Metamorphosis

by gleefulmusings

Summary

A Second Season AU in which a very different Kurt Hummel returns to McKinley after spending the summer abroad with his grandmother. New Directions is thrown by this calm, confident, and happy Kurt, and his new attitude threatens his relationships with some of his closest friends.

Notes

This is an alternative universe based on the second season, with a Kurt-centric focus. Most of the events of that season will not occur in this story, but I reserve the right to include them if I see fit. It's important to know before beginning this story that it is extremely long, involved, and introspective; it's driven by character, not action. This story requires a lot of patience on the part of the reader. Kurt is purposefully out-of-character, and the story is thus about how
other people react to this very different Kurt. The entire premise is how a mature and confident Kurt would react to the people around him and how they would respond in kind. So, please, no comments about how this is not canon!Kurt. It was never meant to be. Fans of Mercedes and Finn will probably not enjoy this story - at least not for a very long time. Fair warning. Also, no Blaine, because he's gross, and no breast implants for Santana, because that's dumb.
Burt Hummel anxiously paced outside the airport terminal.

It figured the plane was late. He suppressed the urge to lament that it was a bad omen of things to come. His gut roiled with both fear and anticipation, and he wasn't sure which one he wanted to win.

Three months ago when he had watched his only child, his baby, walk away from him and step onto a plane which would carry him almost five thousand miles away, he had driven home sobbing and hadn't stopped for three days. He knew he was being ridiculous, knew that Kurt would be perfectly fine in his grandmother's care, but it hadn't stopped him from worrying. They had never been separated for more than four days, and that was earlier in the year, when Kurt had traveled to Los Angeles for that cheerleading thing.

When Suzanne's mother had originally approached the idea of Kurt spending the summer with her in Paris, Burt had refused. He had no good reason for doing so, other than that he didn't want to be without his son for so long. Unfortunately, the decision was taken out of his hands when Katrine had gone behind his back and asked Kurt directly.

Kurt had refused to accept his father's unilateral decision. He hadn't whined or begged or cajoled. He had said flat out that he didn't appreciate being kept from his remaining living relative and only connection to his mother's family. Burt hadn't known what to say to that, so he had come up with a whole other host of reasons why Kurt shouldn't go, each of which had been shot down in Kurt's infuriatingly cold and logical manner.

The language barrier. Kurt was fluent in French. Shit.

He might get airsick. He had traveled to Los Angeles with absolutely no problems. Fuck.

The prohibitive cost. Katrine was footing the entire bill. Bitch.

Summer homework. There was none. Damn.

Finn and Carole. Carole wanted him to have this opportunity and Finn didn't care. Hell.

Mercedes. She was spending her summer at a gospel camp. Oh, of course.

Tina. Asian camp. What?

Artie. Math camp, followed by band camp. That…was a lot of geek.

The ditzy blond girl. Cheerleading camp and something about sewers. Again, what?

The shop. Burt could hire and train a new employee for less than what he had to pay his fully-certified son. Grr.

Kurt would miss out on all of the summer shopping sales. Paris was the fashion capital of the world. Argh.

Once Burt realized that he had no leg to stand on, he had tried to bribe his son with any number of enticements, including a new car, a tour of New York and tickets to various Broadway shows, and even a new tiara. They were long shots and hadn't worked. Besides, Kurt had his own money, thanks to his mother's life insurance, the malpractice settlement, and his various trust funds. Burt had
felt like a complete asshole, trying to buy his son's affections, even though he knew Kurt loved him more than he did anyone else in the world.

So, in the end, he had relented.

Now it was ninety-two days later. Kurt had been to Europe. He had taken two short summer classes at the Sorbonne and a few weekend courses at Le Cordon Bleu during the first month. His grandmother had also managed to take him on several day trips to London.

He had then gone on to Iceland, Ireland, Spain, Portugal, Switzerland, Germany, Austria, Italy, and Greece. He had learned two new languages, which brought his cache up to six. Katrine had hired tutors to travel with them.

That was just obnoxious.

Kurt had attended operas in Vienna, ballets in Paris, fashion shows in Milan, dance classes in Dublin, voice lessons in Rome, and toured the cradle of Western civilization. He had emailed hundreds of pictures and sent dozens of postcards and shipped back crates of Lord only knew what, but had kept phone calls to a minimum. Not out of any malice, of course, but sheer business.

His son had begun pulling away from him.

Burt knew that Kurt was returning because he had to, not because he necessarily wanted to. Indeed, Kurt had put off his flight home until the last possible minute, as McKinley was scheduled to begin the fall semester in roughly six hours.

He had argued for an earlier flight, but Kurt had refused, not wanting his trip to end any sooner than absolutely necessary. He had assured his father that he would rest properly on the way home, and since he had snagged a direct flight into Dