw was the furthest we’ve gone.”

“Okay, okay. I’m just hoping for some good stuff to come you way.”

“He’s a big guy,” Kurt agreed. “But he’s also…” He sighed. “Kind. And patient.”

Santana nodded. “And spicy.”

“He’s chai tea,” Kurt said seriously.

Santana added a little bounce to her step. “I went home alone, too. Dani and I are just too couply. Which is fine for her, because she has that tower of a girlfriend, but it keeps the free ladies away, if you know what I mean.”

“That’s too bad. It sounds like you’re ready to mingle again.”

“I think I am. I haven’t been totally alone since Dani, but if I’m honest, I’m more of a relationship girl, anyway. A serial monogamist, if you will.”
The two of them passed the next few minutes in friendly conversation about the girls (and guys) in LA. As they approached the deli, Kurt could see Mercedes at a table outside, with three glasses of water, each with a slice of lime, already on the table.

"Hey hey," she said happily, and Kurt immediately knew he had made the right decision coming along. Just seeing Mercedes’ smile made him remember all the good heart-to-hearts that they’d had in school. They had always been able to be completely honest with each other (well, apart from that time he pretended to be in love with Rachel), and he knew she would give him a listening ear and sound advice.

They took seats around the table and ordered some light appetizers while Mercedes made Kurt fill her in on the casting process of *Samael*. Unlike Rachel, her jaw dropped when Kurt told her about the changes they were making for him, and she squealed with joy.

“See? *That’s* why I left L.A.,” she said, nodding and pointing at Kurt. “Here in New York, artists aren’t afraid to look outside the box, do things differently. This is not like Lima, where even Maria has to be white, or LA where they want to put half-naked girls on *my* album cover.”

Kurt saw the quip form in Santana’s eyes and gave her a warning look. She pouted a little but restrained herself.

“I just hope the audience will appreciate their bold changes too,” he said, still a little disheartened about the things Rachel had said. “Especially the critics. I’d hate for my career to be over before it even started.”

“Hey, come on,” Mercedes said, putting her hand over his and squeezing it lightly. “They got you, and you’re a star. I don’t see how it can not be a success.”

Kurt smiled a little. He knew she wasn’t just trying to flatter him, and it felt good to have her on his side. But before she could add any more compliments to her accolade, he swiftly changed the subject. “Speaking of success stories, how is your album coming along?”

Mercedes smiled. “It’s getting there.” She glanced over at Santana. “Just trying to attract some more starpower to my side…”

Kurt, who had missed the import look between the girls because their food had just arrived, *ooohed* at
Mercedes. “Anyone famous?” His eyes glittered.

“Infamous, maybe,” Santana corrected. “Mercedes asked me to sing with her.”

Kurt gasped. “That’s... that’s a really good idea, actually. You two were amazing with River Deep Mountain High... And don’t tell anyone, but you totally had my vote for the mash-off senior year.”

Santana smirked. “We were always the top bitches of glee club.” She held out her palm and Mercedes slapped it.

“We got the idea at your dinner party,” Mercedes continued. “Artie called dibs on producing our first music video.”

“And Sony Records is okay with this?” Kurt asked carefully. He didn’t want to rain on their parade, but Mercedes’ previous record label had been pretty restrictive.

Mercedes shrugged. “I already told them I wanted at least 6 of my own songs on the album. It was one of my conditions for signing with them.”

Kurt nodded. It seemed like she had really impressed the label, if she was able to make demands like that. “Do you already have a song?”

Mercedes grimaced. “That’s where we’re still negotiating.”

“Yeah, Mercedes wants us to do this soppy ballad but I’m more for a power song. You know, something that kicks ass,” Santana added.

“‘Love Waits’ is not soppy, it’s romantic!” Mercedes protested.

“Please. How credible am I gonna be singing about ‘saving myself for the love of my life’?” Santana replied, gesturing at her curves. “We all know that ship has sailed.”

“So had Madonna’s when she did Like A Virgin,” Kurt replied. “It’s about the sentiment.” He
“Smirked. “Waiting for love…? There might be more than a few girls in the audience who’d find that romantic.” He speared a tomato on his fork and lifted it to his lips. “Single girls.” He popped the bite into his mouth and chewed while he watched her connect the dots.

“Hmm. Maybe we should see how it works live,” Santana agreed. “Hey, do you think we could open for One Three Hill at one of your gigs?” Her eyes lit up at the thought.

“I don’t know,” Mercedes started, hesitating.

“What? I think that’s a great idea!” Kurt said. “We’d have to check with the hosting club, but I’m sure Dani and Elliott would be okay with it.” He gave Mercedes a questioning look.

She pulled up her shoulders. “I don’t want people to think I’d use my connections to you guys…”

“Everyone uses their connections,” Santana cut her off. “That’s what connections are for.”

“That’s true,” Kurt agreed, “and it’s not like you wouldn’t help us out when your album goes platinum and you’re starting your world tour, right? I think it’d be great to test drive a few new songs to see which of them you might record.”

Mercedes smiled. “Okay. Ask your band, and Santana and I can look into my demos. But I want us to practice, okay? There’s more at stake for me than a meal at Breadstixx this time.”

“That thing was so rigged. We should have won that,” Santana growled.

They spent the next fifteen minutes abusing their memories of Glee club and all the times Mr. Schue had let them down. What should have been a depressing topic was actually quite invigorating, as it united the three of them against their old oppressor.

“For me, ‘A Little Less Conversation’ was a real low point,” Mercedes said. “that was just really offensive.”

“All I can remember from that week was Mr. Martinez’s straddling that chair in the choir room,” Kurt mumbled dreamily.
Santana sighed. “He definitely had duende. You know, when we rehearsed our dance, he-” At that moment, her cell phone went off. She glanced at the screen and got a little excited. “My agent,” she whispered, and answered it with a very un-Santana like bubbly voice. As she listened, she got up and motioned at her friends that she’d be talking the call somewhere a little more quiet.

Kurt realized now was his chance to talk to Mercedes about Elliott. He dabbed at his lips with his napkin and put it over his food, suddenly too excited to eat anything else. “I need your advice,” he announced.

Mercedes raised her eyebrows, followed his glance to Santana, who was out of earshot now, and smiled. “Go on,” she encouraged him.

“I kissed Elliott. Or, well. He kissed me, but I kissed him too. We kissed. It was nice.”

Mercedes let out a little squeak of happiness. “Oh, Kurt, that’s great! I’m so happy for you!”

Kurt nodded. “I am too. He’s super nice and incredibly patient with me, but… that’s just it. He’s so patient I’m just not sure if he really wants me. Is that weird?”

“Well, what do you mean? He kissed you back, right?”

“Yeah, he did, but… I don’t know. I mean, we’re both guys, this is New York, shouldn’t we… you know?” He lowered his voice a little. “Be having sex?”

Mercedes frowned. “So you feel things are going... too slow?”

Kurt sighed. “No, actually… I’m not even sure I’m ready to get into a serious relationship like that. I just think it’s weird that he doesn’t want more.”

“You want him to convince you to sleep with him?” She screwed her brows tighter together and tilted her head to the side.
“Maybe?” Kurt ran a hand through his hair. Why did it have to be so complicated?

Mercedes held her hands up. “You don’t want to have sex yet, but you want him to want to. But if he did, you’d feel pressured and unhappy. Hon, this is some kinda crazy game you’re expecting him to play.”

“I’m not playing games. I mean, I don’t mean to…”

“He’s not a mind-reader. He can’t know you’re thinking all this.” Mercedes sat back and crossed her arms. “Kurt, if a guy respects your boundaries, that’s a good thing. You know that, right? Pushing you to have sex when you’ve said no, calling you when you’ve said you want space, creating a huge spectacle as a ‘romantic gesture’ isn’t so romantic. It’s creepy and kind of manipulative, you know?”

“I know that.” Kurt looked down at his plate, feeling a little ashamed. They were talking about, but not talking about, Kurt’s not so charming ex-fiancé. “But don’t guys want it all the time?”

“That’s what they say. You’re a guy, though. Do you?”

“Well… Not all the time. It’s not like they’ve turned blue-”

Mercedes pointed at him. “Blue balls do not exist. At least not for sex. Maybe due to some of those pants you wear. That’s a lie guys tell to guilt you into sex.”

Kurt wrinkled his nose. Mercedes patted his arm.

“Let the boy have a chance! And you should talk to him, if you’re uncertain. I remember you being all about communication in relationships, once upon a time.” She shrugged. “Plus, he probably is dying to dip into your Hummel-pot. If he wants it so bad, and isn’t knocking your door down for it, that means he wants you more than he wants to get him some booty. And you’ve got a pretty fine booty for a white guy, so you know he’s into you.”

Kurt laughed softly. “This is true. My booty is not to be spurned,” he said. Mercedes was right. Maybe he had been expecting the wrong things—things he had been conditioned to expect. “Thanks, Mercedes. I guess I really just needed to hear that from someone else.”
“Any time, honey. You know you can tell me anything.”

Kurt smiled. Then he noticed Santana making her way back to their table. “Don’t tell her, okay? She’s pushy enough as it is about it, and I don’t want to embarrass Elliott the next time they meet.”

“My lips are sealed,” Mercedes promised. “Well, except for fries.” She popped a French fry into her mouth and winked at Kurt.
Chapter Five

Elliott

“Touchin’ yo-ou,” Kurt sang.

“Touchin’ me-ee,” Dani echoed.

“Touchin’ you, god, you’re touchin’ me!” they wailed together.

Elliott grinned back at them as the three of them launched into the chorus. It wasn’t a trio song, but working out three voices on a number was much easier than working five. Plus, Kurt sounded good with pretty much everyone. He shimmied his shoulders as the three of them danced to the tempo change, and Elliott couldn’t keep his eyes off of Kurt’s smile.

Kurt was just such a beautiful man.

“I wanna kiss you every minute, every hour, every day!” Kurt sang after Dani’s guitar solo.

Elliott felt himself growing warm.

“You got me in a spin but everything is a-okay!”

Elliott’s ears were probably turning red. He needed to write some more songs featuring Kurt’s lower register, because it was damn sexy.

Somehow, he made it through the number, and the three of them talked for a minute about how it sounded, and which numbers to use in their gig that weekend, all while Kurt had his tape measure out so he could make some alterations on their outfits.

“I was hoping we could do the new song,” Elliott suggested. “I know that we haven’t been working on it long-”
“I think we sound good.” Dani shrugged and held her arms up for Kurt. “Anyway, Mercedes and Santana will be doing mostly new material, so it won’t even be that out of place.”

Elliott looked to Kurt.

Kurt held up his hands. “I’m fine with it. But if you get another interview in the Village Voice, you should take one of us with you.”

“I only got that because—” Elliott stopped and picked up the sheet music in front of him for no reason and pretended to look at it. “I will.”

“Because you kept the guy up all night and he needed to get his piece in that morning,” Dani finished with a laugh.

“Up all night?” Kurt asked in a careful, but somewhat high voice. “Lucky him.”

“Well, anyway, that was months ago, and our band doesn’t even have the same name,” Elliott said. The logic didn’t follow, but he didn’t want to talk about conquests with Kurt. Particularly since, around that time, he’d told Kurt how happy he was that Kurt wasn’t crazy or just interested in hooking up.

“Point. Maybe you should give him a call and get us an update!” Dani said.

Elliott raised his brows and shook his head at her. But Kurt was no longer paying attention to them. He was scribbling numbers in his notebook.

“Okay.” Kurt sighed and rubbed his eyes. He looked a little tired. “I have to get going. One more run through later this week, or is this it? When is everyone free?”

When they’d settled on a ‘working lunch’ a few days later, Kurt picked up his bags, gave Dani a hug, and took Elliott’s hand for a squeeze. Then, just before he turned to go, he lifted up and gave Elliott a peck on the cheek.
“See you after rehearsal? Mine, I mean, the one with the dancing elves?”

Elliott chuckled deeply and squeezed Kurt’s hand back. “Yeah, gimme a text, and we’ll get dinner or something.”

“Yay.” Kurt bounced on his toes and hurried out the door.

Dani watched him go and then picked up her guitar and began to tune it with a smile. “He’s so perky right now.”

“He’s all revved up over this awesome part he’s got,” Elliott said, putting away the mics.

“Heeee’s all revved up over somethin’.” Dani laughed, testing her G string, then playing a few chords.

Elliott looked down, smiled, and shook his head. “Yeah. Guess so.”

Dani’s brows rose as she glanced sideways at him. “Supposed he did protest too much about not being ready for a relationship yet.”

“We’re not… Not yet. Not really.” Elliott shrugged. “We’ve talked about it.”

“The day Kurt auditioned? When he got caught in the rain? How Breakfast at Tiffany’s of you.”

“You guys and your musicals.” Elliott sat next to her on the piano bench.

“It’s not a musical.” She propped her guitar against the piano and folded her hands between her legs as she looked up at Elliott. “Though Kurt does have a thing for keeping up with gay authors like Truman Capote and Tennessee Williams. If you’re gonna start something there, you might wanna hit the googles on all that stuff.”

“Nah. He enjoys explaining it to me.” Elliott grinned. “Even if he pretends he’s put out that I’m not up on all of it.” He bit his lip. “Sometimes I pretend that I don’t, just so he’ll—” He cleared his throat.
“I don’t think my spotty knowledge of Audrey Hepburn is going to be a huge problem.”

“You anticipate other problems, though?” Dani narrowed her eyes slightly.

“You don’t approve?” Elliott leaned back. “You always laughed and played along when fans try to get him and me to kiss. I figured you’d be cool with it.”

“In a general sense, yeah, but… Kurt’s got a lot going on. Y’know?” She rubbed his shoulder. “Are you prepared to deal with all of that?”

“All of it? Some of it? I think so. And Kurt’s worth it.”

“I’m not saying he’s not. Aside from refusing to name our band The Nip Slips, he and I get on really well. I’m just… You can love someone and still… Still, things don’t work out. It’s sad, but it happens. I don’t want that for either of you.” She cupped her face in one hand, then reached for his with the other. “He just barely dumped that asshole fiancé of his. He’s still kind of hung up on Adam, if you haven’t noticed. And though I think you guys could muddle through and deal with that baggage…”

She faltered. Maybe because she didn’t want to hold something against Kurt that wasn’t his fault. Something Elliott knew she respected him for.

“I know he still struggles sometimes. He still has some bad nights, and touchy moments,” Elliott admitted. “We all know that. But he’s getting better. He really is. It might not always seem like it. Like, on one day, he seems a little jumpier and more tired, and then the next he’s back to being cheerful. A few good days, some bad. But there are more good ones than bad now. Man, how can I not be thrilled for that?”

“He seems really happy,” Dani said pensively. “Spending time with you. As ‘meant to be’ as he was supposed to be with Blaine, he never seemed that happy. Or happy at all. Not to mention, Blaine never came to any of our gigs, so I only ever saw the aftermath of Kurt being angry at something the guy did.”

“That guy… He’s just the biggest tool in the world.”

“If nothing else, you two should honor his douchetasticness with a couple of songs.”
Elliott chuckled. “I’ve already started one, but it’s less about him, specifically, and more about a town that can teach someone they don’t deserve to be loved.”

Dani whistled. “Even better. Sounds like a real cheerful one.”

“Great art wasn’t made out of blue skies and lollipop rainbows.” Elliott pushed his lips out. “So do you mind if two of the Three pair up? Or are you like the fans, hoping for a threesome?”

“Eww!” Dani wrinkled her nose and gave him a little shove. “Boys.”

Elliott laughed.

“Just… take care of each other. And lemme know if I can do anything to make it easier. I don’t know what that would be, but…”

“Thanks.” Elliott rose and picked up a sparkly top hat that he would be wearing at their next gig. “We may need it, if Kurt ever makes up his mind.”

“Does it bug you? That he’s not doing that? I think it would drive me crazy, being in limbo.” Dani took the top hat and put it on her head.

“No. Not at all. I want him to be sure. I don’t want him to feel pressure. It’s way more romantic to me if two people think about what they want, and then go for it. I don’t get the whole surprise proposal, gimme an answer now! In public! Why try to force or manipulate someone into choosing you? Things are better when people use their heads.”

Dani took the hat off and fanned herself with it. “Whew! Yeah, that’s hot.”

“Shut it. We can do the feet-sweeping after we know we both want it.”

“Not much risk in that, though.”
“No, I guess not. Is that your way of saying I need to be more forceful with Kurt?”

“It’s probably what he recognizes.”

Elliott rolled his eyes. “I don’t want to be anything like the guys he’s been with. I’m serious, Dan. They’ve not been good guys.”

“Maybe you could do something feet-sweepy and dramatic without being an abusive asshole,” Dani suggested.

“Maybe.” Elliott frowned.

He wasn’t sure what he could do that would be a worthwhile romantic gesture for Kurt. Not without making it seem like he was putting pressure on him. Maybe his daily support wasn’t enough, though. Maybe he did need to find a way to make his feelings for Kurt seem a little more familiar.

*

Kurt

“Okay, thanks for coming, everyone.” Beltre stood on the edge of the stage, poised almost on his toes, gesturing with his hands as he spoke. “Guys, this is Kurt, he’s our Samael. He is amazing, and we’re really glad to have him on board.”

Kurt gave the large group of chorus dancers an awkward wave and a smile as Beltre introduced him. It was weird to think that he was standing there now, facing them as the lead in this play, when he only ever expected to be part of the chorus himself. Some of the other dancers were older than he was, and undoubtedly more experienced. He hoped that wouldn’t stop them from giving him a fair chance to be liked.

“Kurt, our group of dancers has been working all week to practice several pieces of choreography, and today’s gonna be all about finding out what works on stage for this act.” Beltre continued, striding over the stage that was marked off and prepped with several wooden boxes and structures that would become scenery later.
“As you know, this is the first time we get to see Samael at his job.” Beltre smiled, looking at the stage like there was already more to see than the makeshift scaffolding. “By the end of this song, three of you will be dead. The way I see it-” He swept his arm over the stage, “it happens right in the middle of it all, and no one but the audience notices. We will see Samael dancing through the crowd, mingling, flirting, perhaps taking someone aside like he would a lover...” He turned to Kurt. “I want the audience to be secretly jealous of your victims.”

Kurt swallowed. “Um. Okay,” he mumbled, but Beltre was already moving on, dividing the dancers into small groups and placing them along the stage.

“Right. Now everyone in position. Over there, I want to see a regular A-B-C-D, and a D-C-B-A to mirror that on the other side, and a C-A-D-B down here in the front,” Beltre instructed, pointing at the groups. “Then change over to the other side and repeat.”

Three dancers, two men and a woman, were left standing near the front. Beltre stepped up to Kurt and touched his forearm. “Don’t look so worried, honey,” he said. “This will all make sense once you see it.” He raised his voice to the back of the theatre. “Can we have music?”

He urged Kurt and the other three dancers to sit down in the first row, and the group on stage came into movement. As it turned out, they had practiced short sequences of choreography that could be combined in endless ways, making the dance on stage seem chaotic and harmonic at the same time. Beltre made them change their combinations a few times until he was satisfied, and then stepped up to the stage. “Kurt, this is where you come in,” he announced. “You will have your own choreography—similar, but original—an you will move from up there—” He pointed at the highest scaffolding, “to down here,” he nodded at the front of the stage, “taking a victim in each group.”

Beltre talked him through his vision and showed him the steps. It was a lot more challenging than the stuff he was used to from Glee Club, but then Cassandra July’s classes had not been for nothing. Kurt nodded, taking it all in. “Okay, so it’s: four, five, stab, and turn, jump down to the other level, eight, nine- and eye contact, knife...?”

“Yes— and down for six counts and then you embrace here, and she chokes— lights out,” Beltre finished.

Kurt let out a long breath. No better way to open up a play than manslaughter. “Okay. I think I got it.” He pulled his shoulders back and kicked loose his ankles. It was a lot to memorize on short notice, but he was determined to get it right.

“You want to walk through it dry another time?” Beltre offered.
“No, with music,” Kurt replied. He climbed up the scaffolding to take his position.

“You’re doing great,” a young man next to him whispered. Kurt smiled tightly, already counting the first beats in his head.

He went through the motions, twirling his cardboard tube that was a prop for the theatre knife he’d be getting later loosely over his wrist. The ‘assassinations’ were part of the dance, and for Samael, part of his ordinary life, and so Kurt let them flow seamlessly into his movements. Pressing a cardboard tube against someone’s abdomen or running it over their throat—each murder—was just another count in the rhythm.

But when he wrapped his hands around the woman’s neck, he wasn’t prepared for her performance. They had skimmed over the move during their first walk-throughs, keeping it light with concentration on the dance and not on acting. Now, with music, his dance partner was giving him a lot more visuals than he was ready for. Holding her breath, she distorted her face and rolled her eyes back, jerking under his hands a little before slumping into his arms—but then there were the sounds. Though he wasn’t really choking her, there were awful little grunts and mewling noises—and it was all Kurt could do not to drop her.

“And lights out! That was great, everyone. I think we should take it from- ...Kurt?”

For a moment, Kurt could hear nothing but his own heartbeat hammering in his ears. Memories came to the front of his mind, overlapping with what he was seeing before his eyes. He forgot to breathe.

“You can let me go now,” the woman whispered, trying not to wince and prying at his hands. Kurt looked down and realized he was gripping her arms tightly, his fingers cramping and his knuckles turning white. When he let go, red fingerprints stood out on the woman’s arms.

“I’m sorry. I’m really- I’m so sorry!” he let out, but she shook it off, rubbing her arms and taking a few steps to the side. Kurt could see some of the other dancers moving their heads together and talk behind their hands. So much for making a good first impression on the chorus. He started to feel sick.

The woman lingered nearby, though she didn’t make a move to get closer. “Are you okay? You didn’t hurt me,” she assured. “I’m fine.”

Kurt touched the back of his neck and felt his cheeks burn. “I- I’m glad.”
Beltre clapped his hands together. “Okay, take five, people. Uh, maybe ten. I need to get in touch with our concept for this scene.” He casually strode across the stage to Kurt’s side. “C’mon, star, let’s conference on this dance, hm?”

Kurt rubbed the bridge of his nose, frowning deeply, but he followed Beltre as he was asked. He could feel his eyes stinging, the anxiety still pricking all over him. He might not be smashing up sets, but he remembered this feeling too well, and he jumped the moment Beltre tried to put a hand on him.

Why couldn’t he just shake this off? This part was more than just his first big role; people were counting on him. They’d started rewriting the musical for him. He’d signed a contract. They hadn’t even found an understudy for him yet!

“Hey, honey,” Beltre said softly as they entered the empty hall behind the theatre. “I’m not gonna scream at you. I just wanted to know what was going on up there. You looked a little panicked by the end... You still kind of do…”

His rich brown eyes studied Kurt’s face, the way he was holding his body. Kurt felt as though Beltre could read everything on him—brokenness, indecision, and failure to save Kitt’s life. And though Kurt knew he shouldn’t, he felt shameful.

“I’d like you to tell me, but…” Beltre rolled his shoulders. “If you don’t want to, we can take a few minutes more before we get back to it?”

Kurt wanted more than anything to just go up there again. Everything in his body, though, told him that if he tried that right now, his reaction would be much worse.

“I-I can’t. I, um.” Kurt pressed his lips together. Beltre waited, crossing one arm over his body and touching his face slightly, concerned. Kurt drew in a deep breath. “About a month and a half ago... It’s just not been that long,” he muttered, before continuing a little louder. “I was in a- I mean, she…”

Kurt touched his lips, feeling inarticulate. He had only had to explain this cold to his therapist. Everyone in his immediate circle knew, and they filled in the gaps for what he struggled to verbalize.

“Take your time. The dancers are probably grateful for the break. I’ve been busting their asses to get their part immaculate,” Beltre assured him. Off the stage, his manner was warmer, maybe a bit flippant, trying to deflect the tension.
Kurt swallowed and tried again. Short, direct sentences. “Kitt was being attacked in an alley. I ran in. Um, I fought. He died.”

Beltre’s eyes went round.

“The man who- He choked Kitt. He choked me.” Kurt realized he was wringing his fingers hard enough to hurt and tried to hold his hands still, just feeling gently over the scars of his last big, triggered fiasco. “I think that’s what did it. I- I’m sorry, I didn’t think about it before going onstage. That’s just what Samael would do, his job, right? I’m so sorry. I can’t go back up there and do that right now.”

Beltre licked his lips slowly as he took that in. His hands hitched on his hips, and he turned away, slightly. Kurt imagined what came next. The star that couldn’t do his part. The diva asking for special favors. They couldn’t just hire an acting coach to work this out. Kurt was already in therapy (and he should really go this week). No, they couldn’t fix this. Samael needed to be able to act out his role as an assassin on stage. Maybe Paul would get his chance, after all.

“Well. Shit.” Beltre bobbed his head from side to side. “Okay. First off… if you can give me a list of your triggers, I can make sure they aren’t in the choreography… or we can talk about it before I spring you onstage. You seemed fine until you had to choke her, right?”

Kurt covered his mouth, swallowed back a noise, and bobbed his head.

“We should get you some water.” Beltre touched his temple, then flipped out his phone to text someone. “Alright. So there’s that. And then… You’re gonna have to talk to Allie about this.”

“How do you think she’s going to react?” Kurt asked after a moment. He couldn’t argue that the director would have to know her lead was a quivering, traumatized mess.

“She’s Alison. She’s gonna be pissed. Though she’d be just as pissed if Sofia got pregnant during the run or Marco got lupus.”

Kurt felt like Beltre was trying to make him laugh, and so forced a half-hearted smile that barely reached a full curve.
“Just talk to her. She might need to have a meeting with you, and Romi, Jasper, and me, to make sure we’re doing everything to keep things running smoothly. We’ll all probably wish we knew sooner, but what can you do? I know now. I can work around that moment in the choreography easy enough, anyway. There are plenty of ways to kill someone.”

“I didn’t think to say anything when I got the part because it never occurred to me this would be a problem,” Kurt said.

“You didn’t think playing an assassin would be a problem?” Beltre’s brows went up and he narrowed his eyes. “After someone tried to kill you?”

“It’s not real.”

“Ye-ah, but… you and Marco throw yourselves into it up there. It’s not surprising to me that actors like you get affected by what you perform. Even then… I dunno that you could just separate this from the role.” Beltre moved to pat Kurt on the shoulder, but pulled back before touching him. “Talk to Alison. She’s in her office right now. I’ll go work with the dancers and try to rearrange a few scenes.”

*

Elliott

After putting down his phone, Elliott went to check the risotto, giving it a few stirs and pouring in more liquid. The shrimp on his grill pan smelled done, so he picked it up and added them to the risotto.

At first, Elliott had been a bit stumped on how to be more ‘romantic’ for Kurt. He normally did that by taking care of things Kurt needed, or making a meal… But that wasn’t a big gesture.

And they always cooked for one another. Elliott wasn’t sure if that meant they were always casually romantic with one another, or if they were already skirting dangerously close to old-married territory.

Luckily, Elliott had started flipping through his songwriting notebook after going grocery shopping and remembered the song he’d been fiddling with on and off. Really, it was strange that he hadn’t shown it to Kurt yet, when it was predominantly based on him—his strength, his humor. Elliott
tended to write more about life than love, but Kurt tended to inspire. Not to mention, being serenaded was probably in Kurt’s mind something people in love did for each other.

So Elliott had spent most of the afternoon working on Kurt’s song, and later on, prepping dinner anyway, because who didn’t like to be cooked for? The surprise was that it wasn’t curry. Kurt never turned his nose up at curry, but he tended to cook from so many different kinds of cuisine… Elliott knew Kurt had the more refined palate of the two of them.

Everything was ready by the time Kurt buzzed from downstairs. Elliott had been beginning to worry that Kurt would be even later and the risotto would sit for too long. He bounded to the front door and buzzed him up, and then rubbed his hands together a little nervously. This was new! Aside from his first audition and tracking Kurt down to beg to be in the band, Elliott didn’t usually feel nervous around Kurt. He’d even put a little extra time into doing his hair and make-up.

Elliott bounced on his toes as he waited for Kurt to come up, then went to quickly light some sandalwood incense. When he opened the door, Kurt looked less put-together. His hair was getting flat, his eyes were lined and a little puffy, and he was hugging that big stuffed frog Adam had gotten for him. It said a lot about his state of mind that he went to his place to pick it up but apparently hadn’t freshened up.

“Whoa, hey. Are you okay?”

Kurt shrugged. “Rough practice. I don’t really wanna talk about it. Is that okay?”

“Yeah, sure…”

Elliott stared at him for a moment and then rubbed a hand over his shoulders. Kurt took a deep breath and pressed his lips into a smile that didn’t reach his eyes. Something was really wrong, and… Kurt didn’t want to share.

“It’s not you, Elliott. I’m just talked out right now.”

“Well, um. If you ever change your mind, I’m here to listen, okay? I made dinner, and…” Elliott cast a look at his guitar. Would the song get Kurt’s mind off of what had happened, or would it just unnecessarily focus attention on Elliott? Maybe the song could wait until Kurt was feeling a real smile. “And it’s not curry.”
“Not curry?” Kurt squeezed the frog tightly. “That must’ve been trial.”

“I know!” Elliott went into the kitchen and spooned some of the seafood risotto onto two plates and set them on the table. Then he took the two already prepared salad bowls out of the fridge. Kurt liked a good salad with meals. He ate a lot healthier than most of the people Elliott knew. “I also have some wine? The girl at the store said we ought to use the chardonnay, but I got a red, too, because you like it better.”

“You’re amazing,” Kurt muttered.

Elliott blinked quickly. It was hard to see Kurt down and not be able to do much about it. But after he’d left Blaine, there had been a number of nights when there was little to do but offer himself as there for whatever Kurt needed. And sometimes that meant food, or it meant listening, or it meant keeping him from sleepwalking into things, or it meant holding him and that frog when Kurt was feeling depleted. Kurt came up to him and nuzzled up against his chest. Elliott set down the chardonnay and wrapped his arms around Kurt’s shoulders.

“It’s no big,” Elliott said softly.

He could feel the frog squishing against him, and was about to say something more, when Kurt lifted his head and awarded Elliott with a firm kiss to the lips. “You look really nice tonight,” he said, then frowned a little. “You’re not ditching me after dinner for some hot date, are you?”

“You are the hot date,” Elliott replied.

Kurt let out a derisive snort, but didn’t comment. “So...risotto, huh? Let’s try it then.” He let go of Elliott, but kept the frog as he sat down at the table. As they ate and Elliott told Kurt about his day and his rather crazy conversation with the seller at the seafood stand on the market, Mr ‘Oppy slipped off Kurt’s knees and wasn’t picked up again. Elliott slowly relaxed. Kurt was laughing again, spooning the risotto that had clearly been approved of while he listened, urging Elliott to keep talking. He knew it was just a distraction, but if it worked?

After dinner, Elliott suggested they could play Cards Against Humanity. It never failed to cheer Kurt up when they both let out their most vicious side to make the answers as biting as possible. They had even added some cards of their own with little inside jokes. Elliott loved the game just as much as Kurt did. It was a safe way to let out some of the negativity he tried to ward from his daily life.
By the time they had finished their wine, they were both in a very good mood. Just as Elliott was contemplating singing his new song after all, Kurt glanced at his watch and sighed.

“I have an early class tomorrow,” he said dejectedly. “And it’s stage combat, not really something I can just sit in the back and snooze through.”

“Mmm. Should come in handy for Samael though, right?” Elliott replied, making a few karate chops in the air. He smiled as he imagined how hot Kurt would look wielding a sword.

Kurt’s relaxed posture tightened a little. “Yeah. Yes, it will. So I’d better go.” He put his glass down and got up. “Thanks, Elliott. I had a really great evening.”

Elliott wasn’t sure what had just changed, but whatever it was, he hoped Kurt would find a way to open up about it to someone soon, even if it wasn’t him. Kurt had been through too much to keep it all inside.

“Me too,” he said, and got up as well to hug Kurt goodnight. Kurt held on a little longer than usual - a few seconds more and Elliott would have been tempted to put him back on the couch and insist he stay until they figured things out. But as it was, he respected Kurt’s decision to handle things on his own. That didn’t mean he wouldn’t be calling in the next day to check on him, though.

*

Kurt

“Alright, time out! Well done, you guys. I’ve seen some excellent sparring over here! Nik, Mira, great footwork, excellent timing. Kurt, magnificent as always-” NYADA’s stage combat instructor moved through the pairs of students, most of whom were breathing hard. They had been training for almost an hour and the last routine had been fast-paced and exhausting. “Now take five and hydrate, and we’re gonna do some stretching to cool down.”

Kurt put away his bo staff and walked over to his bag to take out his towel and a bottle of mineral water. He had pushed himself hard, forcing all of his worries about Samael and his talk with Alison out of his mind with vigorous exercise. The instructor’s praise helped as well. He might not have the stage killing down, but he had the fighting skills, which was a start. Fake it until you make it, right? As he took a long sip from his bottle, he couldn’t help but overhear the other students nearby.
“So how was your date?” Mira asked her sparring partner Nikolas. “Did you have tea and crumpets?” She teasingly put on a posh accent.

Nikolas chuckled. “We went for a coffee, yeah. It was nice. He’s a nice guy.”

“But you didn’t get to taste his crumpets?”

“I wish,” Nikolas replied. “It’s like he wants to, but something’s holding him back. I don’t know. I guess he got dumped pretty badly. But, you know, good things come to those who wait. He did say he wants to see me again.”

“Well, if you want me to do some background poking, let me know. My roomie used to date one of his Apples.”

Kurt froze. He hadn’t really been interested in the conversation so far (Mira’s British accent was deplorable, and he didn’t think it was his business who Nikolas was dating), but he suddenly realized they were talking about Adam. His Adam. Adam was dating? He inched a little closer while he pretended to re-lace his sneakers.

“Thanks. Yeah, anything that would help tip the scales in my favor… I mean, I’m not going to sit around pining until he makes up his mind, but… you’ve seen him, right? I’m telling you, those vests and the plaid don’t do what’s underneath any justice.”

Mira sighed. “Why are all the hot guys gay?”

“That’s not true. Stephen was hot.”

“Well, gay or an asshole,” Mira corrected. “But I’ll ask my roomie for you. And maybe you can ask if Adam has some hot, straight brothers.”

*He only has sisters*, Kurt thought. *I’m pretty sure he told me about them almost right away. Clearly Nikolas doesn’t know him at all. But then how did he know what Adam was hiding underneath his clothes?*

His thoughts were interrupted as Nikolas suddenly appeared next to him.
“Hey, Kurt. Really impressive routine you did just now,” he complimented.

“Uh. Thanks,” Kurt replied, his cheeks heating up a little. He hoped they hadn’t noticed him eavesdropping.

“Maybe next time we could partner up. You could teach me some of those moves.” Nikolas winked.

Kurt looked at him for a moment. Was he for real? “I don’t think you need any help,” he deflected. Why was Nikolas flirting with him when he was dating Adam? Were all guys cheaters?

“It would still be fun, though,” Nikolas said, waggling his eyebrows a little. “Hey, James, check out the gun show.”

Kurt took a deep breath to tell him exactly what he thought, but their instructor called them out to the floor for their cool down. Kurt could definitely use one.

He looked down at the arm he’d been flexing, then up at the guys who had suddenly come over to admire him, before he moved out to the floor as directed. The instructor lifted his arms over his head, and Kurt mimicked the action and drew his breath in and out. Nikolas’s eyes were drawn to him, and Kurt felt himself getting hotter instead of cooler.

He wasn’t used to this kind of attention. For some reason, since school had started back, the guys at NYADA had been looking in a way that they hadn’t before. It was unfamiliar, not entirely unwanted, but he couldn’t focus on it. Because there were the looks, and then there were the whispers. The gossip mill was the most efficient part of NYADA, it seemed. In the hallways, he caught mutters of “fought off those homophobes” and “think I see a scar” and “could always tell he was a hero.” And no matter what, he didn’t really feel like a hero. Heroes succeeded in saving people.

These thoughts buzzed through his mind as he stretched one arm over his head. He looked over at Nikolas, whose gaze had averted to the front for a moment. In a way, it wasn’t strange for him to attract attention now, even if the circumstances were new… but it was strange that he’d gone out with Adam and was still sniffing around for other options. Didn’t he know what a keeper Adam was? Kurt didn’t know whether to tell Nik that or to just let him lose his shot with Adam.

Kurt bent one knee and stretched to the left in a lunge. Maybe he wasn’t exactly unbiased. He knew
what it felt like to lose Adam… And Adam knew what it felt like to lose Kurt. It wasn’t clear whether Kurt should involve himself at all, but… he found himself wanting to at least see Adam, to check in on how he was doing. When they had finished their stretches, Kurt collected his things and started composing a text to see if Adam wanted to meet up.

*

Adam

Adam could see Kurt through the street-side window. His hair was well coiffed, and he rested his hand on his chin. Kurt really was a beautiful man. It seemed like he grew more beautiful by the day. With a slight smile, Adam headed into the cafe.

“Hey!” Kurt rose from his table and came up to Adam with a smile. Almost instinctively, Adam leaned forward, and Kurt responded by opening his arms and giving Adam a hug.

After they’d both let go, Adam went to order a cup of coffee, then returned to see Kurt pressing his fingers on the edge of his mug. Adam’s brows drew together at this sign of discomfort, and he sat across from Kurt.

“So how is everything going? Work, the band, the play?”

Kurt’s lips tightened. “Mm.”

Adam tilted his head back. “Oh?”

“No, no. It’s fine. I just…” Kurt shook his head. “I’m glad to have Mr. ‘Oppy around, sometimes.”

“Did something happen?”

“I’ve had to, uh, talk with the director about getting triggered during rehearsal.” Kurt was trying to keep his voice even, but his eyes fixed on the tea in front of him and spots of pink bloomed in his cheeks.
“Oh.” Adam wanted to ask more, but it was clear to see Kurt was trying very hard to keep himself together and he’d probably prefer to tell the story at his own pace.

“Alison—that’s the director—she was really pissed at me. She didn’t fire me, but you could tell she was pissed. I was kind of upset about it, last night. I’m still not thrilled, but they said they’d work around it, so…” Kurt shrugged, and added, “It’s useful to have something to smush,” referring to Mr. ‘Oppy.

Adam shook his head, and then reached for Kurt’s hand. When Kurt allowed the touch, Adam rubbed his thumb over Kurt’s fingers. Before he could think of a response, and he had been formulating one about not being ashamed about what had happened to him, Kurt looked up, almost brightly, and spoke.

“So, h-how’s your new job? And, um, everything?”

Adam licked his lips, watched Kurt for a moment, and then began to recount his glamorous work as a stage assistant. The barista came by with his cappuccino. Kurt listened with rapt attention, soaking Adam’s words in with such eagerness that Adam paused every so often just to watch Kurt’s expression. And to prompt another encouraging little nod and smiling question.

“I’m really not this fascinating,” Adam said, finally.

“No, I mean… Yes, it’s interesting. I’ve never done it from that angle…”

“I can’t imagine it isn’t moreso from your angle, Mr. Star.”

“Maybe, but… I just miss you, I guess. And I was kind of.” Kurt shrugged. “I like hearing about your day.”

“I’ve no doubt.” Adam narrowed his eyes and tilted his head back. “But there’s hearing about my day, and then…” There’s interrogation. Something was up with Kurt.

Kurt looked toward the window, his ears starting to cook up a fine red.
“As cute as it is to see you embarrassed, though I don’t revel in it… I know you. What’s on your mind?”

Kurt rubbed the back of his neck. “I was just, um, worried, I guess.” His eyes shifted over the table. “There was this guy in my Stage Combat class talking about you, about having coffee with you… and then he flirted with me.” He cringed. “It’s not about me. He flirts with guys all the time—”

Adam frowned. “Nikolas?”

“I- uh. I shouldn’t have said anything. It’s none of my business.”

Adam felt his hands getting a little shaky. Was he excited? Angry? “Kurt, I’m the one who told Nik I wanted to keep this casual for now. I’m not really interested in rushing into something right now. It hardly seems fair to expect him to walk around with his eyes closed while I can’t offer him anything more than a coffee-date.”

“Yeah?” Kurt nodded slowly. Then started to ramble. “I’m sorry, this is so weird. I didn’t know if I should say anything, or how I would even start, and I didn’t want you to get hurt by some asshole flake who just wants to play the field and doesn’t know how to appreciate you…”

“But you wouldn’t be one of the guys Nikolas—” Adam gestured. “I mean, you’re with… Aren’t you?”

“With…” Kurt’s brows rose. “Oh. Oh, yeah… Kind of. I don’t know. We talked about it, but I’m—it’s so… new. I don’t want to mess it up. He’s such a good friend.”

Now his cheeks were really pink. And it was cute, still. But Adam couldn’t say it didn’t hurt his heart a little to see Kurt getting flustered over another guy. At least it was over a good guy. Had this been anyone else, one of his Apples maybe, he would have offered more support, reassurance, advice. But Adam found he couldn’t do that. As much as he liked Elliott and wished Kurt happiness, this was something Kurt had to figure out without help. Especially since he still seemed so unsure. The last time Adam had tried to help Kurt make such a decision hadn’t exactly worked out well.

As Kurt continued, Adam realized he had just been sitting there stirring his coffee and not saying a word. It was his turn to blush a little.
“Anyway, no, I won’t be doing anything with Nikolas, no matter how much he admires my-” Kurt paused for a minute and pinched his lips together, as though he wasn’t sure whether he was amused or not. “-gun show.”

“Ha ha!” Adam clapped his hands together. “He said that? He’s very direct, isn’t he?” Adam chuckled. “I thought I had some training after everything Santana threw at me, but he’s something else alright.” The memories of the things Nikolas had whispered in his ear as they were dancing made him smile. It had been quite outrageous, but very flattering.

Adam noticed Kurt suddenly seemed very busy rearranging the small packets of sugar next to his cup of tea. Maybe it hadn’t been very gentlemanly of him to speak so fondly of someone he was considering dating to the man he used to date.

“But like I said, I want to keep it casual,” he stressed. “Just… get to know him a little. If he’s really such a big flirt, I’m sure he’ll lose interest in me soon enough.”

“Well, then he’s an idiot,” Kurt let out, accidentally tearing open one of the sugar packets. Sugar rained down on the table. “I mean, you should- you deserve…” His fingers nervously tried to sweep the sugar into a little heap.

Adam put his hand over Kurt’s to still it. “Thanks,” he said simply. “Hey, do you want some cheesecake? I think I saw some when I was over at the counter.”

Kurt gave him a grateful look, and Adam rose. They could both use a minute or two to take a breather after this, and find some neutral topic for the remainder of their drinks.
Chapter Six

Chapter Notes

Jopez song from Amber Riley. Elliott Gilbert song by JWMelmoth. "For Your Entertainment" by Adam Lambert.

ELLIOTT

Their big collaboration gig had finally come, and Elliott was nervous. Dani was up front with Santana and Mercedes, doing a sound check for their opening act. Elliott was backstage with Kurt. They had given the girls dibs on the changing room and the make-up mirror, and now that they were done, it was time for the rest of One Three Hill to get dressed and glammed up. The place was sold out, and a look outside the window showed that a queue was already forming down the street.

This was not why Elliott was nervous, though. He was about to play Kurt his song. After days of putting it off, always finding reasons why it wasn’t appropriate, now seemed like the perfect moment. He had considered playing it at their gig, but he wanted to give Kurt the opportunity to keep his song private. The lyrics were about him, after all, and he might not be okay with it. Although Elliott had written the song as a romantic gesture to show Kurt he could measure up to his ideals about love, the most important thing to Elliott was making Kurt feel comfortable. One Three Hill was his band, and song-choices went through him.

Kurt was leaning towards the mirror, frowning and rubbing his thumb over his lower eyelid. He sighed in frustration. “Santana completely flattened out my pencil, and I didn’t bring a sharpener. I look like a panda now.”

“But a cute panda,” Elliott teased, strumming his guitar a little. Butterflies swirled in his stomach. “Actually, I think you look great.” He played the first few notes of his song. “You look like an angel, though life’s put you through hell...and you hide your hurt deep inside so no one can tell”

Kurt grinned at him through the reflection of the mirror and shook his head a little before continuing to swipe at his eyeliner with a Q-tip.

Elliott sang the next few lines, and while he praised Kurt’s generosity to his friends and his courageous nature, he could tell Kurt hadn’t realized that the song was about him yet. Perhaps it was too generic. But as he reached the chorus, Kurt slowly straightened away from the mirror and put his pencil down. He was still looking at Elliott through the glass.
“And I wish you could see the hero you are to me

Wet, cold and freezing, cried out and bleeding-
fighting the ghosts of your past.”

Kurt turned around.

“I will kiss your scars if you let me, frame each like a medal

and sing to you daily of the ways you are special-

and when life throws a curveball and things get too rough

I’ll remind you that even heroes sometimes take a day off.”

Elliott let the last chords ring out and bit his lip nervously. This was worse than his first audition for Pamela Lansbury. At least back then, he had Starchild to hide behind. But the whole point of making this gesture was opening up and showing Kurt what he felt, so hiding was out of the question.

“You wrote that for me?” Kurt asked. He sounded a little shaken, and his eyes were shining.

Elliott suddenly prayed he hadn’t triggered something in him with the lyrics—that was the last thing he wanted. “Yeah. It could do with some fine-tuning and probably some background vocals if we ever want to play it live, but—” He stopped himself to get to the heart of the matter. “I wanted to give you something to show you how I feel.”

Kurt said nothing for a moment.

“I thought about surprising you with it tonight on stage,” Elliott added, feeling his confidence dwindle, “but I didn’t want to put you on the spot in case you didn’t like it—”

“I like it,” Kurt cut him off. “It’s beautiful.” He walked up to Elliott. “I’ve been serenaded before, but… never with an original song. One that doesn’t need switched pronouns to work.” His lips curled up in a smile. “Thank you.” He was now close enough to step between Elliott’s legs, and he leaned down to place a soft kiss on his lips.
“You’re welcome,” Elliott mumbled against Kurt’s lips, wishing his guitar wasn’t between them so he could pull Kurt into his lap. As it was, he just craned his neck up and let his nervousness be kissed away. The butterflies in his stomach were doing a little celebration tango.

“Hey, save it for the shippers,” Dani commented fondly, walking in on them. “You don’t want to disappoint all those fangirls out there, would you?”

Kurt straightened up and smirked at her. “That’s not all we got for them tonight,” he said, and the way he said it made shivers run down Elliott’s spine.

“What’s going on?” Santana asked, stepping into the changing room and surveying the scene. “Kurt, no offence, but you look like a panda.”

“Rude,” Mercedes commented, rolling her eyes. “Want me to help, Kurt?”

“Do you have a pencil sharpener?” he asked.

“I think so, hold on.”

With all of them in the small room bustling about and getting Kurt’s look fixed before showtime, the moment was lost, but Elliott couldn’t bring himself to mind. Kurt had liked his song, and that was all that mattered.

*

Kurt

“Ladies and gentlemen and others,” Kurt began at the microphone. “We’re going to start you off with a treat tonight! As our most loyal OneThree fans know, we didn’t start off as a threesome. We had two other incredibly talented ladies with us, but it wasn’t meant to be. Now, unfortunately in the music world, creative differences often end in an irrevocable split-”

“Just fucking sing!”
Someone shushed the male voice.

Kurt had thought about skipping the intro, but just starting always seemed so abrupt, almost rude. “Anyway, we’ve gotten the band back together… at least we’ve gotten Santana back for you, plus a ‘whole lotta!’ Together, these two voluptuous vocalists, these two mellifluous musicians, Santana Lopez and Mercedes Jones are the two most amazing female vocalists to come out of the Midwest in our age. Put it together for Jopez!”

Kurt stepped back to let them take the stage, and Mercedes gave his hand a squeeze before stepping up to the mic. He fell back and stood next to Elliott. The girls started with a hello, a wink from Santana, and then a burst of sound. It was one of Mercedes’ original songs, with Santana echoing and harmonizing with her.

_I know the night’s so lonely babe_

_There’s so much rain, so far away, yeah_

_Know I’d rather be with you_

_But I gotta do what I gotta do_

Their vibe was really different from One Three Hill, but Kurt could see people starting to slowly get into their sound. It would be hard not to, Kurt thought. He’d meant what he’d said about the two of them, and their voices blended so well. It was a benefit for both of their groups that listeners these days appreciated a variety of musical styles, but a person would have to be Motta-tone-deaf to not appreciate what Santana and Mercedes did when they got together.

_So baby leave a light on for me, when I’m gone_

_Leave a light on for me, all night long_

_Leave a light on for me, ‘cause I’m comin’ home_

Kurt smiled a little and found his hand reaching for Elliott’s. Elliott cast him a little smile and took it, and their eyes met. Kurt’s neck and ears burned as he pretended to watch the stage with undivided interest. They joked about the ‘shippers,’ but in all honesty, he didn’t want their quasi-relationship to be the biggest draw for their band… Still, he didn’t let go of Elliott’s hand. Elliott’s song had made him feel noticed and appreciated in a way that being serenaded never had before. That had to mean something, didn’t it?
After three amazing numbers (Mercedes clearly did not shirk when an opportunity presented itself), the crowd was dancing along appreciatively. Kurt made sure to remind people that they could buy one of the girls’ demos at the bar after the show.

Then, One Three Hill took the stage.

“I Believe in a Thing Called Love” always got the tension going. Maybe it was the lyrics. Maybe it was the way they looked at each other and the way Elliott couldn’t resist rolling his hips like Elvis. (Okay, maybe Kurt shared that weakness.) But that tension always escalated. More artistic, cabaret numbers usually opened the show, and it progressed from there. They’d started with rock tonight, though, to keep the tone from being too far afield of Mercedes and Santana’s.

By the end of the first set, Kurt’s heart was pounding so hard; it was like he’d absorbed the energy of the crowd, and he could never, never settle down. But the set was over, and they needed a break. Kurt accepted a bottle of water from one of the bartenders and took a deep swig, as he walked with Elliott and Dani to the table in the back that had been set aside for them.

“You two are scandalous,” Dani said with a grin.

“What?” Elliott said innocently.

Dani shook her head at them, dropped into a seat, and propped a heeled boot on a free chair.

Kurt drank his water and looked away as though he didn’t know what she was talking about. That was when he saw a familiar figure working his way through the crowd, shoulders slightly slumped, hands in the pockets of his jacket. Baseball cap. Roughly two decades older than their general audience. Had he seen the whole show? Had he enjoyed it?

Kurt remained frozen for another moment before pushing forward himself, past a cluster of people who were approaching their table, hoping to talk to the headliners.

“Dad!”

“Hey!” Burt came up, wrapped his arms around Kurt, and gave him a good squeeze.
Kurt let out a gasping laugh and squeezed back so tightly he was almost shaking. His cheek rested against Burt’s shoulder for a moment. He’d allowed himself to forget how much he missed his father’s arms. How did he always forget? “What are you doing here? When did you get in?”

“Well, I’m here watchin’ you!” Burt let go and patted Kurt’s arm. “In all the... glitter and glory! You were talking on the phone last week about this big gig with Mercedes and Santana opening…” He bobbed his head wordlessly and put his hands on his hips.

Kurt’s brows rose slightly. He knew that face, and that tone. That forced openness, and ‘I’m your dad no matter what’ stance. God, he was flipped. Out.

Maybe it had been the part where Elliott had gotten down on his knees, positioned his mic at Kurt’s crotch, and simulated oral sex. It was a direct homage to Ziggy and Ronson’s ‘electric blowjob’, but something told Kurt his dad hadn’t really been much of a Bowie fan in the 70s. Their fans were probably too young to get the reference, but they loved it all the same. His dad… probably not so much.

Burt shrugged. “Figured, hell, why not head on up? I’ve never got to see you perform before! Well, not like this. It’s not like Schuester ever put you right up front for love or money.”

“True. It probably wouldn’t’ve been like this…” Kurt nodded. He blinked a few times, pressed his lips together, and then gestured back. “Come meet the band!”

“Okay.” Burt followed him back and locked his eyes over Elliott. They went up and down Elliott’s tall, leather-clad form and narrowed at the eye make-up and shining faux-hawk.

“Dad, this is Dani Diaz.” Kurt gestured to her, and she wiggled her fingers up at him. Somehow she’d gotten a glass of wine in the seconds between his leaving the table and now, and had been in the middle of taking a big sip. “And this is Elliott Gilbert.”

“Hey, man! I thought that was you! I just figured Kurt would tell us if his parents were in the audience!” Elliott grinned from ear-to-ear and offered Burt a hand to shake.

“We met before?” Burt frowned as he pumped Elliott’s hand.

“Nah. I’ve seen pictures of you on Kurt’s Facebook. And there’s one in the loft. Is Carole here too?”
“Oh, no.” Burt looked to Kurt. “I decided to come up so last minute. She didn’t have the time to take off right now, busy keeping Sylvester from shutting down the arts programs, and she said she’d give us some time on our own, this visit. Carole swears she’ll be there for your opening night, though. Of the… Sam… Play?”

Kurt had to grin as Burt fumbled the last part. “Samael. And I’m glad. I’ll get you guys tickets!”

“We all can’t wait to see him up there,” Dani said.

Elliott drank from his full glass of ginger ale (with a maraschino cherry in it) that they’d brought over for him. He fished the cherry from his drink and held it up by the stem for Kurt to take. “So what’d you think of the set, man? Kurt’s a hell of a leader. Did you hear that we had one audience member at our first gig? And then just, like overnight, we went from this Madonna cover band to having to turn away appearances.”

Kurt flushed a little and bit into the cherry. Sweetness exploded in his mouth, and he licked his lips.

“Yeah, that’s something… Sure isn’t showtunes.” Burt scratched the back of his head.

“I like a variety of music,” Kurt said, almost defensively. Burt’s body language toward Elliott wasn’t aggressive, but it wasn’t very friendly, either.

“Yeah, I could spend hours poking through his vinyl,” Elliott added. He licked ginger ale from his fingers. Burt’s eyes widened slightly.

Dani gestured with her glass. “He means Kurt’s records, not his pants.”

Kurt turned to give her a sharp look, and she shrugged and raised her brows. God, when had Dani started acting like Santana? But when he turned his head, he could see that Burt had seemed to relax a little more, and his eyes seemed a little less bulging out of his head. Not so Santana, after all, if her comment had diffused tension rather than created it.

His dad was here, and Kurt should be happy, but all he felt was nervousness. No matter how old he got, he still wanted his father’s approval.
“Do you want a drink?” Kurt prodded. “Or anything? We could go out and get some air?”

“We’ve got about ten minutes left,” Dani said, then jerked her head toward the door.

Kurt started to move in that direction when Mercedes and Santana approached the table and sat by Dani.

“Hey, Mr. Hummel,” Mercedes said.

“Hey! You girls sounded real good up there!” he said brightly.

“We always were the hottest bitches to come outta that podunk town.” Santana swatted at Kurt’s arm. “Cept baby boy don’t count because he’s a kitten under all that eyeliner.”

“Hush, you,” Kurt said softly. She was looking up at him, that measured kind of look that had appeared since she’d returned and seen his scars for the first time. He looked back to Burt and motioned for him to follow. “See you in a few, guys.”

Kurt’s heart was still pounding, but he felt different now. As they moved out onto the back patio, Kurt began to dwell more on that disapproving look his father had been giving Elliott. Had he really been all that adoring of every performance Blaine had done? The year they’d met, Blaine had the tendency to sing about sex toys, binge drinking, and panty snatching. It was strange to think that this was Burt Hummel’s limit.

“So is everything really okay back home?” Kurt asked, feeling the cool fall air biting against his cheeks and, truthfully, the gap between his corset and some spectacularly tight pants.

“Yeah, everything’s fine,” Burt promised.

“You’re not… sick, or anything?”

Burt dropped his head a little, rubbed the back of his neck, and then looked up again. “No, no! I’m
fine. This isn’t one of those kinds of visits.”

“So your heart, and your cholesterol levels—”

“I’m okay! Can’t I come up here just to see you perform?” Burt laughed softly.

That was a question. Of course he could, but he never had before. Neither had Kurt’s other loved ones. Even when Kurt had paid for the plane ticket, he couldn’t get his then-fiancé up to see them play. Rachel hardly ever came, either, and she didn’t even need to cross state or city borders.

“I guess.” Kurt crossed his arms and shifted his weight.

“These are some outfits you guys have got going on,” Burt said, cocking his head to the side as he took the whole ensemble in. “I think you’re taller than me in those heels.”

“Yeah, we plan those in advance. One night we were all in suits, one night we all had goggles and steampunk gear. Tonight it’s glam to play off of San and Mercedes’ glamour. I hooked us all up with some cast-offs from the Vogue closet, and there’s a person in the back recording to make a clip for the website.”

Burt nodded slowly, pressing his lips together. “I can see that. I mean, I understand. I’m not sure what you’ve got on that would be in Vogue.”

“Oh, the belt, the corset—” Kurt gestured vaguely. “And the shirts under them.”

Burt nodded again and said nothing for a few moments, though his gaze drifted downward. “Is that…”

Kurt looked down, and then behind him.

“Do you have a tattoo?”

Kurt blinked at his father. Then he looked down to see if his ankle was showing, but no, it was the
low cut pants. A few birds were escaping and fully visible against the pale, soft skin of his hip.

“Um, yes,” he answered finally. “You can’t see the whole thing when I’m dressed, but it’s there.” Kurt traced the tattoo down his hip with his fingertips over where it disappeared beneath his pants.

“When the hell did that happen?”

“Is it really a big deal? Elliott took me after my breakup with Blaine-”

“Oh, so that guy is getting you to get tattoos now?”

Burt seemed so incredulous that Kurt was tempted to laugh, but he knew he shouldn’t.

“He isn’t getting me to do it, he took me to do it. I wanted to do it. It’s not my first,” Kurt said a little defiantly.

Burt leaned his head forward slightly, as though he couldn’t believe he’d heard right.

“Yeah. I’ve got tattoos. Caaall the authorities!” Kurt waved his hands up dramatically.

“Kurt!”

“There are guys in your shop who have tattoos. What’s the big deal?”

“The big deal is that none-a’them are my son! The big deal is that this glam giant has you dirty dancing on stage and inking up your body. This isn’t you! Since when do you wear make-up? Since when are you okay dancing like, like-”

“Like what?” Kurt narrowed his eyes, and Burt pressed his lips together again. “So I guess this means you hated my band?”

“I don’t- C’mon, Kurt. Don’t play the victim here. I’m just trying-”
“Expressing how I feel is not emotional manipulation, and it is not playing the victim. I’m entitled to my feelings of being hurt just as much as you’re entitled to whatever feelings of anger that you’re having.” Kurt sucked in his lower lip and looked up at the cloudy (or polluted) night sky.

“Uh, huh. Yeah, I guess so.”

“That’s what my therapist would say,” Kurt said in a slightly sing-song voice.

Burt let out a little laugh. “Well… I’m glad you’re goin’.”

Kurt took a deep breath. “So. You don’t like my band, and you don’t like Elliott.” He thought of Elliott’s song. Elliott thought Kurt was wonderful. He thought Kurt was a hero. “I like Elliott. And I like performing in the band.”

“I just figured I’d be seein’ you doing musicals and things. People singin’ about rainbows and secretly holding hands. You’re at a musical school,” Burt pointed out.

“And I’m still doing that. But I’m doing this, too.”

“And you… and this Elliott…?” Burt’s mouth tightened, as though he’d tasted something sour. “That stuff on the stage…”

“It’s part of the show. You’ve never seen a rock concert before?”

“I never thought you’d be doin’ stuff like that.”

“Well, before I would’ve been a little young to do that kind of thing in a performance.”

“So it’s just a performance? Nothing… going on between the two of you?”

Kurt hesitated. This probably wasn’t the right moment to tell his dad he was considering—seriously
considering—dating Elliott, but at the same time, he didn’t want to deny it either. Something about his father’s disapproval made him defiant. He liked Elliott, and Elliott liked him. Not the toned down, muted version of himself Blaine had wanted him to be, but _Kurt_, crazy days included.

_I will kiss your scars if you let me, frame each like a medal and sing to you daily of the ways you are special._

“I could do worse.” His voice sounded almost grave in his ears. “I have, in fact. Much worse. Elliott is my friend, dad.”

“Not just…” Burt shook his head. “What is a guy like that gonna treat you like, Kurt? He looks like—” He held his hands up. “I just dunno what to make of him. He looks like he came off a motorcycle gang or something, and it looks like he’s trying to convert you.”

Kurt rolled his eyes. “There’s no motorcycle gang in the _world_ that gay. Elliott likes glam rock. He likes make-up. He’s into music, and yoga, and _Buddhism_. He doesn’t even _drink_. He’s nothing to worry about.”

“After everything you’ve been through, I just don’t see how you can dress like this.”

Kurt furrowed his brow deeply and tilted this head to the side. “I don’t understand.”

“Y’know, in school, when the skirts kept getting you in trouble, you stopped wearing them. They cracked your fuckin’ skull, Kurt. And you’re gonna go around with a guy like _that_, looking like _this_?”

Kurt’s throat tightened. “They cracked my skull, and choked me, because I ran into an alley trying to save someone’s life. Not because I dress like a fag.”

“Kurt, that is _not_ what I meant,” Burt said, pointing at him.

“I was wearing my uniform from the _diner_ at the time.”

“I just want you to be safe. Do you really think this, and _that_ guy, are gonna keep you safe?”
“I have to get going. Do you wanna see the rest of the show?” Kurt turned toward the door.

“Kurt,” Burt objected.

“I just don’t like the implication that Kitt deserved what he got. Because he was killed because three guys thought what he was wearing was justification enough to beat him to death. It wasn’t,” Kurt felt his voice getting low and shaky. “And it’s not for me, either.”

“But it makes you a target. I’m not sayin’ that it’s okay, it just…”

“It makes you scared. But you don’t have to be scared of Elliott. And if you are, you don’t have to be scared at this club, right now, tonight, because they have security and we’re in a group.” He touched his dad’s shoulder before heading back into the club. “Thanks for coming, dad.”

Burt hesitated, but then followed Kurt back into the club and took an offered seat at their table, where Santana and Mercedes were still sitting with a tall, red-haired woman.

*

Elliott

Elliott watched Kurt go with some reservations deep in his chest. Kurt’s descriptions of Burt ranged from ‘PFLAG Dad of the Year’ to ‘Typical Midwestern Homophobe’… although Kurt would’ve never called him the latter. Still, it was safe to say that Elliott regarded Kurt’s family situation as somewhat uncertain and inconsistent when it came to support.

He was swirling his ginger ale around in his glass, and thinking of getting another and eating the cherry this time (even though the face Kurt made every time he munched on one of them was super cute), when a gangly, tallish girl with strawberry blond hair approached their table. The bouncer moved in between her and them, and she frowned at him slightly, raising her angular chin, but then her brow smoothed and she said something, pointing at Santana.

The bouncer, Elton, shrugged and came over to the table. “The girl wants to talk to you,” he said. “She says it’s about Funny Girl.”
“As in the show I’m no longer in?” Santana pursed her lips and crossed her arms.

“Yeah, as in the show she’s in.”

“Really?” Mercedes lit up. “Send her over.”

Santana looked at her with a frown, but Elton was already moving the thin rope sectioning off their table, and the girl came toward them slowly. Her thin hair hung unadorned around her chin, and her t-shirt had a screen-print of a huge robot sitting with a little girl. Over it was a vest with a faux-fur collar, and the odd ensemble ended with a pair of cargo pants that were just barely too big on her skinny hips and tan-colored boots.

“Um, hi,” she said in a low, slightly low voice. She twisted a piece of hair and looked at Santana. “I’m Clover Rosenbaum. Are you Santana Lopez?”

“Yeah, that would be me,” Santana said dryly. She looked down at Clover’s boots disparagingly.

“Yeah.” She paused. “You’re not exactly how Rachel described you, but I can only imagine the things she’s said about me. No wonder she wanted to get rid of you.”

“What did she say about me?” Santana sat up and pinched her hand around her drink angrily.

Clover shifted her weight, causing the cargo pants to slip a little. “She said you couldn’t keep up with her vocally. She said your weight problem was the only reason I could fit my fat ass into your old costumes—”

Elliott subtly craned his head to the side and stretched, trying to see gluteal weight was what kept her pants up.

“-although all of it is three inches too short and huge in the chest-” She gestured in front of her with both hands spread wide. “-so it was never like it fit properly. She said when her last understudy crossed her, the girl had to leave Broadway and was now opening for generic cover bands. She said other things, of course, but clearly none of it was true. I saw your part of the show tonight, and your voice is really too phenomenal to be wasted on the watered down edits we’ve had to do. Clearly you
‘had to leave’ because you had better things going for you than putting up with Rachel Berry.”

Santana’s sour expression warmed, and like a Cheshire cat, her lips spread into a wide, slightly unhinged grin. “Please. Have a seat.”

Mercedes chuckled. “Rachel giving you trouble?”

“She’s talking about getting me fired.”

As Clover stepped into the light, Elliott went from judging her lack of fashion sense to concern because there was a yellowing bruise on her cheek. He wondered if there were any other bruises he couldn’t see, but… Rachel had hit Santana. Elliott had heard about that when the two of them had stopped coming to practice.

Clover sat in a chair across from them, since the table was mostly full. “I just wanted to ask… I don’t know.” She touched her hand to her forehead, then flailed the other as though trying to find the words to describe the situation. “The show has had all kinds of problems, and I guess I just wanted to see what her last understudy had to say. I never thought I’d get this job to begin with. My manager is always sending me to do ‘character work,’ and it’s not like becoming a rock star is an option for me.”

“Lemme get us some drinks,” Dani offered. She was up and gone before Clover could say anything.

“What problems?” Mercedes asked.

“We got some rough reviews when we were workshopping upstate, so they restaged most of the production, trying to find something that wasn’t going to get panned as a ‘lazy knockoff’ with a ‘drag queen Barbra’. The problem is that Rachel doesn’t want to change how she does things. She tries to go to the producer to get him to change things back her way, and then he and the director fight about it. They’ve brought in vocal and acting coaches to try to get everything on track, but the first acting coach quit and the second one… I don’t think he’s going to stay much longer.”

Santana let out a long, hearty laugh. “She has a vocal coach! Oh, my God!” She looked at Mercedes and said gleefully, “This is just too good!”

Mercedes swatted Santana’s arm, but she was smiling as well. Clover looked between the two of them, seeming less than amused.
“When did she hit you?” Elliott asked.

Clover’s pale cheeks went pink, and her hand moved to cover the bruise. Santana stopped smiling and leaned in to look.

Clover shook her head. “We were in practice a few weeks ago, and the coach asked me to do something they’d been working on, and... for Rachel to watch and do it exactly the way I had.”

“No, she waited until we were back at the dressing rooms and accused me of trying to steal her job. I told her that understudy is a great job to have, and I’m not trying to steal anything, but…” Clover’s fingertips touched the lingering bruise tentatively. “We weren’t friends. Not even in the beginning, but we were friendly. She used to pull me aside and give me advice about what the other people in the production were like. She used to confide in me about her roommate and her ex-boyfriend and NYADA. Now, every day it’s like walking into a war zone. I have no idea what’s going to set her off. If I mess up one little thing, she accuses me of trying to sabotage and distract her. She tried to make me go vegan, and I get anemic. I can’t. If I do well, though, she’s convinced I’m going to ‘steal’ her job.”

She suddenly waved her hands in front of her. “I’m sorry, Santana. I’m sure you just wanted to get away from all of this drama.”

Dani returned with a bartender flanking her, who put down a fresh ginger ale for Elliott and sparkling wine cocktails with cherries for the girls. Clover muttered a thanks to Dani.

“Thanks, babe,” Santana said as Dani sat back down. She turned a scalding expression on Clover. “Look. You can’t take any of Berry’s shit, okay? She’s your friend up to the second you get in her way, and that’s how she’s always been. She’s a terrible person, and she’ll never change. You tell her that if she lays another hand on you, I’m gonna go up to that loft and beat her so ugly, they’ll have to put someone on in her place.”

Clover’s eyes widened, and she moved back slightly.

“Guys, guys.” Elliott looked at Santana, who shrugged and shook her head, then back to Clover. “Let’s not resort to violence, okay? There’s no need for that, and there’s no need to get caught up in
Rachel’s drama. Clover, does the director know about the assault?”

“I’m not sure I’d call it assault. I’d probably just call it a bitchslap,” she said dryly. “But no, I haven’t talked to him. He saw it, though. He pointedly didn’t ask.”

Elliott rubbed his hand over his mouth and glanced at Dani.

“Go ahead and drink, sweetie,” she said. “Unless you don’t. I guess I could’ve asked.”

Clover smirked. “I drink. Usually… alone. And usually not pink drinks.” She held up the glass. “I’m more of an IPA or hard cider girl.” She lifted the flute to her lips and pinched the corners of her eyes as she tasted it. Then she licked her lips and grinned. “That’s like drinking fruit punch.”

“Yeah, you just shoot ‘em down.” Dani winked flirtatiously.

Clover’s cheeks were pink again. Whether it was from the flirting or the alcohol, Elliott couldn’t tell, but she took another sip.

“Is there any reason you wanna keep this job?” Dani asked. “Kurt’s in a production that could use some understudies, maybe even chorus members. I’d have to ask. And it looks like they’ll be up and running before Funny Girl is.”

“I signed a contract,” Clover said seriously. “I can’t just leave.”

“I did,” Santana said.

“Talk to the director,” Mercedes advised. “They’re probably in damage control mode already. Producers do not like the stink of drama on a project that’s already over time and over budget. Ask them to do something about the situation, or to let you go. Tell them that you don’t want to go, but if things don’t change, you might have to. He knows there’s a problem, and he doesn’t want to deal with it. One way or the other, he will have to. They can’t afford two understudies walking before the show even starts.”

“I just don’t want to put everyone in the production in a lurch. There are so many problems already.”
“You didn’t cause them!” Santana snapped. “Campion did. And Rachel did. And he let her. If he’d forced her to do things right from the beginning, they wouldn’t be bleeding money now. The sooner he puts his fucking balls back on and takes care of things the way he knew he should at least since they got the reviews from the workshop, the better it’ll be for everyone. I know you want to live in a sunshine sugarpop cupcake land where no one ever has to get their hands dirty, but that show’s gonna flop, and everyone’s gonna be out of a job unless someone does something.”

Clover drained the rest of her glass and took the cherry out, creasing her brow as she sucked on it, then put it on a napkin. “Sunshine sugarpop cupcake land, huh?”

Santana shrugged and pursed her lips. Though they were inching towards a smile.

“Well, I wanted to know what to do. I guess I have my answer. Why didn’t you talk to Campion about it?”

“Because I didn’t walk. They were about to fire me, and I beat them to the punch.”

“So, what if they’re about to fire me? Won’t that just mean Campion tells me not to let the door hit my ass on the way out?”

“Maybe. But if the coaches and directors are now trying to get Rachel to do the part the way you are, I doubt they want the only girl who’s got her stuff up to snuff to snuff to leave the building.” Santana spread her hands. “It’s a gamble. I’ll go with, if you want. Keep the staaar from landing any more cheap ones on you.”

“Nah, I’m a big girl. I can go myself.” She looked down at her cherry and started to pull it apart with her long, slim fingers. “But… thanks.”

“So how did you get into Broadway? You don’t look like the Broadway Baby type.”

Clover screwed her brows together. “What does that mean?”
“I mean we’re the ones all glammed out here. Where’s the diva? Did you just get off work at the warehouse?”

“No.” Clover gestured to her vest. “This is how I dress.”

“Are you gonna wear work boots to the after party?” Santana asked incredulously.

“Maybe,” Clover retorted. “I’ll probably wear a nice suit. I don’t really like dresses.”

“But you’re playing Fanny. She’s not exactly butch.”

“Yeah, and those are costumes. Fanny’s a character. I’m not really Barbra Streisand. I’m an actress. I won’t go up in flames if I have to wear girl clothes on stage.”

“She has a point. Kurt’s not really an assassin,” Elliott put in.

Santana looked like she wanted to say something back, but couldn’t think of any way to make it dirty. “Could you do ‘Don’t Rain on My Parade?’ Right here?”

“I could, but it’s a rock concert, not a karaoke bar,” Clover replied.

“I just wanna hear the pipes that have Rachel Berry running scared.” Santana sat back and toyed with the rim of her glass, looking antsy. “She hated me as understudy because I’m so much hotter than her.”

“And more modest,” Clover deadpanned.

Mercedes laughed, then touched Santana’s arm. “Don’t be mad! She got you.”

“I am hotter than her.” Santana huffed. “I’m not as loud as her, but I’m hotter, and I’m a better dancer than that two-faced, hook-nosed, jowly screamer.”
Clover grimaced. “You really hate her.”

“Yeah, that’s the thing,” Mercedes said. “You weren’t friends with Rachel before this. But she and Santana? They were kinda close. Or Rachel let Santana think they were close.”

“I’m sorry she broke your heart, Santana,” Clover said.

“I wasn’t in love with her!” Santana sneered.

Clover toyed with her fingers for a moment, then shrugged. “You don’t have to be romantic with a girl for her to ruin you.”

Santana looked as though she’d been struck. Then her face closed, and she rolled her eyes. “Whatever.”

“Um.” Clover started to rise. “I should go. Thanks for the drink, and the advice.”

“No, man. Stay,” Elliott urged. “Watch the rest of the show. You can get an IPA on our tab.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I’m sure Santana would love to hear whatever other dirt you have on Rachel. I lived with her for a few weeks, and she kept calling me her ‘new best gay’ the whole time, even though I hated it.”

Clover wrinkled her nose. “Best… gay? Did you say best gay?”

“She thinks that’s hilarious,” Santana said.

Clover then began to regale them with a story about Rachel traumatizing the production assistants with her lunch order. Before she could finish, Kurt returned, looking tired and a little as though he wanted to cry. Burt followed, and Kurt asked if they could meet up after the show.
“Where are you staying, dad? Are you going to be at the loft? There’s plenty of room, now. I have no idea when I’ll see Rachel next.”

“Yeah, that sounds good.”

“I can give you a key, if you want to go now.”

Elliott raised his brows at this offer. Was Burt sick again? Elliott hadn’t known Kurt when his father had been sick, but… He could still feel the tension of it hanging over every Skype and phone call. Kurt had once said, in a joke that was not a joke, that he had been to more family funerals than weddings.

Under the table, he took Kurt’s hand. Kurt squeezed.

“Nah, I’ll stay. I’m not too old to stay up for a rock show.” Burt’s eyes went to Elliott, then to Mercedes and Santana. “I’ll see you girls later.”

After he’d given them a wave, Elliott lifted Kurt’s hand and pressed a kiss to one of the scars creeping up from Kurt’s palm over his knuckle.

“We can cool it a little in the second act,” Elliott suggested. He didn’t have much experience meeting parents, but maybe the Ziggy and Ronson wasn’t a hit with the older crowd.

“Yeah, I guess,” Kurt muttered, seeming unhappy and distracted.

*

Kurt

Cooling it. Toning it down. Kurt felt miserable when their second set started. This band was supposed to be about him, his visions, his music, his style. Not about what other people might find more acceptable. And yet he couldn’t help but find his dad in the crowd after every unintentional shoulder shimmy, every pointed lyric, every shared chorus with Elliott. What was he thinking? Was his dad really afraid that One Three Hill’s stage act was going to get Kurt killed? Or had he just been expressing his personal discomfort with seeing his son flaunt his sexuality for all to see? (Flaunt—that was the word he could imagine his father using in this context, not embrace or enjoy.)
He looked down at the set list taped to the floor in front of the microphone stand. “For Your Entertainment.” Much discussed on the OTH Facebook fanpage, for many fans this was the highlight of their show. Kurt usually sang his part of the lyrics with relish—now he was actually dreading it. They had a cheeky little bit of choreography where Elliott would walk up as close to the audience as he could, bending forward to touch their hands, and Kurt would ‘spontaneously’ decide to come up behind him and grab his hips. Sometimes Dani joined in and lined up behind Kurt, sandwiching him between their bodies. It was playful and fun, and with their fans screaming for more, moments like these were when Kurt felt on top of his game.

So what now? A bland version of it? Dani was starting the intro chords. Too late to tell Elliott to take over all of the vocals. Kurt took a deep breath, closed his eyes for a moment, and decided to go through with it. Acceptable be damned. Did Lady Gaga ever do acceptable? Madonna? He focused on the fans in the front of the stage, pushing all thoughts of his dad far from his mind, and took up his part of the song, rolling his hips for what he was worth.

*Oh, I bet you thought that I was soft and sweet - ‘ya thought an angel swept you off ya feet*

*But I’m about to turn up the heat*

*I’m here for your entertainment*

He turned on his heels and strutted up to Elliott, delivering his lines with a dark glint in his eyes and a smirk on his lips. He crooked a finger at him, beckoning him forward into a seductive dance. Elliott only paused for a second. Then they were circling each other on stage, all heated looks and provocative moves. The line between stage act and real life was blurring. As Kurt came closer, all he could think of was kissing those lips that seemed to be daring him to do so. So when the song ended, he did. He lowered his microphone and reached for the scruff of Elliott’s neck with his free hand, tugging him into an open-mouthed kiss.

Vaguely, he noticed applause going up around them.

“...and that’s all for tonight, guys,” he heard Dani announce, leaving it in the middle if she meant to address their audience of her band members. They broke away from each other, breathing hard. Elliott offered Kurt a small smile that grew into a grin as he reached for Kurt’s hand and pulled it up, basking in the applause. They bowed, reminded everyone to check out Jopez’ sampler, and left the stage, still holding hands.

“I expect that will be all over Facebook in an hour or so,” Dani commented. “All I could see was smart phones pointed at you guys.”
Kurt would blush, if he weren’t completely flushed already. Then he suddenly remembered something. The one person in the audience who didn’t own a smart phone. He let go of Elliott’s hand. Time to face the music.

“I’ll be right back, okay?” he offered. “I just need to make sure my dad’s okay back there.”

Elliott gave him a concerned look, but didn’t argue. Kurt hurried to the back, easily swinging his long legs over the rope before Elton could take it down. His dad was already off his bar stool, hands thrust deeply into the front pockets of his jeans. Kurt wasn’t sure what to make of his expression.

“Hey,” he tried.

Burt nodded. Kurt chewed his lip. It was that bad, apparently.

“Uh, I just came to tell you we’ll be right out and then we can go home,” he offered.

Burt nodded again. “Yeah, about that, Kurt. I know I said I was gonna stay up but I’m feeling pretty beat. And I asked around, there’s a hotel two blocks from here. If you don’t mind, I’m just gonna take a cab, okay buddy?”

Kurt swallowed. “But Bushwick’s only forty minutes from here! I- I can shower at home, I just need to grab my clothes, I’ll be five minutes-” He broke off when his dad shook his head, shrugging awkwardly.

“No, Kurt, you just… do what you need to do at your own pace. Clean up, get that stuff of your face before you go out into the street-” He pulled one hand free from his pocket and vaguely gestured at his son’s eyes and hair. “I’ll come up and see you in the morning, okay? I’ll bring breakfast.”

The willpower to argue left Kurt the moment his father reminded him to take his stage make-up off. He took a deep breath and let it out in a sigh. “Fine. If that’s what you want. Goodnight, dad.”

“Goodnight, son. You, uh, you guys really know how to work your audience,” Burt offered awkwardly, tugging at his cap. Kurt pressed his lips into a smile and returned to the backstage area.
He found Elliott by himself, sliding his acoustic guitar into its canvas casing. “Dani’s gone up to Santana and Mercedes to help with their cds. Can you believe they are almost out of the whole box?” Elliott said enthusiastically.

Kurt smiled. “That’s great.” He eyed the guitar case and felt the same rebelliousness as before take him. “You know, I’d really like to hear your song again,” he said. “My song.” He curled his fingers into his sweaty palms. “Especially the part about the kisses.”

Elliott’s eyes glittered. “Oh yeah?” he replied, licking his lips.

“Yes,” Kurt confirmed. “Maybe you and your guitar should come back to my place.”

Elliott frowned a little. “Wouldn’t that be… awkward? With your dad staying over?”

Kurt shook his head. “My dad’s… had enough of glitter for tonight. He said he prefers staying at a hotel.”

“Oh.” Elliott stepped up to Kurt and put a hand on his arm, squeezing it softly. “I’m sorry.”

Kurt shrugged. “I haven’t exactly made it easy for him. But he’ll get over himself. And in the meanwhile… I’m kind of glad he’s staying in another part of town.” He pushed himself up on his toes to whisper into Elliott’s ear. “I’m not very good with keeping quiet.”

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The following events were a blur: Getting a free champagne cocktail from the bar, drinking it (and Elliott’s) as they took off their makeup in the dressing room, chatting with the girls and their new red-headed foundling… and then Kurt and Elliott were alone, on their way back to Bushwick, hands never far from one another and grinning like giddy children.

The door to the loft was barely shut when Kurt began peeling out of his clothes. Elliott locked it behind him and turned to look at Kurt with his eyes lit up like it was Christmas.

It was lucky that Rachel didn’t appear to be home, because they didn’t even make it to the bed. Kurt
possessed Elliott’s lips as though someone were trying to grab the man from his grasp, and Elliott’s large hands greedily felt over every part of Kurt’s body. Then, Kurt was tugging at Elliott’s belt and pushing him down onto the couch, and with wide eyes, Elliott watched as Kurt lowered to his knees and took him in whole.

It had been a long time. (Also, Santana had been right with her size estimations)

Afterward, Kurt patted Elliott’s thigh and strode, smugly, into the kitchen to get some water. A minute later Elliott had recovered enough come after Kurt, wrapped his arms around Kurt’s trim waist from behind and devoured his neck with kisses.

“Back for more, hm?” Kurt looked over his shoulder.

“My dad... once told me... that sex is like... getting Chinese food-” Elliott said in between kisses. “It’s not over until you both get your cookie.”

Kurt met Elliott’s eye and turned halfway around. Elliott’s broad hand pressed against the small of his back.

“I- Oh.”

Elliott drew his fingers through the hair around Kurt’s temple. “You... are beautiful.”

Kurt started to dip his head, but Elliott lowered his hand to touch his chin. When he leaned in to kiss Kurt, Kurt pulled back slightly.

“I just... Well, you know what I just did!”

Elliott chuckled. “Doesn’t really pay to be squeamish about that.”

He drew closer to Kurt’s lips again, and Kurt smiled and met him there. Kurt let out a soft gasp as Elliott’s hand drifted down to give his asscheek a firm squeeze. Then things sped up again. Kissing in the kitchen, being lifted up onto the counter by his hips, having his thighs spread wide as a wet tongue spread his cheeks. Kurt was shaking with anticipation by the time Elliott pulled back and
jerked his head toward the bedroom.

Kurt hadn’t planned for the evening to go so far… but he hadn’t really planned much of anything, and he was glad for Elliott’s company. It had really, really been a long time… and it had never been quite like that.

Elliott’s hands were large, but they were also patient, and Elliot was likewise as he devoted a laser-like focus to Kurt’s expression and every single noise and move he made. Unwittingly, Kurt made good on his boast about being unable to keep quiet. Likely people on the street knew what they were doing.

Kurt had come twice before Elliott was done with him, and he lay nearly boneless, curled in Elliott’s arms on top of his bed.

*

Adam

Adam sighed in relief as he finally closed the door of his flat behind him. Longest Friday ever. He had been in the theatre all day, running errands for the stage director, helping people in and out of costumes, worming under the stage floor to retrieve lost props, photocopying scripts, and—though it technically wasn’t in his job description—mopping up sick from an extra who had arrived for dress rehearsals hung over. *One day I’ll be stage director myself and won’t need to deal with this shit anymore*, he had told himself over and over all day long, like a mantra to get him through while he breathed through his nose.

But now he was finally home. Tea. Emails. Bed. Maybe not even in that order. Adam put the kettle on and grabbed his laptop, moving it to his bedroom while it booted. He let himself fall onto the mattress dramatically and closed his eyes until he could hear the whirring of his old hard drive had stopped. Time to check what the UK had been up to. His little sister had been taking her driving test today.

“The streets of Sussex are safe a little while longer,” he muttered to himself as he quickly composed a reply with a few words of comfort and encouragement. It was crazy. How could his youngest sibling be old enough to drive already? When did *that* happen? It felt like she had barely shed the training wheels off her bicycle when he had left for New York. Adam sighed. He was getting old, wasn’t he?

Out of habit more than interest, he clicked Facebook when he was done with his emails. His own
profile was woefully untended, but he did like reading other people’s updates. Maybe one of his Apples had posted something about their latest project. He blinked. The One Three Hill fanpage was filled with new posts. All of them seemed to be pictures and videos of tonight’s concert—or rather, a specific event that had taken place at the concert. It featured Kurt, looking spectacular in his boots and corset, and his band member “I don’t know if we’re dating” Elliott. It seemed Kurt had made up his mind about that.

Adam sucked in a breath. The pictures were clear enough. Did he really need to watch the video? Cursing his own masochism, Adam clicked it, and watched Kurt grab hold of Elliott like his salvation depended on reaching Elliott’s tonsils with his tongue.

Adam’s mouse hovered over the unfollow button, but he ended up closing the page instead. He didn’t want to punish Kurt for finding someone new. He wanted to be a good friend to him. That meant he had to move on himself, too. Maybe if he did, this awful, hollow feeling would finally go away.

Adam snapped his laptop closed with a resolute click, and fished his phone from his back pocket.

“Nikolas? It’s Adam. I’m sorry I’m calling you so late, but I was wondering—Really? Oh. Um, yes, I’d love to, actually. Great. I’ll… I’ll be right there. Cheers.”

Adam lowered his phone and shook his head a little at his own impulsiveness. It seemed the opportunity to move on had just presented itself.

In the kitchen, his kettle whistled.
Chapter Seven

Kurt

“Kurt. Hey.”

A large but gentle hand carefully patted Kurt’s naked shoulder. He groaned and pressed his face into his pillow. It couldn’t possibly be morning yet.

“I’m going to get some breakfast at the bakery down the street,” Elliott said. “Do you want anything?”

“Mmm, no thanks, my dad said he’d-” Kurt suddenly propelled himself away from his pillow and sat up. “My dad!” he shrieked. “I- he- what time is it?”

“Nine thirty,” Elliott replied. He studied Kurt’s wide eyes for a moment. “Do you want me to scram?” he offered.

“I need to get up, I need to shower, I look-” Kurt muttered nervously, ripping the blankets off his legs. Then he seemed to realize what Elliott had said, and his shoulders slumped a little. “Would you?” he asked in a small voice. “I’m sorry, I am not ashamed of you, you mustn’t think-”

“I know that,” Elliott cut him off. “It’s fine. I know things are tense with your dad.” He bent down and kissed Kurt’s temple. “And you look amazing.”

“I have morning breath,” Kurt mumbled, turning away a little, but he was smiling. He reached for Elliott’s hand and pressed it. “Thank you. I’ll call you as soon as I can, okay?”

Elliott nodded and he rose to his feet, extending his hand to Kurt to help him up. Kurt climbed out of the bed and looked up at Elliott. Shower. Go on, he told himself firmly. Now. But his body was leaning forward instead, wrapping his arms around Elliott and pressing his naked body against Elliott’s leather-clad form. The first touch was chilly, and then he slowly felt the warmth of Elliott’s body underneath. Elliott’s arms pressed him even closer. Oh. Oh, this might be a thing, Kurt noticed, heat rising in his cheeks, and he let go quickly before the need to drop back on the bed and pull Elliott on top of him became too strong to resist.
Elliott wasn’t looking quite as Zen anymore either.

They hadn’t parted a second too early. Before Elliott had time to pull himself together and get to the sliding door, there was a knock on the other side. He glanced at Kurt. Kurt sighed in resignation, pulled a sheet from his bed, wrapped it around himself and raised his chin. He nodded at Elliott.

Elliott quickly gathered up his jacket and held it strategically in front of his groin as he slid open the door to reveal a big bag of baked goods with a NYADA cap peeking out over the top.

“Morning, Kurt, I got us some bagels,” Burt started, stepping inside. “I didn’t know what you wanted so I got one of each…”

“Great!” Kurt replied, his voice a little wobbly, from the far end of the room.

Burt lowered the bag and looked over it, first at Kurt and then at the person who had opened the door for him. Then back at Kurt, and his sheet.

“Good morning?” Kurt offered.

Sorry, Elliott mouthed behind Burt’s back, and gave Kurt an awkward wave. Kurt shrugged. “I’ll call you,” he promised again, and watched Elliott nod and pull the door closed behind him.

“So…” his dad trailed off, looking everywhere in the loft but at Kurt.

“So… I should probably shower,” Kurt said.

“I’ll, uh, try to make some coffee,” Burt offered. “Stuff’s in the cupboard?”

Kurt knew now was not the time to insist Burt should be drinking decaf, so he just nodded and made his way to the bathroom. This was awkward, but not more awkward than Burt mentioning old-people-sex with Carole in front of him. He was 19. His dad was just going to have to get over himself.
After Kurt had showered quickly, he slipped on a pair of jeans and a loose-fitting green shirt and pushed the arms up before heading back out to where Burt was. Sitting at the kitchen table, drinking coffee, reading the paper.

“Oh, there you are,” Burt said as he looked up. “Didn’t recognise ya without all the racoon makeup.”

Kurt forced a smile and went to get a coffee cup. The make-up had been gone before they’d left the club, but it wouldn’t be a meeting with his dad without tension and bad jokes. “It’s too bad you didn’t come the night we were all in posh suits doing cabaret-style.”

“Maybe I outta start callin’ before I come… Or that’s what Carole said last night, when I called her from the hotel.”

“How was the hotel?” Kurt poured some coffee, then reached for the Truvia in the cabinet to stir in.

“Fine. But how are you? You look good, now that I can tell. A little skinny. How’s school?”

They didn’t really need to talk about school. They talked about these things every other day on the phone.

“Fine,” Kurt answered.

“Well, are you likin’ your classes? Is it harder to go back?” Burt pressed.

Kurt tried to keep his face neutral, but it was a strange question. “Harder?”

“You know what I mean. After Blaine… after Kitt.”

Kurt looked down at his coffee and rubbed his thumb against the abstract pattern on the side of the mug. “It’s good to have something to throw myself into. The classes are just as hard as they were before… though I’m glad I don’t have the same acting teacher as last semester. He’d want me to talk to the class about everything, and it’s bad enough that everyone passes rumors around about what happened.”
“Oh yeah? They bother you about it? Seems like a funny thing to hassle someone over.”

“They don’t hassle me. They just… They look at me differently. I’m this big hero to them, even though I didn’t accomplish anything except to get hurt and maybe ID two of three murderers.”

Burt stood and fished some bagels out of the bag. “Yeah? They have any leads on the last guy?”

“No.” Kurt shook his head. “After not hearing anything for a few weeks, I called the station. They said one of the guys rolled on him, and they have the name, but they haven’t found him. It’s like the whole thing is at a stand-still.”

Burt held up two little tubs of cream cheese. “Reduced-fat honey walnut or reduced-fat wild blueberry?”

Kurt smiled. “Honey walnut.”

Burt held out the bag for Kurt to choose a bagel. After he’d pointed to a strawberry banana-nut bagel, Burt put it and the everything bagel in the toaster.

“You sounded… sad. On the phone the last time we talked.” Burt leaned against the counter and shrugged. “I know I don’t get up as much as I should. And I should’a come see you perform before now.” He moved forward slightly, raised his brows, and repeated, “I should have.”

Kurt didn’t say anything.

“And I know you don’t tell me everything. You didn’t tell me about Blaine, and you didn’t tell me you were struggling.” Burt paused, and the bagels jumped up.

When Burt didn’t move to get them, Kurt took them out (careful not to burn his fingers), and set them out on plates with a knife neatly posed by each.

“You didn’t tell me you had a new boyfriend.”
“He’s not…”

“So that was just uh, um… a hook-up?”

Hearing the word ‘hook-up’ out of his father’s mouth was alien. He might as well have said “metaphase meiosis” or “interpellation of the subject” or any other specialized language that belonged to someone else.

“No that, either.” Kurt took his plate and his coffee and went to the table. “I guess Elliott and I have to have a talk about what that means.”

“Oh.”

Kurt couldn’t see him, but he guessed that Burt was now fiddling with his hat. Eventually, Burt joined him at the table.

“Sometimes it feels like you grew up so quick, and I missed it,” he said finally.

“We did what we had to,” Kurt said.

“You let me off the hook too much.” Burt shook his head. Then he let out a mirthless laugh. “At least I made the coffee today.”

Kurt frowned, trying to puzzle out what that meant. Of course, Burt had never been great at making the coffee, but he’d done fine… Then Kurt remembered the conversation they’d had, right after Kurt had broken up with Blaine.

*It’s how I’ve always dealt with things. I do the laundry. I make the coffee. I look over the books at the shop. I make sure you take care of yourself. That’s our home, dad.*

Burt had to have realized that was the way things were. Maybe he just didn’t like things laid out so plainly.
“It’s good coffee,” Kurt offered.

Burt made a noise. “Expensive beans. You buy those?”

“No, Rachel did. It was her turn. Not that she drinks coffee much anymore.”

Their conversation had been edging towards something real. Things Burt wanted to ask, but maybe didn’t want to know. But now, it veered off into the trivial, and didn’t return. Kurt wasn’t going to direct it there, not on his own. Offering information on the stresses in his life wasn’t natural to him, and he was now wondering if they ever would be.

Except with Elliott. Although, now, Kurt realized that he’d never explained to Elliott why he was having such a hard time with his rehearsals. Before, he would have. He would have told him every detail. Why was that?

*

Adam

It took Adam a moment after waking up to connect the previous night’s events and his current whereabouts. Why were there pigeons cooing outside when he lived over a very busy street without a balcony? Why did his pillow smell like sweat and cigarettes when he had given up smoking years ago? And how was there a young man curled up against his chest, sleeping soundly, when he had no roommates? The answer came to him as he rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and saw the faded ink of a club stamp on his wrist. Ah, yes. Being “spontaneous.”

Nikolas had been on his way to a club as Adam called—the same one where they had met—and, feeling like this was a good chance to get started into a new life, Adam had decided to join him. After some dancing (and quite some drinking, Adam’s pounding head reminded him), they had ended up at Nikolas’ place. Adam shifted a little on the mattress. His limbs felt sluggish and he was faintly sore, but he remembered enough to know he’d had a good time. Nikolas was attractive, charming, and funny. He was also a good lover. It wasn’t until now that Adam remembered his conversation with Kurt about him.

_We’re keeping it casual. I just want to get to know him a little._

Well, Adam had definitely gotten to know him better. He listened to Nikolas’ even breathing as he
considered what Kurt had told him. Nikolas had been flirting with him, too. Kurt had been too flustered to say so, but it was clear he had been afraid Nikolas was a player. But flirting wasn’t the same as sleeping around. After all, it would have taken a man of very strong persuasion not to flirt with Kurt, especially in a physical class like stage combat. Adam could see it now; a hard workout, adrenaline pumping, weapons clashing. Kurt wearing something practical yet fashionable. His dark grey sweats, most likely, the ones he donned for dancing- loose enough for movement but tight enough to show off his trim waist. A black sleeveless shirt? Or the off-shoulder tee Adam had been so fond of (or maybe no shirt at all)... advancing at him with fire and determination in his eyes, a bo staff or a pair of sais in his hands...

“Mmm… feels like someone’s awake,” Nikolas mumbled, burrowing himself further into Adam’s arms and deliberately pushing his back against Adam’s groin. “Good morning.”

Adam hid his blush in the nape of Nikolas’ neck and pretended he was still more sleepy than he was. It would be best for the both of them if Nikolas simply filed this under ‘morning wood’ and not ‘inappropriate-fantasy-about-the-ex’. He quickly banished the thought of Kurt (shirtless or otherwise) out of his head and tightened his arms around Nikolas.

“Morning.”

*

Kurt

“Oh, morning.” Kurt half-sang to Chase over his shoulder. His hands were full with a tray of lattes and a bag of pastries, and Chase opened the door for him.

“You look all… glowy.” Chase smirked.

Kurt widened his eyes and just smiled. “I can’t imagine why.” Then he dipped his head as the two of them headed for the elevator.

“So how’s your band going?”

Kurt looked up at him and narrowed his eyes. “That’s an interesting question.”
“You guys had a gig the other day, right?” Chase fussed with his collar and attempted nonchalance.

He knew. Had he watched the footage from the recording? Kurt hadn’t thought they’d include too much of One Three Hill.

“Yeah. We did. And my dad showed up to watch us,” Kurt replied.

Chase’s expression confirmed Kurt’s suspicions. If nothing else, it gave Kurt a few minutes to vent about his father’s weird behavior over their show. He’d avoided talking to Elliott too much about it. Now that Elliott was involved in Kurt’s life like this, he needed an outside ‘older gay’ to bounce things off of. Chase was older bi, but it was close enough, since from what Chase was saying, it sounded like Chase’s father hadn’t reacted much differently.

“I’m proud of you, anyway,” Chase said as they left the elevator. “The videos were great. Get back on that horse.”

“I didn’t even tell you the part about the riding,” Kurt joked.

“There’s a part with-” Chase stopped himself as Marina walked past them. Then he pressed his lips together. “I need you to fill me in on that later.”

Kurt smirked. Chase patted Kurt’s shoulder before heading into his office. He was glad Chase was a good listener. Though it seemed like, for Chase, Kurt’s life exploits were always something of a vicarious adventure, as much as he was there as a friend. And he did miss talking to Elliott about these things.

But at least most everyone in the office had stopped looking at Kurt like he was a crazy person.

He set out the coffee and pastries for the meeting that was coming up, and then got pulled into Isabelle’s office for a quick, focused chat about the photographer coming in, and the staff meeting they would have right after that. Kurt would be covering the phones during the first meeting (as it happened sometimes), and she wanted him to sort through the proposals for the new featured section.

“You guys sounded great by the way!” Isabelle said with a laugh. “And looked great. Those were
some *tight* pants. Do you have a tattoo?"

Kurt bit his lip and flushed. They talked for a few more minutes about the video, and how soon Jopez would be up on the site before he settled in to read over the materials Isabelle had handed off to him with his headset on.

After he’d breezed through and sorted the proposals, with comments attached via sticky notes, Kurt looked up at the meeting outside through the door of Isabelle’s office. Still going strong. He answered the phone to take messages twice, and gave Jerry the data he needed for their event the next week. He yawned. He was a little sleepy, and this wasn’t the most engaging work he did during his day.

Kurt licked his lips slowly and smiled, remembering Elliott’s strong arms engulfing him that morning. So warm, and tall. His mind drifted a little further, to Elliot’s hand in his hair, his hands on his hips. Jerking him up onto the bed, and then gently guiding Kurt into a better position as he looked down on him, almost worshipfully.

Kurt’s ears were starting to glow red. He kept thinking about their night together. He might’ve jumped into it because of his father, and the champagne, but it had been fun. It had been *good*. Blaine hadn’t really cared so much about even distribution of cookies, really, as long as he didn’t have to miss out when he wanted it.

Kurt answered another call, feeling his face burning as though the caller had any idea what he was thinking about, and then went back to remembering. Elliott leaning over Kurt just before entering him, to give him a kiss, to see that he still wanted it. Elliott’s noises as Kurt went down on him like a wild thing. Elliott’s hand moving down the small of Kurt’s back, cupping his asscheek, whispering…

“You are perfect.”

Kurt jerked his head up as his ears remembered the sound of the words. No, that wasn’t right.

“You ah puhfect.”

A different set of memories now. Kurt pulling aggressively on a skinny, black tie. Throwing his partner down on the bed. Mounting him like a creature to be devoured. Owning his lips and neck with kisses. Making him moan beneath him.
“Ohhh, Kuht!”

The two memories were strikingly different. Kurt had been in such a different place when he’d been with Adam. Free, for the first time in his adult life, to do whatever he wanted. And Adam was safe, and willing. Kurt had trusted Adam as much as he was able to… but he’d never bowed beneath him and given himself up so completely as he had with Elliott.

On the contrary, Adam tended to spend his time in the bedroom on his back. More than once, Adam had looked a little confused as Kurt shied away from his touch as he tried to return the favor.

Dealing with Blaine (and with Cody, no matter how little he liked to think of it), had left Kurt more closed off than he’d wanted to admit. He wasn’t the type to play the field. He wasn’t the type to play games. He’d never meant to, and Adam hadn’t done anything wrong…

And sex with Adam…

Kurt checked behind Rachel’s curtain quickly, then grabbed Adam’s tie aggressively. Adam’s eyes softened with surprise, and he smiled as Kurt jerked it and then whipped it off him and threw him back against the bed. He appreciated that Adam had dressed up for their first real date, but right now, he needed to be wearing less.

Adam’s smile widened. Kurt curled his lips to the side in a smirk and shimmied out of his shirt, flung it to the side, and then leapt onto the bed.

“So, about those board games…”

“I’m… all about the board games!” Adam laughed and reached around Kurt’s waist.

He pulled back slightly, then pushed Adam back against the bed again and crawled over him, studying his face. His heart was pounding in his ears, and his fingers ghosted across Adam’s well-defined cheekbones.

“What is it?” Adam asked.
“No-nothing.”

Kurt dove in with a kiss, and then another, and another. Adam’s gentle hands moved over Kurt’s naked back. It almost made him angry, this gentleness. This care of touch.

Kurt unbuttoned Adam’s shirt and pushed it back over his shoulders. He squeezed Adam’s biceps and chuckled.

“How are you single? Or don’t you do relationships?”

“Oh, I’m not that type,” Adam said. “I’m really kind of a hopeless sap.”

Kurt continued moving his hands over Adam’s perfectly sculpted pecs, abs… as his hands moved down, he could see that Adam had those ridges along the sides of his pelvis that guys in the magazines had. Kurt felt like a puny twelve-year-old in comparison.

“You?”

“Me?” Kurt looked up. He gave Adam’s jeans a firm tug, revealing the tightly swaddled bulge he was aiming for.

“A hopeless sap?” Adam’s eyes were so… open. It was hard not to give him what he wanted.

Kurt wasn’t sure he had it to give, though.

“I used to be, I guess.” Kurt gave the thickening bulge a squeeze and twisted his lips into a mischievous smile.

Kurt closed his eyes tightly. He didn’t want to think about that. What he’d lost. Adam, yes, first and foremost. But also those parts of himself that Blaine had taken from him. Cody had taken. Dave, too, even though he hadn’t meant to. And all those parts they’d taken, that he’d let them take, until it felt like he had nothing of value left to give.
It had always been good with Adam. He was a generous lover, and friend, to a fault. And Kurt had proudly left him screaming, breathless, and nearly boneless at times. But Kurt wondered what it would’ve been like for them, if Kurt had ever been able to really connect with Adam...

No point in whining about it now, he supposed. He had Elliott… Or did he?

Kurt started organizing the clutter on Isabelle’s desk. He had Elliott. Elliott was his best friend. But while he’d opened up to him physically, Kurt had hesitated to tell Elliott about getting triggered, about his issues with his dad, about his worries with Adam… the latter was obvious, if Elliott and he were really going to get together. The rest, though? Weren’t those the kind of things a best friend—a boyfriend?—should know about?

There was something seriously wrong with him, Kurt decided, if he could tell Elliott everything, up until the moment they became intimate. He needed Elliott in his life, but could he keep going like this? Would they even stay as close as they had been, if Kurt kept pulling away?

“What is wrong with me?” he muttered. “I have these perfect guys, and I just ruin it. What do they even see in me...”

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“The phone’s been ringing for a while now. You might want to pick up.” Chase reminded him gently. “Could be your new boyfriend, after all.” He winked and closed the door again, retuning to the meeting.

Kurt didn’t dare look at his employer as he hastily picked up the phone. It was just Bonnie from Glossy, calling to confirm her boss’ appointment for a few days later. Kurt sighed in relief, but apologized for keeping her waiting anyway. He could just kick himself for being so unprofessional. Feeling he ought to make up for it, he took extra care double-checking the agenda for the upcoming staff meeting, making sure all of the previous meeting’s minutes were up to date. When his cell phone buzzed discreetly, he ignored it. Whoever it was, it could wait. He had a job to do.
From the corner of his eye, he saw the people in the meeting room getting up, and he quickly rose from his seat, stack of printed meeting agendas in his hands. The photographer was already on her phone, taking no further note of Kurt despite his efforts of non-verbally expressing his availability should she need assistance getting her coat or calling a cab. Chase shot him a smile and pulled a pack of cigarettes from his breast pocket. “Two minutes,” he mumbled, and suddenly, Kurt was alone with Isabelle.

“I’m sorry-”

“Is everything okay?”

Kurt and Isabelle spoke at the same time. His boss gave him a questioning look. “It’s not Blaine, is it?” she asked carefully.

“Blaine?” Kurt replied, frowning a little.

“I thought he might have been calling you again, and that was why you didn’t pick up.”

“Oh!” Kurt quickly shook his head. “No, no, I’m fine. It wasn’t Blaine. I haven’t heard from him in months. Thank god for that, right?” He let out a huff of breath in surprise. He never thought he’d be saying that, but he really meant it. The last thing he needed right now was his ex-fiancé complicating things.

Isabelle gave him an expectant look.

“Oh, it was Bonnie. I said you were still okay with Friday, and I confirmed with the sushi place.”

His boss nodded, but still seemed to be checking him out for signs of distress.

“I’m fine,” Kurt assured her. “I was just… getting everything ready for our staff meeting and I didn’t notice-”
“Oh yeah, our meeting. Can you stall everyone for five minutes? Just tell them they can eat the leftover doughnuts. I have to check my mails, and I really need to pee. Thanks!” Isabelle hurried off as fast as her high-heeled shoes allowed her, and Kurt looked after her, letting out a long breath. He wasn’t sure what he had done to deserve such a caring employer, but it must have been something good.

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During the meeting, Kurt’s phone (on silent) had been buzzing itself nearly apart. When Kurt checked the first two callers, and found that it wasn’t a family member to give him grim news, he slipped it back in his pocket and tried to ignore it. Isabelle was busy telling them the number of hits their music video had gotten overnight and the requests from higher-up for follow-up coverage on both bands. Momentarily, Kurt let himself be distracted from everything. This was a break. It could be a huge one for Mercedes and Santana. He couldn’t wait to congratulate them. That must be why they had such a strong urge to reach out and touch him during the meeting.

When the meeting was over, he excused himself for a break and started to check his messages.

The first, and latest sent, was from Elliott, *Don’t listen to them at all, babe. If you want, I’ll come over tonight.*

Kurt frowned and scrolled back. *Talking to the guy who reuploaded the video now and seeing if some of the worst can get deleted from the comments section. Some people just can’t control themselves. You were OTT amazing at that performance, and anyone who gets on the video and only focuses on the most stereotypical aspects of you is both stupid and tone deaf.*

Now blood was rushing through his ears as his heart thudded away, apparently understanding what was happening before his mind did. Kurt began to scroll through the other messages he had gotten: First, Mercedes telling him that someone had ripped the video from the Vogue site last night and put it on YouTube where it had gotten almost 10,000 views before getting pulled down for copyright infringement. Then, that it had been reposted that morning. Apparently the reposter had advertised it on his blog, then Mercedes had called her manager and told him to make sure the record company let it stay up, and now the video had nearly 60,000 views, and climbing.

Mercedes had provided the link to the blog, so he clicked on the link, rather than the video itself, considering Elliott’s warnings. The first thing that loaded was a .gif of him, back to the audience, shaking his tightly-clad booty rapidly. It was followed by a brief blurb about YouTube being run by Nazis, another gif of Santana getting low in her dress, and her cleavage dipping forward as she shimmied. Then came praise for both bands as “mindfuck awesome,” and encouragement to support them and “go see the video before YouTube yanks it again!”
The ending .gif showed Kurt grabbing Elliott and kissing him over, and over, and over.

Kurt hadn’t realized during that moment on stage his tight pants had been slipping down precariously, and his cheeks started to redden at how scandalous the view actually was. Maybe he should take a look at the video... but not now. He should really tell Isabelle what was going on, if Mercedes’ management hadn’t gotten around to it yet.

As he headed back to the office, Kurt’s head felt stuffed full. He and Santana were on the internet as ever-shaking pieces of cheesecake. She probably loved it. He wasn’t sure how he felt.

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Later that day, Kurt hurried up the stairs to the Jopez abode where Mercedes had instructed him to come (and bring some wine). The others were already there, plus that girl from the gig. As Santana greeted him with a hug and a kiss on the cheek, she caught Kurt looking at her and insisted, a little too forcefully, “Dani invited her. I guess she’s interested, or something.”

That didn’t seem likely, since Dani had a girlfriend. She was out of town, but Dani wasn’t like that.

“What’s her name again?” Kurt asked quietly.

“Oh. Clover.”

Before they could say anything else, Mercedes was there, hugging him forcefully, and he was dragged over to the table where some wine was already cracked open and they had laptops open. Elliott came over to put his arm around Kurt, and kissed his neck.

“They were just answering some questions in the comments section. The blogger, MistahJane, wants to do a Skype interview sometime,” Elliott explained.

“I thought we weren’t supposed to read the comments?” Kurt asked.
“No, you shouldn’t read the comments.” Santana picked up her glass and looked at him pointedly.

Kurt blinked. “Are they bad? A-are we an internet joke? Or just me?”

Kurt braced himself against a prom queen flashback.

“No, no!” Elliott insisted. “It’s not a joke! But some of the comments are kinda… directly mean. I mean, they called me and Mercedes and Dani fatties.”

“Whatever.” Dani waved her middle finger at one of the laptop screens. “Anyway, it’s not like they’re taking over the comments. There are some really mean ones, and then there are a bunch of people defending you, too.”

Kurt didn’t know how to respond. He let Dani put a glass of wine in his hand and took a seat near one of the computers.

“Remember, boos are just applause from ghosts,” Clover instructed. Santana frowned at her, and she shrugged. “Wisdom from drag queen Sharon Needles. But among the ghosts, it looks like you’ve all got a lot of fans already.”

“So the response is… good?” Kurt leaned in to read the top comment.

_How can’t YouTube keep up garbage like Blurred Lines and not support artists like Jopez and OneThree? And I do mean artists! Look at how the whole performance is choreographed from outfit to theme-- these kids are sharp and fucking talented, and anyone who doesn’t like it, TO THE LEFT SON!

The second highest comment read simply: DAT ASS

The responses to that one seemed to be arguing which ass they were talking about, but aside from a few jerks complaining about Mercedes’ size, there was overall agreement about the quality of ass they were given.

“It’s good,” Mercedes confirmed, petting his hair and then resting her hand on his shoulder.
“Well, then, stop worrying about me and enjoy it!” Kurt appreciated their concern, but he’d dealt with worse back in Lima, and on the streets of New York. He’d be bullied for the rest of his life, probably.

Surrounded by them all, Kurt continued to skim down the comments. Occasionally, Santana or Elliott would read one out loud, dramatically. And they all cringed or laughed. At a particularly long and nasty one, Clover launched into a voice twice as high as her regular dusky drawl:

“OMIGOD, do you people haf ears? I never herd such trash in my hole lif! Ur all ofviously retarted and gay, liking bands led by trannies with their ass and boobs haning out—” Clover fanned herself with one hand and feigned clutching her pearls with the other. “—an humping each other like dogs its disgusting! Ur all disgusting YOU NEED JAYYSUS!”

Being called a tranny hit Kurt right in the chest and brought back uncomfortable memories of Kitt, and what his father had said the night before, but he couldn’t remain serious with the end of that comment. Especially not with the revival Southerner twang that Clover had added to it.

“Oh, no, honey,” Mercedes said to the screen. “You need Jesus. We already got Him on our side.” Mercedes started to sing an energetic church song, clapping her hands, and soon the others started clapping their hands as well, and Clover danced away from the table with a high-stepping jig. Santana stopped clapping and just covered her mouth with one hand, watching with amused, admiring eyes for a moment, before she got up and came out to lock arms with Clover and dance around in a circle.

Kurt sipped his wine, smiling from ear to ear.

Dani hugged him from behind. “I told them you’d be okay. You’ve got a lotta defenders out there, and anyway, you’re a tough little kitty.”

Kurt turned to her. “Mrow.”

Dani laughed and picked up the bottle to top off both of their glasses. “I think it was mostly Elliott and Mercedes who were worried. And Santana, too, though she didn’t want to talk about it. They love you, and she wasn’t here when all of the stuff went down. She wishes she’d been able to be there, especially for the stuff with Blaine.”

“Santana?” Kurt shrugged. “It’s all over now, though. Except, y’know. The trial, if they ever get
around to it.”

Dani rubbed his back.

“I don’t know why she feels like she has to be there for me. I wasn’t always there for her, back in high school,” Kurt added.

“She probably made it hard for you to do that. It’s difficult for Santana to let people in. Sometimes she sabotages it. When you care for someone a lot, and do everything you can to help them, and take care of them, and make them proud, and then they just… turn on you. It’s shattering. It makes it that much harder to let yourself be loved again.”

Dani laid her head on Kurt’s shoulder, and their eyes met.

“Are you talking about Rachel or her grandma?” Kurt muttered. “Or Brittany.”

“She’s still friends with Brittany.”

“And she’s still friends with you. But she broke up with you both kind of abruptly.” Kurt took a deep breath. “It felt like, when she broke up with you, it was almost like when I broke up with Adam. We hadn’t been going out long enough to have any problems, but I was just…”

“Yeah. I knew she just needed to get away from it. I do care for her, but I can’t fix everything. And I can be there for her better as a friend she trusts.” She shrugged. “It’s okay. It’s okay to be friends with exes.”

“Unless exes are only being your friend to get back in your pants.”

She nodded. “Unless exes are Blaine.”

Kurt chuckled softly.

“Anyway, I understand breaking up with someone before things really get going because you’re
scared. That happens.” Dani picked up her glass and swished the wine around.

“It happens. And then in thirty years, you live alone with forty cats, wearing a muumuu around the house.”

Dani let out a cackle. “I don’t know whether to imagine you or Santana in that! I’ve never seen either of you wear something that loose!”

“Mean.” Kurt lifted his chin and pretended to be offended. The impromptu ‘church service’ seemed to be dying down.

As the party moved away from the laptops to the area with the sofa and a few chairs, Kurt let Elliott sweep him up in his arms and sit with him, folded nearly together, on one of the chairs. Were his doubts about Elliott just fear? God, he hoped so. Was he just sabotaging things? Trying to poke holes in it, believing the worst would eventually come, and heading things off before it happened? He’d opened himself up to Elliott, a lot, and now almost without thinking, he was shutting him out. This couldn’t last, not like the way things were. Kurt had to figure it out, before he lost everything between them.
Chapter Eight

KURT

The following days, the hype about their video grew even bigger. The venue had called and asked to book them again (Jopez and OTH) and Isabelle had already set her team on designing a new look for the follow-up piece they were going to do. It seemed like their big break had arrived. It was a little unnerving; Kurt already felt like he had gotten his big break with landing the Samael part, and with Elliott. Things were almost too good to be true, which was why the events of the day didn’t surprise him. Terrify him, yes— but something like this could have been expected. It was his special Kurt Hummel Karma.

But even amidst the sudden, unasked-for internet attention, Kurt still had his Samael rehearsals. Today’s group was small, just himself and Marco, Jasper, Beltre, Alison’s assistant Jamie, and the stage hands. They were working on an intimate scene between Kurt and Marco. In particular, Marco’s solo, the one they had written especially for him. It was his big moment.

Kurt enjoyed watching Marco shine. His own part consisted of back-up lines and dancing only. He was supposed to fool the audience into thinking Marco was his next victim, only to have them end up on the bed together. He moved around Marco while the other man sang, picking up and playing with several heavy-looking objects but putting them down again without using them as a weapon, taking out his knife to twirl it playfully around in his fingers, and leading Marco precariously close to the window but then turning to push him down onto the bed instead. It was a subtle but fun choreography, and the song was pleasant and sweet (and followed by the sensual reprise of one of Kurt’s earlier numbers). They did the first few run-throughs without music, and then took a small break to go through it again with the score afterwards.

Kurt used the opportunity to check on the video. It was still amazing to him how many people actually took the time to leave comments-- and most of them were even positive! That was until his eyes caught on a single comment, left anonymously, that made his heart skip a beat.

We should have killed you when we had the chance.

Kurt tried scrolling past it, to see something, anything to take his mind off it, to stop himself from hearing it in their voices, but the screen of his phone blurred before his eyes and his hands started shaking.

Do you think you’re a fucking ninja or something?
He wasn’t sure how much time had passed, but at some point he vaguely heard Jamie tell him they were almost ready for the scene on stage. He nodded and put his phone away.

*Come on, you can do this,* he admonished himself. *Give them your show-face, Hummel.* He squeezed his eyes tightly shut and concentrated. It helped that he wouldn’t have to do the bulk of the singing. Just a few more run-throughs of the scene and then he could go. He let out a long breath and opened his eyes again, making his way to the stage with determination.

“Promise me, Lonan, that this is forever,” Marco sang, “let us make ties that no one can sever!”

“Not with a thousand knives,” Kurt answered, smiling sweetly before throwing a sinister look at the audience. “We’ll be together for the rest of our lives.”

Kurt went through the steps, his hands surprisingly steady as he played with the stage knife, and for a few moments, he didn’t think of the anonymous message at all. But he couldn’t stop his mind from coming back to it, repeating it over and over until it drowned out Marco’s singing. By the time the scene was over and they were face to face, Kurt was holding onto Marco to stop himself from shivering.

“Are you okay?” Marco whispered in his ear, not letting go just yet.

“I need… a moment,” Kurt replied, hating himself for having to admit it. He did not want to throw another scene. He definitely did not want another talk with Alison. Although she had grudgingly agreed to accommodate his issues with the strangulation act, whenever he saw her now he felt she was waiting for him to diva out.

Marco slipped his arms from Kurt’s shoulders and turned to their stage hand. “Can I please have a glass of water before we do another round?” he asked. “Um, non-carbonated, if possible.” He gestured at his throat and cleared it raspily.

The stage hand raised an eyebrow but nodded and hurried off.

“That will probably take a while. The vending machines only have sparkling water,” Marco said quietly.

Kurt nodded gratefully.
“Did I do something to trigger you… your… um… the thing?” Marco started, but Kurt quickly shook his head. He didn’t want to be reminded of the fact that everyone on the crew now knew about his problems.

“It’s stupid,” he said, looking down on his fingers and fretting with his cuticles. “Someone left a comment on a video from my band, and I just-” He shook his head. “I shouldn’t be reading stuff like that while I’m at work. It’s unprofessional.” Kurt wasn’t sure if he was talking to Marco or himself.

“Nah, that’s not stupid,” Marco replied. “I bet 90% of the comments are great. And those other 10% are just jealous because you are so good.” He offered Kurt a fond smile. “Don’t sweat the haters, right?”

Kurt shrugged. “Yeah, I know, but… this is different. I’ve been called lots of names before, I’m pretty much used to that.” He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “The death threats are a little less common.”

Marco’s eyes went wide. “Someone threatened to kill you?” His lips twisted up in a nervous, jittery smile. “You mean in a harmless, fan-crazy hyperbole, right? Like OMG I love you so much I’m gonna kill you! …and then lots of heart-eyed smiley faces?”

Kurt smiled back, though it was clear from his eyes that it wasn’t really funny. “I wish,” he replied. “No, I think I can tell the real ones from the poorly phrased compliments by now.”

“By now?” Marco echoed. “Someone threatened you before?”

Kurt shrugged. “Sort of. Back in high school. In retrospect, I don’t think he could have really done it, but back then, it was scary enough for me to change schools. And he was more than a little unstable for a while. Until he had to get help.” He sighed. “This is different. If this was left by who I think left it, it’s not just an expression. I saw him kill someone before my eyes. And now he’s saying he wished it had been me.”

“Oh my God.” Marco gaped. “You should report it to the police!”

Kurt laughed mirthlessly. “Yeah. Like they’d do anything about an anonymous comment on YouTube. They don’t even do anything when I identify two of the guys from a line-up. All they can tell me is that it’s an ‘ongoing investigation’ and that they are ‘working on it’. I heard they found out the name of the third guy too, but did they find him? And what happened to the two other guys? Are
they still being detained? Did they get out on bail? No one tells me *anything*, and meanwhile they could be back out there on the streets, waiting to take out the *single eyewitness* to their crime!”

He rattled off his worst fears, growing more and more agitated as he spoke, voicing thoughts he hadn’t even finished formulating in his head when he had seen the message. It was like all of his frustrations of the past weeks were all falling out of his mouth at once. Despite his best efforts not to, Kurt was shaking again.

“You know, we should call it a night here,” Marco suggested. “I can take you to the subway?”

Kurt shook his head. “No. I want to finish this scene. And I have a shift at the diner at eight anyway, so it’s no use stopping early.” He took a few steadying breaths. Maybe if he just distracted himself enough…. “How about we go through the steps again while we wait for your drink? And maybe this time, we pause a little longer by the window and really make it seem like he’s about to fall?”

Marco smiled. “Oh, he’s falling alright,” he said fondly.

Kurt saw a world of unspoken thoughts in Marco’s eyes, and it built him up more than anything he could have said. In a way, Marco reminded him of Adam; who also seemed to know when to stop pushing. He accepted Marco’s support gratefully and got back to work.

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After rehearsal, Marco walked Kurt to the subway, under pretense of continuing their conversation about Samael and Jasper’s ‘off-screen’ moments together, and how they related to one another. True, Marco liked talking about these things, and getting Kurt’s perspective on where characters were coming from. Sometimes Kurt would just start speculating, and then he’d remember something from his narrative theory class, or something his acting teacher had said, and Marco got this look on his face… like he was attending a lecture or something.

It was a little awkward, but really, Kurt had the benefit of attending these classes. Marco didn’t. Not yet, although Kurt would try his hardest to put in a good word for him. Kurt knew that if he were in Marco’s position, outside of NYADA but near to someone with access to that kind of training, he would be listening to any scrap of information, absorbing any stray bit of training he could. It was in fact exactly what he’d done when he’d been rejected from NYADA and Rachel was embroiled in her first semester.

Their conversation kept Kurt distracted far into the ride on the subway, but eventually, they had to part ways. Marco offered to walk him to work, but Kurt had declined, since it wasn’t far from the
subway.

He should’ve accepted, Kurt realized, as he passed the alleyway and the words from YouTube echoed in his ears again. It was like being haunted. And now he was chilled, and shaking. If they were out there, if they were watching him… Wouldn’t it just make it easier for them, if he weren’t there? The police weren’t doing much in Kitt’s case as it was, but if they had no witnesses, then how would they prosecute at all? The defense could just call everything else circumstantial… except the blood under Kitt’s nails. He’d scratched the one guy to hell.

Someone bumped into his shoulder, and Kurt jumped a mile. He had passed the Spotlight Diner.

“Outta the way! Christ!”

Kurt stepped back, crossed his arms tightly over himself and headed back to the diner.

Over the first half of his shift, he dropped two plates, messed up four orders, and tripped and faceplanted right onto the floor once. It didn’t help that he kept looking around the diner, expecting to see the faces of his would-be killers.

“Whoa.” Santana appeared behind him and grabbed his arm before he dropped another plate. “You high?”

“No. No, I’m um… It’s nothing.” Kurt turned his head as another group of people entered the diner.

“I’ve never seen you this freakin’ twitchy.”

“Maybe I should take one of those blue apathy pills the doctor gave me,” Kurt muttered. He rubbed his forehead. “Remind me not to look at any more of the comments on our viral video.”

She tilted her head to the side and frowned.

He set the saved salad in front of his patiently waiting customers, then let Santana lead him into the back. Reluctantly, he told her what the comment had said and what he suspected.
“You think they’re that dumb? I guess they must be, not to get outta town after murdering someone.” Santana shook her head. “Well, you’re probably okay in here, right? Why come after one witness with witnesses everywhere? Anyway, they’re probably just trying to scare you.”

She blustered, but didn’t really sound convinced of what she was saying. She put her hands on her hips and leaned forward. “Hey, if they come at you here, they’ll have to go through a whole lotta Lima Heights first!”

Kurt quirked his lips to the side. Santana was like a kitten puffed up; she thought she was three times her size.

“I’ll be okay.”

“Maybe stay with someone tonight. You should tell the cops, too.”

Kurt shook his head. “They won’t do anything.”

“What we need is one of those computer hackers that can trace who made that comment back to wherever they are.”

“This isn’t a movie.” Kurt went over to the window and picked up a pair of new plates for a table he’d already screwed up. “If it were, they’d already be on trial. As is… I don’t know if they ever will. I don’t know if anyone really cares, except for me and Kitt’s family and community. It was barely in the news.” He looked out over the packed restaurant. “Maybe, if I don’t get fired before opening night, the reporters will spare a couple of minutes from football when they kill me in the street.”

“Hey! That’s not going to happen,” Santana protested. “We’ll-”

“Could you two get your asses back to work?” Gunther demanded behind them. “We’re already behind in the kitchen because of all of your mistakes tonight.”

That wasn’t really fair. Santana hadn’t made any mistakes. Although she’d come pretty close to telling that one old lady who didn’t seem to understand that Santana spoke English perfectly well to
Kurt nodded and hurried out to give the table their food. Then he swung around to refill all the glasses he could and clear away plates. He needed to focus on the here and now. Santana was right that cold blooded murder in the middle of a busy diner was probably too stupid a move, even for those assholes. The understanding didn’t keep Kurt’s skin from prickling or his hands from shaking.

Two of the waitresses went up to sing some Taylor Swift for a customer, unintentionally making it a lesbian Love Story, which caused devilish smirks from Santana cast in his direction. Kurt held up his fingers in a ‘V’ shape and waggled his brows. She stuck her tongue out in response and wiggled it up and down.

Then a hand touched his shoulder, and he dropped the plate in his hands as he spun around. It hit the floor and shattered loudly. A surge of prickling cool adrenaline rushed through his body, and his heart wouldn’t slow down as he stared at the man behind him.

“Christ, I’m sorry. I just wondered if you could get us some dessert, since our server is on the stage,” the man said.

He actually looked nothing like any of the men who had attacked Kitt. Kurt took a deep breath.

“N-no, no. It’s o-okay. Um, l- Let me take your dessert order, and I’ll put it in while I’m getting the b-broom,” Kurt managed, although his voice sounded like he was on a bumpy car ride.

Gunther cornered him by the order window just as he was putting up table six’s dessert order.

“What the fuck is wrong with you? You know those plates aren’t disposable, right?” he demanded, loudly.

“He startled me,” Kurt said weakly. “I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

“What is it with you kids from Ohio? Can’t show up at work on time, disappear for weeks at a time-”

“I was in the hospital when that happened.”
“That Santana disappears for the whole summer. Rachel missed shift after shift and showed up when she felt like it until she blew us off for Broadway. That boyfriend of yours stopped coming to work without so much as a word of notice!”

Kurt hadn’t known about that, but it wasn’t really his responsibility to make others come to work.

“I don’t disappear, though, not without notice. Not without a reason,” Kurt said.

“Tonight you have cost us more than you’re worth. You know that? You’re a fucking basketcase, and none of the customers request you as a singer. Get it together, or don’t bother at all!”

Kurt leveled his gaze at Gunther and crossed his arms. “Fine.”

“Excuse me?”

“Fine. Consider this my two weeks’ notice.” Kurt reached up for the desserts that Gabe had put on the window.

“Forget it,” Gunther snapped. “Just get out of here!”

Kurt’s hand fell to his side. The singing onstage had lulled when the plate crashed, but now it had stopped altogether, and the restaurant was quiet. The silence stretched on for another moment before Kurt heard Santana’s shoes stomping forward.

“It’s okay,” Kurt said before she started running her mouth and got herself fired, too. “You know I had too much on my plate anyway.”

“Rita breaks a plate every day she’s here, and she doesn’t get fired!” Santana argued.

“Rita gets requested every night!” Gunther snapped. “The customers like Rita.”
“They like her ti-”

“They” Kurt took her hand. “It’s okay. I worked here as long as I could.”

Santana looked between Kurt and Gunther. Her own financial status was unstable until things started to pick up with their record deal, so it wasn’t like she could tell Gunther where to shove this job. Yet.

Kurt pointed to the window. “Could you get those pieces of pie to table six?”

“Yeah, sure.” Santana continued to scowl, but did as she asked.

Kurt let out a sigh and went to the break room to pick up his things. He was shaking even more now. His hands didn’t want to hold steady enough to open up his locker. He really should have called in sick to work today. He grabbed his things as quickly as he could, and then headed for the door.

Outside it was cold, and he hung by the door for a minute, unsure of what to do. The subway stop wasn’t that far. But it was far enough. And this area. Right now, Kurt wondered why he’d wanted to work around here again at all. After the attack, he had just wanted to pick up his life just as he had lived it before, but maybe he should start accepting that that wasn’t possible.

He looked down at his phone, trying to decide who to call. If he called Elliott, he’d have to explain. If he called Adam, would that be pushing their friendship too far? ...If he called one of them, and they came to protect him, would they get hurt?

Would they die?

Eventually, he went to the street and hailed a cab. He didn’t want to be alone tonight, but right now, he just needed to get home.

---

When the cab stopped in front of Kurt’s building, Kurt managed to gather himself together long enough to pay the cabbie and scramble up the stairs. The moment he was inside the apartment he locked the door behind him. He stood still for a few seconds.
Then, holding his arms and touching his lips lightly, his eyes began to flit around the large, dark room worriedly. This wasn’t a good area of town. Not a terrible one, but… still. Would his neighbors stop a couple of thugs from coming up here? From lying in wait, and then…?

He dropped his bag and went around the apartment turning on every light, even the bathroom. He pulled back the privacy curtains. He ran to the window and checked the locks. But what would keep them from climbing up the fire escape and busting open the windows? He scanned the streets for movement.

A loud knock on the door made him nearly jump out of his skin. Kurt stared at the door, frozen.

“Hey, Kurt?” Dani’s voice called through the door. “You in there?”

Kurt touched his chest and let out a heavy breath, then headed to the door.

“Dani, you scared me to death!” he said after he’d pulled the door open again.

There she stood with her blue hair pulled back into a messy ponytail, carrying a backpack and a big paper bag. She frowned and set the bag down to wrap her arms around him.

“Santana called me. She said you were really freaked out. Can I come in?”

“Yeah, of course.” Kurt sighed, letting her hold him for a moment longer, then stepped back to let her in.

“I brought cake. Technically, it’s cake for work tomorrow, but I can pick something up on my way there.”

Kurt nodded absently. He looked to check again that the door was locked.

“Do you want to change into something comfy? I could call Elliott and make it a One Threepover,” Dani suggested, setting the paper bag on the table and reaching in for the cake.
“No, no, no-” Kurt waved at her, trying to sound more casual. “No, you don’t have to. Please don’t? I just… I guess I’ll go change. I’m fine. I haven’t had a moment to think yet.”

“I’m right here,” Dani called after him.

Kurt stood in front of his dresser, torn between criticizing himself for panicking and wondering where those guys were right now.

He changed out of his Spotlight uniform into a pair of black pajama bottoms and a dark green sweater, then came out to sit with Dani on the couch. She wrapped her arm around his and rested her head on his shoulder.

“How’s my kitty?”

Kurt drew in a deep breath. “Scared.”

“That’s okay.”

“I can’t even tell if this threat is real.”

“Real as in the comment was there when Santana called me. It exists.”

“No, I mean…” Kurt pushed his free hand in his hair.

“And it’s obviously real to you. It was threatening and meant to be a threat,” Dani said flatly.

Kurt let out a heavy sigh and let his head drop back. “Let’s order pizza or something.”

“Yeah? Pie and cake.” She smiled.
“I don’t really care what it is.” Kurt could hear his voice growing defeated and gravelly. “Order what you like. I should’ve eaten before, but I’m not even hungry. I just want to take a pill, and if I don’t eat something and split the pill, it’ll just make me even more loopy.”

Dani nodded and leaned in to kiss his cheek. “Gotcha. Good thinking. I like pizza.”

---

It was very late and Kurt had already dozed off on Dani's shoulder in front of the TV twice when the loft door slid open-- and Rachel made her dramatic entrance. The door hung wide open, letting in the cold air from the hallway, and she just stood there for a moment, waiting for them to notice her.

Kurt didn't have the energy to tell her off for wasting their heating. His half-pill and the events of the day had drained him. He simply closed his eyes and braced himself for a volley of lines from *Funny Girl*, or possibly a play-by-play retelling of all the imagined slights her understudy had done to her today. "Wake me when she's done," he whispered into Dani's ear.

"You might want to be awake for this one," Dani replied, her eyes going over Rachel's appearance. She still had her stage make-up on, though it was partly smudged. She was carrying several large bags of clothes and appeared to be wearing two coats. All that was missing were a few stray cats winding around her legs.

"I'm so done," she announced without prompting.

Kurt wrenched open his eyes and sat up. "I can see that," he managed in a slow drawl. "What happened? Are those all your Fanny costumes?" He thought he recognized a few hats and a sailor outfit spilling from one of the bags. He sincerely hoped it wasn't late night emergency makeover time again. It was the last thing he needed right now.

"I quit," Rachel said. "Let them have her. If that's what they want, so be it. I won't stand by and watch them destroy Barbra's heritage by changing everything people love about Fanny. I won't!!"

Kurt shook his head, trying to clear it. "Wait, what? You quit? You quit *Funny Girl*!"

Rachel raised her chin. "Yes. It's over. They have wasted their chance. They had me and my talent, and they have chosen to throw away their production on an amateure." She draped her coats over a
nearby chair and finally closed the door with a hard push, probably imagining she was slamming it into someone's face.

Slowly, Rachel’s point began to dawn on Kurt. "You mean Clover?"

Rachel rolled her eyes. "Yes, of course I mean Clover! She's been after my part ever since she got cast as my understudy. It's like Santana all over again, only with more clothes on. I mean, in *her* case, I could see why the director hired her, but this girl Clover? Some days when she comes in I can't even tell her apart from the riggers!"

"*So she looks a bit off-balance, she possesses golden talents,*" Kurt hummed under his breath, wondering if Rachel ever really understood the point of Fanny's struggle in *Funny Girl* at all.

"What did she do?" Dani asked. Her arms were crossed a little defensively. However nicely she spoke right now, Dani had been the one keeping Clover in mix of their little group; she probably didn’t appreciate Rachel’s commentary.

"*What didn't she do?*" Rachel sighed. "She completely undermined me at everything I was trying to accomplish. Sabotaging my diet. Criticizing my dresses. Always sucking up to my vocal coach, insisting on being at every *single* one of my sessions-"

"Isn't that the *point* of an understudy?" Dani tried, but Rachel cut her off.

"To *spy* on me. And I'm pretty sure she spread rumors about me, too."

Kurt shook his head. "Like how you told her you suspected that when I sleepwalk, I sometimes sneak into your closet and put on your clothes?" When Clover told him this, it had seemed too ludicrous even for Rachel, but now he realized it wasn't. Clover had even seemed embarrassed to repeat it. Somewhere in the last few months, *one* of them had completely lost their mind-- and though he was the one taking pills, it wasn't him. "I would never, *ever*, wear your clothes, Rachel-- not even in my sleep."

"I didn't- that was just a *joke,*" Rachel protested. "I can't believe she'd take it out of context like that! We were talking about *being in the closet.*"

"And you figured there *had* to be a laugh about gay men cross-dressing in there somewhere?" Kurt finished. "Thanks, Rach."
"Kurt, come on. I need my best friend on my side, here," Rachel pleaded. "You know I'd never mean that. That's just the way Clover works. She set me up, making me look bad, and then she made them choose."

Kurt glanced at Dani. He could tell she was biting down on a small smile. It appeared Clover had taken Santana's advice, and Dani was fucking tickled pink about it.

_Viva les filles._

"So… you didn't _actually_ quit?" he asked calmly. "She told them it was her or you… and they chose her?"

Rachel didn't reply, but her quivering lip said enough. "Well, I didn't wait for them to make it official, anyway," she offered defensively. "They told me their lawyer would be in touch with me to negotiate ending my contract, and I told them not to bother. I just packed up and left."

Kurt closed his eyes. It was Rachel storming out of the choir room all over again. Would she ever learn?

“Seriously?” Dani shook her head. “You know that by quitting, they don’t owe you anything, right? If they’d _fired_ you, they’d have to give you some severance. I _know_ you don’t have another job lined up, and quitting looks way worse on you than firing you looks on _them._”

“I wouldn’t expect you to understand, _Dani,_” Rachel replied shrilly. “There’s a principle involved. Broadway has _standards._”

“Yes, they do. Like skill and innovation.”

“Exactly!”

“And Clover’s a _way_ better actor than you.”
Rachel gasped. “I don’t need to take this kind of judgement in my own house—” she sputtered. “What are you doing here, anyway? Why are you always here? Kurt is *my* best friend, not yours.”

Kurt, who had sat frozen for the exchange between the two women, finally recovered enough to speak. “First off, Rachel: I live here too, and I get to choose my own friends. And second: in all the years I have known you, I have seen you do some crazy shit-- mostly at the expense of other people-- but this probably tops all of it. What did I tell you last time? *There’s a time and place*—”

“To be a diva, I know,” Rachel admitted grudgingly.

“Exactly, and that time is *not* when you are about to achieve your lifetime dream!”

“But it’s not my dream if I don’t get to do it the way it should be done!” Rachel whined. “It’s a nightmare!”

Maybe it was the drugs, or the hour of night, or maybe Kurt had simply reached his absolute fill of Rachel-crazy… Whatever it was, words were coming out of his mouth completely without filter now. He no longer cared to wrap them in fluffy faux fur shawls from Sax Fifth Avenue to protect Rachel from the big bad world because of what they had been through together, or because she reminded him of himself a little. If this killed the last spark of their friendship, so be it.

“You know what, Rachel? If that is the worst nightmare you’ve got, let’s switch dreams right now. I’ll take whatever fear of rejection you might have developed in that cushioned, privileged little life of yours and dream about it gladly, and you can dream about being beaten up, taken advantage of, strangled, and nearly killed. Or maybe you’d prefer the dreams in which someone is killed before your eyes. Or the ones that have someone breathing down your neck, whispering ‘You’re next’? You can have them all, Rachel, because I’m tired of dreaming them every single night.”

His hands were shaking again now, but Kurt didn’t notice until Dani took one of them and closed her hand around it.

“It was just a figure of speech,” Rachel replied meekly. “I didn’t mean to imply—”

“You never do,” Kurt cut her off. “But I’m tired of it. I’m tired of you thinking the world revolves around you. I’m tired of fixing your problems. And I’m definitely tired of pretending we’re still best friends when in fact we haven’t even been friends at all since you moved to New York.”
Rachel stared at him. “What are you saying?” she asked.

Kurt paused and asked himself the same question. “I’m saying maybe you should move out.”

*

Elliott

Elliott surveyed the Spotlight Diner as he stepped in. A pretty busy night, with waitstaff darting between tables. No one was on stage, since it looked like they had their hands full just serving food. He looked down at his phone, wondering if he should’ve given Kurt more notice than “OMW”, and took a free seat.

The texts from Kurt had been a little light in the past day or so, but Elliott had chalked it up to his little star being overly busy with the play and school. He knew Kurt had some papers coming up, and he was a bit overworked. But Kurt hadn’t canceled their date to hit the music store, so Elliott tried to wait patiently and looked up whenever a red and black blur burst out of the kitchen doors.

It took almost fifteen minutes for someone to get over to his table, and Elliott didn’t recognize her. The staff had shifted dramatically since Elliott had first come here. The only one he knew now was Santana, and she probably wouldn’t stay that long, if Jopez continued to be successful.

“Hi!” the girl said cheerfully. “Sorry for the wait. Can I get you something to drink?”

“A diet soda? Hey, do you if Kurt is on a break?” When she looked at him in confusion, he clarified: “An intermission?”

“Oh, um…” She looked back toward the kitchen, and Elliott read the name Sherry from her tag. “I just started, so I don’t know all the names yet.”

“Well, he’s working today,” Elliott offered. “About 5’10, dramatic chestnut brown hair with some blond highlights, blue-gray eyes, slim and graceful?”

“For a minute I thought you might be talking about Jamie, but all the guys working today are kind of
bricks.” Sherry pointed her pen at him. “Lemme go get your drink and I’ll ask a few people.”

Elliott sat back and slumped his shoulders over. Had he gotten the wrong day? He pulled out his phone and checked over the string of messages between himself and Kurt… No. It was today. Maybe Kurt had gotten his schedule wrong? If that were the case, Kurt might be in another part of town, totally unavailable for the day. The drawbacks of dating a chronically multitasking superstar.

Sherry reappeared with the drink in hand. “Okay, I asked a few people, and Kurt doesn’t work here anymore.”

“H-He what? Are you sure?”

His eyes followed her hands as she pulled a straw from her apron. “Yeah, apparently he got fired the other day? For… I don’t know about that part. Jake says he got fired because Gunther is mad at Kurt’s ex, and Tia said he got fired for dropping a plate. I’m not sure that can be true because I’ve dropped my share this week training, and they still have me!”

“Well, do you know-”

“Well, do you know-”

“Excuse me!” interrupted a petite girl with long hair.

“Hi.” Elliott looked them over curiously. The girl was flanked by several other girls, who were hanging back, wringing their hands, looking nervous.

“You’re in One Three Hill, right?” she asked.

“The TV show?” Sherry cocked her head to the side and narrowed her eyes at Elliott.

“No, the band!” the girl practically snapped. She looked to Elliott again. “You are, aren’t you? You’re Elliott? Starchild?”

Elliott chuckled. He shouldn’t let Dani post so much on their Facebook page. “Yeah, that’s me.”
The girl squeaked. She looked back at her friends and then eagerly back at him. “Can we take a picture with you?” Several of them already had their phones out.

“Uh...sure. I guess,” Elliott replied, running a hand through his hair. The news about Kurt was still puzzling him. Why would Gunther fire one of his most loyal employees? And why hadn’t Kurt told him? Was he really that overworked that he’d forgotten to mention it?

The girls got up around him and struck their poses. Elliott automatically slipped into a Starchild smirk for the camera, holding it patiently until they had switched phones a few times, only flinching once when a small but decisively bold hand pinched his bottom.

The girl who had originally recognized him spoke up again. “Are you guys playing tonight? We came here because we heard Kurt Hummel worked here, but we haven’t seen him…”

The girls behind him shook their heads.

“We noticed there was no one using the stage, and wondered if they were doing something special,” she continued.

“Nope. We’re just too busy to breathe, over here. We’re understaffed,” Sherry explained. “Our manager just fired Kurt.”

“Are you serious?!” One of the girls behind the first put her hand on her chest. “That’s awful!”

“Yeah, it is,” Elliott said. He pulled out his wallet and put down some money for the soda. “I’m gonna go try to track him down. I was supposed to meet him today. If Gunther hadn’t fired him, he could’ve had a free show today.”

Sherry crossed her arms. “Sorry I don’t know more about it. Gosh, if you’re gonna pay for the soda, let me put it in a to-go cup for you at least?”

“Don’t worry about it. I just wanted a reason to wait for Kurt here.”

“Were you guys on a date?” one of the girls asked. She was looking quite flushed, and Elliott wondered if she might have been the owner of the wandering hand.
Elliott looked back at them and hesitated. Would Kurt be comfortable disclosing that information to fans right now? Then, it dawned on Elliott: This was a fan sighting. They were excited because they were fans of their band.

“We were supposed to meet up to look at some music, yeah. Not a big deal. I’ll find him,” Elliott answered noncommittally. “See you guys.”

He gave them a wave and a smile and headed out. As he left, he could hear one of the girls ask Sherry if she could have his soda. Fans were weird.

After walking a little bit, Elliott took a deep breath and stopped. He looked at his phone once again, hoping Kurt had already replied, but nothing. Elliott sighed and texted, “Where are you?”

He waited a moment, to no avail, and then continued walking. If Kurt had gotten fired, he was probably doing something else now… but why in the world wouldn’t Kurt have come to him about it?

He was almost all the way to his apartment when his phone buzzed with Kurt’s answer: “home”

Elliott quirked his mouth to the side. “No music store today?”

Now Kurt’s reply came quick: “Oh no! I’m sorry!”

Elliott dialed Kurt’s number and waited. It only rang once.

“I’m sorry!” Kurt said again, sounding stressed and dismayed.

“It’s no problem. I just didn’t know where you were. I thought we were going out today and showed up at the diner. Did they really fire you? You? They only had a few waiters who could really both wait tables and sing. What are they gonna do now?”

“I don’t really care. I needed to cut something loose anyway, for my sanity,” Kurt said grimly.
“Probably true. And you’re getting paid with the play, right? It’s a real thing.”

“I am. And enough to stay in this place without a roommate… though I’d kind of like to have one.” He paused. “I don’t like to be alone.”

“Well, you’ve still got Rachel?”

“That’s… no. Do you want to come over? I can make it up with cookies. I’ve been baking in between therapy and trying to pump out this essay. Adam’s right, it’s very comforting to have something where you can follow the steps and have it come out right.”

Elliott smiled. “I’m definitely down for cookies. And don’t worry about the mix up, okay?”

“I won’t worry, but I still feel bad. After I got fired I came home and took half a pill and kind of Zenned out,” Kurt admitted. “I should’ve thought, at some point, to call you not to come. It’s been… weird.”

There was a crashing sound and Kurt sighed.

“Are you okay?” Elliott asked.

“That’s just Rachel’s movers packing up her stuff. Nothing broke. They’re actually pretty good, but I’m glad I happened to be home when they appeared out of nowhere. If I’d come home to these big strangers in my apartment, I might’ve had a heart attack.”

Elliott frowned at that. “I’ll be over in a few, okay? Don’t have a heart attack.”

“Be safe,” Kurt almost pleaded.

“I will.”
Elliott put his phone back in his pocket and quickened his step.

---

Elliott could hear *Wicked* playing inside the loft as he approached the door, and with a smile, he recognized Kurt’s voice harmonizing along with Elphaba. He waited for a moment, listening. It was hard to get enough of Kurt’s voice.

Then he rapped loudly on the door so Kurt could hear it over the music. His singing stopped. Elphaba continued. Kurt had clearly heard him, but the door didn’t open. Elliott moved his ear to the door, then knocked again.

“Hey, Kurt?” he called. “Kurt, it’s Elliott!”

The music stopped and a moment later, the door inched open. Elliott could see a flash of Kurt’s eyes, and then the sound of a latch clicking, and Kurt jerked the door open.

“Hey! Sorry about that, I um…”

“Did you get a second security lock for this door? It’s about time. I worry about that,” Elliott said gently. Maybe Kurt hadn’t been entirely kidding about that heart attack comment. He seemed jumpy.

Kurt stepped back and looked abjectly guilty. “Yeah, I did. I installed it this morning.”

“You did?” Elliott chuckled. “You constantly amaze me. I can’t even change my air filter.”

“I hope you’re joking. It’s bad for you to breathe in all the dust and junk that gets pushed and pulled through the air system of an old building. Mold, asbestos… Do you know when your building was built?”

“I’ll be fine.” Elliott shut the door behind him and fastened the extra lock securely.

“Maybe we could get you an air purifier—”
Elliott turned and dropped a kiss on Kurt’s forehead. “I will if it makes you feel better.”

“I… Okay.”

Elliott looked around at the changed apartment. Big chunks of things were missing. Rachel’s privacy curtain was open and the area completely bare. The wall of cubed shelves had empty spaces, and the star-shaped lightbulb lamp was gone. Elliott couldn’t really say it was a change for the worse. The things that really gave the place its look were all Kurt’s anyway, like his vintage furniture and the pictures he had put up. And the smell of freshly baked cookies definitely made up for a certain lack of coziness in the big space. Still, it did look different, and it had to be weird for Kurt.

“How are you holding up?” Elliott asked.

“Okay.”

“You know…” Elliott took his hand. “My kinda magic properties include being a leeeeeeettle bit psychic. So I know ‘okay’ isn’t really how you feel after getting fired and losing your roommate.”

Kurt shrugged. “I told her to go. She got fired, too. Clover Rosenbaum in, Rachel Berry out. I didn’t think she’d be out quite so soon, but I guess you can hire movers at a moment’s notice if your daddies pay for it.”

“Did you guys have a fight?”

When Kurt looked up at him, Elliott raised his hands. “I’m not questioning your choice to tell her to go. You’re not the only former ‘best gay’ to ask her to leave his apartment, if you’ll remember.”

“We had a fight. And I’d had a pill. I’m just so frantic, lately. I can’t take her drama, and her passive aggression, and her, you know, kind of inexcusable homophobia disguised as ‘I’m one of you’ type humor. No one can have a problem when she has a problem. No one can be happy if she isn’t winning. And if she is, her winning is so much more important than anything you’ve done.” Kurt threw his hands in the air and headed for the kitchen. “She’s going on and on about how her life is a nightmare if she doesn’t get things exactly her way, and I’m over here trying to survive a real nightmare, again.”

Elliott’s brows knit together. He was missing something. But he knew that. He’d known that Kurt
was keeping things from him since that night he came over a mess with Adam’s frog and didn’t want to talk about what was happening. It was like he was starting over with Kurt, and Elliott was no longer the friend Kurt opened up to. Did he not trust Elliott anymore? If Elliott asked about the nightmare, would Kurt blow it off, or make a joke that just hinted at what was happening to him?

“Kurt, you know I’m here for you, right?” he started, stepping forward slowly.

Kurt bent over the oven and pulled out a sheet of cookies. “Yeah. I didn’t mean to imply you were anything like Rachel. Did I?”

“No, that’s not.” Elliott looked down, then licked his lips and shook his head. “You remember when you thought I was trying to steal your band from you, and you took me out to ‘keep an eye’ on me and ‘subtly’ interrogate me about my intentions?”

Kurt nodded.

“And I saw right through you? Your prowess with acting doesn’t translate to real life.”

Kurt meticulously lifted each cookie off the sheet with a spatula. “It seems to fool some people well enough.”

“If you mean Rachel, Blaine, and your dad?” Elliott grimaced. He didn’t want to say anything too harsh about Burt, but… “You know it’s easy to be fooled when you actually don’t care, or you care a lot but want to believe what’s being sold to you.”

“So you don’t want to believe I’m okay?”

Elliott scowled and tilted his head to the side. Kurt sighed.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “You’re right, I- I haven’t been talking, and it’s not fair.”

“I don’t know about ‘fair,’ but… if something is wrong, I wanna help. Or if I can’t help, I can at least listen. I love you, Kurt. I don’t want you to ever have to feel alone with what you’re going through.”
“Um…”

“Did something happen? Something that made you go out and get extra security for the door.”

Kurt pressed his lips together.

Elliott waited a moment and felt his chest growing tighter. “I don’t understand.”

“It’s, um, it’s hard,” Kurt said finally after a long silence. He walked over to turn off the stove. “It’s harder for me to talk to you about this now.”

“Now? What…” Elliott watched the twin spots of pink blooming on Kurt’s cheeks and suddenly understood. “We went too fast.”

“I don’t even think it was that we were going too fast,” Kurt said quietly. “I enjoyed it. It’s just…”

Again, Elliott waited. The loft seemed preternaturally quiet, with their hearts thudding into the silence.

“When I’m with you like this, romantically… intimately, something’s just off. One day I was hanging out with my best friend, and then suddenly, I’m self-censoring, and not able to tell you all the things- I don’t want you to think that I’m needy and pathetic, or a coward-”

“I don’t! Kurt, you know how I feel about that. You are incredibly strong! Do you want me to sing the song?” Elliott added lightly.

“I know, but… I’m not strong all the time, and when we started changing our relationship, you went from… my friend, my, my… brother, who I could tell anything, to my boyfriend, and… I miss having you as my brother.”

Elliott began to feel cold.
“No, that’s not just it. I love you too, Elliott, and I don’t want to hurt you. But I don’t just miss you as my best friend; I need you.” Kurt began to twist his fingers. “And things have been happening. I’ve been getting triggered in rehearsal… Turns out it isn’t that easy to play an assassin after you’ve seen someone be killed right in front of you after all. And there was a-a death threat in the YouTube comments. I’m starting to think that they’ll never catch Kitt’s killers. I should be letting you in, but I can’t, and there’s something wrong with me, and I’m just terrified that now we’ve gone this far, I’m going to lose you.”

It was like being kicked in the chest. Elliott had opened things up, said Kurt could have room to decide. He shouldn’t have assumed that the sex meant they were finally together. But he still ached.

“You won’t,” Elliott promised, his voice thick and wobbly. A tear escaped down his cheek, and then another. “Y-you’re saying, that us… We should be friends?”

“You’re a lot more than just a friend.”

“I-I know, but…” Elliott pressed his lips together.

“Say it,” Kurt urged.

“Say what?”

“Whatever you don’t want to say.”

Elliott wiped his eyes, but more tears appeared. “You couldn’t’ve told me any sooner? Maybe before we fooled around? Argh! No, forget it, that’s not fair. I started it myself, the day of your audition.”

“I didn’t stop you, though.”

“I’m not one of your creepy exes, okay!!” Elliott snapped. “I hold myself to a higher standard than just, ‘he didn’t say no.’ I want you involved, I want you to be there, and if I’m fucking you and not paying attention to how you feel, then I’m no better than Blaine or Bondage Santa!”

“That’s not what it was like, Elliott!” Kurt protested. “It was good. I wanted it. I went down on you!
But I didn’t know that I didn’t want that with you… until I knew. The day after. I’m sorry.”

Elliott looked down and shook his head rapidly.

“Elliott, you’re funny, and kind, and more Zen than I can ever hope to be, and I’d be lying if I didn’t say I love the way you hold me, and you’re an amazing man, and frankly the only guy I’ve actually enjoyed topping me. You’re so worth it, and I just wish I could… make that enough. I wish I could just force all of the pieces together and make that work for us.” Kurt’s eyes began to shine as well. “I wanted it to. It wanted it to so bad.”

“You don’t like to be alone,” Elliott echoed bitterly. “But maybe you should be.”

It was a moment before Elliott looked up and saw the disquieted expression on Kurt’s face.

“That’s not what I meant,” Elliott said. “I just meant-”

“I know. But it’s not like I’ve not thought it that way myself.” Kurt moved around the kitchen table. “I never meant to use you. I just thought that… we work so well together…”

“No, I get it…” Elliott was losing the battle wiping away his tears. He turned abruptly and swatted a chair, causing it to slide all the way to the couch. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Kurt draw back. “Jesus.” The last thing he wanted was to lose his cool and frighten Kurt-- not after all the shit he’d already been through with his exes. Elliott shoved his hands into his hair and started to pace.

Could he have seen this coming? Maybe. He could’ve been real with himself the moment it stopped being ‘casual’ exploring what they could be. He could’ve told Kurt his expectations after they’d slept together. Then again, Kurt could’ve told him the day after that he’d made his decision.

Knowing that Kurt wanted to be with him, but it wasn’t working, didn’t actually help that much. In the end, his face was still burning, his chest still aching, his tears still falling.

When Kurt’s arms wrapped around him, Elliott startled. But it was comforting. Because he was getting dumped, but his best friend was right there. And Kurt was right; it was nice being held.

“If you need some time away from me, I understand. If you’re mad at me, or hate me, I understand,” Kurt offered.
“I’m not goin’ anywhere,” Elliott snapped. “I’m not leaving you here while you’re scared.”

He turned to face Kurt, then, after a moment of looking into his shining blue eyes, kissed his cheek and hugged him tightly.

“I’m not leaving you, Kurt.”

“You’re too good,” Kurt muttered.

“There you go again, assuming the decent thing to do is amazing, because someone’s doing it for you. Maybe now that Rachel’s gone, we can rid you of that baggage, hm?” Elliott moved back, but didn’t step away. He was afraid of how he’d abuse Kurt’s furniture further.

Kurt lifted a hand up to cup Elliott’s cheek, and his lips curved into a smile that didn’t reach his eyes.

“Thank you, anyway. For not being one of my creepy exes.”

Elliott let out a huff of breath, trying hard to make it into a laugh but failing. “Still one of your exes, though,” he said sadly. Kurt shook his head.

“Can you please just be the best friend that I had amazing sex with one night? No ex-anything?”

Elliott sighed. “I guess so.” He paused. “Our stage act will need some new choreos though. I’m not sure I can… do that now.”

Kurt nodded. “I understand.” He looked so chastised that Elliott immediately felt sorry.

“Just for a bit,” he backpedaled. “Until I-” get over you? stop wanting you? Elliott wasn’t sure how to finish his sentence. All he knew was that if they let themselves get swept up in their performance again, they’d probably have a repeat of the rest of the night too, and although every part of his body was saying yes to that, he now knew that that wasn’t what Kurt wanted. If he really didn’t want to be like the creepy exes, they’d have to work on minimizing temptation until things felt normal again.
“Yes,” Kurt agreed, though Elliott never did finish his sentence. “You’re right. As usual.”

“Old and wise I am,” Elliott tried, using a screwed-up Yoda voice. Kurt grinned, and it automatically made him feel a little better, too.

“Wise, yes. You’re not that old,” he said kindly. “Just more experienced.”

Elliott shrugged. “In some things, maybe. But you’ve been through a lot more stuff than I have. Sometimes it’s hard to remember you’re only nineteen.”

Kurt’s lips tightened. “Sometimes it’s hard to remember how I even got to nineteen.” His eyes flicked towards the new lock on the door. Elliott put one of his hands over Kurt’s and squeezed it.

“Do you want to tell me about that now? Now that we’ve cleared the air between us?”

Kurt took a deep breath and nodded. Bit by bit, he started telling Elliott about what had happened in the past weeks, starting with the evening he had come over with his frog. Elliott could tell Kurt still had problems opening up, but at least he was talking, now. It was hard trying to ignore the heartache that was still in the back of his mind while Kurt talked, especially as he heard about the hard time Kurt had been having and all Elliott wanted was to hold him and kiss it better, but in the end, listening and being there for Kurt trumped his own sadness.

As Kurt got to the part with the death threat and getting fired, Elliott just shook his head.

“Gunther is an ass,” he said quietly. “You were his best performer. Did you know there were actually One Three Hill fans there to see you today? They came especially for you.” He looked away, his eyes lingering on the empty space where Rachel’s ornate mirror-frame used to hang, and scowled. “I hope they left without ordering anything,” he added, uncharacteristically bitter.

Then he focused back on Kurt. “Have you notified the police yet?”

Kurt shook his head.

“I think you should-” Elliott started, and Kurt nodded.
“I know. Marco also told me. I guess it won’t hurt to report it, even if they can’t do anything. Or won’t.” He sighed deeply. “It’s just so frustrating sometimes. I feel like I am all alone.” He seemed to realize what he had just said and shot Elliott an apologetic look. “I mean, I know I’m not, but… you guys can’t be here all the time. You have lives. And it’s their job, and they are just not making any progress.”

Elliott took his hands between his own. “I know what you mean,” he assured him, even though it hurt to hear Kurt actually felt that way despite his efforts. “And hey, you got the extra lock, right? That’s good. And you’re also forgetting one important thing.”

“What’s that?” Kurt asked.

“You yourself. You kick ass, dude.”

Kurt smiled a little. “Only on stage.”

“Nah. I mean it. You’re one tough cookie.” To emphasize his point, Elliott grabbed one of the last cookies off the plate and pretended to be unable to break it in half.

Kurt chuckled. “You’re getting crumbs on my couch.”

“Get a cat,” Elliott replied. “You can, now that miss I’m-Allergic-To-Everything moved out. Although you’d have to be careful… once Dani sees it, she might never leave.”

“That doesn’t sound too bad. We could get a whole litter and become crazy cat ladies together. I already got the crazy part down.”

Elliott rolled his eyes. “I want you to stop saying that, Kurt,” he said, getting serious again. “You’re not crazy. I think it’s really good that you’ve started taking sessions with your therapist again. There’s nothing wrong with that. In fact, you shouldn’t have started skipping those in the first place. No job is worth risking your health for.”

Kurt avoided his eyes and gathered crumbs up from the cushions, picking at them with his long fingers. He shrugged. “So I keep telling my dad when he complains about his own group,” he said
softly.

“I can see where you got your stubbornness,” Elliott said fondly.

They were quiet for a while, and Kurt put on the television. Somehow the silence didn’t feel as oppressive as it had the past weeks, and after a while, Kurt scooted closer on the couch and rested his head on Elliott’s shoulder. Elliott put his arm around him in reflex. It felt good. Normal. But he couldn’t stop his head from going over the things Kurt had said.

After a few commercial blocks, he cleared his throat. “Kurt? I know we’re supposed to be watching Project Runway, but there’s something I really need to say before we go fully back to… you know. Platonic best friend stuff.”

“Oh?” Kurt sat up and looked at him. He looked a little apprehensive.

“It’s about what you said. I just think... being someone’s best friend and someone’s romantic partner shouldn’t have to be mutually exclusive.”

Kurt frowned, but before he could interrupt, Elliott quickly continued. “I’m not saying that to pressure you into giving us another shot. I just mean, maybe you should think about why you feel you can’t fully share yourself with the person-- whoever it is-- you are trying to have a relationship with. Because that’s pretty important.”

He studied Kurt carefully. He was a little afraid he had gone too far, but he felt that he couldn’t be much of a best friend if he kept this to himself. He was afraid Kurt might keep having the same problems if he did. Finally, Kurt nodded almost invisibly.

“I know,” he admitted. “And I try. I’m just afraid. I mean, I freak out over nothing. I sleepwalk and fuss over symbolic clothing colors and count sugar packets and break plates. That’s not exactly sexy.”

“Relationships are not just about sex though.” Elliott wanted to kill Blaine again. That boy had done so much damage to Kurt’s understanding of how love worked, it was infuriating. Most Zen person Kurt knew, psah. All Elliott needed was a room with no windows, Kurt’s ex-boyfriend, and a pair of pliers. “Besides,” he added, forcing his thoughts away from murder and towards calm oceans and sandy beaches, “you couldn’t be un-sexy if you tried.”
Kurt smirked. “Oh yeah?” He crammed the last remaining two cookies into his mouth at once and crossed his eyes. Then he hooked his fingers in his nostrils and pulled them up into a pig snout. “How’s this?” he mouthed through the crumbs.

Elliott laughed. “Take me now,” he moaned, letting himself drop on his back on the couch.

Kurt had to laugh too and then started to cough, trying to clear the cookies from his lungs. “I hate you,” he wheezed.

“I think we found our new stage act,” Elliott teased. “The fangirls will love it.”

“Shut up,” Kurt rasped. “Commercials are over.” He nodded at the TV and pulled Elliott up by his shirt so he could rest his head on him again. Elliott knew that the problem wasn’t solved just by mentioning it, but for now, he had done all he could, and he had a piece of broken heart of his own to mend.
“You’re like *lesbians,*“ Santana said, fussing with Kurt’s collar. “Breaking up and going right back to cuddly handholding support.”

Kurt smiled. “You and Dani set a good example,” he replied.

“One of these days, Santana, maybe you’ll stop using lesbian and lezzie as an insult… since you are one,” Clover said with an arched brow. Santana turned her gaze away and pursed her lips. Clover looked to Kurt and changed the topic. “Walk me through it one more time. I always do before rehearsal, just a mental recount, and it makes me feel better.”

Kurt ignored the peanut gallery, who had sat down to brush her hair and glare at Clover covertly, and closed his eyes as he talked through the assassination scene he’d been having trouble with. It had been a few weeks since his and Elliott’s ‘break-up,’ and dress rehearsals were upon them. They’d all been told to bring a few friends to act as audience, since the next performance would have reviewers watching, ready and waiting to give them preliminary judgements. Of course, the audience would be experiencing a different show, depending on what night they came. During regular rehearsals, the creative team had decide that on half the nights, Samael would end up with Rosalinde, half with Jasper.

Clover clapped. “You’ve got it. Don’t worry. If the producer were worried about the actors not being ready, he or she would put the brakes on, *trust me.*”

“But the brakes are off on *Funny Girl* now too, aren’t they?” Santana said.

“Oh, God, yes.” Clover shook her head. “We’re practicing non-stop. Sydney wants us ready to go by New Year’s. The show was delayed so much already.” She spread her palms. “So I’m glad I get to see you perform now, because pretty soon, my calendar’s going to be booked.”

“I remember. This is your only night off, isn’t it?” Kurt said.

“And I get to see a *free* up and coming show.*” She smiled. “How sweet is that?” She rubbed his shoulder. “This is the first time with people watching. Pretty soon, you’ll just *thrive* off them, you
“Thanks.” Kurt liked having Clover’s calm, professional energy around. She’d even dressed ‘up’ for the occasion, with a pinstriped suit and her hair pulled back to the nape of her neck.

Then Elliott’s voice came from down the hallway. “Down here? Do I just- Oh.”

He entered Kurt’s dressing room and stopped abruptly, his hands fiddling with his powder blue tie.

“Hey. Thanks for coming.”

“Yeah, of course.” Elliott scrunched up his nose and shook his head.

“So, um…”

“So… Your costume.”

Kurt had a number of what might be called ‘tricky’ costumes. Both to get into, and out of. The designers had let their imaginations run wild with the ‘dark elf’ theme and somehow they had ended up with a cross between Edward Scissorhands and Alexander McQueen. Each piece was form-fitted with grommeted lace-up panels, hidden zippers that double-serviced as pointed darts, snaps and buckles—some ornamental, some functional. At his first fitting, Kurt had spent a few minutes figuring out which pieces were supposed to come undone and which weren’t. And he wasn’t exactly a beginner when it came to elaborate outfits.

This was partly also what dress rehearsals were for: to learn how to move in costume, and to train how to change in and out of them between acts. Unfortunately, his costume for the first act was the least flexible of all, and had suffered some during the last move.

“I wouldn’t ask, but Mel is trying to help Sofia with her dress made of butterflies, and I don’t know if they’ll have time to get back around here.”

“You’re the star. You could just tell them,” Elliott drew closer. Kurt’s costume was definitely not made of butterflies. Elliott’s eyes were suitably wide as he took in Kurt’s leather-encased limbs and the chains that snaked up his body.
“I don’t want to be that kind of a star. It’s not the biggest emergency in the world. Sofia’s butterflies are trying to fly away.”

Elliott drew nearer and looked more closely at the outfit. Kurt watched his eyes, and after a moment, it was clear that Elliott had managed to stop being enthralled by the outfit on Kurt, and just become enthralled by the outfit itself.

That was a good sign. Kurt needed his expertise right now, not his heart-eyes.

“Let’s go get some seats,” Clover suggested.

Santana gestured to Kurt and Elliott. “But I wanna watch.”

“I didn’t know you were into Project Runway,” Clover drawled.

Santana laughed and leaned over Elliott to give Kurt a kiss on the cheek. “You go make Auntie Tana proud.”

Kurt fluttered his lashes and said in a light tone, “I’ll try.”

The girls grinned back at him, waving, and Clover took Santana’s hand on the way out. Elliott knelt down to look at the waist of the outfit, how it fastened, and the detailing.

“Maybe you do need Mel in here. This needs to be re-fitted.”

“It’s supposed to be tight,” Kurt said, a bit defensively.

Elliott moved his fingers over the fabric. “It’s supposed to be form fitting. Part of this needs to be let out—”

“Ugh.” Kurt grimaced.

“Hush. I mean up here in the chest and shoulders. You’ve bulked up a little… and we need to take in
the waist. Either that, or we need to feed you.”

“I can’t eat when I’m this nervous. You’d think it would be the other way around, though. We’ve all been living off of takeout between school and rehearsals.”

“Well, don’t worry. It’s fixable. Are all your costumes in need of proper fitting? It seems like a bad idea to leave that to the last minute for your lead.” Elliott went over to get some pins.

“No, just this one. We’ve had fittings for the others, but this one kept breaking, so they had to work on it while we were getting everything else ready. Maybe they used the measurement sheets from my first week. The others were all done later.”

“Well, fear not, my little elf.” Elliott pulled up a stool. “We’ll have you ready for showtime.”

Kurt took a few deep breaths. “Good thing my dad saw the show costumes for One Three Hill. He probably needed something to brace him for this,” he joked, and shimmied his hips, letting the chains that crisscrossed his groin jingle.

“Is he coming?”

“Not for the rehearsal. He’s coming for opening night.”

“Awesome,” Elliott said warmly. He continued to work for another minute. “Who else is showing tonight? Me, Clover, Santana, Mercedes, Sam… I know Dani had to work, and she’s pissed about it, but she’ll come see the show when it opens. Adam?”

“He couldn’t come. He said he had something to do. I told him I’d get him a ticket for opening night, too.”

Elliott nodded. “We’re all proud of you.”

“I’m glad you all came. And don’t lecture me on what real friends do, I know. But I’m happy anyway.”
Elliott chuckled. “Okay. You can be glad. I’m not stopping you.”

“I just appreciate you guys. That’s all.”

And of course he had to. How many times had his supposed ‘friends’ in the past let him down? Blaine had straight out skipped Pamela Lansbury’s first performance, without phoning him to say he’d missed his flight. Rachel had overshadowed him, deliberately and not, many times. It had been a continuous raincloud on his parade to have these people around him.

Of course he was grateful to have people willing to celebrate his successes now, and to come support him in it as much as he would have supported them.

Elliott finished putting in his pins, then demanded that Kurt strip. It could have been awkward, considering the last time Elliott had seen him naked, but it wasn’t. Elliott was already in full costume-saviour mode. Kurt did as he was told, and waited for Elliott to fix up the outfit. Kurt could have done it himself, but truthfully, he didn’t think he could get his hands to stop shaking enough to use the sewing machine. This was it-- the actual dress rehearsal for his very first real show.

There was a firm rap on the dressing room door, and Kurt grabbed his robe just before Alison came in.

“Hi!” Kurt pointed to Elliott. “See? He’s taking care of it.”

“What? Oh! The opening costume. Thank god. That butterfly dress is absolutely insane,” Alison said with a shake of the head. She was a lot calmer these days than she had been during their beginning rehearsals. Kurt didn’t know how to explain it, other than maybe she was the kind of person to flounder when there was less for her to control, and thrive within chaos.

Or maybe it had to do with her lead having fewer panic attacks.

“There are some reporters who would like to talk to you, Sofia, and Marco, if you’re up to it, after the show tomorrow. We opted to keep them clear of our first run through,” she said, taking a seat next to him.
“Sounds fine.” Kurt nodded. He was listening, but also mentally running through everything, one more time.

They spoke for a few more minutes about press and a photo shoot they had planned to send out with the last wave of promotions, involving faux-nude shots of their three leads. Their make-up artist had also suggested using Kurt’s scars as a base for his Samael look, exaggerating them so they could be seen from the audience. She had said it made him look even more authentic. Kurt couldn’t help but feel a little proud of that. Then Alison rose to leave.

“Let me know if there’s anything else we can do for you—Oh. I arranged for some extra security for the first few weeks, just in case,” she said.

“Oh. Well, thank you.” After some deliberation, he had decided to tell Alison about the online threat upfront, before she found out some other way. Now he was very glad that he had.

“It’s not a problem. Especially if it keeps Samael on the stage, right?” She smiled and gave a wave to Elliott.

Elliott raised his brows at Kurt. “Anything for our star.”

“I don’t want to be like that!”

“It’s not you, honey. They’re offering. Because like me, they can see how special you are.” Elliott rose with the costume. “Try it on. I think that’ll do it.”

“Thanks.” Kurt slipped his robe off and began to pull the costume back on.

“Anyway, extra security actually sounds like a pretty good idea. Have you heard from them again?”

“Whoever it was posted a few other messages after finding my other YouTube videos, but they haven’t found my phone number or address or anything like that. So far.” Kurt shimmied into the pants, then pulled up the top.

Elliott stood in front of him and zipped him up. “They’re trying to scare you.”
“Well, if they want to come see me play with weaponry and kill people on stage, I’m not opposed, as long as they pay,” Kurt said flippantly.

“Don’t.” Elliott brushed his hand over Kurt’s hair gently, careful not to muss the work that had been put into it. “I don’t want to think about those guys coming after my best friend again.”

“It’s not on the top of my bucket list either, but they’re not going to make me stop living my life, or make me regret trying to stop them from hurting Kitt,” Kurt said defiantly.

Elliott chuckled and shook his head. “Of course not.” He squeezed Kurt’s shoulder and bit his lip. “See you out there?”

“I can hardly wait, now. Finally with an audience.”

“This night will get passed over in Broadway history. The opening nights of Samael and Funny Girl this year will get written down in textbooks, but tonight is no less legendary,” Elliott said.

“Okay, okay.” Kurt shooed him toward the door. “I need to finish getting ready. Thank everyone for coming for me?”

“You can do it after!”

“Still.” Kurt paused by the mirror. His make-up team would be coming in a minute, pointy ear prosthetics, scars, and all.

“Okay. Break a leg, Shooting Star.” Elliott winked at Kurt, and then was gone.

*  

Rachel had once told Kurt, after she’d first been cast as Fanny, how strange it was to move from the stage back to the classroom. For once, she had been right.
Kurt sat in dramaturgy class thinking about how Romy’s vision for the script of *Samael* had shifted between concept and execution. He looked at the listing for next semester’s registration planning which classes he could take once a week and wondering if he could get into a more advanced acting seminar to push himself forward in that area. He caught Cassandra July out of the corner of his eye and considered whether he’d be up for an upper level dance course, now that he’d done professional choreography.

He wondered if he offered her a ticket, would she give him good feedback on his work.

That probably wasn’t what Rachel had meant. She probably meant that it was strange to be a star walking around among the plebs. But Kurt didn’t feel like a star. He just felt oddly mercenary about his education.

“Okay, partner up and practice your melees,” the stage combat instructor directed. “One of you attacks, one defends. Take it across the room and then switch. And remember: the advancing party is the retreating party’s eyes. They’re going backwards, and you are responsible for them.”

Kurt would *definitely* be taking the second semester of stage combat. It had been the single most useful class in preparing him for this role, and getting him comfortable enough in his body to attack the role the way he had.

Kurt looked around the stage combat class for available options. He saw several pairs of eyes glancing his way hopefully, but before he could ask anyone, someone had already chosen him. Feeling it would be childish to refuse, Kurt nodded briefly at Nikolas and flicked his wrist, spinning the wooden sword around his hand. Nikolas smiled eagerly. The instructor whistled and Kurt took a firmer stance, raising his shield and signaling to his combat partner he could start.

“So,” Nikolas asked as he lunged at Kurt, “have you thought about those extra training sessions I suggested a while ago? Because I have...”

Kurt brought up his shield and warded off Nikolas’ sword, grunting a little at the impact. “I thought you were-” He side-stepped to avoid the next blow. “Seeing someone?”

Nikolas paused for a moment, then attacked again. “I was. But now I’m not.”

Kurt lowered his shield to look at him. “What happened?” he asked.
Nikolas shrugged and spun his wooden sword over his head before bringing it down. “He broke it off.” He drove Kurt further back along the room, leading him around the obstacles with the direction of his blows. “He said he still had feelings for someone from his past, and that it wouldn’t be fair to me.”

Kurt almost forgot to parry. Adam still had feelings for him?

“He really said that?” he asked.

Nikolas nodded. “I should have known,” he replied. “It was clear from the start he’d been through a rough break-up, but he was so hot… I really just wanted to give it a shot and see if I could change his mind.” He smiled and swung his sword at Kurt’s shield. “And when someone like that calls in the middle of the night, it’s really kind of hard to say no, even if you know you’re just the rebound, you know?”

Kurt knew, and he caught Nikolas’ blow on the edge of his shield, nearly losing his balance. His words were more distracting than his attacks. Kurt thought about Adam. The last time they had spoken, Adam said he didn’t plan on getting serious with Nikolas. Clearly Nikolas had managed to change his mind about that, in any case, even if it had just been for a night.

They had reached the end of the room, and Kurt raised his sword. It took all of his patience to wait for Nikolas’ signal before attacking. It was unfair and immature, but he fueled all of his frustration into his attacks, bringing down his sword on Nikolas’ shield over and over again, barely giving him time to parry. He wasn’t exactly sure whom he was punishing; the man before him or himself, but it felt good to feel the clashes of wood on wood jolt through his arm.

Rationally, he knew it wasn’t Nikolas’ fault for trying to start something with Adam, but it still felt like he had taken something away from him; something that used to be his. But you dumped him, he reminded himself. You can’t blame others for wanting to step in. He justified his attacks by focusing on Nikolas’ flirty behavior; if he was already looking around for the next guy, clearly he hadn’t really cared about Adam anyway, and didn’t deserve him.

He didn’t let up until their instructor whistled again. Nikolas was on his knees at the end of their lane, having sunk into a crouch at Kurt’s last lunge. Both of them were breathing hard.

“I’m sorry,” Kurt mumbled, offering him his hand to help him up.

“What for?” Nikolas replied, panting but managing to smile. “I knew what I was getting into when we partnered up.” He slipped his hand up Kurt’s arm, gripping his elbow. “Just think about it,” he said in a low voice. “We make a good team.”
Kurt nodded vaguely and pulled away. He was not interested in Nikolas’ offer. The other man’s words were still spinning around in his mind. Maybe he should go and see Adam. If there was some way to make up for what he had done, if there was still a chance for them, he wanted to try.

*

Kurt patted the ticket in his coat pocket and reached to his forehead to adjust his hair, his fingers brushing his skin looking for the ghost of the bangs he hadn't worn combed down and partitioned since joining Glee club. He felt more nervous than he probably should. Even though he knew he probably shouldn't read too much into it, his talk with Nikolas had given him hope that Adam might still be interested in getting back together. (That, or it could have been a line to let down Nikolas gently, but somehow Kurt didn't think Adam would do that). Elliott’s advice about trying to be alone for a while was still in the back of his mind, but at the same time, a guy like Adam wasn't going to be single for long. If Kurt waited until he had sorted out all of his issues, it might be too late.

He knocked on Adam's door and put on a smile. When the door opened, he immediately started talking.

"Hey! Sorry for turning up without calling first; I know you're probably tired from work, but I wanted to bring you your ticket personally, you know, with compliments from the lead." He winked and pulled out the ticket. "Opening night, front row." He lifted himself up on his toes and dropped down again, feeling a little giddy.

Adam beamed a smile at him. "That is so sweet of you, Kurt! Thank you! I really look forward to it."

Kurt looked at Adam fondly as he watched him accept the ticket, holding it carefully by the edges to read the print. It had Kurt's name on it right under the title and Alison's credits.

"This is amazing," Adam said reverently. "You'll have to sign it afterwards. It'll be my pension fund." He winked.

Kurt grinned, feeling pleased. "Something smells good," he remarked, breathing in deeply from the scent that was wafting through Adam's doorway. "What are you making?"

Adam looked over his shoulder as if he only just remembered what he'd been doing before Kurt came. "Italian," he replied. "Or, well, Max is."
He opened the door a bit.

Kurt saw a tall, dark-haired man standing in Adam's small kitchen, wearing nothing but sweatpants and Adam's apron that said "Kiss the Cook." His biceps bulged out as he grated a large hunk of cheese over a bowl. Kurt swallowed, feeling his giddiness fizz out like fireworks in a puddle.

As usual, Adam was able to read Kurt's emotions right off his face, and he added quietly: "Max is… an old friend from Essex. We used to share a flat together."

Kurt nodded, chewing his lip. It's wasn't hard to fill in the gaps of what else they used to share.

"We broke it off when I left for the States," Adam continued, confirming Kurt's suspicions. "The long distance wouldn't have worked, with both of us studying, never having the time or the money for visits. It seemed like the rational thing to do."

"I guess so," Kurt agreed, thinking of Blaine. There hadn't even been an ocean between them, yet it had been far away enough for Blaine to feel the need to cheat on him. Why hadn't they been able to make a mature decision like that? It would have saved them both a lot of heartache.

"I hadn't seen him in five years when he suddenly showed up here, looking for a place to stay,” Adam continued. “He's applying for a job as a chef at some of the larger restaurants in the city. He's quite good."

"Mmm. I can see that," Kurt replied, now watching Max dice vegetables with a speed that would make others lose a finger.

Visitors from England were not a rare occasion at Adam’s place. Basically everyone he knew (or his family and friends knew) used his place like a cheap youth hostel. Where else were you going to find an affordable place in New York that even had decent tea? Kurt knew Adam was far too polite to ever turn anyone away, and maybe he enjoyed the company from home, too.

It certainly looked like he was enjoying this company, anyway, judging by the state of undress the man was in. Kurt only now realized Adam's shirt was inside out, like he had just thrown it on before opening the door.
"So... are you two...?" Kurt trailed off.

Adam looked back inside over his shoulder. "Trying to pick up where we left off? Yeah, I suppose. He's applied for a green card. If he's really staying, it wouldn't be a long-distance thing any more." Adam turned to Kurt and smiled. He looked content and hopeful.

"Right."

Kurt was starting to feel numb. Maybe Elliott was really right. Maybe he should just be alone-- if nothing else, just to avoid these kind of emotional roller coasters. He watched Max whisk the vegetables into the bowl with his knife. It felt like watching a cooking show.

The man must have noticed his eyes on him, because he suddenly looked up. "Oh, hello," he said, and put the knife down. He quickly wiped his hands on his apron.

_The one I gave Adam for Valentine’s last year_, Kurt's mind supplied as his lips formed a half-mumbled, "Hi."

Adam opened the door the rest of the way and looked from one to the other. "Sorry. Kurt, this is Maximillian Kamal."

"Max, please," the man corrected, walking up to the door with his hand out. "Only my nan ever calls me Maximillian."

He had a deep, warm voice and his accent was undeniably British, and just as irresistible to Kurt as Adam's was. Kurt shook his hand. "Kurt Hummel." His own voice sounded shrill in comparison, his accent flat and dull.

_The Kurt Hummel, who's starring in that musical I keep telling you about,_ Adam added enthusiastically. He held up his ticket and hopped up and down on his feet a little.

"Wow," Max replied, nodding appreciatively. "I heard you're still in school. Pretty amazing opportunity, this part. Well done, you."
"Thanks." Kurt hesitated. As much as he wanted to dislike the guy, he seemed nice. More mature than Nikolas, anyway. "I, um, could probably get you a ticket too," he offered.

"Really? That would be amazing! I haven't been to any shows in New York yet, though I've been dying to. For years, Adam's been telling me how everything worth seeing starts right here in the Big Apple, and that he was going to be a part of it."

Adam cleared his throat. "So much for that," he mumbled. "Though I suppose bringing stage actors their lattes sort of counts."

"Everyone has to start somewhere. I worked in a coffee shop, too, y'know," Kurt said. "You'll get your chance."

"I keep telling him that," Max agreed. "Say, you want to stay for dinner? I just need to finish stuffing the cannelloni, it'll only take a sec. Oven's already warmed up, and Adam's got this fantastic wine-"

Kurt shook his head. Even if he did sort of like him, watching Max and Adam being this domestic was simply too soon. He didn't want to see Max wear that apron, in Adam's kitchen, stuffing cannelloni. It would inevitably lead to thoughts of him without that apron, in Adam's bed, stuffing other things. And it was definitely too soon for that. "I wish I could, but I have this… thing."

"Of course," Adam said, stopping Max from insisting so Kurt wouldn't have to specify. "Kurt's always so busy. Well. Thank you, again, Kurt, for the ticket," he held it up, "and good luck with the final rehearsals. I really can't wait."

"Me neither," Max added pleasantly.

Kurt thanked them and left, feeling hollow. He said he still had feelings for someone from his past. Well, that had turned out to be true, Kurt scoffed. He should have known Adam hadn't been talking about him. Why would Adam ever long back to the time where Kurt left him for his lying, cheating ex-boyfriend? Even if they were friends now-- maybe especially because they were friends-- Adam knew how Kurt had a tendency to make a mess of his relationships. And he didn't even know about Elliott yet. There was no way he'd break up with someone because he felt nostalgic about that.

Maybe, Kurt thought, he just couldn’t have it all. Maybe his dad’s remission, Vogue.com and Samael, and having this wonderful group of friends who supported him and cared about him, cancelled out his chances of ever being happy in love. "It should be enough," he told himself sternly. "It’s more than I deserve."
As it turned out, Kurt didn’t have much time to think about Adam and Max and what they might or might not be doing in the weeks that followed. Samael was moments before its premiere night, with several glowing pre-premiere reviews from reputable theatre critics, One Three Hill and Jopez had been approached by a talent scout for a possible collaboration or even a record deal (provided OTH changed their name to make it easier to differentiate from the TV show - they were still talking about that, with Dani suggesting The Nip Slips every opportunity she got), and the police finally seemed to be cracking down on Kitt’s case. Despite Kurt’s misgivings, they had managed to link the user who had left threatening messages for Kurt to a twitter account that boasted about another case of violence against a member of the LGBTQ community, and it gave them grounds to search the suspects’ computers. They wouldn’t disclose what they had found, but Kitt’s sister had confided in Kurt on the phone that it might be enough to finally bring the case to court. The prospect of facing Kitt’s killers again and testifying, reliving his story while they were in the room terrified Kurt, but he knew it was something he had to do. If not for himself, for Kitt and his family, and for all of the community who’d be just that little bit safer with the killers behind bars.

In all, the good, the bad and the scary were distracting enough from his love life to make time fly by.

Now, it was finally opening night, and Kurt knew that for the next several hours, at least, there would be no lovers on his mind except Samael and Rosalinde.

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ADAM

Adam made his way to the front row of the crowded theatre, marveling at the grandeur of it all. This theatre was almost twice as big as the one he worked for, and yet it was completely packed. It was a very mixed audience. Some of them had dressed to the nines like they were attending a Broadway premiere or Oscar Night, others were more casual or simply New York City chic. Adam smiled as he saw a group of brightly clad drag queens in the middle section, animatedly discussing something on the playbill. He wondered if they might be acquaintances of Kitt, or if word had simply gotten around about Kurt. He thought he recognized Kitt’s family in another row, though it was hard to tell having seen them only once at the memorial service.

As he reached the first row of seats, he was relieved he had chosen to dress up too, otherwise he might have looked very much out of place. He smiled at Santana, who was sitting in between Dani and Clover, looking like a queen with her (suited) ladies in waiting. There was no sign of Rachel, but after what Kurt had told him about the way they had parted, Adam hadn’t really expected her to be
there. She had never been very good with being happy for anyone else’s success. He found his seat next to an older looking couple who was also studying the playbill. He looked at the jackets piled on the chair next to them. He politely cleared his throat.

“Um. Sorry. It’s just, um, I think this is my seat?”

The man looked up from the playbill and immediately apologized, picking up the jackets.

“I’m sorry, I was going to put them away but then we got a little distracted-- Our son’s in here, you know?” He held up the playbill.

Adam smiled and immediately brushed aside their apology. “No problem at all. What part is your son playing?” He settled down next to them and picked up the playbill that was on his seat.

“Samael.” The man looked like he might burst with pride.

“You’re Kurt’s parents!” Adam let out in surprise. Now that he looked at Burt, he did see a vague resemblance. The woman next to him had to be Carole, Kurt’s stepmom. He held out his hand to her first. “I’m Adam. I’m a friend of Kurt’s.”

They shook hands. Adam immediately liked Carole, with her warm smile and friendly greeting. Burt looked like a tough guy to cross, though he seemed quite harmless at the moment.

“So where do you know Kurt from? You’re not in his band, right?” Burt asked, and he nodded towards Dani and Santana.

Adam followed his eyes back a row and saw that Mercedes and Elliott had arrived as well. Mercedes was looking extremely glamorous in a tight sequined dress, and Elliott had put on his tux from one of their OTH performances.

“No, I met Kurt at NYADA,” Adam explained. “I graduated last semester.” He held up the playbill. “Your son is extremely talented, Mr Hummel. I never had a doubt he’d land a leading role like this.”

“Call me Burt,” Kurt’s father replied, looking very pleased. “So, you graduated, huh? What do you
do now? Are you, uh- in some kind of show as well?”

Adam smiled and shook his head. “Sadly not. I’m auditioning, but… it’s tough out there. In the meanwhile, I got a job as a stage manager assistant. It’s alright.”

“Well, I’m glad you found something. You know, before Kurt got this part, I was a bit worried about his career opportunities. I mean, I know he’s got the talent for it, but that doesn’t mean people are gonna give him a job, you know?”

“Oh, I know.” Adam agreed. “Casting can be quite arbitrary and nepotistic, and it’s a marketplace like any other business. Artists who don’t fit the mold are harder to sell. Though in Kurt’s case, the director simply decided to fit the mold around him.”

The first bell rang, signaling for everyone to find their seats. The seat beside Adam was still empty and he checked his phone.

“Still expecting someone?” Burt asked.

“Yes… a friend,” Adam replied, looking at the entrances. The lights in the seating area were being dimmed. Adam shook his head a little and turned his phone off. He was not going to let anything ruin Kurt’s big night. Just as he had picked up his conversation with Burt and Carole again, Clementine appeared from behind an usher with a flashlight.

“Sorry I’m late,” she said, looking slightly harried. “There were two people fighting on the subway, and someone pulled the emergency break. We had to wait for the police to get there before they could get going again.”

“Wow. I’m happy you’re okay. You didn’t miss anything yet,” Adam assured her. “It’s usually a few minutes between the first bell and the last before they actually get started.” He saw Burt and Carole smiling at her and quickly introduced them. After exchanging a few pleasantries, Clementine excused herself to go and say a quick hi to a few other friends from NYADA who were seated a few rows further back, lighting her way with her cellphone.

“I’m glad your girlfriend made it,” Burt offered kindly.

“Girlfriend? You mean Clem? Oh, we’re not- she’s just…” Adam stuttered, a little surprised. “She’s
like a little sister to me, really. I’m uh, more inclined to the other gender.”

“Oh. Oh,” Burt mumbled, his eyes going a little wider as he took in Adam’s appearance with a new kind of scrutiny. “Are you sure?”

Carole hit his arm and shot him a warning look.

“Quite sure, yes,” Adam replied, smiling. He didn’t mind too much when people made assumptions about his sexuality per default, though he did always correct them.

Burt looked like he wanted to say something else, but stopped himself when Clementine returned. They settled into their seats as the lights went down and the first act began.
Chapter Ten

KURT

Kurt had imagined that, in the moments before his first big show, he’d be a wreck. He remembered what it was like, before performing with the Glee club for the first time at Sectionals, before his first duet with Blaine, before his first audition for Carmen Tibideaux… The sweating, the loose anxious feeling inside, his heart feeling like it might jump from his chest and go onstage by itself.

And it was like that. For about half an hour before the show started. Then he was waiting in the wings as people fussed with his hair and makeup, and watching the chorus onstage… and his nerves were gone. His heart continued to thud away, but now it moved with anticipation, an almost fury inside.

He was Samael. Just waiting for his moment to leap forward and own the dance floor where the courtesans vapidly exchanged pleasantries. Thirsting for the moment when he caught his prey.

Kurt took the stage with determination, danced his part, sang his lines almost effortlessly. There was no audience. Not now, not in this moment. There was just the faerie world, and all its complications. There was Jasper. There were beautiful men, and beautiful women, and all in between.

Kurt extended his leg, made his leap, and slipped through the crowd of the chorus, stabbing his first victim.

Blood spurted gloriously, and the audience gasped just before the stage went dark.

Now the real story would begin. Kurt couldn’t be more eager.

There would be more gasps where those came from.

*

ADAM

As the lights went on for intermission, there was a brief moment of silence. Then, the audience roused as one and started clapping loudly. Adam and everyone else in the front rows were up in their seats. Adam couldn’t stop grinning. It was no different next to him.

“Everyone sure is loving it,” Burt said loudly over the noise, his fatherly smile nearly splitting his face in two. Carole beamed and nodded.

“What’s not to love?” Adam replied. “It’s breathtaking. The music, the singing, the dancing, the scenery—”

“The costumes!” Clementine added enthusiastically. “How can Kurt even dance in those pants?!”

Adam was glad the theatre had heated up considerably by all of the people there so he wasn’t the only one with bright red cheeks-- he had noticed Kurt’s wardrobe as well. It was kind of hard not to, being in the front row and all. He knew from experience the lights would be far too bright for Kurt to see them, but the other way around, he had been able to make out every strained zipper and clasp.

“Kurt’s used to stuff like that,” Carole replied proudly. “And he always says it’s not the size but the cut that makes the difference between a success and wardrobe malfunction.”
“Well, he does work at Vogue.com,” Adam said fondly. He loved the things Kurt wore, even if he was, by Kurt’s standards, one of the world’s most unlikely critics, wearing only faded jeans, henleys and beanies himself. “I mean, I don’t claim to understand fashion at all, but he didn’t get that job for his knowledge about car parts.”

He looked back at Burt to find him watching him with a curious sort of look on his face.

“I sure wish Kurt knew more guys like you,” Kurt’s father blurted out.

“Sorry?” Adam asked.

“Burt,” Carole hissed, but her husband ignored her.

“You know, someone who appreciates him but doesn’t… make him forget he’s not actually from New York.”

“I’m not quite sure I know what you mean,” Adam tried carefully.

Burt nodded back at Elliott. “Like that guy, who took Kurt to get a tattoo. I mean, I’m sure he’s nice, but the way he looks is just-” He broke off.

Adam glanced at Elliott and tried to see him from Burt’s point of view. The tuxedo was actually quite conservative, but he supposed the eyeliner, the sparkling earring and the extensively styled hairdo weren’t.

“I know I’m probably old-fashioned, but secretly I’m kind of relieved they didn’t work out,” Burt finished his trail of thoughts.

“That’s enough, Burt. I’m sure Elliott didn’t make him get a tattoo. Kurt’s an adult and can make his own choices,” Carole said sternly.

“Yeah, but did he really have to jump from someone wearing clothes my own dad would’ve worn to Ziggy Stardust over there? Couldn’t he have stopped somewhere in the middle, like-?” He gestured helplessly at Adam.

Clementine looped her arm through Adam’s and gave it a comforting squeeze. “He did,” she said simply, saving Adam from having to say it.

Adam nodded. “We, uh… Kurt and I dated for a few months after he and Blaine had broken up. The first time.”

“Before he got engaged to that slimeball,” Clementine added helpfully.

“Yeah, thanks, Clem,” Adam mumbled. “I think they know.”

Burt was staring again, but in a different way now, like he was trying to remember something. “Wait. You’re Adam. I mean: you are Adam, the Adam? Kurt didn’t tell me you were so…”

Adam braced himself.

“British,” Carole supplied, and Burt looked confused, like he had been preparing to say something else but his wife changed his mind for him.

“Yeah. I mean, Kurt didn’t say much, actually,” he added sheepishly.

“It’s alright,” Adam said quickly, though it stung a bit that Kurt apparently hadn’t talked about him to
his family much. Adam did tell his family all about Kurt. Then again, considering Burt’s view on things, maybe Adam understood why he might not be so keen on details of Kurt’s love life as his own sisters were. But then there was this other thing Burt had said. Kurt and Elliott weren’t together anymore? He wondered why. They had seemed quite perfect for each other.

“I didn’t know you two still knew each other.” Burt’s brows knit together.

“We’re still friends,” Adam explained. “We only stopped talking because… Well, because his fiancé blocked my number.”

Carole made an irritated noise. “The gall, I just… I’m glad you two were able to patch things up.” She gave him a warm smile. “It’s too bad that Kurt couldn’t have brought you around. I mean, I don’t know what his plans were, but he must have had his reasons. His friends were so nosy back then. If he’d said much more, you would’ve had Tina showing up at your door, ordering you to get out of the way of her boys.”

Burt frowned even more deeply and shook his head. “That girl just went off-kilter.”

“Well, and I’m sure he told you about the stress our family was going through. I can’t imagine he would’ve invited anyone home under those circumstances.” Carole sighed. “I wonder if he even spoke to Rachel about it, at the time. Though I wish he were more inclined to let his friends help.”

“It’d be nice if he told us a few things,” Burt groused.

Adam remained quiet. From Burt’s comments, and the few that he’d gleaned from Kurt, Adam could guess why Kurt held back with his parents. And, maybe, why he’d held back so much when they had been together. Behavior like that wasn’t innate; it was learned.

“Well, maybe,” Adam said tentatively, “if you asked—”

“Asked? For him to tell us things?” Burt leveled his gaze on Adam, as though he’d overstepped his bounds.

Adam touched his lips lightly, then shook his head. It wasn’t as though he had much to lose with this man. Kurt did, though. “I suppose that would be a start, but I can’t pretend to know what you two talk about!” he joked lightly. “I meant about the tattoo he got for Finn.”

Carole’s eyes grew huge as she leaned forward. “For Finn?”

Adam nodded, gauging their expressions. Carole eager to hear anything about Finn, Burt strangely suspicious.

“It’s on his ankle. With Finn’s nickname, Frankenteen?” Adam offered.

Burt’s brow grew deeper, but Carole’s hands flew to her mouth and she whispered, “He… Oh, Burt.”

She touched his arm and blinked quickly as emotion overcame her.

“Kurt said that Finn was still a part of him, and that—” Adam paused, remembering that conversation just before he’d gone to England. “-now he was written as much on his body as on his heart. Oh, something like that.”

“Awwww!” Clementine squealed.
Carole seemed almost breathless at the revelation.

“Huh,” Burt said.

“I just thought, if you wanted to know that sort of thing, you could ask about that. To begin with, anyway.” Adam shrugged. “He didn’t seem to mind talking about it.”

“I see,” Burt said.

Adam smiled and rose. “I’m going to stretch my legs for a bit.”

He touched Clementine’s shoulder on his way out, and then headed for the restroom. There was a bit of a line, so he looked around at the people scattered around the lobby. It wasn’t long before he spotted a smattering of NYADA professors clustered together. Oh, what he wouldn’t give to hear what they had to say.

Then his eyes caught sight of Elliott, leaning against a wall, toying with an earring and talking with Santana and Dani. Adam wondered again at what Burt had said about it being over with Elliott. Was Elliott sitting among the rows, among friends, masking a broken heart? Did he ache? Was it both agonizing and sweet to watch Kurt so magnificent and perfect onstage? Adam definitely knew what that felt like.

Adam was torn for a moment. He and Elliott were friends, but it would be odd to talk to him about Kurt… It also might be manipulative to talk about the situation with everyone besides Kurt himself. It was bad enough that he’d talked to Kurt’s father behind his back, even by accident.

Nothing to be done about it now, though. He would certainly talk to Kurt after the show, if only to tell him how spectacularly amazing he was. Samael was more than Adam had even been able to imagine. He hoped the reception would be good, but if the pre-show reviews were anything to go by, Kurt would have his evenings booked for a long time.

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**KURT**

The applause was deafening, and it just wouldn’t stop. Kurt grinned as he looked at Marco and Sofia, squeezing their hands at either side of him. “Another go?” he mouthed at them over the noise, and nodded at the curtain. They had already gone off stage and returned for their accolades five times in a row, with the main cast, the full crew, and the three leads coming up for their curtain calls in separate groups. They had done a small encore reprisal of the musical’s theme. They had thanked the director, the writers, the choreographer, the orchestra and the conductor, and yet the audience would not stop calling for them. Marco shook his head and stepped up to make himself heard over the crowd.

“Nah, this one is all yours, Kurt. Go on. You deserve it.”

Kurt had to swallow a lump in his throat, but he couldn’t deny how good it felt to finally be the star of something. They were clapping for him. They wanted Samael-- and they wanted Kurt. He took a deep breath, squared his shoulders, and let go of his co-stars to take the stage alone.

The audience became even louder. Kurt walked right up to the edge of the stage and looked around, smiling appreciatively and trying to make them feel like he was making eye contact despite the blinding lights, occasionally giving a small nod to acknowledge their support. Then, the exultation from the audience’s reaction and the post-performance adrenaline woke the showman in him, and he reached for his sai swords. He pulled them free from the loops on his belt and spun them faster than
he had dared during the show, letting the shiny weapons whizz around his wrists as he slowly raised his arms to shoulder level, only to let them come to an abrupt stop between his fingers, the shafts pointing outward to lengthen his arms to a dramatic victory pose. The brilliant lightning crew, recognizing this as the climax of the curtain calls, immediately blacked out all the lights except for a round spotlight on Kurt, making the weapons sparkle dangerously.

The pandemonium that broke out told Kurt this was probably going to be his signature move after the shows from now on.

As the noise slowly started dying, the lights in the seating area swelled, and Kurt sheathed his swords, took a short bow, and left the stage. Not before he had seen his father’s beaming face, however. It was even better than that time he had scored the winning point for his high school football team. He wanted to jump up and down and scream, "Dad! Dad! Did you see?!"

But he didn't.

Backstage, stage assistants were taking the lead to gather the excited players. The actors’ jobs might be over for the night, but theirs was only half done.

“Alright, no one leaves until all props and weapons are accounted for!” Jamie shouted. “Have someone sign you off at the door or I will come and drag you back from the after-party!”

Kurt grinned. He knew the small but fierce woman was good for her word. He dutifully began removing all of the props from his costume, in between being hugged by almost all of the crew, it seemed. It had taken some getting used to the touchy-feely way they all treated each other, but after so many weeks together, it felt like family, and he returned each hug with heart-felt warmth.

“Well done,” Jasper whispered into his ear as he squeezed Kurt tightly. “It’s been an honor to write my songs for you.” Then, he let go, cleared his throat, and said loudly: “And don’t drink too much tonight. You don’t wanna mess with that voice, kid.”

Kurt grinned. “No worries. I’ve got plenty of vocal chord soothers left over from my roommate.”

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It took Kurt and the main cast quite some time to get from the theatre to the after-party venue. By the time they had changed out of their costumes and had their props lists signed off, a small crowd had formed outside the stage door. Newly won fans and journalists clamored for their attention; people held out playbills and markers. Kurt had never been asked to sign one of his own pictures before. (A few girls wearing self-made One Three Hill fanshirts also held out printed screenshots of Kurt and Elliott’s kiss for him to sign, which was a little awkward, but Kurt thanked them for coming and signed anyway.) He tried to give each person as much attention as he could, but at some point, Sofia reminded him that their friends and families would be waiting at the party, as well as a few press agents who would be expecting quotes and pictures from the main cast, and they had to be back at the theatre the next afternoon. He reluctantly left, unable to suppress a small but lingering worry that something might happen between today and tomorrow (bad reviews? awful YouTube clips? Alison suddenly realizing she wanted to recast Samael?), and this could have been the only time he’d ever experience success.

The after-party soon made him forget his worries. As soon as he was there, he was practically tackled by Mercedes, bear-hugged by his teary-eyed dad, and lifted into the air by Elliott and Sam while the rest of his friends cheered and raised their glasses in his honor. At the end of what seemed an everlasting queue of well-wishers and media journalists taking pictures, when Kurt was just wondering where he had left his fifth barely sipped glass of champagne (over-enthusiastic waiters
kept clearing away the glasses he put down to allow himself to be hugged), Kurt saw a very welcome familiar face. In his usual, reserved and polite way, Adam had waited to the last to give Kurt time with his family before coming up to him. Kurt could tell that underneath that calm patience was a bubbling source of enthusiasm, though, and it started flowing out of him as soon as Adam stood in front of Kurt.

“That was amazing. Simply amazing! I was at the edge of my seat the whole time! Kurt, you were absolutely fantastic!”

“Thank you,” Kurt replied, doing his best not to look away or blush too hard while he said it. By now he knew better than to deflect Adam’s compliments— the man would simply insist anyway. (There were plenty of ‘but I breathed on the wrong note in the fifth song’ and ‘I missed a step at the finale’ that would haunt him tonight, but Kurt had always hated it when Rachel griped over her own performances like that, so he tried keeping it to himself.)

“I hope Max liked it, too?” he asked, trying to sound casual as he looked around for Adam’s handsome boyfriend, secretly hoping he might look terrible in formal clothes.

Adam pressed his lips into a thin-lipped smile for a moment, then softened his expression. “I’m sure he would have, Kurt. But he’s in San Francisco. He, uh… got a job offer there and, well, as it turns out, five years was a little too long to just pick up where we left off.”

“Oh.” Kurt did a little double-take. “I’m so sorry.”

Adam shrugged. “It’s alright. I think we both just got swept up in nostalgia for a little bit. It’s easy to forget one another’s less attractive habits if you spend enough time apart.”

“Mmm.” Kurt repressed the memory of his accepting Blaine’s proposal back in Lima. He knew what longing for something you had lost and idealized in your mind was like, only to have harsh reality slap you in the face. So Mr. Handsome Masterchef hadn’t been so perfect after all.

He couldn’t be, to give this man up.

Adam was dressed in a well-cut black suit and, Kurt noticed as his cheeks flushed involuntarily, a skinny, black tie. He wondered if that tie had some special memories for Adam, too.

“That bit at the end, the very end, after the encores…” Adam shook his head. “I always knew you could be a showman, Kurt, but that was just brilliant. If only someone were smart enough to snatch you up. That’ll be on front page of all the entertainment sections, I’m absolutely certain.”

“Well, my secret desire to be a fucking ninja had to pay off sometime.” Kurt pinched his lips to the side and looked down. “I’m really glad you came. It just means a lot for you to see this. I dunno how to say it… You were the first person in this city to really see me. You were the first one here to watch me perform and just…” Kurt let out a sigh. “Just love what I do. That makes performing this for you sort of special.”

“I think everyone at the Winter Showcase loved watching you, Kurt. That’s what the standing ovation means,” Adam said gently. “And Madam Tibideaux admitted you based on that performance!”

“You were the only one to say anything though. And she’d rejected me twice already.” Kurt laughed. “No. You’re special, Adam. You are. To me. And I hope people recognize what a sharp eye and mind you have for spotting and fostering talent, soon.”

Now Adam’s cheeks were getting a bit pink, and he smiled that sweet, self-effacing smile. “Thank
you, darling.”

For an awkward moment, neither of them said anything. Kurt wondered what the chance was of getting Adam alone to talk for a bit. Then, a tall young man with a camera slipped through the crowd next to them.

“Mind another picture? Who is this?” the man asked.

“You can take one of me, but…” Kurt looked to Adam in askance.

“I’m his numbah one fan. I don’t mind.” Adam turned to the camera and gave an extra sunny smile as the man took a few pictures. When the man finished, he thanked them and gave a wave. Adam turned to Kurt and tented his brows, looking slightly anxious. “Will that be a problem for the PR? Do you need to be photographed with your costars?”

Kurt waved a hand. “They’ve gotten plenty of pictures of Marco and Sofia and I. And if they want more, they can come see the play tomorrow.” He smirked, then leaned in closer to Adam. “There’s a bit of a surprise.”


Kurt held a finger to his lips, which twitched with deep amusement. Then, when Adam’s eyes had widened in curiosity, and his lips bowed just slightly, Kurt whispered, “There’s a different ending.”

Adam’s mouth dropped open. “Really? Is it just… How different is it?”

“You’ll have to wait for the reviews.” Kurt shook his head teasingly.

“Maybe I’ll just sneak in tomorrow to see it!”

“You don’t have to sneak in. I can tell you after the show tomorrow, but not before. Elliott’s going to see the whole thing again for… reasons.” Kurt laughed a little at the expression Elliott had made, talking about Kurt and Marco kissing.

“Elliott, so… So you two are… alright?” Adam asked tentatively.

“Me and Elliott? Oh, well… “ Kurt paused for a moment and took a deep sip of his champagne. “That happened then unhappened kinda fast. But we’re okay. It was a little awkward at first, but… We’re still friends, and that’s for the good. I don’t know what I’d do, if we couldn’t be friends anymore.”

Adam pursed his lips thoughtfully. “The two of you are close. He’s the one you ran to, when things with…” He stopped and shook his head. “Kurt, I’m glad you have him as a friend. But I want to be clear…” He broke off again. “Sorry, I’m not sure this is the time for it.”

“No, no, Adam. If you have something you want to talk about-” Kurt took Adam’s arm, smiled at a few crew members and pulled the two of them over to an uninhabited corner. Then he let go and motioned for Adam to sit.

“I appreciate that. It’s a big night for you. I don’t want to divert the attention from you or sully it in any way,” Adam said almost sternly.

“No, it’s fine…” Kurt had just sat down, but he looked up then, suddenly. “Are you okay? You’re not sick or any-”
“No!” Adam took Kurt’s hand in his own, the large hand enveloping a few of Kurt’s long, graceful fingers. “I’m perfectly healthy. No worries there.”

Kurt took a deep breath and nodded, letting it out slowly. The relief probably showed on his face, because Adam pressed his hand in reassurance.

“I promise you I’m fine.” Adam shifted in his seat a little. “I just wanted to ask…” he started, still looking a little hesitant. “Before I left for England this summer, I kind of had the feeling that you and I… Well, that we were starting to get close again.”

Kurt got a sinking feeling in his stomach. Was this the moment where Adam told him he felt neglected as a friend? Hoping he wouldn’t sound too much like Rachel, Kurt opened his mouth to try and explain how busy he had been, but Adam frowned and spoke before he could.

“But then when I came back I couldn’t help but notice how close you were with Elliott. I kept telling myself you were just friends, and I couldn’t possibly have made the mistake of falling for you twice while you were really in love with someone else, but the more I saw you two together, the more I realized that maybe that really did happen.”

Kurt breathed in sharply.

“But unlike with Blaine, I couldn’t really be angry,” Adam continued. “Except maybe with myself, a little. Clearly, my ‘not now’ had become for you a ‘not ever,’ and before I’d shown you how I felt, you were moving on. I knew Elliott is a great guy, and he really cares for you. So when I saw you dancing in the club, I thought: Okay, Adam, it’s time you step aside and give Kurt the chance to decide for himself. And you did.”

“But…!” Kurt started to protest. The few sips of champagne he had managed to drink were now swirling around in his stomach, making him feel dizzy. All this time, Adam had still had feelings for him? And he hadn’t noticed? He vividly remembered telling Elliott (long before they had kissed) how he had blown all his chances with Adam.

“I know,” Adam replied, nodding with a wry smile, “that sounds horribly conceited. I’m sure you would have done your own thing even if I had been hanging around more waiting for you. But I just wanted to make things easier.”

“By dating Nikolas,” Kurt filled in flatly.

Adam shot him a guilty look. “That may have been sort of a knee-jerk reflex after seeing that YouTube video of you and Elliott,” he admitted.

“You wanted to get back at me?” Kurt asked quietly, unable to keep memories from Blaine’s passive-aggressive behavior from popping up in his mind.

“Not at all,” Adam replied, nodding with a wry smile, “that sounds horribly conceited. I’m sure you would have done your own thing even if I had been hanging around more waiting for you. But I just wanted to make things easier.”

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Adam sat up. “No! No, of course not. I mean, there was nothing to get back at you for. I was just… a little sad and lonely, I suppose. And I thought it would make it easier.”

“Make what easier?”

“Getting over you, so I could be a proper friend again.”

“But you’ve always been a proper friend,” Kurt replied. “Stop saying you aren’t!” He paused. “Did it work?”

Adam looked at him for a moment and sighed. “No. When I realized what I was trying to do, I broke
up with him. It wasn’t fair or healthy for either of us.”

“I thought you broke up with him because Max showed up,” Kurt said.

Adam shook his head. “I’m quite pathetic,” he said, avoiding Kurt’s eyes and looking over at the other party guests. “Max saw through me almost right away. So much for being a theatre school graduate, huh?”

Kurt wasn’t sure what to say. His mind was spinning with all the might-have-beens and missed chances, and the heartache he had unwittingly inflicted on Adam (yet again). When he finally sorted through his thoughts, the first thing he said was: “I wasn’t in love with Elliott.”

Adam looked confused, and Kurt hurried to explain.

“I mean, I wanted to be. I tried to be. He’s handsome and kind and funny and-” He broke off, shaking his head. “He’s my best friend. He makes me feel safe, and I thought: what could be more perfect than dating my best friend? I’d never thought about it before, but when he kissed me, I figured…” He shrugged. “I didn’t know you still cared about me like that,” he added a little defensively. “I mean, when I kissed you after the memorial, you said you didn’t want me.”

Adam shook his head. “No, Kurt, I-” He sighed. “That’s not what I meant. You were hurting. I didn’t want to take advantage of that.”

Kurt pushed on. “And then we did all of these couple-y things without ever going beyond platonic cuddling. It didn’t matter what kind of movie we watched, or what songs I played for you, or what clothes I wore. Right up until you left.”

Adam looked a little hurt now, and Kurt could feel the ever-old mantra return to his thoughts. *You suck at relationships.* His inner voice was condescending and sounded eerily like Blaine. Apparently what he thought had been a big, blinking neon sign over his head saying “I’M READY!” had been too subtle (or too un-sexy, or just too Kurt, his inner voice nastily added).

“It did matter. I did notice,” Adam said. “I was just afraid. I thought if I started pushing you, and it was too soon, the way I did when I knew you were still in love with Blaine, I’d mess everything up. I was giving you space.” He frowned a little. “Too much space, apparently.”

It hurt. Space had been the last thing Kurt wanted back then. After never having any space at all with Blaine suffocating him, the months after their break-up felt like he was floundering, thrown into a void. Adam ‘giving him space’ had felt like he was keeping his distance of the crazy.

Mercedes’ words suddenly came back to him. *If a guy respects your boundaries, that’s a good thing. You know that, right?*

His heart sank. Was he just doomed to make the same mistakes over and over again? Adam hadn’t wanted to crowd him. Elliott hadn’t pushed him into making up his mind. And he had interpreted both their intentions as “I’m not interesting enough.”

Adam picked up Kurt’s hand between the two of his and kissed it gently. “I didn’t say all of this to ruin your night. Maybe I should’ve waited-”

“No. I would want to know this, no matter when you decided to tell me. But… Why now? Because you heard about Elliott?” Kurt’s skin was still prickling with anxiety. He didn’t know what to do from here, especially if the answer was more ‘space.’

“Well, partially. Partially because I was sitting next to your father, who spilled that tidbit, and I didn’t’
want to talk to anyone else about our relationship before I’d gotten things straight with you.” Adam sighed. “It didn’t seem right.”

Kurt gave a short nod. “That’s very honorable.”

“And… To be perfectly honest, I felt like if I waited until tomorrow morning, another guy might have already snatched you up while I was fussing around.” Adam smiled warmly, then cringed. “Oh, no! Don’t look like that! It’s a joke, darling. You’re a prime catch!”

“Well, I don’t think anyone can say I haven’t been fickle.”

“Fickle suggests not being able to make up one’s mind. If I’m not an option in your mind, it’s not like you chose Elliott over me. I wasn’t there to be chosen.” Adam looked down, tenting his brows. “I wanted… I wanted to take care of you, and give you what you needed, but… I could’ve been more… I mean, Max has called me a wet hen a time or two.”

Kurt raised his brows. “And that crazy Britishism means…?”

“That I’m soggy and boring.”

Kurt flattened his lips into a line. “Then Max is an asshole.”

“Oh! He is not. Better off than a lame duck. He’s just…” Adam shook his head and stroked his fingers over the back of his hand. “I love how fiery you are. I’ve never had a guy defend me the way you do. Your spirit is indomitable. From ill treatment from your friends, to chances stolen from you by bigotry, to literally surviving anything thrown at you-- Nothing stops you. Not completely, not for long. In comparison, I really am a wet hen. I couldn’t do half the stuff you do with one hand tied behind your back. Even if I could, I’m not sure I can ever match your passion. Or your strength. I’ve never been that way. And while I would have preferred if you could slow down, for me and for yourself so you could heal, I also think that there’s a reason if you just didn’t feel… what I felt for you.”

Kurt was silent for a moment. Then he pulled his chair closer to Adam’s, lifted Adam’s chin with his hand, and brushed away a few tears. Adam met his eye, and pressed his lips together in a somewhat embarrassed smile.

“I don’t know if I can be still,” Kurt admitted. “But I know that ever since I called it off with us the first time, I had doubts. Ever since you were out of my life, I felt it, and I missed your energy, even if it’s different from my own. And ever since I saw you again, standing at the door with your beanie and that bouquet of apples--” Kurt laughed softly. “--just because you’d heard your jerk ex had been in the hospital, and you were worried… It aches. I don’t know how else to put it. I want you in my life, and not just as a friend, even though you were worth the pain of having lost you.”

“Kurt…”

“I can try to slow down. I can try to open up.” Kurt felt his insides threatening to rebel. Adam gave him so much credit for bravery, but talking to Adam about this after everything that had gone between them was terrifying in a different way. “I can try to do it, if you still want to try to keep up. We’ll meet half-way. But… I don’t want you to feel like you’re not enough, just because I have this demented complex about believing people could actually love me unconditionally.”

Adam’s eyes were wide, and still a little wet, as he looked at Kurt. Kurt wasn’t the mind-reader that Adam seemed to be sometimes, but he remembered that look. That vulnerable, wounded expression, the near-tears and open features. Adam always seemed palpably hurt himself when he saw or heard
Kurt hurting. That was when Kurt heard Alison calling his name across the room. Kurt turned his head to see her standing with a group of unfamiliar people, then sighed.

“Sorry. I have to go. Think about it?” Kurt rose and leaned over to press a kiss to Adam’s forehead.

Adam caught his hand just as he moved toward Alison. “I don’t need to think about it. I want to try.”

Kurt bounced a little and beamed. “Oh! Yay. Okay. Um… text me later? We can meet for coffee or something later this week and talk more?”

“I’d love to,” Adam said solemnly.

Kurt didn’t want to go, but this wasn’t a great place for this discussion, and Kurt needed some time to think about everything they had said anyway. Alison was beckoning him forward, emphatically, with one arm. He took Adam’s hand, gave it a gentle kiss, and whispered, “See you later.”
Chapter Eleven

KURT

Kurt didn’t have an immense amount of time to himself these days, so a morning off from Vogue and classes was something to be grateful for. He’d only barely been able to give K’evondra a nod at Samael’s opening. She’d had to go almost directly afterward, when Kurt had been swamped by the crowds at the stage door, and she had mimed across the crowd with hands clapping and a thumbs up.

So after breakfast with Burt and Carole, there Kurt was, heading up the stairs to K’evondra’s apartment, his head full of all sorts of things. Show things, school things, Adam things, but mostly… Kitt.

Kitt was never too far away from Kurt’s thoughts, even though enough time had passed that the attack didn’t occupy his every waking thought. He could push it away. He could make new memories and not be dragged back down to that night. But there were moments, often, that Kurt wondered what Kitt would say about something that had happened, or what Kitt would be doing now, if he were still alive.

What would he think of Kurt? Would he have liked the show? Actually, Kurt didn’t wonder too hard about that one. It looked like some of Kitt’s friends had made it to a few of the shows, and what Kurt had heard about Kitt’s performances, drag and otherwise, Kitt would have appreciated every little flicker of subversion the play offered. And he would’ve liked the music. K’evondra had told him Kitt wasn’t a huge musical fan, but enjoyed less soppy ones—musicals with some grit and passion. Sweeney Todd. Repo. He and Kitt would’ve fought over the value of Wicked. Kurt would of course, be pro. Kitt would find the musical too watered-down from the political satire of the novel.

Kurt found himself smiling just a little, in a grim way. It couldn’t be that healthy to have mental conversations with dead people. Since Kitt wasn’t the only one he did this with.

When Kurt reached the top, he rapped on the front door and waited. By the time K’evondra opened the door, Kurt was humming the opening number of Samael and bouncing on his toes.

“Hey, hon! I’m glad you could make it!” K’evondra reached up and gave him a forceful hug. “Come on in. Do you want anything? Tea?”

“No, no, I’m fine.”

She shut the door behind her and flipped the extra locks. Kurt’s gaze fixed on the locks for a moment, and then he frowned.

“Do you have any tools around? Because your deadbolt isn’t really installed right. If you let me go at it, I can make it more secure.”

K’evondra patted the back of his hair. “I’ll see what I’ve got. They had to fix the door a few weeks ago. Damn thing was kicked right off the hinges.”

“Oh my God!” Kurt turned his head sharply.

“They didn’t take anything.” K’evondra waved her hand and went into the cramped kitchen. From the size of this place and the toys on the floor, probably belonging to Kitt’s youngest sister Vera, Kurt figured that the kids lived here, too.
“Still.” Kurt’s brow furrowed, and he set down his bag and went to look at the door. The frame didn’t look strong. It could probably still get kicked in pretty easily.

“Big dumb assholes.” K’evondra returned with a cup of hot chamomile and a little toolbox. “Didn’t take anything and just made a big old mess. Stepped on some of the work I was editing, too. Left a footprint right on one of the pages. I had to explain that to the writer I was working with.”

“Creepy.” Kurt immediately thought of Kitt’s attackers. Would they come after Kitt’s sister here? “And they just… What did they want?”

“Oh, drugs or money. Or something they could sell easy. Good thing we already pawned the TV, I suppose.”

“Glad the kids weren’t home.”

K’evondra leaned back against the sofa and watched Kurt watching the door. “They’re coming after us because I’m a single woman here. And we’re on the end of the row. Easiest to get to on our floor.”

Kurt scanned up and down the door, then set his tea down, flipped the locks back, and opened it up again. After glaring at the frame for another minute, he said, “A security door would fit on here, y’know? One of the steel ones, if your landlord doesn’t mind. Something he doesn’t have to pay for? Give him a key?”

K’evondra’s full, maroon-painted lips curved slightly.

“See, doors like this are easy to kick open…” Kurt pointed to the side of the frame that was still a bit splintered. “The hinges aren’t secure enough, and the frame needs to be replaced with a sturdier wood, and the deadlock helps, but they can really just bust the frame out and bypass the deadbolt, because the door opens inward.”

“That so.”

Kurt pinched his lips to the side. “Is this something you’ve thought about?”

“No really… but I’m not sure I can afford to pay for extra repairs.”

Kurt waved his hand. “It’s only about a hundred for a good solid security door.”

“And manpower,” K’evondra pointed out. “And I don’t have the extra hundred to spare right now.”

“Well, I do. And I know how to install it. If I can make Adam hold stuff for me.”

“Okay. I’ll think about it. But I can’t have you shilling out for this. I’ll manage, somehow.”

“I just want you to be safe.”

“Well, shut that door, little brother. It’s cold outside.”

Kurt did as he was told and locked the deadbolt and chain behind him. “Sorry. I meddle.”

“That’s okay. I don’t know when you’re going to have time to be my handiman, but I appreciate the assessment. Maybe I can get some of the boys at the church to get started on reinforcing the frame, and then we’ll see.”

Kurt followed her around to sit on the sofa, lowering his head slightly. They didn’t see one another
as often as they spoke on the phone, but he was still glad to have a connection with her, and he’d been honored that she’d come to the show.

“Oh I almost forgot I brought you something.” Kurt opened his bag and pulled out the ‘clean’ trinity style poster that featured Samael, Rosalinde, and Jasper. He’d gotten Sofia and Marco to sign it for him and scrawled his own signature along the bottom.

“Aw.” K’evondra grinned as she held out the poster. “Kurt. God, look at you. Our little baby, all dressed up and ready to dominate!”

Kurt laughed. “Uh, I wasn’t sure what you’d think about some parts of the play. It gets a little… Um… Anyway, I figured you might have kids running around, so the nude poster was out.”

K’evondra threw her head back and laughed. “Oh, good Lord. Maybe save that one for my office, huh? Thanks for this, Kurt. I really did enjoy it. I don’t get a lot of nights out.”

“Yeah, I know you’ve been super busy.”

K’evondra trailed her finger over Marco’s stunning image, then set the poster down and reached over and took Kurt’s hand. “You, too. I appreciate your taking the time.”

“Just not enough hours in the day.” Kurt shrugged. “I don’t manage to call you enough.”

“You do fine.” K’evondra laughed softly. “I was just thinking the other day I ought to check in on you more. I feel better, though, seeing all those friends you have now. It’s good for you.”

Kurt smiled softly. “It is. It’s kind of strange, even. There’s always someone around, and that… It didn’t used to be like that. Before… I felt very alone.” Kurt bit his lip. “Sorry I flaked out on your youth choir. Everyone was telling me that I was taking on too much, and even after that, I had to scale back-”

“Hon, you have way, way too much to do. Remember I was one of those voices in your ear warning about you overextending yourself while you were still recovering. And I understood it was a long shot for someone who was still a student. It would’a been nice.” She smirked. “Besides, now that you’re part of a popular band and the star of an off-Broadway show, think how much more it’ll mean to them for you to drop in someday.”

Kurt raised his brows. “I didn’t think of it that way.”

“I always do. I’m a schemer.” K’evondra squeezed his hand. “No worries, babe. We have have someone to do it for the time being. We just need to find someone who actually needs a job.”

As they settled into the couch, K’evondra told Kurt her favorite parts of Samael, Kurt pressed her for what was going on in her life, and K’evondra prodded about Kurt’s romantic prospects. Kurt demurred, telling her that it was all far too much of a tangle to get into at the moment, but he would give her details on how things were working out with Adam later, and she told him she would hold him to that promise.

“It’s just strange,” Kurt muttered, his eyes drifting toward the door again.

“What is?”

“Everything in my life. How much good is in it. And I still can’t believe it. I think I’ll turn a corner, and suddenly the reviews will be bad, I’ll be kicked out of school, Dani and Elliott will become a music sensation without me, and Adam will…” Kurt shook his head and shrugged. “I dunno?
Suddenly go back to England before I ruin both of our lives. Again.”

“None of that’s gonna happen!” K’evondra scoffed. “You’ve been working on you, on this, for years. How is it so impossible to believe that work paid off?”

Kurt thought for a moment. “I guess… Part of me thinks I don’t deserve it. That it’s just luck, or maybe, it’s just bad luck, that…” He paused and twisted his fingers. “I’m still here.”

K’evondra’s brows deepened for a moment before her expression opened curiously, her eyes widening and her lips parting suddenly. As her rich brown eyes began to shine slightly, Kurt whispered:

“I’m sorry.”

“No, no, hon…”

She swallowed, then leaned forward. The two of them held each other tightly, and Kurt couldn’t keep his tears from dampening the shoulder of her crisp purple shirt.

“Lord knows, if I were wishing, I’d wish you’d both made it out. But as much as I want my sweet, brave brother, I am glad you’re still here. A lotta people are,” K’evondra said fervently.

Kurt pulled back and wiped his eyes. “I know. I just- I’m sorry for bringing this up-”

“Don’t ever be. I miss my brother. I’m going to miss him for the rest of my life,” she admitted. “I don’t mind talking about him.”

“God, I wish I didn’t know what that felt like,” Kurt muttered. He looked down at his lap. They’d talked about Kitt a lot. They’d talked about Finn, too. “I don’t think I’ll ever get over not saving him. Maybe that’s self-involved.”

“That’s survivor’s guilt. You can’t help bein’ a survivor.”

Kurt wobbled his head from side to side and gave a faux-smug smile. “It was the way I was raised.”

“Aren’t we all?” K’evondra reached for her cup.

“No. Not everyone is raised that way. It took me so long to figure that out. You would’ve come with me… You would’ve helped me save him. Not everyone would.”

K’evondra reached over and cupped his cheek. “I know you’re not Jesus-y, babe, but I think the Lord needs angels like you down here. Our world is so wicked. People are so cruel to each other. What happened was a tragedy… but you know what real angels are like, right? They’re not a bunch of white boys in robes.”

A wrinkle appeared in Kurt’s brow. He didn’t quite understand any of the Bible talk, but he did like to listen to K’evondra. She was a smart woman, with a big heart and a generous spirit.

“Oh, there are robes, but angels, they’re just… these spirits, who are so much bigger and more powerful than we humans can fathom, and they carry out the work of God with whirling swords in hand.”

“If only I’d brought my swords with me into the alley.” The words came out flatter than Kurt had intended. He’d meant to lighten it up, but the levity just didn’t come.

“You did everything you could,” K’evondra insisted. “And now? It’s time for you to live. It’d be a
shame if you couldn’t.”

Because Kitt couldn’t. Kitt never would.

Kurt drew in a deep breath and nodded. K’evondra rose, taking their teacups with her.

“How ‘bout a nip of something stronger, hm?”

Kurt raised a brow. “It’s ten.”

“Well, I didn’t say we’d be doing shots.” K’evondra rolled her eyes and put a drop of bourbon and bit of honey into their teacups before refilling them both and pinching a cut lemon wedge over each cup. “Trust me.”

“I do.” Kurt sucked in his lower lip as she came back, pressed his warm cup into his hands, and gently petted his hair before taking her seat again.

—

Shoving his hands deep in the pockets of his long blue coat, Kurt headed down the sidewalk as quickly as his stylish boots would take him. It was cold, and Kurt was a little less than eager to be out at the moment. But he needed to pick up a few things so he could make dinner for his dad and Carole. It was so tough to run errands when he only had one night off.

He’d done so much laundry and cleaning up that day that he’d forgotten to go get the food to cook with. He was even thinking of hiring someone to run his errands, but that seemed so bougie that it seemed beyond the scope of Kurt Hummel’s world.

The streets were fairly crowded. Not quite shopping season yet, but almost there. Plus, it was getting dark, and that only brought out more impatient pedestrians.

Kurt was a couple of blocks from the store when his phone began to buzz in his pocket. He pulled it out and gave it a quick look while walking. He didn’t recognize the number, but that didn’t mean much, these days. There were always people from the staff of Samael grabbing someone’s phone to call him in for a refitting or to give him a message from Alison.

Keeping his pace, Kurt held the phone to his ear. “Hello?” he chirruped.

“Hey, faggot.”

Kurt stopped walking suddenly, causing a woman to run right into his back.

“Fucking, Christ!” she shouted, quickly moving around him.

Kurt swept a look around the street, ignoring the angry walkers shifting around him.

“Hey, hey. Did you hear me? Did you hear me, faggot?” the rough voice on the other end demanded.

Kurt’s already chilled limbs began shaking. He recognised that voice. “Where did you get my number?” Kurt asked dumbly. His voice, strangely enough, sounded deep and angry.

“You don’t want to talk? I saw your show-” He made it sound like a dirty word. “-Still flitting around like a fucking fairy-”

Kurt ended the call and picked his pace back up. The sides of his face were burning, and while he
kept sweeping his gaze from side to side, no one seemed that interested in him. When he reached the
store, Kurt ducked inside and felt as though something had just been cut loose in his chest.
Something about the brightness of the store lights, and the well staffed aisle made him feel slightly
better.

But, as Kurt slipped his phone back into his pocket, he wondered if the man on the other end even
knew where he was. He hadn’t mentioned anything, like they did in the movies. Like maybe,
mocking his blue coat or his fluffy scarf. But still…

A woman came up behind him to grab a basket, and Kurt jumped. She gave him a frown, and Kurt
instinctively took a basket himself. He was here for chicken. He could get the groceries, and then…

And then what? he asked himself. And then you get a cab, he answered. You get your groceries and
flag down a cab and ride the couple of blocks home and lock the doors.

Kurt drew in several deep breaths before heading first to the wine section.

He was lost in thought as his fingers moved over the wine selections. He’d planned to pick up one
for the chicken, and one for himself for that week. But he couldn’t focus on the labels. His mind kept
drifting to that voice. How had that guy gotten Kurt’s number? Kurt didn’t give it out easily… But
he’d never advertised his job at The Spotlight Diner either. The One-Three fans had found him there
anyway (or Elliott, anyway). Dani would never publish Kurt’s contact information on their
FaceBook page, but… if someone were determined… if they said they were looking for Kurt and
tried to seem nice about it…

Just as Kurt turned down the aisle, he spotted someone moving behind him and his heart leapt into
his throat. He turned around sharply to see no one there.

“Losing it,” he muttered. Slowly, he turned back to the shelf and tried to make himself choose a
wine. Okay, just pick a white one for the chicken… He began to turn bottles and skim over the labels.

“Oh, no! Burgundy. What am I thinking?” Kurt started to turn again.

A greasy-haired man ducked behind the end of the aisle.

Kurt’s insides turned to ice water. He set the wine down and, eyes glued to the spot he’d last seen the
man, slipped over to the next aisle. He moved as quickly as he could without looking panicked, and
headed toward the front of the store. Every couple of seconds, he stole a glance behind himself.

Stay calm. Stay calm. There are plenty of people here. He just wants to scare-

Kurt caught sight of the man before he moved out of sight once again. Definitely a short, heavyset
man with dark hair. Kurt’s fingers clutched over his scarf as he tried to decide what to do. What
would happen if the man got to him before he got to the front of the store? What if he did get to the
front of the store… then what? Out into the dark to get a cab? Call 911? They’d never get here in
time, if the man had a weapon… but if that man was here to eliminate a witness, he wouldn’t be
looking to make more.

And Kitt’s attacker was short, fat (even heavier than Kurt had remembered), and had Kitt’s claw-
marks on his face. People would be able to ID him just as easily as Kurt would have, if the police
had caught him sooner.

Kurt grabbed his basket on the side rather than the handle, then stormed in the direction his stalker
had disappeared, with the basket raised.
“Stay the *fuck* away from me!” Kurt snapped as he turned the corner.

His eyes went wide as the heavyset man startled and went sprawling backward.

“*Blaine?*” Kurt threw his hands in the air. The basket clattered to the floor. “Are you kidding me? What are you doing here? You scared me half to death, you crazy… bow-tie addicted… *dork!*”

Blaine’s brows raised, and his eyes crinkled at the sides, and his lips quirked to the side haplessly. “I wasn’t *trying* to scare you.”

“No, but you were following me. I have half a mind to beat you with this anyway, just for my raised blood pressure.” Kurt put his hands on his hips. “Do you think I don’t have enough stress on me without you *stalking* me around the grocery store?”

“It wasn’t anything like that!” Blaine huffed. He pushed himself up with a grunt, and Kurt rolled his eyes and grabbed his hand to pull him to his feet.

“Is everything okay?” a young clerk asked.

Kurt looked at him and shrugged his head to the side. “Yeah, it’s fine. I thought he was someone else.”

The clerk frowned at Blaine. His expression suggested that he’d seen Blaine following Kurt around. But then he nodded, met Kurt’s eye as though to say, ‘Come get me, if anything happens,’ and headed for produce.

“If it wasn’t anything like stalking, what was it like?” Kurt asked bluntly. He picked up the basket, let the it hang over his forearm, and straightened his scarf and coat.

“N-nothing,” Blaine said.

Kurt rolled his eyes and headed back to the wine. “You were *accidentally* tracking me through the wine section?”

“No, I just… I saw you, and then… “ Blaine followed him, barely keeping up with Kurt’s long strides. “And then, I thought I’d say, hi, and, um…”

“Then why didn’t you just say hi?” Kurt went to the right section this time and started perusing the burgundies.

“The burgundy!” Blaine chuckled.

“That’s not funny. It’s creepy.”

“This is why I didn’t want to just say hi. I… You weren’t that friendly the last time we talked.” Blaine shrugged. “You were really closed off, and Santana dragged you outta there like…” He shook his head, thinking of what to say.

“Like doing a line-up was really draining for me? Like talking to you would also be draining, since it hadn’t been that long since we’d broken up?” Kurt paused to choose a bottle, then looked at Blaine. “Santana’s a bitch and proud of it, but she was just trying to protect me. She wasn’t there when Kitt died, and the people who weren’t able to see me directly after… They feel helpless. That’s not a comfortable feeling for most people, let alone Mz. Lima Heights.”

“I guess. I don’t think I ever got her.”
“She doesn’t make herself gettable.” Kurt scrunched his lips to the side. “I don’t really either. Okay. Burgundy selected… Now for a dessert wine…” He moved to the other side of the aisle.

“Who are you cooking for?” Blaine asked eagerly.

“None of your business,” Kurt replied. “You’ve said hi now. Is that it? Boo, hi, goodbye?”

Blaine smiled and shook his head. “How’ve you been?”

“Have you been in New York?” Kurt raised a brow. He found it unlikely that Blaine wouldn’t have heard through someone what was going on in Kurt’s life.

Blaine frowned, his lips pouting and his cheeks poking out a bit chipmunk-like. “Yeah, I’ve been around.”

“Just wondering. Um, I’m good. Busy. Always. But the play is going well. Dad liked it, which is… I’m glad the outfits didn’t scare him off. One Three Hill is still together, although I don’t have time to be in any gigs right now, so we’re on what Elliott termed a ‘creative sabbatical’ so we can polish up some of our original songs. Mostly his and Dani’s, but I say we’ve all contributed, since he likes to write about my life.” Kurt selected a sparkling pink and put it in the basket. Then he continued to the next aisle.

“Yeah, yeah. That sounds good.” Blaine bobbed his head up and down like a drunken chicken.

Kurt pinched his lips into a small line and eyed Blaine for a second before reaching the produce.

“And you? I heard you left The Spotlight.”

“I heard you did, too.”

Kurt frowned. “I didn’t leave so much as I got fired? But it didn’t matter. I needed to quit. When you’re in a real production- That sounds so pretentious. But my point is, between two jobs, a band and school, I didn’t have time for it.”

“You sound like a really busy guy.” Blaine smiled flirtatiously and nodded again.

“Yeah. I just said so.” Kurt picked up a package each of blueberries and raspberries, then bit his lip.

“I also heard…”

Kurt continued inspecting the lettuce and waited for Blaine to finish.

“You kicked Rachel out.”

Kurt selected some leafy romaine and turned his head slowly. “Did she say that?”

“Yeah. And that you changed the locks the day after.”

“That’s! Ugh!” Kurt looked up at the lights above and shook his head. “You know? She can say whatever she wants to say. God forbid I refuse to live in the same space with an emotional vampire who only admits I exist when she needs something.”

“That’s a little harsh,” Blaine said.

Kurt glared at him. “I have given that bitch makeovers, and a shoulder to cry on, and song arrangements, and found her a place to live, and I signed her up for Funny Girl! And when I disagreed with her for hitting Santana, and that she has to have an understudy, she told Elliott that
I’d never done anything for her.”

Blaine crossed his arms over his open vest and cocked his head to the side. “That’s harsher.”

“And you know that when I was flipped out with PTSD and clinical depression this summer, she couldn’t get far enough away.” Kurt pointed at him. Blaine hadn’t been much better, running off to work, or to hang out with Sam every possible moment he could. “God forbid that she turn down a single social engagement to support her crazyass ‘best gay.’”

He held a hand to the sky and said in a reverent, affected tone. “Broadway above all things.”

Blaine’s eyes narrowed, and he stepped closer. “Yeah, that was really bitchy of her, huh? She’s back in Lima living with her dads now anyway, but, I mean, I had enough on my hands, and she’d known you longer. She could’ve helped just a little bit! Sam helped more than she ever did!”

“By telling me you lied to me,” Kurt said dryly.

“No, uh…” Blaine faltered. “No, I meant, when you sleepwalked, Sam was good at getting you back to bed, instead of say, letting you wander out the window.”

“Oh.” Kurt relaxed just a little. “I didn’t know he’d done that. That was sweet of him. I can be hard to get back to bed, apparently.”

“He had no trouble.” Blaine gave a half-hearted shrug. “I never could get you to go.”

“That should’ve been a sign, I guess,” Kurt mused. He looked over the produce he’d selected, then headed for the meat and dairy section.

“Oh, does Adam handle you perfectly when you’re sleepwalking?”

Kurt set down the package of chicken he’d been looking over and turned to stare hard at Blaine. “I meant that my subconscious is willful. Finn was good at getting me back to bed. I never fucked him.”

He set his basket down. “How did you know about me and Adam? Hm? Because we haven’t talked to anyone about it.”

“What?” Blaine screwed his thick, furry brows together.

“You call me? Did you call me, just before I got to the store?” Kurt demanded.

“No!”

“I don’t believe you would accuse me-”


“No!”

Kurt felt the tension in his jaw starting to hurt. “You’d better not be lying to me.”

“Just another stalker.” Kurt grabbed his basket, plucked a chicken out of the case, and went to quickly pick out some cheese. “I need to get home.”
“Are you doing the ‘laugh in the face of tragedy’ thing, or do you really have a stalker?” Blaine asked as he followed him.

“Well, I have my ex trailing me around the grocery store in a neighborhood where he no longer lives, and not even carrying a basket. So there’s that.”

“I don’t understand why you’re attacking me,” Blaine complained.

“Is this the first time you’ve followed me?”

Blaine said nothing.

Kurt picked up a smoked gouda and a wedge of triple creme brie. “Done.” He looked at Blaine.

“You need to stop following me. Blaine, as much as you piss me off, you need to stop. Get out there and get your own life.”

“The world doesn’t revolve around you,” Blaine snapped. “I’m just trying to be friendly-”

“You don’t do friendly. The last time I let you pretend that everything was ‘friendly’ and ‘bros helping bros,’ you worked on me until we were a couple again. That’s not gonna happen this time!”

Kurt headed for the register and Blaine followed, huffing slightly.

“Kurt, you and I are something special. If you’d just give me a chance-”

“I gave you enough chances.” Kurt got in line and then met Blaine’s eye.

They were a little bloodshot and puffy, his eyes. He looked tired, and badly put together. He had a smudge of something orange on the edge of his vest, which normally Blaine would’ve buttoned together primly in line with his clashing bow-tie, but it didn’t look like it would close. Kurt hadn’t failed to notice that Blaine had put on about fifteen pounds, mostly around the waist and hips. That was the main reason Kurt had mistaken him for one of Kitt’s killers. Kurt hadn’t realized that Blaine and that guy were the same height… but they were.

“After everything we’ve been through, I can’t believe you’d treat me like this,” Blaine said, a little loudly.

“If you don’t stop following me around, I’m getting a restraining order,” Kurt said flatly. He knew anyone who had heard Blaine’s carefully voiced whining would hear that as well. “And you don’t want to be following me anyway. Not with Kitt’s killers out there looking to off witnesses.”

Kurt set his basket on the counter and let the cashier scan and bag his items. The young man worked quickly, eyeing Blaine as he did so. Blaine was quiet for a few minutes, but then tried to pick up one of Kurt’s bags.

“No,” Kurt warned.

“You were scared when you saw me,” Blaine said almost triumphantly.

“You were sneaking around the wine section like a trolly little goblin.”

“How about I take one of those bags and walk you home? It doesn’t have to mean anything,” Blaine tried again.

“No.”
“C’mon, Kurt.”

“Blaine.”

“It’s only a few blocks, and I know you want me to.”

“I’m getting a cab,” Kurt insisted.

“Why waste the money? I’ll come with you, and you’ll feel safe,” Blaine said, reaching for a bag again.

“I couldn’t possibly feel less safe around you,” Kurt snapped.

Blaine looked around self-consciously.

“It’s a shame if whatever’s going on in your life right now isn’t satisfying, but another ride on our merry-go-round of hell isn’t the answer, Blaine. It’s just not. So stop hanging around my neighborhood trying to scare me.”

Blaine’s posture shrank, and he looked defeated. “I’m not trying to scare you, but your landlord won’t let me in, and Vogue won’t let me in the building, and there are security guards at your theatre! What am I supposed to do?”

“You could try, for once, respecting the boundary I’ve set and not keep trying to see me.”

“You loved it when I pushed your ‘boundaries,’” Blaine said smugly.

“No means no, Blaine. I would never use a safeword with you.” Kurt turned and walked out of the store. The air was even colder now.

Blaine was still following him, but Kurt didn’t slow down.

“Do not test me, Blaine!” Kurt called behind him. “If I have to get a restraining order, I will!”

He stopped at the curb, just as a cab was letting someone out. He smiled gratefully to the woman getting out. Then he slipped in, slammed the door, and rattled off his address as he settled his bags on the seat next to him.

“Is not too far,” the driver said, looking back at him with a frown.

Kurt looked out the window. Blaine was still standing there, sulkily crossing his arms.

“I know, but I need to get home to make dinner…” Kurt sighed. “My psycho ex is out there and he won’t go away,” he blurted out.

“Ah. No follow. I get you there. Quick.”

The driver pulled out, and Kurt sank back into the seat cushion. His phone buzzed again. He licked his lips, slipped it out of his pocket, and looked down. It was the same number as before. When he didn’t answer, eventually the buzzing stopped. Then the voice mail alert sounded.

Kurt swallowed. He wanted to delete the voicemail unheard and block the number, but if this was who he thought it was, he needed to turn the evidence over to the detectives. For now, he turned his phone off, and breathed slowly as he let the driver take him home.

*
ADAM

No matter how many ways Adam had looked at it the last few days (and those ways were plenty), his conclusion was always the same: You screwed up royally, Adam Crawford. Had he really been ignoring all of Kurt’s signs, just because he thought he needed to do the noble thing, be wiser, more mature? He had thought he knew what Kurt needed, and it had turned out to be the exact opposite. It was amazing that Kurt had agreed to give him another chance. It was far more than he deserved. He knew that if he wanted this to work, he really needed to work on himself.

As he waited for Kurt to arrive at the coffee place, Adam couldn’t help but replay his last conversation with Max in his head.

“That’s all you’re going to say?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m telling you I got a job offer in San Francisco, and all I get from you is ‘That sounds like a great opportunity’?”

Adam shrugged. “But it does sound great. It’s what you’ve been looking for, isn’t it?”

Max rolled his eyes. “Yes, it is. But you do realize what that means, don’t you? I’m moving out, Adam. I’m leaving.”

Adam nodded slowly. “Yes, I figured that.”

“You figured,” Max echoed. “And yet all I get from you is a ‘good luck’ to send me on my way?”

“Well, what was I supposed to say?” Adam replied. “I want you to give up your dream job and stay here?”

“Maybe?”

“Would that have worked?”

“Probably not, but you didn’t even try, did you?”

“I didn’t think you wanted me to.”

Max sighed. “That’s just it. Maybe what I wanted, for once, was for you to put up a bit of a fight. When you left for New York and I told you we might as well break up, you didn’t try to argue with me. Do you know how that made me feel? Like you didn’t care.”

“I was heart-broken!” Adam protested.

“How was I supposed to know that? You just left!”

“I didn’t want to make it worse! I thought you wanted me to leave you alone!”

“Well, maybe instead of assuming you knew how I felt, you could have just asked me.”

Adam squirmed in his seat. When Kurt had come back to New York engaged to his ex-boyfriend, Adam had done the same thing. Apart from asking him to leave the Apples, which he’d thought he was doing for both their sakes, he hadn’t tried to change Kurt’s mind. He hadn’t asked him to explain. He had just accepted it, thinking he knew what was going on in Kurt’s mind. Then when he
thought Kurt was about to choose Elliott, he had accepted that as well.

Had Kurt been waiting for Adam to fight for him, too?

“Here we go, one Lady Grey with a dash of milk and a black-and-white cookie for the handsome gentleman in the beanie,” a warm voice interrupted his thoughts.

“I’m sorry, but I didn’t order anything ye– Kurt!” Adam sat up and looked into Kurt’s smiling face.

“Hey,” Kurt said, looking happy. He put the tea in front of Adam and sat down across from him with his own coffee. “I asked the barista if you’d already ordered and when she said no, I figured I’d get us something. I hope that was okay. You still drink Lady Grey, right?”

“Um, yes. Yes, thank you, I do,” Adam quickly offered, but a blush was rapidly creeping onto his cheeks. He couldn’t help but remember another conversation that he’d had with Max not too long ago.

“Morning,” Adam mumbled, padding across the room towards the small kitchen in his pajama bottoms. Max was already dressed and making quite some noise with his pans. Adam tried to ignore it as he rummaged in the refrigerator and took out a tub of cream cheese. Even though they’d only been living together for a few weeks, their morning ritual had already established itself: whoever woke first got breakfast down the street, and the other got to sleep in. Today had been Max’s turn to go out.

Adam put down two plates on the table and picked up the paper bag from the bakery.

“Oh. Did they run out of plain bagels?”

“No,” Max replied, lightly shaking a frying pan over the stove to spread the oil over the bottom while beating eggs in a bowl with his other hand. “I got us two with caraway because I am making an omelette with eggplant and coriander and it’s gonna give it just that extra hint of Provence."

Adam put the bag down. “I’m not quite sure it’ll go with cream cheese,” he said carefully.

“Trust me, you’ll want to taste this omelette.”

Adam didn’t say anything. Max poured the egg-mixture into the pan and turned around to face him.

“You’re upset, aren’t you?” he asked.

Adam shrugged. “I just like having a plain bagel with-”

“With cream cheese for breakfast. I know. With a cup of Lady Grey tea and a black-and-white cookie.”

“What’s wrong with that?” Adam asked.

Max shrugged. “Nothing. I just don’t understand how you can eat the same thing every single day. It’s so boring. And I don’t mind cooking us breakfast, I told you that a million times.”

“I had a turkey bagel at that Sunday brunch thing,” Adam replied defensively. “It’s not as if I never-”

“That was brunch. And they didn’t even have cream cheese! Come on, I’m not saying you’re a criminal. I’m just saying that maybe you could let loose a little and try something new every now
and then. I’m telling you now, I’m not going to settle down to a ‘meatloaf on Wednesday, fish on Friday, roast on Sunday’ life. That stuff might have been charming in the 50s, but I will not have us turn into my grandparents.”

Adam bit his lip, not sure what to say. “You didn’t get black-and-white’s either?” he finally asked.

“Are you okay?”

“Sorry, what?”

“Are you okay?” Kurt repeated. “You looked a little lost there for a moment.”

“Oh, no, I—” Adam said, shaking his head. Then he took a deep breath and faced Kurt. “Do you think I’m boring?”

Kurt looked confused. “Why would I think that?”

Adam shrugged. “I don’t know. I mean, predictable. After all this time, you still remember how I take my tea.”

Kurt cocked his head and looked at him for a moment. “Does that bother you?” he asked softly.

“It’s not exactly adventurous,” Adam admitted. “I mean, here you are, the star of a musical, the leader of a band, about a million miles away from that young man I met who couldn’t even meet my eye when I complimented him—”

Kurt scrunched up his nose a little and smiled.

“-and I feel like I haven’t changed at all.”

Kurt paused a little. “Maybe I like it when something in my life is consistent for once,” he said, and stirred his coffee. Then he looked at Adam again. “Are you sure you’re okay? You’re not having second thoughts about this, are you?”

“No, no, absolutely not!” Adam assured him. “It was just something someone said. They actually told me that, um, I was at risk of turning into an elderly person with crazy rituals.”

Kurt snorted. “Over tea? I wonder what they would have said about me, then. After Finn died, I had the same two flavours of ice cream every single day for weeks. One time, I totally freaked because Santana finished my strawberry-cheesecake and replaced it with raspberry, which is not the same thing.” He rolled his eyes at himself. “And you remember the stuff I did when my dad got sick, right? When I made you count the chocolate chips you put in your cookies for luck?”

Adam smiled a little and nodded.

Kurt smiled back. “Trust me, if either of us was turning into a crazy elderly person, I would be the first. I already go to therapy, and half of the people I know on Facebook are actually living in a retirement home.”

Adam chuckled, but then schooled his face into a frown. “I’m still so bummed that I missed you as Peter Pan,” he said seriously. “I really would have come if I hadn’t been over the pond.”

“You would have loved Marty,” Kurt said, grinning. “He was a Lost Boy if ever you saw one, and I’m not saying that just because he kept forgetting to put his dentures in.”

Adam smiled again. He had no idea how Kurt managed to do all the things he did in the time he
had– or maybe he did. Kurt would never indulge in an extended break like he had, even if he really could use it. While Adam was lounging with his family enjoying some post-graduation mollycoddling, Kurt had been taking summer classes to get back into his NYADA rhythm, working two jobs, and rehearsing a play with a group of elderly actors he had met through a little old lady visiting the diner.

Adam really needed to step up his game if he wanted to keep up with that kind of energy.

“And you know,” Kurt added, leaning forward and inching his hand closer to Adam’s, “if you want to be adventurous– I can help you meet me halfway…” He gave him a conspiratorial look and swiftly took his cookie, replacing it with his own almond biscuit. “There.” To accent his words, he opened his mouth very wide and took a large bite out of Adam’s black-and-white cookie.

Adam couldn’t help it. He laughed out loud, making quite a few people in the small bistro turn their heads towards them. “Cheers,” he mumbled, raising his teacup to them.

“Anyway, it’s not like you don’t sometimes drink coffee. That’s just… radical, right? Over there? A traitor to the crown.”

Adam dramatically hushed him. “Not so loud! If there are any other Brits in here they might make a citizen’s’ arrest!” he joked. “But yes, I do. As much as I cling to my… quirks and traditions, I do sometimes need caffeine.” He picked up Kurt’s biscuit. It was the bistro’s flavour of the week. Of course. Adventurous, and everything.

They spent the next fifteen minutes enjoying their drinks and each other’s cookies while Adam told Kurt a few anecdotes about his job and the hours he sometimes had to keep that required him to fall back on coffee and Red Bulls. Most of his stories were funny after the fact, but had been quite stressful at that moment. Kurt could definitely relate, with the last weeks of rehearsal he had had for Samael, and there were a lot of shared eyerolls and moments when they were able to finish each other’s sentences.

When Adam got them the next round, he got two more of the flavour of the week cookies, as they had turned out to be delicious. When he saw Kurt checking the time on his phone, he knew that as pleasant as their smalltalk was, there still were a few things they needed to discuss before Kurt had to leave for Samael. It was probably about time to do that.

He sat down with their drinks and decided to just start. They needed to work on their communication, and what better way was there than to just… talk?

“So, I was thinking… since we seemed to have missed some opportunities due to– you know, different expectations or misinterpretations…” Adam gestured with his hand and rolled his eyes a little, not really sure how to express his regret over failing to understand what Kurt had wanted from him. “Well, I just thought maybe we should just start by being really clear about what we want this time.”

He continued as Kurt nodded, looking encouraging but a little apprehensive too.

“Um, so, what I want is… I want us to try again. To be friends and lovers.”

He saw Kurt relax a little in his seat.

“And I also want it to be exclusive,” Adam added, a little more resolutely than he felt. It was an important point to him, but he had never actually said it out loud before. “I mean, I want to give this thing with us a try without… ex-boyfriends popping up, or casual hook-ups or friends-with-
benefits… just us.”

Kurt winced a little at the mention of ex-boyfriends, then again at ‘friends-with-benefits.’ Adam hurried to clarify.

“I’m not saying that to put blame on you, Kurt. I understand I am as much at fault for not making my expectations clearer, and after what happened with Nikolas and Max I should be the last person to-”

“No, no. I agree,” Kurt interjected. “I want that too. I mean, I really want that. Those other things… I tried them. I thought I could make it work, but I guess, in the end, I’m really just a romantic after all.”

Adam smiled softly. “Me too.”

“I thought I’d lost that.” Kurt began sweeping their crumbs into a neat pile. “And I do feel a little bit better, knowing that you want to be exclusive. I like hearing it out loud, actually. I’m not good with hints because every time I’ve thought that I knew what a guy wanted, I was wrong, and things were totally opposite from what I’d thought.” He stacked their plates on the corner and took the sugar packets out of the holder on the side of the table and started to sort them. “So, if we can definitely say that we’re together, then I can handle almost anything else, I think. I hate being in limbo. It makes me feel like I’m an option that you could do without.”

“Kurt-”

Kurt held up a hand and swallowed. “I know you don’t really think that. I’m just trying to be honest. I don’t need huge gestures, or an audience for our big moments, but I do need to feel that you really do want me, all of me. And I’m working on it, but I’ve always had a hard time believing that. Especially now. Especially-” Kurt sighed and looked exasperated, maybe with himself. “-especially when guys are as nice to me as you are.”

Adam reached for Kurt’s hands tentatively. He didn’t want to force Kurt to stop whatever anxious gestures made him feel better, but hearing something like that stung a bit. How could he win, if Kurt expected him to show him that he cared, but not be nice to him?

Kurt saw Adam’s hand coming forward and met him halfway. “I want to be with you. If we’ve got that seal stamped onto us, then maybe we can try going slow, but with more communication? Out loud? I think you were right that we should go slow– and I can do that, really, not that my history makes it look like it.”

Adam chuckled and bit back a huge grin. He couldn’t help but remember how their first ‘coffee’ had turned into Kurt grabbing his tie and throwing him onto his bed.

“I can wait, believe it or not, although my past few attempts at being with anyone have um, sort of started with jumping into bed… or jumping into bed and getting tied up.”

Adam frowned.

“I guess I do that because in my first relationship, we waited about six months. And it wasn’t all about me being ‘comfortable’ with it. I was ready that summer! It was because Blaine never really saw me as attractive.” Kurt sucked in his lower lip and drew in a slow breath through his nostrils. “So it basically made me feel like I should take every chance I got if a guy showed any interest in me after that.”

“Then I am telling you now, in a very verbal and out loud way, that I think you are utterly, utterly gorgeous,” Adam said.
Kurt pinched his mouth together and made an expression that both fought and accepted the compliment. “Well, if the reviewer of The New York Times thinks I’m hot, I guess I have to stop trying to argue,” he tried to joke. “Thanks. That’s always meant a lot to me, that you cared whether I believed your compliments or not. Most people only give compliments to make themselves seem nicer or thoughtful.”

“You never let me put myself down, either,” Adam pointed out. “You talked me down from committing myself to a nursing home just now.”

“True.” Kurt brought Adam’s hand to his lips for a kiss, causing him to shiver. “So, we’re on…?”

“But slow,” Adam agreed.

Kurt let out a high-pitched noise and bounced in his seat. Adam had to laugh. Kurt was an impossible creature: from completely adorable to totally sexy, and back, in a matter of seconds.

The sugar packets slid off the table as Adam leaned over to kiss his cheek, and neither of them bothered to pick them up.
Chapter Twelve

ELLIOTT

With a grin to Dani, Elliott rapped on Kurt’s door with alternating knuckles.

Rap RAP rap RAP rap RAP

Dani bounced back from foot to foot excitedly. Her eyes were sparkling with excitement as she snuggled the little bundle to her chest.

“WHO IS IT??” Kurt yelled.

That was encouraging. Kurt had been jumpy lately. Elliott knew that recovery was an uneven process, and that while Kurt had seemed to get better, getting triggered and having to fight in his art had been frustrating. There could be setbacks as well as successes.

“IT’S YOUR BAND! LET US IIIIIIN!” Dani yelled.

“Come iiiin!” Kurt sang.

Elliott arched a brow at Dani, then pulled the door to the loft open.

Kurt stood in the middle of his apartment, hands on his hips, head tilted to the side, and squinted up at his window. He was wearing only a snug dark blue t-shirt, blue socks, and a pair of worn blue jeans.

“Hey,” he said absently. He turned his head for a split-second to give them a smile, then approached the window, where a big black apparatus with bars was propped. He climbed up on a two-step ladder.

Elliott and Dani exchanged a look.
Kurt picked the thing up and held it in place with one hand, then grabbed a screwdriver and began to work on the upper right hand corner. Elliott was surprised that he could hold that thing in place one-handed, but maybe he shouldn’t be. His eyes focused on the sleeve of Kurt’s left arm. How it stretched around the swell of a sinewy bicep.

“Oh, Lordy!” Elliott gasped, pressing his hand to his chest. “What a fiine, musclely maaa-un!”

“Ha ha. You want to hold the top of this thing for me?”

“If you’re so worried about security, maybe you should lock your door,” Dani suggested.

“It was locked, until I got the text that you were coming over.” Kurt grunted softly and put some power behind the tool.

“How are you gonna get out in case of fire?” Elliott asked as he stood over him to keep the apparatus in place.

“It opens from the inside.” Kurt gave one last turn, then slipped under Elliott to get to the other side. “Besides, Adam’s seen me sleepwalk, and now that he’s around again, he worries I’ll flail my way out the window.”

Then a questioning squeak from Dani’s bundle caught Kurt’s attention. He turned from his task to see the bundle grunt and wriggle, and then a fuzzy blue and white nose peeked its way out and let out a long, plaintive whine.

“Kitty for our Kitty Kurt!” Dani danced the tiny cat up and down as it complained.

“Aww. Stop that,” Kurt admonished. He nodded to Elliot and they both gingerly let go of the security window guard. It held, and Kurt came over to see the cat. “Where did you get him? Her? Zir?

Dani giggled. “Her. But she’s fixed, so I dunno how she identifies.”
“I see.” Kurt reached over to the complaining kitty and rubbed her nose. “Does she have a name? I thought you couldn’t have cats at your place.”

“I can’t,” Dani said. “But you can, if you want her. And no, she doesn’t have a name yet.”

“Oh.” Kurt allowed Dani to hand the cat over to him. He cuddled her up against his chest, his strong arm curving around her to make her feel secure. She meowed again anyway, and reached a paw out to cling to him.

“We thought maybe you could use some company here, being all alone,” Elliott suggested.

“Yeah, maybe… I’ve never really had pets, um, except for a bird I accidentally killed.” Kurt’s long fingers stroked over the little cat’s head, and he looked at the paw kneading on his shirt. “Does she not have claws?”

“No, whoever had her before got her declawed on her front paws, probably when she was still a kitten,” Dani said.

“Aw, you look like a kitten to me,” Kurt said in a high, baby voice.

Elliott covered his mouth and tried not to laugh.

“So you like her?” Dani asked. “The shelter I got her from says she’s probably eight months old. Someone brought her in because her owners moved from their apartment and left her there.”

“Oh!” Kurt looked up with a horrified expression. “Poor girl.” He pouted. “Well, I’d love to have her, but I don’t know how to take care of a cat… And I’m never home at night until late. What will she do by herself?”

Elliott crooked his mouth to the side and shrugged.

“I couldn’t just leave her there,” Dani said. “She looked so sad and scared. And her previous owners maimed her then abandoned her.”
The cat had stopped clinging so tightly and was beginning to purr a little under Kurt’s gentle, even
strokes.

“I dunno. Let me think about it.” He looked around his apartment and sighed. “I mean, my place
isn’t that pet-friendly, but I’ve been trying to find the time to redecorate anyway. Maybe I could get a
gate for now, and give her a section to herself… or get one of those cat trees so she can look out the
window when I’m not around…”

Elliott smiled as Kurt’s eyes sparked with ideas. He loved it when Kurt got the creativity bug.

“So…” Dani said in a lascivious tone. “Is Adam around… a lot? Like… more than usual?”

Elliott raised his brows, then looked between Kurt and Dani in surprise.

Kurt pinched his lips together and carried the cat toward his bedroom. As he pulled back the curtain,
he tilted his head to the side. “Maybe.”

“Oh my Goood, Kurt!” Elliott threw his hands in the air.

“What?”

Elliott hung his head and bit his lip before looking at Kurt. “Kurt, man, you are my best friend, and I
love you, but you’ve gotta stop jumping into bed just to keep from being alone!”

“Elliott!” Dani half-laughed in surprise.

Kurt straightened abruptly, as though struck. Elliott had the same reaction, even though they had
been his own words.

“I don’t mean it that way!” Elliott scratched the back of his hair and felt his skin burn with shame.
“Sorry. That was awful. I don’t wanna be that guy.”
Kurt deposited the cat on his bed. His expression was blank. The cat began to sniff around.

Elliott sighed. “I just meant… I thought you said Adam was done with you. And now you’re, what? Jumping right into it again? I just don’t want you to be wrecked, the way you are when things fall apart, but you’re too nice to say anything. I want for you to be happy.”

Kurt came closer. “Well, about Adam being done… I was wrong.” He shrugged one shoulder forward. “I thought- But it wasn’t what I thought, and to be clear: I’m jumping on the opportunity now that I know it’s there, but not jumping onto him… yet.”

A little smile played on his lips.

Elliott looked down and licked his lower lip. “God, I’m sorry, Kurt.”

“No, no.” Kurt came over and grabbed his hand. “I understand. It’s like you’re watching over an addict, here.”

“Love addict,” Elliott muttered with a smile.

Kurt swung his hand. Sometimes it felt weird between them. Then suddenly, it was like this. Holding hands like brothers, grateful to have one another.

“So far, we’ve just talked. And it was a really, really important talk. And he comes over and we hang out. But that’s it.”

Elliott nodded in reply. He rubbed over Kurt’s fingers with his thumb.

“If you two bitches start to cry, I’m takin’ my pussy and leaving,” Dani said.

Elliott tried to scowl at her, but it was hard not to laugh.

“You sound more like Santana every day,” Kurt accused.
Dani clutched her chest and widened her eyes hugely.

“Mrr?”

All of them looked back at the cat. She was on the edge of the bed.

Kurt squeezed Elliott’s hand, and he knew all was well.

Twenty minutes later, after they’d played with the kitten with hands and string until she conked out in the crease between the the sofa cushions, Kurt wanted to get the window guard up before it got dark. So Elliott went over with Kurt to get handy. He didn’t have the same kind of gritty prowess that Kurt had, but he could hold things steady while Kurt worked.

Dani strummed on her guitar, pausing every so often to scritch the kitty’s belly or make a few notes in her music notebook.

“Oh, kitty kitty, how did they ever let you go,” she sang.

Kurt laughed and looked at Elliott as he turned the screw tighter.

“When they left for good, did you even know,” she continued.

“That’s terrible, Dan-Dan,” Elliott said cheerfully.

In response, she sped up her strumming and started singing, energetically:

“She’s perky, she’s furry, she’s cute, and she’s quick. She’s the sun and the stars, and she’s not into dick.”

Kurt let out a high-pitched laugh.
“She’s more gifted than anyone you could get! Oh, yeah, my pussy’s the best that you’ve ever met!”

“This is why you don’t get to rename our band, Dani!” Kurt said.

“Hmph!”

There was a knock on the door, and Dani got up and peered through the peephole.

“This apartment is a sausage fest,” she said as she pulled the door open.

“Oh?” Adam chuckled and came in.

“Hey, sweetie!” Kurt called from the window. He didn’t turn his head because he was busy giving the fixture’s lower left-hand corner. Sweat shimmered on Kurt’s biceps and brow.

Elliott looked back at Adam, who was watching Kurt work with stars in his eyes and a grin on his lips.

Kurt gave a soft grunt, pushing in the final screw by force of will and with a twist of his shoulder. Adam’s hand settled on his hips, and his lips parted.

Elliott watched Adam watching Kurt. It was hard to imagine Kurt had really thought Adam had given up on him. Really, what kind of fool would give up on Kurt while there was still a chance? Elliott definitely felt it had been worth risking some pain, even if they had found out he and Kurt weren’t right for each other.

Kurt leaned back and tugged on the black bars. “There we go. No midnight strolls on the fire escape.”

He turned and gave Adam a big smile. “Hey.”
“Hey.” Adam looked up at Kurt and walked over to the step ladder to give him a hand down.

They looked like they might get a little cuddly. Elliott turned just as Adam looked to him with concern, and he dropped onto the couch and held up the kitty. He could have a talk with Adam later, let him know they were all cool.

“I hope you’re not allergic, man. Dani brought Kurt a cat,” Elliott said.

“Oh? No, I’m not allergic.” Adam turned, still holding onto Kurt’s hand, to look at the cat.

“Good. I want my loft to be Adam-friendly,” Kurt said. “I still need to name her.”

“You could name her-” Dani started.

“I’m not naming her Knipple,” Kurt said.

Dani pouted. Elliott laughed.

*

ADAM

A while later, Elliott and Dani left (though not before Dani heavily implied the sexual tension in the loft was getting to her, with many winks, and Elliott took her by the arm with a stern look and steered her out). Adam wondered how much Kurt had told them about their talk, but he didn’t mind even if Kurt had told them everything. He had nothing to hide. Dani’s hints were about as good an endorsement as he could get, and in an unobserved moment as Kurt and Dani were trying to take a selfie with the kitten, Elliott had assured him that he was okay with them as long as Adam had Kurt’s best interests in mind. With Kurt’s best friends thus on his side and Kurt and his new cat snuggled against him on the couch, it was hard to worry about anything.

“I have to say, I was quite curious when you texted me that you’d gotten a new roommate,” he said conversationally, stretching his long legs out on the coffee table.
Kurt grinned. “Were you afraid I might have subletted Rachel’s room to a hot chorus dancer from Samael?” he teased. He sat up a little as his cat jumped off his lap and started stalking the waving Queen figurine that was standing by the tv.

Adam returned the smile, but answered seriously. “Not at all.” Now that they’d had their talk and agreed they both wanted to be exclusive, he wasn’t worried about that. He knew Kurt would keep his word. “But your friends from Lima do sort of have a tendency to drop by with a big suitcase and stake their claim.”

“Hmm, that’s true,” Kurt agreed. “But so do your folks from Essex.”

Adam couldn’t argue with that. “I’ll make sure there’ll be no more surprises of that nature,” he said solemnly.

“Good,” Kurt murmured, burrowing back against his side. “Because I want to be the only one who gets to walk around half-naked at your place.”

“Only half-?” Adam replied, not able to resist a glance down at Kurt’s outfit. He wondered if there was anything in his apartment he could ‘accidentally’ break so Kurt could come and fix it. Was it too soon to suggest securing his own windows too, in case of Kurt spending the night?

Just as he thought he might be jumping ahead of himself, he saw Kurt’s glittering eyes and suspected their thoughts weren’t that far apart.

*

**KURT**

As Kurt made his way to Vogue, his mind was still at NYADA. Ever since opening night, it seemed all of his classes had somehow revolved around him. There wasn’t a single teacher who hadn’t seen Samael, had tickets to go see it, or at the very least read the reviews about it. After a few days, Kurt had begun to wonder if Madame Tibideaux had made it mandatory for her staff. But that wouldn’t explain why they were all so enthusiastic.

Ms. July had said his timing and rhythm had been “on point” (and even spared him her usual snide
commentaries about his pirouettes). She was a little less gracious about Sofia, but then she had always seemed more harsh in her criticism towards women. Kurt’s vocal coach had dedicated an entire lesson to discussing Jasper Knipple’s repertoire, comparing his older work to the songs he had written especially for Kurt’s range, and Kurt’s stage combat instructor had flat out offered Kurt a job as his TA. Although Kurt had to decline due to his already crazy schedule and other jobs, he had agreed to an in-class demonstration of some of the stage weapons he used for *Samael*, and today’s class had sort of turned into a “show and tell” open class. Word had spread through the NYADA blogs, and there were at least double as many attending students than usual. Kurt had brought a pair of practise sais from home (there was no way Jamie was letting him bring his actual props) and his instructor had arranged for styrofoam padded nunchaku. Interestingly enough, despite all of their boasting, the men in Kurt’s class were actually a lot worse at handling the sais than the women. Not embarrassed to use their experience with baton twirling, ribbon sticks and cane dancing, they had a much better feel for the wrist movements than the guys, who were all complaining about sore muscles after a few minutes.

Kurt had really enjoyed the class. Most of the students were genuinely interested in what he had to show them, and the sycophants slinked away after a few minutes when they realized Kurt wasn’t handing out backstage passes or parts for the chorus. It was fun to teach. Kurt already found himself regretting he had to turn down the TA offer, and was wondering if there really wasn’t a way he could fit it into his schedule somehow.

Madame Tibideaux had also called him into her office to congratulate him. She said he had done a fine job representing the school and she was already facing more applications for next season than usual around this time of year. Kurt hadn’t been sure how to react to that. It wasn’t every day that he got complimented by someone as intimidating as NYADA’s Dean of Vocal Performance and Song Interpretation. In the end, he settled for his usual tactic: deflection. He told her a bit about the director and their process, and then casually mentioned how Marco was hoping to come in for a second audition next season. He also stressed the fact that Marco was already taking open classes—just in case Madam Tibideaux thought he’d be another Rachel; talented, but flakey. Madam Tibideaux didn’t acknowledge his recommendation with more than a “hmmm, but the seed had been planted. Like Santana had told him once, the whole point of having connections was to use them, right?

Kurt’s phone vibrated. He fished it from his pocket and smiled. Sofia had forwarded him some links to new reviews again. She had taken her initial disappointment about his sexuality pretty well, though she did relish in knowing she was one of the only two women Kurt had ever kissed in his life, even if hers were only stage kisses. Kurt left that uncommented, though the few kisses he had exchanged with Brittany had felt like stage kisses, too, at the time. He and Sofia had a comfortable working relationship now, and Kurt had found that kissing and romancing her and Marco had been remarkably easy to detach from his real life. It helped that neither of them ever made him feel that it was something they should be feeling weird about.

He crossed the street by a red light, along with a throng of other New Yorkers, barely noticing the ever-present car horns. He was skimming through an article from a high-profile website for bisexual representation, which was recommending *Samael* for its unbiased profiling of the main characters. It didn’t *quite* give away the alternative endings, but left many hints about going to see the musical
twice. The author gushed about the chemistry between him, Marco and Sofia and nominated Kurt for their person of the year award. Kurt blushed. It was Alison who had been adamant about not tapping into any clichés when she could have easily used the plot for a love triangle for some cheap laughs. He felt that award really ought to go to her. Maybe he should leave a comment on their site.

He was still a few blocks away from the Condé Nast building and immersed in his phone, his feet finding their way to his office on auto-pilot, when his eyes caught the flicker of a shadow cast on the sidewalk before him. Kurt’s heart sped up, and he pocketed his phone as casually as he could and kept up his pace. It was just a feeling, after all. There was plenty of foot traffic, even at this hour, and someone walking behind him didn’t mean that person had any interest in him.

He lowered his head slightly as he turned the corner, spotting a familiar looking short, squat figure with dark hair.

*Blaine. Dammit, Blaine!* 

Kurt’s cheeks began to burn. He picked up his pace. Blaine was probably on his heels again because Kurt was no longer answering the cell phone number that Blaine knew. Kurt had given his new number to only a few people, since the police had to keep his old phone as evidence. What kind of excuse was Blaine going to use now?

He shook his head, pressing his lips together. The crowd around them thinned, and Kurt kept his ears perked for the sound of Blaine’s shoes hitting the pavement. It became clear that the heavy breathing behind him came from this source, too. Kurt cast another surreptitious look as he shifted a row over in the crowd but couldn’t catch another glance.

The breathing was behind him again a moment later. God, wasn’t Blaine working out at all? That made sense, given how he *looked*, but still…

Even knowing that he was being followed, Kurt was caught off guard as a hand grabbed him roughly and pulled him into an alley. He spun around angrily, ready to spit some serious venom at Blaine when he saw the man’s face. His squarish face. His broad shoulders.

That *wasn’t* Blaine. That was the one of Kitt’s attackers, the third man who hadn’t been brought in.

Kurt felt like someone had poured a glass of ice water down his back.
“You get my messages, hot stuff?” the man asked smugly. “I saw you at the theatre. Guess you’re a big fuckin’ deal now, huh? Y’sing just like a pretty lady.”

Still stunned, Kurt said nothing as he jerked his arm back. He couldn’t get free, though, and the man just started to laugh.

“Funny. Your queer ass didn’t seem so scared when you were breaking Abe’s balls or ratting Steve out to the police.”

Kurt recovered a little. “My bad. I thought you were my fat, greasy ex. If I’d known it was you, I would’ve slowed down and invited you out to dinner,” he sneered.

The man pulled him closer, and Kurt’s eyes flitted out toward the opening of the alley.

“Still got that smart ass mouth, don’tcha? If you want to keep singing your fairy songs, then you’d better keep-”

In a swift motion, Kurt twisted his and the man’s arm around until he squawked in pain. The man reached for Kurt’s throat, but Kurt jerked backward, letting him go in the process. It was a stupid move, because once freed, the man plunged his fist straight into Kurt’s stomach.

Kurt stumbled back, gasping for breath and his mind reeling. How was this happening? Again? He’d gotten guards at the theatre, he’d put security everything on his apartment, he wasn’t even in a secluded area-- but he was back in the alley, even if it was on a different side of the city.

“You just need to keep your fucking faggot mouth shut! You got it?” A foot struck Kurt’s side again. “You keep it shut!”

Kurt fell back again, though the last blow had been glancing. Someone wasn’t a well trained martial artist or dancer, that was for sure. He had no aim with his legs… but if Kurt fell to the ground, he would be in trouble, and the man had cornered him in the alley and was blocking his escape route.

Kurt had plenty of aim with his legs, however; it was necessary to do fighting choreography and not kill the people in the chorus. He clenched his jaw and flipped a kick into the air. The man dodged it, but he was supposed to, and Kurt had already launched into a roundhouse, aiming for where the man would retreat. His boot landed against the man’s chest, sending him flying backward.
Kurt landed with his feet spread and reached into his bag. He still had his practice sais. He lifted his chin defiantly and gave them an impressive twirl. The man was now staring back, his angry expression diluted with fear. If Kurt could get this guy to run… Kurt didn’t like the idea of hurting people as a general principle… Except maybe the man who had killed Kitt personally. The man who had nearly destroyed Kurt’s voice while trying to kill him, too. Abe.

But the man didn’t run. He grabbed a pipe lying nearby and rushed at Kurt. Kurt blocked the pipe as it swung down at his face, and pushed with all of his strength. This guy was strong under all that chub. He let up and made another swing for Kurt’s head.

Kurt dodged, twirled his sai around, and jammed the butt of the weapon into the man’s ribs. He kept exposing himself to make those huge, over-handed swings.

He came at Kurt again. “You little fuck!”

“You talk too much,” Kurt snapped back, spinning around him and hitting him so hard in the ribs that he heard a crack.

“Motherfuck....”

“This isn’t funny!” Kurt shouted. “It isn’t a game! You murdered someone-- someone wonderful-- for no reason! You and the the inbred idiot gang all deserve to rot your lives away in jail! And if I can make sure that happens? You’d better fucking believe I’m gonna make it happen!”

He twirled both sais and ran toward him. “Do you think I’m scared of you?”

But the man didn’t swing over-handed this time. The bar came down at Kurt’s legs, knocking him off balance, and he tumbled backward, knocking his head hard against the rail of a fire escape.

It could only have been a moment, as he lay there dazed, but the man kicked his sides viciously, spitting slurs and profanity at him. Then the pipe came down again.

And Kurt grabbed it with a vice-like grip. He kicked upward into the man’s stomach, and when his attacker pulled back, Kurt came up with him, wrested the pipe from his hands, and gave it a single
twirl before bringing it down on the man’s back. *Hard.*

When he fell to the ground, Kurt struck him again, and pressed his boot to the man’s cheek.

His hands shook for a moment. The pipe was in his hands. He was tempted, too tempted, to keep going. To take out at least *one* of these assholes, especially since there seemed to be no sign of justice forthcoming from official channels. Kurt had never felt anything like this before, and it turned his stomach and wetted his eyes.

“What’s your name?” he demanded.

“Donnie Mann,” the man groaned.

Kurt listened to the man’s coughing, and his own shaky breathing, and his ears ringing, for a long, long moment.

“Stay there,” Kurt ordered finally. “I *am* a fucking ninja. But I’m not a murderer like you. So you stay fucking put.”

He stepped away from the man, who looked up for half a second, before seeing Kurt stare down at him and putting his head down again. Kurt watched him for four more seconds before grabbing his dropped messenger bag and sais and making a hobbling run out of the alley.

His mind was too occupied with what had just happened to track anything else between the alley and the Condé Nast building. Kurt hadn’t even really realized he was still heading to the evening meeting that Isabelle had set up.

But suddenly, there he was, in the brightly lit lobby, with Adrienne coming up from her desk to his side.

“Oh, my God!” Her hand was on his shoulder. “Are you okay?”

“Fine, I-I’m fine,” he managed. “I’m late, I need to…” He closed his eyes for a moment. “I need to call the police.”
Adrienne guided Kurt to her chair and gave him the office phone. In a few minutes, he was relating the story in a ramble to the person on the other end, and making sure they knew the guy’s name was Donnie Mann. At some point, they put a detective on who knew about his case, and Kurt began the story again. By that time, Isabelle had appeared, and the moment she caught sight of him, her hands flew to her mouth and she ran to his side. Chase was right behind her, his brows pinched together and his mouth frozen in an ‘O.’

“Y-yeah, I can come in,” Kurt muttered. “But you’ll send someone? He’s in the area, and he’s… injured.”

After Kurt was sure someone was on their way, he finally got off the phone and looked up at Isabelle, who cupped his face with a gentle hand, and pressed the other to his shoulder.

“Oh, sweetie. It’s going to be okay,” she said softly.

“I’ll be alright,” Kurt said lightly. “You should see the other guy.”

“God, I hope we don’t see the other guy,” Chase said. “I called Ramirez and asked him to fetch your car, Isabelle.”

“Thank you,” she said emphatically, not removing her tender hands from Kurt. “Traffic isn’t too bad at this time of day. We’ll get you to the hospital in no time.”

Kurt leaned forward. “I don’t need a hospital. I’m fine.”

“Honey, you’re bleeding,” Isabelle admonished.

Kurt looked down. Somehow he hadn’t realized how much he hurt until this moment. Adrenaline, probably. He didn’t see blood on his pants, or on his shirt. Then he felt something warm trickling down his neck.
When his fingers touched his neck, they came away with bright red. He stared at the blood in surprise.

“Oh…”

Adrienne had returned with a few towels and with a nod from Chase, pressed them to the back of his head. The pressure caused Kurt to wince and open his mouth with a gasp as nausea rolled over him.

Isabelle knelt beside him. “Just let them look you over, put in a few stitches, okay? You don’t want to mess around with another head injury.”

“This was one of the guys, right?” Chase asked. “Is that what you were saying to the police? From before?”

“Yeah. He’s been following me around.” Kurt swallowed and pinched his eyes shut as he started to bow over. Isabelle’s hand rubbed circles over his back.

He didn’t want to be in a hospital again, not at all. He still remembered the feeling of helplessness and alienation from the last time. But they wanted him to get checked out, and their worried eyes were on him, so Kurt stopped protesting. After a few deep breaths, Kurt let them get him up and help him toward the door.

Once Chase had helped pack him into the passenger’s seat, Kurt laid his head back, holding the towel in place with one hand, and stared at the ceiling of Isabelle’s car. This was familiar… Why was it familiar?

“How many assistants get to ride in your car this often?” Kurt muttered.

“Only ones that turn up bleeding,” she replied, with a warm fondness.

“So only me, huh? You’re gonna have to take the cleaning money out of my check.”

Isabelle shot him a look. A moment later, she drew in a sharp breath. “Does your stomach hurt?”
“Some.” Kurt looked down. He hadn’t realized he’d been clutching the front of his shirt. “He hit me. And kicked me, I think. It gets a little fuzzy after I wonked my head.” He pulled up his shirt to reveal bruising along his right side and abdomen.

Isabelle was quiet for a moment. “Did he hurt your arm?”

“My arm? No.”

She swatted his arm twice. “You could have internal bleeding!”

“...I don’t mean to.”

“I’m not blaming you, honey. But don’t you dare tell me you don’t need to get checked out by a doctor. This could be serious. None of us wants to lose you!” Isabelle scolded.

Kurt pressed his lips together. She wasn’t entirely wrong, but there was part of him that still didn’t want to go to the hospital. No amount of telling himself that it wouldn’t be as bad as his last visits--for himself, for his father, for his mother--made it feel okay.

Isabelle made a turn, then reached over to take his free hand. “Don’t worry. I’ll be right there. Do you need to call anyone?”

He should probably call his father, but that wasn’t the first person to jump to mind. He gave a little nod, careful to keep the towel on his head from dropping. He reached down for his bag, which Chase had put at his feet, and took out his phone.

“Hullo?”

“Hey, Adam?”

“What happened?” Adam answered in alarm.
“I don’t sound that bad, do I?” Kurt tried to joke.

“No, you just… You sound shaken, darling.”

“Oh. Well. Maybe some. Look, are you busy?”

“I’m just finishing things up at work.”

“I need you to meet me somewhere.” Kurt paused.

“Anywhere. I’ll leave right now.”

“Um, the hospital on 28th?”
Chapter Thirteen

Adam

*I ran into the third guy. Ran into.*

Kurt’s words kept repeating in Adam’s head as he rushed to the hospital as fast as he could. Kurt hadn’t said much more on the phone other than that he was fine, and he was just getting checked out because Isabelle had insisted. Then, as Adam could hear Kurt’s employer start to protest in the background, Kurt had quickly said goodbye and ended the call. Adam had a bad feeling about Kurt insisting he was “fine.” He could be saying that for a number of reasons-- not wanting to worry Adam, not wanting to admit it to himself or to Isabelle-- in none of the scenarios that ghosted through Adam’s mind was he really fine.

When he arrived, Isabelle met him in the waiting room and said they had taken Kurt for a head scan and some abdominal ultrasounds. Adam felt sick to his stomach. Why did these things keep happening to Kurt? How could anyone be that malicious to someone so wonderful?

Waiting was the worst. Every time a nurse or doctor came out Adam jumped, even if they were just checking in with front desk or taking a new patient. Bloodied, broken images of Kurt’s face intruded on his thoughts and wouldn’t leave. His treacherous mind had plenty of material to work with… from the last time.

At some point, Isabelle had to leave, and Adam could tell she felt quite bad about it, but he assured her that he’d call straight away as soon as they had any news. After he had let two paper cups of bitter coffee from the machine in the hallway grow cold and memorized all the headlines from the old magazines in the waiting room, a nurse finally came to look for Isabelle. Adam quickly jumped up and told her he was there for Kurt. He had already prepared a long list of arguments as to why he should be permitted to see Kurt despite not being a member of his direct family or the one who had helped him check in, but apparently the worried look on his face was already enough to convince the nurse to take him to Kurt’s room.

Adam tried to wheedle information from her as they walked, but that was taking it too far. She calmly informed him about doctor-patient confidentiality, though she relented a little by adding that Kurt was doing okay.

Adam could feel his heart hammer in his throat as he stood in front of Kurt’s door. He took a deep breath and knocked before entering.
Kurt was sitting on a bed, propped up against a few pillows. He was fully dressed, save for his shoes. A magazine lay in his lap. Adam recognized it right away: *Heidi Klum’s Best Kept Diet Secrets Revealed*. They had the same rag in the waiting room.

Kurt smiled at him. “Hey,” he said. He sounded a bit tired, but not as shaken as he had on the phone.

Adam looked Kurt over. His clothes looked clean, and Adam couldn’t see any bruises at first sight. In fact, the only sign that Kurt might even need to be in that bed was a clean white bandage wrapped around his head, messing up his hair, but-

“How are you?”

“I told you, I’m fine. I didn’t even need stitches, and the scans and the ultrasounds were all clear. They insist on keeping me here for a few hours for observation, though, in case I have a concussion. They *said* 24 hours, but I think I can negotiate it down to half a day. I mean, I’m already missing one night of *Samael* as it is, and my understudy’s great but she’s just not.”

“What happened?” Adam cut him off. He wasn’t really to go into casual conversational mode and chat about the musical just yet.

Kurt noticed his expression and stopped thumbing the pages of the magazine in his lap.

“He followed me. I thought he was *Blaine* at first, would you believe it? He pulled me into an alley somewhere between NYADA and Vogue and tried to intimidate me into not testifying. Like *anything* would stop me.”

Adam swallowed. He could think of *one* thing that would stop him. Thank God that hadn’t happened. “And he… hit you?” he prompted.

Kurt shrugged. “Well, we fought. I got some good kicks in, too. I was very bad-ass.” He smirked. “At some point I pulled out my sais. You should have seen the look on that guy’s face! I think I broke one of his ribs. Serves him right. I guess it was just unlucky for him I was cast as a sword-wielding assassin and not as the Phantom or something. A cape and a mask just wouldn’t have made the same impression.” He covered half of his face with his hand and made a spooky expression, rolling his eyes a little.
Something snapped inside of Adam. Seeing Kurt’s smirk and hearing him laugh it off like someone hadn’t tried to kill him for the second time in a few months added the last little push on the pressure that had been building up inside of him since Kurt had first called.

“For God’s sake, will you just stop being so blasé about everything!” he shouted angrily.

Kurt looked at him with wide eyes, his hand dropping from his face. “Adam?” he started, but Adam shook his head.

“No. I mean it, Kurt. It’s not funny. He could have killed you!”

Kurt’s expression grew serious. “No, he couldn’t. The odds were even this time.”

“He could’ve had a gun!” Adam countered, still very agitated. “Or a knife! You could’ve cracked your damn skull and ended up in a coma! God, Kurt, do you even realize-” His voice caught in his throat. “You could be dead!”

“I understand, okay?” Kurt cut him off sharply. Then he took a deep breath and held out his hand. “Trust me. When it happened, I wasn’t laughing. Believe it or not, I was trying to get out of there, but he had a grip on my arm, and I couldn’t. I had to find another way. I know what he’s capable of… I-” He dropped his hand and took a breath. “I saw it, first-hand.”

Adam’s anger deflated almost as quickly as it had risen. “I know that,” he said quietly. “I’m sorry.” He sat down next to the bed and took Kurt’s hand in his. “I just feel so helpless knowing I could have lost you, again. Maybe forever, this time.” He pulled up the corners of his mouth a little. “I’d be angry with anyone who jokes about that, including you.”

Kurt returned the smile. “Yeah, well, that’s how the Hummel family deals with hard stuff. Bad jokes and deflection. Get used to it.”

“My family stress-bakes,” Adam replied.

“A good combination,” Kurt said. “Food and humor. Remind me to tell you sometime about me, my dad, raw/burnt chicken, and my dead mom.” He squeezed Adam’s hand. Then he frowned and looked a bit troubled.
“What is it?” Adam asked. “Are you feeling dizzy?” His eyes went for the emergency button by the side of Kurt’s bed, but Kurt shook his head.

“No, I- I feel okay.” Kurt licked over his lower lip and sucked it in. Then he looked back up at Adam.

That was when Adam realized that he knew that look. That look that said Kurt needed to tell him something, but he wasn’t comfortable admitting it. Adam scooted closer and put his other hand on top of Kurt’s, waiting for him to speak.

“When I was fighting this guy… when he was down on the ground-” He hesitated and seemed breathless for a moment. “I think I could have killed him... I knew I could have, and I- I wanted to, Adam.” His voice had dropped until it was not more than a whisper. A single tear slipped down his cheek, and he brushed it off with his hand and forced a smile. “Two weeks into Samael and I’m already having character bleed,” he added, clearing his throat a little with a chuckle.

This time, Adam didn’t try to stop him from trying to laugh it off. He could tell how shaken Kurt was beneath it. He waited, in case Kurt waited to say anything else.

“It was frightening. So much more than the actual fight.”

Adam nodded. “I understand. I think it says a lot about you that you didn’t do it,” he offered.

Kurt shrugged uncomfortably. “I didn’t know I was capable of even thinking about that,” he admitted. “I mean, I’ve had my share of dark thoughts, but they usually just involved hurting myself, not other people.”

Adam’s heart turned just a little heavier at that. He needed a moment to recover.

“Not for a long while,” Kurt assured him. “Definitely not since you showed up at my door with your apples.” He smiled a little. “Mr. ‘Oppy also helps a lot.”

Adam let out a breathy laugh. “I hope he’s getting along with your new roommate. These French frogs can be quite snobby.”
“They’re fine. It helps that Julie Andrews doesn’t like flies.”

Adam felt the severity of the moment lift a little, and realized this was exactly why Kurt did it-- the jokes helped.

“Is there anything I can do for you while you’re here?” he asked. “Do you want anything from your place, a toothbrush, clothes? Shall I go and feed Julie?”

Kurt shrugged. “I really didn’t plan on staying that long. You could try and persuade the doctors to let me go home, instead.” He chewed his lip for a moment. “Maybe… by offering that you’ll stay with me overnight and keep an eye out. I… really hate being in hospitals. As a visitor or as a patient.”

Adam looked at him for a moment. “I could do that,” he finally said. “I.. yeah, I can definitely do that.”

*

**KURT**

After about a minute in the cab (which Adam had insisted they call rather than take the subway), Kurt was grateful for a slightly less bumpy ride, the pain medication the doctors had sent him home with, and Adam’s arm securely around his shoulders. Despite the jokes, Kurt’s head kept going back to dark places, and his body was shaky and sore. But at least he was heading home.

Adam kept pressing gentle kisses to Kurt’s cheek and neck. Nothing heated or demanding, just caring, worried little kisses and caresses.

“Home in time to feed Julie Andrews,” Kurt said brightly as they went, intertwined, up the stairs to the loft.

Adam shifted Kurt’s bag and his own over his shoulder. “She must miss you! Does she get lonesome during the day?”
“Yes. And she whines all night if I don’t help her up onto the bed.” Kurt shook his head and fished out his keys.

As though summoned, a long mew greeted them from behind the door. It was followed by several more, until Kurt got the key to turn. Adam leaned over and pulled the door open for him. Julie Andrews came stumbling out around their ankles.

Kurt gave her a little wave. “Hi there, baby!”

“Meeeeeeeee!” Julie Andrews cried.

“She’s hungry. Could you-”

“Got it.” Adam picked her up and closed the door behind him.

Kurt locked the door and the deadbolt and let out a deep breath. His shoulders felt loose. It had finally happened, the thing he’d been so scared about, and he’d survived.

“Are you…?” Adam looked up from where he was emptying some catfood into Julie Andrews’ dish.

“Fine. I’m fine. I think I need to take a shower. Um.” Kurt rubbed his hands over his arms.

Adam set down the dish, and Julie Andrews finally stopped singing to them. Adam took the bag straps in hand and came over to where Kurt was standing aimlessly by the sofa. Their eyes met for a moment, and Adam tossed the bags on the sofa and opened his arms. Kurt leaned forward into them.

“Careful,” Kurt muttered, although he knew that Adam wouldn’t do anything that might even slightly hurt him.

“I will be. If you want to grab a shower, that might feel good? Nice hot shower, I’ll make us some dinner, and we can get you comfortable, hm?”
Kurt nuzzled his forehead into Adam’s chest and stayed there for a moment. It occurred to him that he just liked to be held, whether it was when he was hurt or scared, or after sex, or just trying to get to sleep. Kurt thought that, even if being cuddled was a thing for him, Adam was so much more than a snuggly set of arms. He felt secure even when they weren’t around him.

When Adam let go, Kurt walked over to his bedroom and around the room dividers that he’d bought to replace the curtains.

“Okay.” Kurt began to unbutton his waistcoat. It was a miracle that his outfit had only been slightly scuffed in all of that. Just a bit of blood on the collar of his shirt from the head wound, but it was barely noticeable, and Kurt figured he would be able to get it out.

No trace of his latest brush with mortality. His own, and Donnie’s.

“Ah!”

Kurt winced and leaned over on the bed, pressing a hand to his stomach. Maybe he needed another pain pill after dinner. He would definitely have to ask his co-stars to be careful with him for a few days.

“What is it?” Adam said, hovering outside of the divider.

“Nothing. I’m just sore.” Kurt sat back against the bed and rested for a moment. “Could you help me?”

Adam slipped around the side of the divider. “What can I do?”

“In no way rushing things… help me undress? I think I’ll be capable of normal clothes by tomorrow, but thankfully, I have a dresser for the complicated outfits at work.”

Adam smiled and came over to lace Kurt out of his waistcoat and helped him slip it over his head. Kurt made a prolonged a noise of relief, which caused Adam to laugh and lean forward, pressing his forehead to Kurt’s.
“I don’t know how you wear these clothes on a good day, to be quite honest!”

“I don’t look as good as you do in nothing but worn-ass old jeans and sleeveless shirts.”

“You lie.”

Adam kissed his lips tenderly as he began to unbutton Kurt’s shirt. Now Kurt’s cheeks were warm, and that delightful warmth chased away his embarrassment about needing help. Once the buttons were undone, Adam’s fingertips brushed against Kurt’s skin, but went no further. Without meaning to, Kurt leaned toward them. Adam hesitated, but was clearly tempted; Kurt could see that in his eyes.

That was gratifying to know. Adam wanted him, but wouldn’t treat that want as more important than Kurt’s comfort. They’d agreed to it, of course, but now, Kurt felt it to be true.

Adam pulled Kurt’s shirt back, then froze. “Oh my God.”

Kurt set the shirt on the bed and raised a brow.

“Oh my God, Kurt!” Adam almost shouted, stepping back.

Kurt looked down at the mottled purplish bruises on his stomach and sides. “Adam-”

“No, no! That’s not okay! Please don’t tell me it’s fine!”

Kurt touched his lips for a second, then came closer to Adam, whose eyes were now wide and wet with alarm. He touched Adam’s cheek.

“They did ultrasounds and checked my vitals for hours. I know it’s not okay, but it isn’t serious. I avoided the worst of it, baby, alright? It hurts, but it won’t last. A few days at most.”

“I…” Adam closed his eyes for a moment, letting several tears trickle down his cheeks. “I’m sorry.”
“Don’t be sorry. I only talked about the part of the fight that freaked me out. It’s okay to be surprised.”

“No wonder you needed help with that straightjacket,” Adam muttered.

“There, see? The jokes help.” Kurt kissed Adam’s forehead and watched him trying to breathe normally. “You can be upset, if you need to.”

Adam scrunched his nose up, and Kurt kissed his wet cheeks.

“I hate-” Adam swallowed. “-that you’re so intimate with being in pain that you know how long bruises like those will last.”

“Well, I learned that from high school,” Kurt replied. Then, “Actually, that part’s not a joke.” He frowned and felt something that he hadn’t felt, at all, when he’d gotten bashed alongside Kitt.

This hadn’t just happened to him. This had happened to both of them. Adam was hurting, too.

“I’m not trying to go out and get myself hurt,” Kurt said.

“Oh, I know that. It just that, people keep trying to hurt you. They keep doing unconscionable things to you, and it just… It kills me,” Adam finished with a half-hearted laugh. At himself, maybe. At not knowing how to feel.

“I’m really glad you’re here tonight.”

“Ah, yes. The blubbering man from Essex is so helpful.” Adam wiped his cheeks.

“You are. I’ve told you about holding that pipe over Donnie’s head at least four times now, and you haven’t once told me to can it.”
“Who would- Kurt, why wouldn’t I want to know what you’re thinking about this?”

Kurt shrugged one shoulder. “Why wouldn’t I want to know how you feel? You’re not doing it to be the center of attention. You’re not faking it-” He saw Adam roll his eyes as he realized who Kurt was talking about. “-I understand why you’re worried, and… Sometimes I try to distance from things that are bothering me. I don’t want people I love to have to shoulder my problems, but... I think we should be this involved with how each other are dealing with this. Okay? But all I can tell you is that tonight will be rough, but since my injuries aren’t bad, it’ll get better.”

Adam nodded slowly.

“And even if you’re upset, you need to know that what you’re doing is helping me.” Kurt pinched his lips to the side. “You get a little shouty when you’re scared,” he teased.

“Oh, hush.” Adam lightly swatted Kurt’s hip. “Let’s get you out of those spectacularly tight trousers.”

Kurt leaned back against the bed again and let Adam undo the front of his pants. Though he could’ve gotten that part himself. As he wiggled out of his pants, Julie Andrews came trotting in, meowing and demanding attention. Adam lifted her up to the bed, and Kurt gave her a few pets before he headed to the shower.

“Can you manage? Is there anything else I can do?” Adam asked, baiting the little kitty with his hand.

“I’d like to ask you to help me in the shower, but I think I can actually manage.” Kurt sighed. “Unfortunately.”

“Dinner, then.”

“Thank you,” Kurt half-sang in a sweet voice.

He closed the bathroom door to the sight of Adam smiling again.
After he’d gotten clean in a steaming shower and slipped into a cozy pair of pajamas, Kurt was greeted in the kitchen with fresh soup and a Caesar salad with grilled chicken breast. They ate together, holding hands and occasionally brushing their feet together. There were no more tears, although they did find themselves talking about the attack a few more times. When that happened, Adam squeezed Kurt’s hand a little more tightly.

When they’d finished dinner, Kurt made for the sink with his dishes, but Adam intercepted them.

“Do you mind if I do something?” he asked with a coy grin.

Kurt tilted his head to the side curiously. “Um, maybe? Sure.”

Adam bent over and swept Kurt up in his arms in one quick motion.

“Ah ha ha!”

“I think for one night, maybe you ought to take it easy, hm?”

“No more walking?” It hurt a little, but Kurt kept giggling softly.

“Nope. Not a bit.” Adam carried Kurt over to the sofa. “Also, I have to admit this is mostly to show off my manliness.”

“Oooh,” Kurt replied with a serious nod.

Adam set him down gently and held back a smile for a moment before cupping both sides of Kurt’s face in his hands and giving him a worshipful kiss. “I’ll get the dishes, love. Settle in with kitty.”

Kurt bit his lip and sat back. Julie Andrews jumped up with him, mewing around and kneading on things, until Kurt took her into his lap and started to scratch her back. Meanwhile, he watched Adam taking care of the kitchen.

Yes, they were definitely in this one together.
When Adam came back, Kurt snuggled up to him with the same demand for affection as his little cat (who was now snoozing in a fluffy ball), and curled up under Adam’s strong arm and rested his head against him.

“There you go, my little warrior. Just relax,” Adam murmured.

“Little warrior,” Kurt scoffed. He closed his eyes as he saw that pipe again and Donnie’s form collapsed against the pavement.

“What is it, darling?”

“How do you do that? How do you know when I’m upset?” Kurt demanded. “Can you see through my head? Is it an aura I give off?”

“I don’t think you have to have superpowers to have a bit of empathy,” Adam drawled. “Maybe just keep yourself vaguely aware that other people have feelings.”

Kurt said nothing at first, then, “It’s still bothering me, that I thought about killing him. I forget it for a little while, and then it comes back, and I feel sick.”

Adam’s arm hugged Kurt a little more tightly, and he chose his words carefully. “I think that we all have dark impulses, especially when we’ve been pushed and pushed, and when we’ve seen horrible things happen, and so little good to balance it out.”

“Like I have,” Kurt muttered, although it was obvious.

“Yes. But what marks you, Kurt, is that I’ve never seen you shred someone unnecessarily, or hurt someone who hadn’t hurt you first, and that includes Rachel because you didn’t challenge her until she’d been unforgivably awful to you in my estimation.”

“Wanting to run someone through with a pipe isn’t the same as having a sing-off.”
“No. It’s not. You stopped yourself, though. You thought about it, yes, but that doesn’t make you a bad person, having a bad thought. Thinking isn’t the same as doing, darling. What makes you good is that you can have those feelings, and choose not to hurt or kill.”

Kurt thought about that and nodded slowly. He tried to sear those words into his mind, force them to stay when he started to doubt again.

“Thank you,” Kurt whispered again.

Adam pressed a kiss to the top of Kurt’s head. “As many times as you need to hear it, love.”

*

When Kurt started to wake up, he resisted it with all his might, scrunching his eyes closed and pressing his face further into the soft arm of his boyfriend pillow. Then something happened that pulled him from his sleep. His pillow hugged him back. Kurt’s eyes flew open, and he looked into Adam’s face, inches from his own, smiling, his hair slightly tousled, his arm wrapped around Kurt’s shoulders.

“Hey,” Adam said.

“You’re still here,” Kurt croaked, clearing his throat.

“Of course I am,” Adam replied. “You asked me to stay, didn’t you?”

Kurt sighed. “I thought that part had been a dream.” Relief washed over him. For the first time since the threatening comment on his YouTube video, he didn’t feel alone or afraid at the loft. He didn’t need to look down the bed to know that Adam was still fully dressed and had probably carried him to bed and held him like that all night. Even though Kurt had practically roofied himself with Ambien to come down from the adrenaline and the after-shock of being attacked and remembered near to nothing from after they had settled on the couch, he knew he could be certain that Adam hadn’t abused his trust. He felt the urge to thank him for that, but didn’t-- it was too early for the look he knew he’d get in return.

Adam kissed his forehead. “How are you feeling?”
“Mmm. Fine,” Kurt replied, moving around a little. “I may need to go easy on my warm-up tonight, but -- ah!” He had tried to sit up, and was now clutching his abdomen, breathing out with short, hard stabs.

Adam shot up as well, looking very concerned. Before he could say anything, Kurt held up his hand in a sign of surrender.

“I’m okay. I’m alright,” he said, feeling the bruise with the fingers of his other hand and wincing. “I just moved too fast.” He gingerly changed his sitting position, trying to catalogue his hurts. After a moment, he gave up. It was no use trying to fool himself. As a dancer-- a professional one-- he needed to be honest with his body.

“Okay, maybe Samael should wait one more day,” he said in a small voice, feeling defeated.

“There’s no shame in that,” Adam said softly. “You won’t do them any favours if you overstrain yourself and the doctor orders six weeks of convalescence.”

Kurt nodded, but his throat felt thick. It still felt like copping out.

“If you want, I can stay in, too. After all the extra hours I put in the past weeks, I can definitely pull a ‘family emergency’,” Adam offered. “We could watch some Downton Abbey?”

Kurt shook his head. “You shouldn’t risk your job for me.”

“It’s not at risk. They can’t do without me. I’m their best latte boy,” Adam joked. “Honestly. I’ll prove it. I will hop down to the coffee shop while you call Alison.”

Kurt pressed his lips together in a watery smile. “Can you get some cookies too?”

* 

ADAM

Adam was lost in his own thoughts as he made his way up the steps to Kurt’s loft, balancing two
large coffees and a bag of pastries in one hand while pushing loose change into his pocket with his other. He breathed in the smell of the coffee, imagining it already made him feel more awake. The past 24 hours had been very draining. His speed-limit-breaking drive to the hospital, the long wait, losing his cool and yelling at the one person who didn’t deserve it at all (not really)... trying to stay awake during the night because the hospital staff had still been hesitant to release Kurt from their observation, keeping one hand on his phone in case Kurt’s condition took a turn for the worse… His adrenaline was slowly ebbing now, and if he wanted to be able to offer Kurt some actual company today and not just a warm, snoring body to cuddle up against, he’d definitely need the triple espresso shot that was in his cup.

He reached the sliding door of the loft and could hear Kurt talking on the other side. He let himself in using Kurt’s key and heard Kurt end the call. He smiled and held up his coffees and the paper bag. Adam caught a flicker of sadness in Kurt’s eyes right before Kurt banished it from his face and put on a smile.

“That looks yummy.”

“Thanks,” Adam replied, striking a pose with a hip jutting out. “I hope you’ll like the cookies too, though.” He winked. Kurt’s smile became a little more real.

“What did Alison say?” Adam asked carefully, putting down the coffees on the table and turning Kurt’s with the drinking opening towards him before picking up his own.

Kurt made a face, raising his eyebrows a little as he thought about it. “I told her I needed to take a day. She told me to take three and the Sunday matinee, and more if I need it.”

“That’s really great,” Adam offered, a little surprised, but grateful.

Kurt shrugged. “Yeah, I guess it is.” He hesitated. “She also asked my permission to issue a press statement.”

“About the attack?”

Kurt nodded. “About everything. Kitt, the death threats, the extra security... and this. She told me she’d email it to me to okay before releasing it.”
Adam studied him carefully. “How do you feel about that?” he asked. It was one of those rare occasions when Kurt was hard to read.

“I don’t know,” Kurt said with a sigh. “I mean, it’s not a secret, but I don’t-- I never wanted to paint myself as a victim. But I guess anything that gets Kitt’s case some attention is a good thing.”

“Do you think she’s doing it to sell more tickets?”

Kurt shook his head. “No. I mean, maybe it will attract some sensationalists, but I genuinely think she wants the story out there to help. And she has to explain my absence to our backers and the production team anyway- I guess she figured the story would spread whether there’s a statement or not.”

Adam nodded. “Right. Might as well make it official,” he added.

Kurt pressed his lips into a tight smile and spread his arms out wide. “So… officially cleared to spend all day watching Downton Abbey with you.”

“Excellent,” Adam said and opened the bag of cookies he had brought. But just as they had settled on the couch, there was an urgent knock on the door. Adam could feel Kurt tense up in his arms.

“I’ll get it.” Adam got up.

He opened the sliding door and looked into the surprised faces of Burt and Carole Hummel-Hudson.

“Good morning,” he said politely, stepping aside to let them in.

“Hello, Adam,” Carole replied with a warm smile, finding her words faster than her husband. “Is Kurt okay? We got the first flight to New York…”

“I’m fine,” Kurt called from the couch, rising carefully but masking his efforts well. Adam knew it probably hurt to strain his midriff like he was, but he bit his lip and let Kurt face his family the way he wanted to.
“That’s what you wrote,” Burt said gruffly. “Which doesn’t always mean you are.”

Adam chewed down on a small smile.

“Well, I am. You didn’t have to come,” Kurt replied.

“We wanted to, honey,” Carole said. “But if you’d rather talk later we can check into a hotel first-”

“No, I wanna hear about this,” Burt cut her off. “What happened? You only wrote you ran into one of your attackers. What the hell does that mean? Did he hurt you?”

“Not as much as I hurt him,” Kurt said lightly.

Seeing Kurt had the situation under control and the unexpected visit wasn’t stressing him out too much, Adam went into the kitchen to straighten things up and give them some privacy. When he came back, Kurt had just finished telling them about his release from the hospital.

“And you’re sure you’re okay? You’re not just saying that to get back to your musical? I mean, they can’t kick you out, right? You’re the star,” Burt said.

“I’m sure, dad,” Kurt confirmed. “And I just got off the phone with Alison. She insisted I take three days off. I’m not worried. My understudy is good, but she’s not me.”

“Your understudy is a girl? Didn’t you say those songs were written for especially you?”

Kurt shrugged. “It’s only fair, after I spent my high school glee club career singing girl songs, isn’t it?”

Adam smiled and exchanged a fond look with Kurt. Unlike Rachel, he had taken the hiring of his understudy really well and didn’t see it as a threat to his own role. And it hardly could be; even finding a girl who could pull off the vocal and physical gymnastics Kurt performed nightly had been difficult. Adam suspected that in between rehearsals, Kurt probably took her under his wing and
gave her auditioning advice.

Burt took off his hat and let out a long breath. He seemed to shrink in that moment. “Funny, how it feels when the thing you’ve been so scared of happening finally does, huh?”

Kurt let out a soft laugh and crossed his arms over himself.

“We’re so glad you’re okay, though. What a year this has been,” Carole said.

Kurt was in the middle of a nod when his phone rang again. “Hold on. It’s probably Alison again-”

He picked it up and frowned as he looked at the number. Adam studied his expression for alarm, but he’d answered before Adam could figure out what was going on. Kurt’s expression remained stern, until his eyes went wide and he sputtered, “O-oh, good!”

Adam waited just long enough for Kurt to hang up before he was by his side, gently curling an arm around his shoulders.

“They caught him. They caught the guy. A-apparently he didn’t get very far from the alley where he attacked me-” Kurt let out a tense laugh. He huffed a strange little breath, and then wrapped his arms around Adam.

Adam didn’t need another signal. He held Kurt in return and rubbed his back. “See there? It’s done. You’ll have them all put away, before long.”

Kurt nodded, pressing his face into the curve of Adam’s neck. Adam could feel Kurt melt further into his arms with every shuddering breath he let out. In a way, tension was falling off his own shoulders as well. Kurt was safe now, or as safe as he’d ever be in a big city like New York. Vaguely, Adam could hear Burt and Carole talk among themselves excitedly, happy with Kurt’s news as well, but at the moment, all Adam could think of was that that guy wasn’t going to hurt Kurt any more.

He pressed a kiss to the side of Kurt’s face and held him a little longer. Then he noticed Burt and Carole were looking at them. He caught Burt’s eyes and offered him an apologetic smile before slowly releasing Kurt. His father had come over from Ohio to see his son, and here he was, hogging all the hugs!
Kurt made a small sound against Adam’s skin, clearly reluctant to let go. His fingers wound into Adam’s sweater.

Burt cleared his throat. Years of awkward coughs and disapproving hums had conditioned Kurt to straighten away from Adam immediately.

“So, you two are, uh- back together then?” Burt asked.

Kurt stepped a little closer to Adam again, holding out his hand. “Yes, we are,” he confirmed, and Adam could feel a little flutter in his heart hearing Kurt say it again. He squeezed Kurt’s hand softly.

Burt nodded slowly, then smiled. “Good. That’s real great, Kurt,” he said.

“I think so, too,” Adam said, looking at Kurt and beaming.

“That’s so wonderful! And to be honest, I’m glad Kurt has someone around after what just happened,” Carole said. “Oh, not that you couldn’t take care of yourself, Kurt! It’s just that with Rachel gone, and this not being the best part of town… Well, I wouldn’t want you to be alone is all. It’s good to have someone in the house to look after you.”

“He does a good job.” Kurt tilted his head toward the kitchen.

“Oh, I suppose if I weren’t here, Elliott and Dani would be over guarding him, or Santana and Mercedes,” Adam added. “They were practically on sentry duty a few months ago. I was lucky to get a rotation.”

“Well, true.” Kurt met his eye. “But I like having you here.”

Kurt shook his head. “I can’t believe they finally got that guy. I mean, I guess it had to happen, with him following me and calling like that…”

“Wait… He was following you around?” Burt said.
“Yeah, for a little while. But I didn’t know it was him… or maybe it wasn’t always him. Blaine was following me, too. He was lucky I didn’t brain him in the grocery store. He scared me to death.”

Burt’s brows screwed together and he repeated, “He was following you.”

“Honey,” Carole muttered. He looked at her, dumbfounded.

Kurt bit his lip, then added. “That’s why I changed my number. The guy they caught was calling me, so I gave it to the police for evidence. Kitt’s attackers were trying to scare me into not testifying… Blaine was just trying to get me to talk to him again so I’d take him back.”

Burt finally let out a long sigh. “I dunno sometimes. I mean, I was scared of you gettin’ hurt, and these guys are still coming after you?”

“But now they’ll probably be able to move to trial, finally,” Carole said. She rubbed Burt’s shoulders. “It’ll be good. They’ll get put away.”

“That doesn’t mean they won’t still try something,” Burt said, his voice sounding less gruff and more uncertain.

“Maybe.” Kurt leaned into Adam. “But nobody pushes the Hummels around, right?”

Adam looked between Burt and Kurt for a moment. Burt put his hands on his hips and shook his head.

“Yeah, I guess not. Especially you.”

“Why don’t we let you two get some rest?” Carole suggested. “And we’ll come back later to take you to lunch, or dinner?”

She let Burt go to come give Kurt a gentle hug. “Finn always said you were the bravest little fighter. He couldn’t believe how gutsy you were, never letting the other boys tear you down. Just be careful,
“for our sakes, okay?”

“I will, Carole,” Kurt promised. “I’m not going out to look for trouble.”

She pulled back and looked at him. “I know, I know. But… It’s just funny, as a parent. I get scared of losing you, but I’m still so proud.”

Then she touched Adam’s arm and gave him a smile overflowing with warmth. “And it’s so good to see Kurt with such a good, kind man.”

Adam dipped his head slightly, but returned her smile and muttered a thank you.

“And handsome,” she whispered to Kurt. Adam pretended not to have noticed, but went a little red at the ears.

Burt gave Adam a nod, then came forward to give Kurt a hug before he went.

“I meant it, you know,” Kurt said after his parents had left. The two of them were curled up on the couch, sipping their coffee. “I really am glad to have you specifically here with me.”

“I believed you. Though, it’s true that I’ve sometimes felt like the sixth wheel among your friends,” Adam admitted.

“I never wanted you to feel left out.”

“I’m sure you didn’t. But as it happens, we spent some time apart, and there are other people in your life who are close to you. And in the end, I suppose I’m mostly glad of it. At least for the friends you have now.” Adam pulled Kurt close.

Kurt watched him quietly for a moment, smiling appreciatively, in a way that Adam didn’t quite understand.

“You don’t mind Elliott being around?” he asked, finally.
“I suppose not… As long as he’s not around naked. He was your friend before all of that, wasn’t he?” Adam worried a bit that this fell into the ‘not passionate enough’ category, but Kurt seemed pleased by what he was hearing. “I trust the both of you.”

“He’s like a big brother, sometimes. Maybe that’s a weird thing to think. He’s so tall, and warm, and he looks out for me and gives me advice. Maybe that’s why it didn’t work… That, and I never stopped being in love with you.” As Kurt added the last bit, he rested his head on Adam’s shoulder.

Adam had to admit it helped to know that Elliott had been brother-zoned. It also didn’t hurt to hear the L-word. Adam kissed Kurt’s forehead and held up a cookie for him to bite into.

*

Kurt

Although Kurt wasn’t used to taking time off, he had to admit that a whole day with nothing to do but curl up in a pile with his boyfriend and his cat wasn’t bad at all. In fact, it was very, very good.

“We should do this more often,” he said, nuzzling Adam’s sweater. “Not the getting attacked part, obviously. But the staying at home and vegging out.”

“I wouldn’t mind that,” Adam said, tightening his arms a little around Kurt.

Kurt smiled. “For the record, this is me enjoying taking it slow,” he said.

“I’m proud of you,” Adam teased, but he kissed Kurt’s temple to make up for it. “What time are we meeting Burt and Carole again?”

Kurt lifted his phone to check the time. Julie Andrews let out a ‘meep!’ of complaint at the movement. “Oh, take it easy, cat. At six. We have a few hours, still.”

Adam ducked his head toward the crook of Kurt’s neck. Kurt laughed and flushed as Adam’s lips moved over his skin.
“I suppose I ought to go jump in the shower.” Adam launched himself off the couch.

“You tease!” Kurt called after him.

He shook his head and looked at his phone again, casually scrolling through his email. He deleted a few pieces of junk mail, and then eyed an unfamiliar address with the subject ‘Samael!’

Kurt lifted a brow high and clicked, just to be sure.

*I was at your show last night, but you weren’t there.*

Creepy. Fortunately, it was only Blaine, and not his now apprehended stalker or one of the man’s friends out on bail.

He skimmed over the the rest of the email, which ranged from a few veiled negative comments about the nature of the show (“though it isn’t really necessary to glorify promiscuity the way the show does… It’s sort of a surprise that you’d involve yourself in show like this, even if the vocals would be challenging, to some”) to more comments about his disappointment that Kurt hadn’t been in the lead when Blaine had bought his tickets. And likely had been intending to trap him at the stage door.

“What a lucky pipe.” Kurt rolled his eyes. He considered telling Blaine once again that his tactics were on par with those of the asshole who had been trying to scare him into recanting his testimony, or that Blaine was essentially complaining that Kurt hadn’t been there to entertain Blaine when he’d actually been in the hospital. Instead, he just deleted it and blocked the address.

Blaine would figure it out when Alison took care of the PR. There was already a short blurb up about it at Broadway.com.

Following that, Kurt saw that he had a text from Santana demanding to know if he was alive, and warning that she would activate her Mexican Third-Eye to know if he lied. With a chuckle, Kurt tapped her named to call her. They talked for a few minutes, as she alternatively pressed for details and told him to shut up when he intimated she might care. When Adam returned, combing his wet hair, Kurt smiled at him warmly.
“I gotta go. I need to start getting ready soon.”

“Yes, clearly, that will take hours, to put on your little pointed hat and short pants.”

“Yeah, okay,” Kurt muttered as Adam sat next to him, grinning.

“I’m calling you Pinnochio,” Santana said.

“I know, dear.”

“So, can I come over later?” She paused. “Can Clover come too?”

Kurt raised both brows. “Clover? Is that who you’ve been with while we’ve been talking? Are you two dating?”

“I’m going to kill you.”

“No, that’s the job of the guy who beat me with a pipe.”

“Oh my God!” Santana laughed.

Adam frowned and blinked. Kurt leaned over and kissed his cheek.

“Yeah,” he continued. “And he failed.”

“Okay, so, to your question-” Her voice lowered. “-Yeah, maybe.”

“Whoo!”
“Shut up. It’s not like… either of us has time for anything. I’m trying to launch a music career, and she’s about to single-handedly save a huge Broadway show. It’s more like we’re micro-dating. I come to the set to have lunch with her. She goes to the studio to hang out between cuts. We take the subway in the same direction, trying to have a few minutes to talk. We’ve only really gone out twice.”

“Well, don’t worry. Once the show starts, her schedule will stabilize. Right now, Campion has to be pulling his hair out trying to get everything done in time for opening night. Alison was a complete loon right up until the dress rehearsal, and then she became a Zen master.”

“God, I hope so. This is crazy important to Clover. That show has fucked up so much, if it isn’t a wild success now, with Rachel gone, they’re gonna want to blame her.”

Kurt pressed his lips together and smiled smugly. “You like her.”

“Shut up. Can we come over later or not?”

“I’ll give you a text when I know how long dinner with the folks is going. And don’t worry so much about Clover. I’ve heard her sing, and we all know she’s genuinely funny. If it fails, the critics aren’t going to blame her. Not after losing the lead’s understudy, then having to fire the lead, and restage the show more than once.”

“Oh… Right. Hm. You have a point. Maybe.” Santana sighed. “Okay, tell Doctor Who I said something funny.”

“I will.” Kurt said goodbye, then hung up and looked at Adam. “Santana still calls you Doctor Who.”

Adam grinned. “I have to say, of all the things I’ve been called, that’s probably the name with the least bite.”

“She’s feeling warm and fuzzy now that she and Clover are dating.”

“Oh! That’s wonderful!”
Kurt leaned over and rubbed Adam’s chest. “Alright, sunshine. Are you ready to go meet my parents?”

“I’ve met them before.”

“I know, but that was just for a minute this morning.”

“No, I mean, when I sat next to them on opening night.”

“Oh, right.” Kurt lifted Julie Andrews up and rose. He needed to start getting ready now himself, and leave Adam some time with the mirror. "I was busy… thinking about how we’d nearly screwed all this up when you told me that before. I guess that’s why dad was so cheerful. He is usually a little more awkward when it comes to seeing a guy stayed over with me.”

Kurt frowned then. “What did he say to you?”

“He seemed sort of approving, generally,” Adam said hesitantly. “We mostly talked about the performance.”

“And he told you that Elliott and I had broken up.” Kurt crossed his arms. “How did that come up?”

“He, er…” Adam pinched his mouth closed and scratched Julie’s head.

“I’m not mad at you,” Kurt clarified.

“I’m a bit more worried I’m going to get you mad at him.”

Kurt lifted his chin and watched Adam closely.

Finally, Adam sighed and folded his hands between his legs. “He didn’t realize at first that I was the Adam you’d dated. So we talked about the show for a bit, and I made… some comment. I forget about what. I think cars? I’m sorry.” He shrugged.
Kurt laughed softly. “That’s okay. This isn’t a deposition.”

“All right.” Adam gave a tight smile in return, then continued, “And then he said that he wished you had met someone like me to date, in between Blaine and Ziggy Stardust.”

Kurt covered his eyes with one hand.

“He implied I was a better choice because he felt I appreciated you and wouldn’t let you forget where you came from. And Clem was with me, so she made a point to inform him that you indeed, had picked me for an in between.”

“God.” Kurt felt his energy leech from him. Should he just let this one go?

“Then Carole implied your friends back home were insane, which I sort of agree with now.”

Kurt smiled a little, because Adam had added that part to make him smile. “Sorry, it’s just...Dad has these ideas about the right kind of gay guy you have to be in order to be ‘safe.’ And he accepts me to a point, but some things still make him uncomfortable. Seeing One Three Hill made him uncomfortable. Everything about Elliott made him uncomfortable. It didn’t influence our relationship, really. It’s not why we broke up, or why I chose you, but...”

“He’s more comfortable with my dating you than our resident glam rock god?”

“Something like that.”

Adam rose and hugged Kurt around the shoulders. “That’s a perfectly reasonable thing for you to be uncomfortable about. It’s not like your costumes in Samael are the slightest bit conservative.”

“He hasn’t said a peep about those!” Kurt shook his head.

“Also, when I told him I wasn’t dating Clem, and told him I’m more for the men, he asked me if I was sure.” Adam said this with a smile. He obviously had intuited that Kurt wasn’t angry, and was
still trying to make him smile.

This did make him a little angry, though. It came down to his father’s approval of Adam being solely determined by how much he could pass. Kurt wondered, if he were to date someone just like himself, if Burt would hate him on principle…

Maybe that was taking things a little far. But it was how he felt, every time his father pulled something like this.

“I should get ready,” Kurt muttered.

“Don’t be upset, darling. I didn’t tell you this to upset you.”

“No, you told me because I asked, and you respected my right to know what was going on.” Kurt heaved a sigh. “I think I’m still angry with him for pushing the proposal to Blaine so hard, and mostly because he hadn’t met you, so he assumed I’d be safer with Blaine. I wish I’d just… taken a cab back to the airport after we all got back from the oncologist’s.”

Adam rubbed Kurt’s arms. After a minute, he said, “That’s behind us now, though, right?”

Kurt knew Adam was trying to placate, to smooth things over and help him feel better. But Kurt didn’t want things to seem smooth if they weren’t. “I don’t know,” he finally admitted.

“Do you want me to wear eyeliner?” Adam suggested, just as casually.

Kurt looked up at Adam for a moment, then lightly slapped his chest. “You stop. I don’t want to intentionally rile things up. We’ll just try to have a nice dinner, and we’ll see what happens.”

Adam hugged Kurt to himself gently, then followed him into the other room. Kurt appreciated the unasked for hand as he changed gingerly into his outfit for the night. He would heal all the quicker if he didn’t have to strain himself doing these things. And it was much easier to ask when the person standing there simply moved alongside Kurt, as though he were going to help no matter what.
In the interests of keeping the evening calm, Kurt enforced the no eyeliner rule, and they had to stop by Adam’s apartment to get Adam some appropriate dinner attire. Carole had texted them to make sure they knew the place she’d made reservations had a dress code, and that they could pick them up at Adam’s place.

Kurt pawed through Adam’s closet until he found a deep burgundy shirt, and then held it up to Adam’s chest. He smiled indulgently at Kurt’s determination, and after he’d put it on, let Kurt fuss with his tie, then his hair. Kurt wasn’t nervous, per se, but he felt ramped up. When Kurt was finally satisfied with their outfits, Adam took Kurt’s hand, and leaned in to give him a gentle kiss.

“Easy, darling,” he said quietly.

“I’m fine. I’m just… oddly full of energy.” Kurt looked down at his phone. It was buzzing with a text from Carole. They were here. “It’s time to go.”

Adam squeezed his hand, and they headed out.

The cab was waiting for them, and Kurt recognized after a few minutes that they were heading toward the Lower Eastside. Carole was sitting in the back with them, and kept up the conversation with Adam, getting and clarifying details about what he was up to and how he’d come to New York.

“And how did you two meet?” Carole asked.

“Oh, uh, in the hallways of school,” Adam said. His cheeks were a bit rosy. If not from the warmth of the three of them in the seat together, because Carole kept subtly saying that he was incredibly handsome. “Actually, er, I’d seen him before that.”

“He was at the Winter Showcase,” Kurt clarified. “And he watched me perform ‘Being Alive.’ He didn’t talk to me, though.” He glanced at Adam fondly.

“I didn’t dare to,” Adam added shyly. “You were the man of the hour.”

“Then, after I’d started at NYADA, I was-” Kurt continued and shrugged. “-a little lonely because Rachel was always busy with her boyfriend or her minions, so I went to the activity board to see
what kind of clubs were available to join, to make some new friends.”

“And I sort of swung by, putting in a pitch for my show choir,” Adam said.

Kurt grinned. “I couldn’t even see him. You went by so fast!”

“I was nervous! You were a superstar at the Showcase!”

“Anyway, it wasn’t until the next time that I went to look at the poster that Adam actually stuck around to talk to me,” Kurt teased.

“I’d rehearsed my pitch by then.” Adam pressed his lips together in a bit of embarrassment.

“Still impressive.” Kurt squeezed his thigh.

“Yeah?” Burt asked from the front. “So you invited him to your show choir to ask him out?”

Kurt frowned.

“Oh, no!” Adam said. “I invited him to the show choir because he’s amazing! And to be accurate, he asked me out.”

“After a week of pretty hardcore flirting on your part,” Kurt added.

“Hum. Well. True.” Adam ducked his head. “But I wasn’t just flirting, you know. Everything I said was an honest assessment!”

Burt looked back. “That’s funny. I figured you’d be more of the type to get things going.”

“I would’ve tried eventually,” Adam amended. “I was interested. It just takes me a little while to work up the nerve, I guess. Often, I wait too long, or end up getting asked out first. I don’t like to
push things or pressure anyone into anything. Wet hen, and all that.”

Carole and Burt exchanged a confused look.

“He’s trying to imply he’s boring. Which he is not,” Kurt explained. He pointed at Adam. “I am banning that term from conversation. I don’t know how you can even think it. When I first met you, I thought you’d explode over the excitement of doing a Sondheim mashup. Wet poultry could never handle that.”

Carole laughed.

“So you went on a date, and then, uh-?” Burt prodded a little.

Kurt screwed his brows together and scrunched up his nose. “A few dates. And we got snowed in with Rachel and Santana—”

“A truly harrowing experience,” Adam added cheerfully.

“And then I had a lapse of judgement and ended up engaged to the wrong guy.” Kurt shot Adam an apologetic look, but he softly shook his head and touched Kurt’s knee.

“I’m really glad that’s over and you and Adam managed to work things out,” Carole offered, smoothing things over.

“Yeah. Yeah, me too,” Burt quickly said. “Adam’s great.”

Kurt thought about what Adam had shared earlier. He wanted to be happy. He wanted to be able to appreciate the novelty of having his father here with him, happy about his relationship. It was soured, though, by the feeling that his father’s approval was so conditional.

They soon arrived outside of what looked to be a pawn shop. Burt paid the driver as Carole, Kurt, and Adam climbed out of the backseat.
“Beauty and Essex!” Adam exclaimed as he read out the gaudy sign above the pawn shop.

“I’d hoped you’d like that!” Carole said cheerfully. “I saw it listed under the top restaurants to visit and thought, well, we’ve got to take Adam here!”

“I think you may be one of the first persons I’ve met in the States that even remembered where I’m from,” Adam said, practically smiling his face off.

“Is this even a restaurant?” Burt said as he came to stand on the sidewalk with them.

“It is,” Carole insisted, leading them inside.

And inside, it did look like a pawn shop. Kurt looked up at the wall of guitars and for a second wondered when he’d have a spare second to practice with the band again.

“Through these doors, you think?” Adam pointed to the large doors in the back.

“Follow the man,” Burt said.

They entered a large dining room with vaulted ceilings and a skylight, through which the dying light of the day filtered through and bathed the rich brown decor with further warmth. They sat, and quickly decided that, since the menu was to be shared tapas-style, each of them would select an entree.

While they waited for their first plates to arrive, Carole and Burt kept up with the questions about Adam, and he answered them all with a fair amount of indulgence. Kurt wasn’t sure if it was his earlier agitation at Burt’s behavior at opening night seeping through, but Kurt felt like Burt’s questions were veering in a particular direction, at times, seeming to seek what kind of roles Adam had taken (Adam had mentioned a few Shakespearean roles, and a role as a punk teenager), whether he’d ever played sports (only casually with his ‘mates,’ but not as part of a team), or if he liked watching them.

Adam cast a glance at Kurt at that one, then gave a shrug. “Not especially. I don’t mind playing sport with a group, non-competitively, or watching soccer occasionally, but in general, I suppose I’d rather find something else to do.”
“Huh.” Burt pushed his lips out and nodded slowly.

“Tough luck, dad,” Kurt said.

Carole patted Burt’s arm.

“What?” Burt said. “I thought we were all just gettin’ to know each other.”

“Some of us are getting to know each other,” Kurt said with false cheer. “And some of us are interviewing a new partner to watch sports with while making fun of me for not being interested.”

“Whoa, hey. Where did that come from?” Burt looked so offended that he might fall back in his chair.

“It came from the Christmas after Blaine and I broke up and you dragged him into my apartment to do exactly that. But Adam’s not gonna do that with you.”

Adam looked between Kurt and his father with keen, cautious eyes. Kurt swallowed, afraid after the fact that he may have ruined the mood for the whole evening.

“I haven’t said a bad word about Adam,” Burt protested.

“Not directly, no. You’ve been so enthusiastic about us dating. I just want to make sure you’re happy about the guy who’s actually sitting here, because he’s great. And not just because he’s not currently wearing leather and eyeliner.”

Burt made a noise and looked like he was reaching for something to say. “Well, y’know… I gotta admit, that does help, yeah.”

“What?”

Kurt let out a huff of breath through his nose and looked away. The table grew awkwardly silent. At least his father wasn’t denying it. Adam’s fingers touched Kurt’s tentatively. Kurt swallowed, then lifted his eyes to meet Adam’s.

“You know,” Kurt said quietly, “the ability to pass as straight doesn’t make someone a better person than Elliott. Or me.”

Burt frowned. “Come on, Kurt, we’ve been over this. I just want you to-”

“Be safe, I know,” Kurt sighed wearily, “but it hurts, Dad. Do you have any idea what it feels like for me when you make assumptions about my friends based on their looks, knowing that that’s the way people make assumptions about me, too? That I won’t just be passed over for jobs and roles, but as a potential son-in-law?”

“I don’t mean it like that,” Burt said, the fight leaving his voice.

Kurt felt his chest tighten at the futility of this conversation. Why had he even started this? The waitress came over to set out their kale apple salad and the lobster tacos.

Then Adam spoke.

“I’m terribly sorry. I know you don’t mean it that way, but if you say things like that… You’re talking about him. You’re talking about me. Just because you think I pass doesn’t mean I always have, or always do. Americans always read my habits as ‘European’ rather than gay; it’s a bit funny, honestly. And I assure you there are plenty of Samael fans right now who can’t even conceive of the idea that Kurt might possibly be gay. What reads as gay changes.” Adam squeezed Kurt’s fingers. “If you say it, you say it about all of us. It’s not innocent. It’s never innocent. And I don’t think there’s anything funny about Kurt not liking sports.”

“Oh course. You’re right. Both of you,” Carole said. “I think Burt knows that, too.” She gave her husband a sharp look. “It’s hard as a parent when your child starts dating someone you think isn’t right for them. Believe me, I had my issues with Rachel, too-”

Kurt bit down on the corner of his mouth, trying to keep it from going up at the way she had rolled her eyes when she said it.
“But in the end, it’s not about us,” she continued. “It’s about you, and who you want to be with.” She took Burt’s hand. “Eyeliner or not.”

Burt looked at his son. “I never wanted to hurt you, Kurt. I thought I was doing the right thing, looking out for you.” His voice sounded a bit wobbly. “I’m sorry.”

Kurt nodded wordlessly, feeling his throat close up. While all of this needed to be said, seeing his father like this almost made him feel guilty for bringing it up. Still, he couldn’t make himself brush it off with a half-hearted ‘it’s okay.’ “I guess we can file this under that father-son communication thing we agreed to try,” he said, his own voice a bit rough as well.

“Yeah,” Burt let out, looking a little relieved that no more accusations were coming. Then he cleared his throat. “You should let me know if I mess up again, okay buddy? I really want to get this right.”

“I will,” Kurt agreed.

Burt reached across the table and took Kurt’s hand with a protective squeeze.
Chapter Fourteen

ADAM

“Kurt! Kurt, over here please!”
“Mr. Hummel, a smile?”
“Over here, red sweater, please Kurt-”

The official opening of *Funny Girl* was a-go, and dozens of cameras were flashing away at the marked-off photo wall by the theatre entrance. Kurt smiled obligingly, now and then tipping his top hat for a few shots, and turning left and right to fully display the fantastic outfit Chase and Isabelle had designed for him. Adam stood to the side, holding his overcoat and his phone, and basking in the joy of seeing his boyfriend so in demand. Though Kurt had already been hot stuff in the public eye since *Samael* had opened, he was even more sought after since his return. The press release about the attack had probably done its piece, as did the sparse interviews Kurt had done afterwards. Kurt still didn’t like it when the media tried to pin hero-status on him, but he had used the platform to talk about LGBTQ safety and the prejudice still present in the city, despite its reputation as a Gay Promised Land.

Adam was glad people were finally seeing what he had seen all along: Kurt was breathtaking.

At a nod from his boyfriend, Adam quickly crossed the small catwalk to join him, trying to ignore the continued flashes of the cameras. He had dressed up in his best suit as well, but he was well-aware that wasn’t what the paparazzi were after. He handed Kurt back his things and received a quick kiss on the cheek-- and that was what the photographers had been waiting for. It had taken some getting used to to hear them clamoring out his name at such events too, but with social media as it was, it hadn’t taken long for fans and professionals alike to find out his name, occupation, and relationship status in regards to Kurt. Someone had even asked for his autograph as they had gotten out of the car. (Adam had declined, not wanting to usurp any of Kurt’s fame). In all, he was just happy to be Kurt’s ‘latte boy’ (and cellphone holder), as long as there were kisses in it for him.

*  

KURT

The *Funny Girl* premiere was incredibly grand, and Kurt still couldn’t believe Rachel had thrown away her chance of being right in the middle of it. This was everything they had been dreaming of back in Lima; big billboards, their names in lights. They had joked about what they’d wear to each other’s opening nights (just in case they wouldn’t be starring in a show together) and which hot dates they’d bring. Kurt suppressed a wince at the memory. Rachel was out of Broadway’s good graces, and neither Finn nor Blaine was with them now. *Finn is*, he corrected himself, thinking of the small tattoo on his ankle. *He always is.*

But Blaine, that was a different story. After several nights of disturbances at the stage door after Kurt’s return to *Samael*, Alison had had enough and had Blaine arrested. It wasn’t hard to convince the police to come, given everything that had happened to Kurt, and Blaine had now been slapped with a restraining order, instructing him to keep away from the theatre and Kurt’s private home or risk a heavy fine. Kurt had been a little shocked when he found out, but agreed it was for the best. He couldn’t deny it had been very stressful having to face his ex-fiancé every night after work. He’d later heard through Sam that Blaine’s father had also had enough and told him to come home or be cut off. With Blaine out of the way, Kurt had been able to focus on his fans, and even greet some
more pleasant familiar faces. Paul, the actor who had auditioned for his part with him, had shown up
to catch a matinée while he was in town for another round of auditions, and on another night, David
Karofsky had surprised him with a large bouquet of flowers and a dashing gentleman at his side
whom he had introduced as his boyfriend. Kurt smiled at the memory. In their own way, they were
both proof that it did get better.

Kurt and Adam met up with Elliott and Dani in the lobby once they’d made it past the line of
photographers.

“Managed to finally get through, did you?” Elliott asked with a grin. He was looking very stylish in
what Kurt knew was one of Elliott’s own creations, a little heavier on the glitter than his own outfit.

“Barely,” Adam replied, but he didn’t look like he had minded. Kurt smiled at him fondly. Hot date
to a friend’s opening night? Check.

“Is Santana here yet?” Kurt asked, and looked around the filled lobby.

“I’m sure we’d have known if she was,” Dani replied.

Kurt smiled and nodded in agreement. Santana did usually make herself hard to overlook. And true
enough, when she did arrive, every head turned to see her make her entrance. Santana looked
stunning in a ruby red dress that was practically skintight down to her knees and then fanned out into
a tail. Some of the reporters had followed her into the lobby, but she waved them off as soon as she
saw Kurt and the others.

Dani whistled. “You certainly went all out for your gal pal,” she teased.

Kurt smirked. By now, everyone in their circle knew Santana and Clover were dating, but whenever
they were seen together, celebrity reporters insisted on writing they were “very close friends.” Kurt
suspected the production team of Funny Girl was secretly glad of this. After all the drama and
negative press they already had around Rachel, they probably didn’t want anything to undermine
Clover’s credibility opposite her male co-star. It annoyed Santana to no end, though, to be in the
closet again, even if it hadn’t been their choice. One night she and Clover, with wine and IPA in
hand respectively, had sprawled over Kurt’s new sofa planning increasingly epic and subversive
ways to ‘come out,’ after their directors and managers calmed down.

Once again, Kurt was grateful for Samael and his open-minded director.

“You’re not exactly underdressed yourself,” Santana replied, nodding at Dani’s smart suit. “Are you
hoping to make some new friends at the after party?”

“A gal can never have too many pals,” Dani said. “Especially when her last girlfriend just moved to
Seattle for school.”

The ushers opened the inner doors and the large mass of people slowly started filing towards their
seats. Kurt began feeling the butterflies he always felt when going to see a show, his body making
itself ready to be swept up in the music and dancing and the colorful rush that was Broadway.

He took Adam’s hand. “I love this part,” he whispered, “going in and knowing that there’s a whole
world waiting for you behind that curtain.”

Adam gave his hand a soft squeeze, and they showed the usher their tickets. Prime seats, courtesy of
Clover. “I could get used to this view,” Adam said, looking around the theatre from the front.

“Just stick with me, then,” Kurt replied. “All of my friends are crazy talented.”
“Oh, I intend to.”

Kurt looked back at Adam to find him watching him with soft eyes, and the butterflies in his stomach did an extra swirl.

“That includes you, by the way,” he added.

“I fetch the best coffee in the land,” Adam joked.

Kurt bumped Adam’s shoulder and took his hand. He knew what it was like to stand by while all of your friends had their dreams coming true. And Kurt himself was a particularly hard person to stand beside, right now. The success of Samael and the band had produced new opportunities for Kurt. A few people had called asking to cast him in bit parts, and one producer had asked if Kurt would be interested in taking over a character role in his already established show on Broadway. Since he didn’t have an agent (yet, and needed to get one), these were coming to the theatre, and Kurt had been in talks with Alison about when he’d be available; his loyalty was to Samael, first, and she’d promised to use these offers to get a commitment from their backers sooner rather than later if they wanted to extend the run.

In the meantime, Adam seemed happier when he wasn’t talking about work. Kurt wondered if he’d been auditioning at all lately. Since he didn’t talk about it much, Kurt suspected that he was giving it a break.

“Well, you also look really, really nice in that suit,” Kurt pointed out.

“I am an accomplished man.” Adam smiled, but Kurt wasn’t fond of Adam making fun of himself like that.

“Remind me later to talk to you about something. Isabelle wants to have lunch with us and one of her designers.”

This was not true, even though Kurt had been thinking of Adam in that particular designer’s clothes for a while, but Adam was astute. He raised his brows in interest, and suspicion.

“I mean, it’s just selfish to keep all of this to myself.” Kurt trailed his fingertips over Adam’s slim tie.

“All right.” Adam smirked and leaned over.

“It can’t hurt to get your handsome face out there.”

“You don’t have to go with the hard sell, darling. I’ll go. It’s worth a shot.” He looked up at the stage and sighed. “Selling my body.”

Kurt laughed. “It’s not like that!”

Adam grinned and squeezed his hand.

* 

* 

Funny Girl was everything they had expected, and more. Clover brought every ounce of her own awkward outsidersness to the role. Fanny wasn’t just funny; she was angular, and odd, and fiercely genuine. When in heels, she found herself looking down at her male lead, forcing him to go on tiptoe once or twice.

And unlike Rachel’s predictions, the audience loved it. After holding his breath at every funny line in
the first act, hoping for laughter at the appropriate moments, Kurt started breathing easier when he realized how well it was working. In addition to Clover’s unique embodiment, she knew how to distinguish Fanny from herself— at once vulnerable and new, in contrast to Clover’s sometimes abrasive intellect. It made Fanny Brice much less a caricature of Barbra’s iconic role, and more a reflection of modern insecurities.

And then they heard her sing, really sing. Kurt had no small love of “The Greatest Star,” but he leaned forward, watching Fanny pulling out every awkward trick to endear herself to directors and get her foot in the door, and twice literally tripping over those feet. She had all the raw power in her voice that Rachel possessed, but stripped of the tricks and mimicry.

“D’you think beautiful girls are gonna be the stars foreva? I think not! Any minute now they’ll be out. Finished!” she spat with a bit of a growl. “And then it’ll be my turn.” Her eyes, wide with passion and defiance, grew soft as she swept her gaze over the audience, slumped her shoulders and sighed heavily.

Then, suddenly, she began storming to the front of the stage, beginning to sing again with a frustration and determination that Kurt recognized all too well. It had been the same desperation he’d had singing this song to his laughing peers and mentors: I can do this, if only you’ll let me try.

As Kurt began to relax and enjoy the show, he caught Santana out of the corner of his eye, pressing her lips together, and twisting her program in her hands, and watching with eyes like saucers. She had nothing to worry about. Kurt could hear each joke landing and see the energy in the room. This show would be a success, with or without the reviews to back it up, although he hoped the reviewers appreciated what Clover could do.

ADAM

Adam had to admit that he’d only seen the Funny Girl musical once or twice in his life, so aside from the classic musical numbers that got repeated endlessly at auditions and round room, he’d not been overly expectant either way. At intermission, he, Kurt and their group talked excitedly about the show, while Santana fanned herself frantically with her abused program.

“She’s a star, sweetheart,” Adam assured Santana, touching her forearm gently. And for once, instead of returning with a biting comment, she simply gave a grateful smile.

The after party was an overwhelming affair, with so many big names in attendance that Adam felt in danger of gawking for their entire stay. Instead, Kurt grabbed his hand and began working his way around the room as the lead of Samael. Adam thought he might die, overcome by his inner awkwardness, but somehow he smiled through it and managed not to babble through it. Not even when Kurt bounced in place and then went over to start up a conversation with John Barrowman.

They were in the middle of listening to a story Audra McDonald was telling to a group of people, when one of the stage assistants came over to grab Kurt for some pictures.

“Oh, no. Thank you, but this isn’t my event,” he said.

“Ms. Rosenbaum requested you,” the man said. “Could you please come?”

Kurt frowned slightly as he looked to Adam. “Um, hold on, babe. I’ll be right back.”

Audra lifted her head from the A-listers and watched Kurt crossing the room. “Who is that?”

“That’s Kurt Hummel,” Adam said proudly. “He’s the lead of Samael.”
"Oh." She nodded in recognition.

“I’ve been meaning to see that,” said a man Adam didn’t recognize.

“What are they doing over there?” a woman said.

Adam turned to see Clover in her sailor outfit with her fists up at Kurt. Someone had grabbed a prop sword for him, and apparently Fanny Brice was battling the faerie assassin to the death. Then, laughing, they pulled back, and Clover grabbed Santana, lifting her up as Kurt lunged forward in a mock attack.

There was laughter around the room.

Adam could practically see Kurt’s eyes sparkling from here. Clover let Santana go, and then Kurt smirked mischievously.

He dropped the sword, took Clover’s hand, and kissed her cheek. Not dropping character, Clover looked right at the cameras and formed an exaggerated “O” with her bright red lips.

There was a flurry of clicking from the press, as well as several attendees with their phones.

“I’m gonna kill him if there’s a story tomorrow about Fanny and Samael dating,” Santana said grumpily.

Adam turned and blinked. “Where did you come from?”

She pushed a full glass of champagne into his hand and downed her own. “Over there. Clover got me in one of the pictures.”

“Not having fun as the plus one?”

“I’ll have more when we’re home.” Santana shrugged. “I’d rather head out to a club, but this is like a PR requirement for them, right? They have to go to these things.”

“True. And networking. Kurt’s a lot better at that than I’d thought he’d be. He tends to stand and stammer when he’s met someone he idolizes, but I imagine being on a mission to get connections for me has made him less shy.”

“Aww.” Santana twiddled her glass in her fingers. “Yeah, I can see him doing that. I’m not as into the whole Broadway world, but I know a couple of the performers over there. C’mon. I’m gonna go tell them how amazing my gal pal is. You can impress them with your incredible Britishness.”

The next part of the evening by Santana’s side was filled with stories from musicians and comedians. When Adam spotted Elliott, he waved him over, since these were people Elliott ought to meet as well. And when the group got too tangled up in their industry talk, Adam and Elliott talked about their impressions of *Funny Girl*, and the Broadway crossover photoshoot that Clover had arranged.

Adam was just thinking about going to find Kurt again when two strong arms hugged him from behind, and Kurt rested his chin on Adam’s shoulder.

“Hullo, there,” Adam said.

Clover followed behind, and behind her was a waiter with a tray of champagne glasses. “Sorry, ‘Tana. The press was endless.”

“I know.” Santana cuddled up next to her and made sure to leave a big red kiss mark on her cheek.
“There, they can take a picture of that.”

“Or you could piss on my leg,” Clover teased. “Samael’s bi. He’d so try to mack on some Fanny.”

Adam started chuckling and found he couldn’t stop. He probably found that joke a bit more filthy than was intended.

Clover motioned to the waiter, and he held the tray out for everyone to take a glass. “Thank you guys for coming. I just… This has been a dream come true. I never thought I’d be the one up there on opening night. I never thought anyone would take a chance on me like this, or choose me when they had the option of someone else—”

“But they did,” Santana said firmly. “Because you’re freaking amazing. Everyone loved you, because you’re just that good.”

“I… well…” Clover dipped her head.

“To life-changing roles,” Kurt said, raising his glass, “Fabulous opening nights, inspiration, innovation, connections, friends, and… Santana’s spectacularly hot dress.”

Santana shook her shoulders and waggled her brows, then lifted her own glass. They all clinked glasses.

*  

KURT

By the time they stumbled back into the loft, arm in arm, looking a little worse for wear, it was past midnight. Though they had both politely declined to drink anything more than a celebratory toast at the after party, the excitement and the happiness of the evening had made them more than a little giddy. There apparently really was such a thing as being ‘drunk on life’, Adam had mused on their way home as he watched Kurt animatedly reenact the best parts of Clover’s *Funny Girl*.

They stepped inside. Kurt looked at the clock on the wall and groaned. “I have to prep a meeting with Isabelle and some of the advertisers in a few hours,” he mumbled.

“Ugh, don’t remind me, we have a dress rehearsal at the theatre,” Adam replied. “I’ll probably be there all day administering Xanax to my boss.”

Kurt winced in sympathy. He had actually met Adam’s boss, Scott Leitner; a nice guy in social situations, but according to Adam, extremely prone to hysteric when it came to the productions in his theatre. It seemed like producers and directors dealt with stress in a variety of productive and unproductive ways: Campion avoided problems, Alison freaked out until there was something to micromanage, and apparently, Scott drove everyone in his employ to distraction. Kurt took off his hat and formal jacket. As he put his hat on the kitchen table and draped his jacket over a chair, he noticed Adam’s overnight bag by the couch. He smiled.

“That was smart, bringing your stuff. I know the loft isn’t exactly next door to Broadway, but your place would have been even further and you’d have to travel all the way back through morning traffic tomorrow.”

“Mmm. It’s also a perfect excuse to spend more time with Julie Andrews,” Adam said cheekily, picking up the small cat who was winding herself around his ankles, and made kissy noises at her.
“Oh, so you’re not here for *my* company then?” Kurt asked, an expression of mock-outrage on his face, complete with a pout.

Adam winked at him. “But now that you mention my bag, that reminds me of something,” he said, and walked over to the couch. He pulled out a medium-sized cardboard box covered in stickers and labels. Julie sniffed it curiously. “This came for you today.” He held the package out to Kurt.

“For me?” Kurt went over and took it, turning it around in his hands. “It’s from England.”

Adam nodded. “I had it sent to me so I could be there when you opened it,” he explained. “It was going to be an opening night care package for Samael, but my sisters kept adding stuff and the royal mail takes *forever* so—”

“Your sisters?” Kurt repeated, staring down at the package in amazement.

“My mum put in a few things too. But the main part is from me. I just asked them to buy it for me as I couldn’t get it online.” He was blushing now. “Just open it already, yeah?”

Kurt was beaming by now. A gift from abroad— and from Adam’s *family*. No matter what was in it, it was already special in so many ways he could hardly contain himself. He sat down on the couch, hopping up and down a few times as he waited for Adam to join him. Julie immediately jumped onto his lap to further investigate the package, but Kurt put her down.

“Not for *you*,” he said sternly. “Go and eat something. Shoo.”

He started to peel at the cellotape but then got impatient and ripped the side. Adam didn’t seem to mind; he was also looking quite excited. Kurt pulled out a bundle wrapped in lime green tissue paper. He folded it open and squealed. Inside were several packets of tea (“My mum’s favorite,” Adam said), English cookies and sweets, a Union Jack suitcase label, a t-shirt that read “English at <3” (“That’s from Irene,” Adam said, “I tried to dissuade her but she insisted.”), several postcards with scenic views from Essex and the English countryside, a very stylish monogrammed leather booklet which turned out to be a passport cover, and finally, a tourist guide book for London ("*Brass Buttons & Burberry; Vintage Vendors of Notting Hill*"). The last two were from Adam.

“I figured that could come in handy when we stop over in London on our way to Essex,” Adam elaborated.

“That would be *amaaaazing*.” Kurt lowered the book, his hand still petting it as he looked at Adam. "Thank you, it's perfect. I can't wait to read it and, you know, make imaginary plans on where I would go…” He sighed. “Oh well, a guy can dream…”

Adam looked at him quizzically for a moment. “I’m quite serious. You. Me. London? Now that I’ve met your family, it’s only fair that you’d meet mine…”

Kurt rolled his eyes a little and nudged Adam’s arm. “Don’t tease me like that. You know I’ve got Samael, and NYADA and Vogue.com, and you’ve got your job at the theatre…”

Adam shrugged. “Screw my job. I can mop up other people’s sweat anywhere. And I’m sure Isabelle will give you some time off during NYADA’s summer break. By that time, Samael will be over, and you will definitely be in need of a relaxing holiday.”

“Unless we get picked up,” Kurt countered, hesitating. “Are you really serious?”

Adam beamed. “I am. And so is my family.” He nodded at the package. “Irene can’t wait to introduce you to all of her friends and Karen said she needs you to give her a make-over. My mum is
probably already sorting her photo albums to find my most embarrassing childhood moments.” He winked at Kurt. Then his face grew serious. “I’m willing to put my foot down for this, you know. No more wishy-washy promises or putting things off. We still have a few months, plenty of time to save up and get an affordable flight…” He took Kurt’s hand. “I really want you to see my home.”

“You don’t have to go for the hard sell, darling,” Kurt said, echoing Adam’s words from earlier that evening. “You had me at make-over.” He winked and leaned forward for a kiss.

Adam did not hesitate, and the urgency of his kiss confirmed his words. This was important to him, taking their relationship to the next level. Kurt couldn’t imagine Adam had taken many New York boyfriends overseas, if at all. He was definitely serious about this.

Kurt pressed his forehead to Adam’s for a moment, staring into Adam’s eyes and thinking about the past year, all the starts and stops and pauses and hurts. The moment when Adam had seen him and not said anything, when they’d met and Kurt had hesitated, when Adam had reached forward for a real relationship and Kurt had pulled away out of fear.

Watching Adam’s creased, vulnerable eyes, Kurt curled his fingers into Adam’s collar and caressed the back of his head. He deepened their kisses, hearing passionate noises every time they came together, and then felt for the knot of Adam’s tie.

Adam’s eyes softened with surprise, and he smiled as Kurt jerked his tie and then whipped it off and threw him back against the bed. He appreciated that Adam had dressed up for their first real date, but right now, he needed to be wearing less.

Kurt slowed his kisses, letting each linger as he slowly removed Adam’s tie, and then found the row of buttons and started opening them.

Adam broke their kiss and looked down at Kurt’s nimble fingers for a moment. His hair, well coiffed for their evening out, was now falling loose into his eyes, which were wide and a little overwhelmed.

“Just breathe,” Kurt whispered, his earlier giddiness now replaced with determination. His fingers ghosted over Adam’s cheekbone, and he smiled to himself when Adam’s lips circled, and he let go of the breath he’d been holding.

He finished the last button and pushed Adam’s shirt back, exposing his chest.

Kurt pinned Adam down between his powerful thighs; Adam’s clear blue eyes looked up, vulnerable but receptive. Kurt looked down and focused on his strong, well-cut pecs instead.

Cupping Adam’s face in his hands, Kurt kissed him tenderly and looked into his eyes again.

“Bedroom?” Adam murmured. Kurt knew Adam would go along with any answer Kurt gave, but there was really only one on his lips.

“Yes.”

Kurt took his hand and led him, kissing gently along his jawline as they went. Adam pushed the partition back so that Kurt didn’t trip as he moved back into the bedroom area. By the time they were beside the bed, Adam’s shirt was gone, and his pants unbuttoned. He looked absolutely delicious, and Kurt could see Adam waiting for Kurt to make the next move. So he did, starting with kissing him again, and letting his hands glide over Adam’s taut flesh.

Adam shivered. His hands explored in turn tentatively, waiting for Kurt to pull away… instead Kurt
moved into Adam’s touch, and spared a hand to begin unbuttoning his own shirt. Then he let Adam take over. It was a slow striptease, very unlike the hurried pulling and tearing from their first dates. After a while, they were both naked from the waist up, and devoted their hands, and mouths, to exploring and rediscovering every inch of skin on their chests and necks.

“Y-you’re…” Adam murmured. He smiled, almost laughed, then dipped his head forward.

“What?” Kurt rested his hand on the small of Adam’s back.

“I don’t know. Different?”

Kurt pressed his lips together and hugged Adam’s waist to him, letting their naked chests press flush against one another. “I am.”

“Not that I minded, before I mean, it was always good-”

“It was.” Kurt gave Adam another kiss before pushing his boyfriend pillow off the bed and climbing back. He bit his lower lip and beckoned coyly. Adam’s eyes danced in excitement as he crawled forward in only his boxer briefs. Kurt reached for his belt, but Adam brushed away his hands—meeting Kurt’s eyes as though for approval—and took over, gently undressing him and kissing the skin he uncovered. With a sigh, Kurt lay back and let Adam take care of him.

As he reached Kurt’s briefs, Adam hesitated again momentarily, but Kurt caressed his jaw, looking up at him with half-lidded eyes, and nodded. Adam’s strong, broad hand cupped the bulge in the front of Kurt’s briefs as Adam kissed him again, causing Kurt to groan deep in his throat. He wasn’t used to waiting for what Adam would do; he’d always just taken charge, gotten them both off efficiently.

Now, Kurt found himself letting go. Adam met his eye knowingly as his fingers slipped under Kurt’s waistband and he pushed the briefs down. Then, he hesitated, his eyes taking in the image tattooed over Kurt’s hip: A little silver wire ball with a deluge of birds escaping through the door, which had been wrenched open, allowing the birds to burst out, flying upward and around his hip to the very edge of his torso. Adam moved his thumb over the birds, as though feeling their feathers.

“Did it hurt?” he asked quietly.

“Yes. But I survived, and then I got this tattoo.”

Adam’s seriousness dispelled, and his large hands gave Kurt’s ass a good squeeze, causing Kurt to laugh as Adam freed Kurt of his briefs completely and, then, went to work. His fingers stroked, gently at first. Little ghost touches along his shaft, but soon enough they became firm and confident, and Adam bowed before Kurt, kissing the head of his cock before opening wide and ministering to it in earnest.

Kurt felt himself floating, Adam’s mouth and hands the only thing keeping him tethered. His fingers gripped the top of the duvet, and from his mouth came a long, ragged moan. In his effort to keep control of their previous sexual encounters, he’d apparently been denying himself a spontaneous, playful lover with fantastic breath control and the ability to drag the edge of his teeth just… hard… enough… to....

“Oh, oh, God,” Kurt gasped. When Adam relented, Kurt huffed a little, catching his breath, then looked up. Adam met his eye just for a moment, and Kurt felt… first something warm in his stomach, and something clenching in his chest.

Adam bowed down again and devoured Kurt until he sang out loud enough to fill an entire
auditorium.

Kurt’s arms sprawled over his head. Adam came up beside him, smiling in a way that was almost  

smug. Kurt wrapped his arms around Adam and pressed grateful kisses along his chest and collarbone.

“Liked that, did you?” Adam continued to grin.

“Mm.”

“I wondered if you might not want to do something else.” Adam reached over and scratched Kurt’s  
back lightly in broad circles.

“I might yet.”

Kurt’s eyes drifted downward. Adam’s boxers had disappeared during his ministrations, and his  
errection bobbed suggestively as Adam shifted closer. Kurt rested his head on Adam’s shoulder and  
reached over to stroke him up and down. He wasn’t going to just return the favor, though.

New directions.

Kurt breathed in deep and, after giving Adam a kiss on the corner of his jaw, rose up and straddled  
Adam’s legs.

“Oh,” Adam whispered. “Can you…? So soon?”

Kurt waggled his brows and reached for the nightstand, fetching the lube and condoms. He looked to  
Adam with a smirk, causing Adam to smile in turn and squeeze his hand over Kurt’s thigh. Kurt bit  
his tongue as he ripped the condom open and rolled it slowly over his boyfriend’s waiting erection.  
Then, he squeezed Adam’s hand over his thigh, spread his thighs further, and reached between his  
legs.

With a healthy dollop of lube on his fingers, Kurt kept his gaze locked on Adam’s stunned— and  
excited— face. Kurt’s lips twisted to the side and he grunted softly as he pushed deeper and began to  
rock his hips slightly.

“Oh…” Adam said again, eyes locked on the sight of his boyfriend fucking himself on his fingers.

His grip on Kurt’s thigh was almost too tight now, but Kurt just laughed. “Liking the after show?” he  
tezed.

“Uhhh…”

Kurt pushed another finger inside and scrunched his nose up.

“Gentle…” Adam breathed.

“Mmm… Yeah… You tell me… when I should speed up. When to go harder, faster… scissor,” Kurt  
instructed.

Adam’s eyes were reaching saucer territory, but he nodded, panting softly and leaning in with every  
suggestion he made. Soon he began to squirm and just sat up and grabbed Kurt’s ass, pulling him  
forward.

Kurt laughed and leaned over to brush his nose against Adam’s.
“Get on me,” Adam said, his voice thick and unsteady with desire.

“Yes, sir,” Kurt teased.

He hung his arms over Adam’s shoulders and pushed himself up. He took a deep breath, and then began to lower himself, slowly, stopping every few seconds to get used to the feeling of Adam’s rock hard erection stretching and filling him up. He closed his eyes and breathed out slowly, and he felt Adam’s strong hands under his thigh and against his back, holding him securely.

“Is it okay…?”

“Yeah, just give me…. a-a minute…”

Kurt pressed his cheek against Adam’s, feeling so grateful for Adam’s hands, and eased himself the rest of the way down, at which point, Adam clutched the small of his back. Kurt clasped Adam’s face between his palms, and then he began to ride. Slowly at first, but then harder and faster when he’d gotten his knees in position. The two of them began making alternating grunts and gasps, their bodies growing slick with sweat, and beginning to shake with pleasure.

When Adam came, his head falling back with a staccato cry, Kurt tightened from his abdomen down and held tight, among other things, filling with a sense of satisfaction.

“Good?” he whispered.

“G-guh...uh....” Adam mumbled. He caught his breath and shook his head, moving his hands up and down Kurt’s back. “Good. Very good.”

They needed to clean up, but instead they lay together, legs intertwined and bodies lax and spent. Except for their hands, which continued to gently caress one another.

“At the risk of sounding extremely corny,” Adam said, his voice still a little hoarse, “I am very much in love with you.”

Kurt smiled lazily. “Good,” he whispered. “Me too.”
Epilogue

The last encore. The last flash of his sais. The last spotlight. The last crowd around the stage entrance. Kurt seemed to absorb every sight and sensation, like his mind was taking a picture. Luckily, he didn’t really need to. His fans (FANS!) would do so on their own and have their goodies on the internet in a few hours time.

Unlike his first night at the stage door, Kurt no longer had the sense that all of this would slip away the moment he turned his focus to something else. That confidence might have something to do with the ongoing critical appreciation and media coverage of their show, or the fact that as soon as Kurt came back from England, he had to start preparing for his next role. After the fact, Kurt was very glad that Adam had talked him into going on vacation. Roughly eight months of performances, with only a few very short breaks, and Kurt had learned for a fact that time off would be just as critical to his career as working.

Santana and Mercedes weren’t able to make it for the wrap party, since their summer tour had already begun, but they had made sure to have a gift and a note delivered, for Kurt and Adam to open before they left for the airport. Kurt was swamped with things to do before getting on the plane, but he looked forward to meeting Adam when he got off work and relaxing for a few minutes. Then, they would be off to JFK.

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Kurt barely had a pinky free when he’d arrived back at his apartment. He could hear the television through the door, so he sang a high note and nudged the door with his elbow. A moment later, Elliott appeared with a big grin.

“Hey, superstar,” Elliott said.

“Lemme in. I got you both some goodies for while you’re over here… Well, for the first few days.” Kurt edged past him and carried his haul over to the table.

“Meeeee!” Julia Andrews whined.

“Yes, baby! I got goodies for you!” Kurt told her in a high voice. She squeaked back in return.
“I am so glad Dani decided you needed a pet. I don’t know if I could’ve lived the rest of my life without seeing how cute you are with animals.”

“You should see me around old people and babies,” Kurt joked as he pawed through the paper bags. “Okay, here we go.”

He pulled out a furry stuffed rat and danced it in front of Julie Andrews. Her eyes widened, and grew blacker, and her butt wiggled in the air.

“Eee!” Kurt jumped back she pounced. Then the force of her pounce caused her to slide across the kitchen floor.

“Aww.” Elliott peeked into the bag. “Don’t get too wrapped up in kitty play. You’re on next.”

“I’m... what?” Kurt looked up from where he’d fallen and just sprawled out to tease Julie with the ratty.

“Your interview is about to air on Late Night with Agador. You’re up after the guy from that space movie coming out.”

“Oh. I forgot about that. Weird.” Kurt laughed, caught Julie as she jumped at him, and scratched her back. “Were you gonna watch?”

“Well not?”

Kurt shrugged.

“C’mon. Slow down a little, and let’s see you with the press.”

“Okay, okay. Just give me a minute.” Kurt pushed himself up and started to sort his purchases. “And then we’ll go over the instructions for Julie again?”

“Yes, I’ll take very good of your precious baby.”
“You’d better!”

*

Elliott

Elliott pulled Kurt close to him as the camera panned back into the night show set.

“Oh, gosh,” Kurt muttered. His hand rose as if to cover his eyes, but he put it down and twined his fingers together.

“Today we have the pleasure of talking to Samael star Kurt Hummel,” Agador announced, “Kurt, you’ve had an amazing run, fantastic reviews, the blogs are going crazy—”

Kurt nodded and smiled, rolling his eyes fondly at the last remark. Elliott smirked back at the screen, remembering some of the comments Santana enjoyed forwarding their group.

“Folks, this, uh, this show is something truly spectacular, it’s about, could you explain it for us?”

“Oh. Well, um. No spoilers, it’s a pretty standard coming of age story.”

“Right,” Agador said with a tinge of irony.

“From a, you know… a fairy,” Kurt added.

The audience laughed.

“Who happens to be a bisexual assassin,” Kurt added.
“-and this is your last week, isn’t it?” Agador continued after waiting for the laughter to die again.

“It is. Yes. Five more days,” Kurt confirmed.

“What’s that like? I heard the role was basically created for you, and now you’re getting a replacement?”

“It was… Not exactly created for me. I stepped into the role, and as Jasper-- the writer, not my on-stage boyfriend--” Kurt looked to the audience with a smile. “As Jasper would say, I informed the role. They had their story, and their character, but once they found me, they started doing all these quick, amazing edits, and Jasper rewrote the whole score.”

“That’s got to be so flattering, though, right? They changed their whole thing to have you in the role.”

“I know! It’s weird. It’s definitely weird. But I’ve loved working with everyone, and I’m glad it’s been picked up. We have such a wonderful cast and it’s good to know there’s enough interest in Samael for it to go into a renewal, you know? But it’s definitely going to be emotional when I, eh, lay down my swords, so to say.”

“I bet. Are you close with your co-workers?”

“Oh, yes. It’s been such an adventure, and we’ve spent so much time together; they are my theatre family. And not just the cast, everyone involved.”

“So what’s coming up next for you?”

“Sleep,” Kurt replied solemnly, and the audience laughed.

“And after that?”

“Travel,” Kurt said, sitting up a little in his seat with a bright smile. “I will be making my very first visit to England.”
“With your significant other?” the interviewer prompted.

“With my *real-life* boyfriend, yes,” Kurt confirmed.

Elliott smiled softly, checking himself for resentment but finding none-- not with how happy Kurt had been since he had gotten back together with Adam.

“You were in *Vogue* magazine together recently, right? I think we have a picture of that.” A screen behind them showed one of the main images of the Lagerfeld Men editorial, a black and white shot of Kurt in a dark suit with silver studs that were reminiscent of his *Samael* costumes, coming down a staircase towards Adam, who was dressed in white dress pants and an open shirt. The audience made quite some noise at that, applauding and whistling.

“Wow. You looked amazing. Both of you.”

“Thank you.”

The interviewer prodded a bit more about Adam, but Kurt shut him down with concise answers, making clear that his personal life was not the topic of this interview. He gracefully led the conversation back to *Vogue* and working with Isabelle.

“Is this the start of your modeling career?”

A stray audience member whooped.

Kurt grinned and shook his head. “I don’t think so. I mean, I love fashion and doing the shoot was great, but I am already juggling one job and an education-”

“One job? I heard you even had *three* at some point last year.”

Kurt dropped his head and shook it a little before looking up again. “Yeah, I am a bit of an overachiever. But it was getting a bit much, so I had to make some concessions.”
“I think we’re all happy that you’re an overachiever!” Agador said. He held out a hand. “So you’ve got the most popular off-Broadway play in town.”

Kurt blushed a little and nodded.

“And you’re going to school at the prestigious theatre school, The New York Academy of the Dramatic Arts—”

“And on the Dean’s list this semester,” Kurt added, bouncing in his seat smugly.

“Oh! Are you… scholarly?”

“Oh, oh yeah. I’m just a… huge closet nerd. Huge.”

“No way. But—” Agador lifted his hand again so that the tech crew brought up one of the more saucy posters from Samael’s run.

“Um…” Kurt dipped his head slightly. “Marco’s a really well put together young man, isn’t he?” The audience started to cheer. Then he drawled, “I can’t even really talk about where those pearls ended up by the end of the shoot.”

The audience howled, then:

“WE LOVE YOU KURT!!”

“I love you, too!” Kurt called into the audience, with his brows tented together. “Be proud to be you!”

Agador tried a few times to ask his next question, while the audience refused to quiet down, until he turned to them and stared hard in mock aggravation. Kurt spread his hands.

With a heavy sigh, Agador dramatically checked his cards. “So, yet another thing you’ve been up to: You’re in a band!”
“I am! I started the band.”

“Pamela Lansbury, right?”

“Yes. Formerly One Three Hill, formerly Pamela Lansbury. We changed back to our original name because there was some confusion with the tv show.”

“Right.” A screen behind them showed a video of their band at one of their gigs, and the audience applauded. The camera panned to the seats, where a few young audience members were wearing shirts that read “OTH” and “My Beautiful Hero.” Elliott smiled. That was his applause, too.

“We’ve talked about recording a few songs, maybe an album,” Kurt explained, “but we want to write our own material, and we need our schedules to line up, so that might not happen until next year. Until then, I have another project lined up that I unfortunately can’t really talk about yet.”

“That sounds big.”

Kurt pressed his lips together coyly. “I’m not at liberty to say. I need to wait until my team clears it. I hope I’ll be able to tell you more after summer.”

“Well, you’ll have to come back and tell us all about it then.”

“I’d love to.”

When the show came back from commercial, Agador was already in conversation with Kurt, who leaned on his hand, holding his mug in the other hand.

“Welcome back, folks. We’re here with the amazing breakout star, Kurt Hummel.”

Kurt took a sip of his mug and waved before putting it down.
When the audience quieted again, Agrador grew serious. “So, we’ve waited until the end of the interview at your request to address the recent events that have been in the news alongside your rise to success.”

“Yes, um… the trial.”

On the couch, Elliott squeezed Kurt’s shoulder softly.

“You recently testified against the trio of murderers who killed Kitt Allan.”

“I did.” Kurt looked down. “It took a long time to get the case together.”

“But things finally came together around the opening of your show.”

“Yes.” Kurt swallowed and looked up.

Agador looked a little off his game as Kurt grew quiet.

“One of his attackers decided to target me,” Kurt said finally. He paused again, then let out a breath. “Because I was the only witness to what had happened. And that was the nail in their coffin. They were leaving evidence all over the place, comments online for my band, coming to the theatre, calling my phone and leaving voicemails. It was messy. And when the police took him in, he rolled very quickly on his two ‘friends’.”

“That must’ve been an incredibly tense time for you.”

“It all was. I was injured trying to save Kitt, and I’ve never felt like…” Kurt shook his head. “I’m just lucky that I have some very good friends to help me through it. And it takes a lot longer than you’d think. Or longer than I thought before it happened, and I was no stranger to homophobic violence before coming to New York, but…”

Kurt twisted his fingers. “Kitt Allan was a truly amazing person, who I regret not having met before he was dying. Still, what happened to him was not the exception. There are so many violent acts, motivated by backward ignorance and insecurity. Motivated by stupidity and hatred. They’ve robbed
our world of some of the best of us, and too often, they target people like Kitt. They target gay men of color, and trans women, too, and those crimes, they go unsolved a lot of the time. I honestly think that if I weren’t, y’know, a white guy in a fairly popular show, the media might not have ever really picked the story up. When it happened, I was just a student slash part-time singing waiter, and it was like the whole thing existed in a vacuum. It was so disorienting, for me and I’m sure for Kitt’s family, to have all of this going on, and nothing was being said for so long. Not on the mainstream news shows, not on any of the social media sites, nothing! Kitt’s family was mourning, and I was healing a broken head, and no one seemed to care outside of our two little communities.”

He took a breath. “But it’s happening, and not always to people who are in the spotlight. And it matters. Kitt matters. He still matters. As much, or maybe even more than I do.”

“And the men who killed him?”

“Well, as anyone following the story knows, they’ve all been convicted. They’re gonna be confined in iron and concrete for a long time.”

“And did you ever consider letting it slide? Not testifying? Considering all the threats you received?”

Kurt’s gaze fixed angrily on Agador. “Not for a second. I don’t care if they all escape from prison and come after me with nailbats. There is nothing on this Earth that would’ve stopped me from giving Kitt, at the very least, a modicum of justice, and something for people to remember him by.”

“Weren’t you scared?”

“On the stand or when they came after me?” Kurt shook his head. “Both, either. I was terrified. But that doesn’t matter. I can’t hear someone crying for help and not try to do something. And when that jackass jumped me a second time, I wasn’t about to back down. Nor would I have at the stand. The defense tried to rip me apart, but unfortunately for him, the kids at my high school were much more vicious.”

A light roll of laughter came from the audience.

“I’m sorry, it’s just…” Kurt touched the side of his head. “Of course, you’re going to be scared, but someone has to stand up. If we’d had more back-up, I think Kitt might have made it. People must have heard what was going on in that alley. No one came. No one tried. And… I can’t ask people to run blindly into dead end alleyways like they’re Batman or something.”” His eyes widened and held
out a hand. “Kids, don’t go running out and getting hurt, please-- but I wish people could... If you see a moment when you can effect change, and you can do it with less risk than the person next to you, if everyone did that, we’d just be so much stronger. We might stand a chance to make this world a kinder, more human place.”

Agador nodded and waited to see if Kurt would speak again, then said, “You’re an inspiration to the LGBT community.”

Kurt shrugged. “I don’t feel that way. But if you insist on being inspired, I hope you can spread information to everyone you know on cases like Kitt’s that get lost, and… stand up, when you can.”

"Or call 911," Agador suggested.

"Yes! Exactly!" Kurt agreed. "The sounds of oncoming sirens was, I think, what eventually made our attackers back down. I might not have survived otherwise."

"Well, we're certainly glad that you were able to be here today, in one piece, so I can say 'break a leg' for your final run as Samael--"

"Thank you!"

"And enjoy your holiday, it's well-earned! Kurt Hummel, ladies and gentlemen!"

Elliott waited for the applause to die down and then muted the show, which went into commercials.

"Break-out star and overachiever extraordinaire," he said fondly. "Are you happy?"

Kurt looked back at him. His cheeks were a little pink. "I am," he said, sounding genuine. "Exhausted... but happy." He paused. "You?"

Elliott smiled. "Yeah, I'm okay. The past months have given me a few things to write about. My head's brimming with songs that want to come out."
"I can't wait to hear them," Kurt replied. "You could play them when we Skype from England."

"Skype? You'll be on vacation!"

"But I'll miss you! And Julie needs to hear my voice every now and then or she might pee in my sheets."

Elliott chuckled. "We'll see. Once you get there, you might be too busy." He waggled his eyebrows suggestively.

Kurt paused for a moment, then caught on and blushed a little. "Maybe," he admitted.

"I knew it!" Elliott let out, chuckling. "So, eh- everything okay, there?"

Kurt grinned. "We each get our cookies."


“Now, about Julie...?”

Elliott rolled his eyes and prepared himself to go through his cat-sitting instructions once more.

*

ADAM

Adam had been studying Kurt for a while now. It was taking a very long time for their flight to board, and they had been at the airport even longer. They had shared a lunch and then settled down in the designated waiting area with some magazines, but Adam kept getting distracted by the little noises Kurt was making while browsing his phone. He occasionally sighed, or frowned and tapped the screen, but most of the time Kurt had this dreamy smile on his face, and it made Adam really
curious what he was doing.

"Has Sam's new photoshoot come out already?" he teased gently as Kurt let out another sigh. Their friend has been very enthusiastic about their pictures for *Vogue* and had swung by a few weeks ago to tell them all about how he was the new face (or, better said, the new abs) for some big label's underwear range, and how "his junk would be on huge billboards across the US."

Kurt blinked and shook his head a little, as if waking from some dream. "Sam? Oh! No, I was just… It's nothing. It's stupid." He put his phone down and flipped the cover over it.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to pry," Adam offered. "You don't have to stop."

Kurt seemed to be hesitating. His long fingers were tracing the raised pattern on his phone case. "Promise you won't laugh," he said finally.

"I promise to try," Adam replied, which was good enough, because Kurt was opening his phone again.

"I was updating my bucket list."

Adam cocked his head. “Aren’t you a little young for that?”

“Are you kidding?” Kurt laughed. “I’ve been making lists of things to do when I got out of Lima, Ohio since I was eleven!”

“Well, when put that way, it sounds very sensible.”

"It is. I lost track of what I wanted for a bit after graduation, but this-" Kurt held up his phone for emphasis, "will help me stay focused." He then smiled and kissed Adam's cheek. "As will you, of course," he added.

Adam smiled. "So what's on the bucket list of a triple threat like you? A Tony? An audience with Madonna?" He was joking, though after meeting John Barrowman, Adam wasn't even so sure these suggestions were too farfetched.
Kurt chuckled. “Most of them are more modest than that.” He opened up his file. “Here’s one we can do when we get to London: number 63. *Lay a rose at the birthplace of Noel Coward.*”

“Aww.”

Adam glanced at the other numbers. “You can cross that one off already. Fifty: *Getting recognised in public.*” Kurt had signed a few napkins for the girl at the subway stand where they’d had lunch. She had turned out to be a musical fan and was quite upset she didn’t have her picture of Fanny and Samael with her.

Kurt grinned and tapped the screen to delete it. As he did, the list sprang up a page. “Ugh. I’m crossing that one off too,” he mumbled. Just before it vanished, Adam read: “*Hit up guy from FreeCreditRatingToday.com.*”

“You actually-” Adam started, but Kurt shook his head forbiddingly.

“I’m not hitting up any more Andersons, ever,” he said grimly. “Not even one as good-looking as Cooper.”

That actually raised more questions with Adam than it answered, but it was quite clear Kurt wasn’t going to answer any right now.

“Becoming CEO of LOGO?” he asked to distract Kurt instead.

“Obviously,” Kurt said. “I’m expecting a call any day now.”

Adam snorted. “Remember you promised to take it slower. No third or fourth jobs this year.”

“Right.”

They scrolled through a few others. Kurt was right. Some were quite doable— as a working adult with a budget to spend, anyway. Adam could just imagine how traveling to London would have
seemed just as much out of reach for an eleven year old boy in a small town than meeting Madonna was. He put an arm around Kurt and squeezed him tightly. He knew he couldn’t undo the things Kurt had gone through before they met, but that didn’t stop him from wanting to try.

“Wait, go back.”

“What?”

“There. What’s that about a dewy meadow of lilacs...?”

Kurt groaned. “I thought I had taken that out years ago!”

Adam couldn’t help himself, and laughed.

“Hey. You promised!” Kurt objected, swatting his arm. People were beginning to look their way.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Adam said, still chuckling. “It’s just so sweet how you went from ‘have relations’ to ‘hit up’ in one list. I’m guessing puberty happened in between?

“Very funny.”

“So the werewolf guy, the commercial guy… do I want to know who else is on that list? Was I ever on it?”

Kurt rolled his eyes. “I can add a new item for ‘Kill boyfriend on International Flight.’”

“I can think of something better,” Adam replied, and snatched Kurt’s phone from his hand. He quickly typed something into it and then gave it back. “If I had a bucket list, that would be on it.”

Kurt looked down on his phone. Join Mile High Club.
Adam watched as red splotches appeared on the side of Kurt’s neck, and he secretly prayed he hadn’t pushed his luck. Then Kurt looked into his eyes and slowly nodded, pocketing his phone.

*Take that, Max,* Adam thought vindictively, and a giddy feeling started bubbling in his stomach.

Both of them sat up immediately as their flight number was called, only to slump when it was just a repeat announcement again. At least another half hour.

Kurt reached down into his hand luggage and pulled out a paper box. He held it out to Adam, showing him the contents. Four black-and-white cookies. “Hungry?” he asked.

“Starving.”

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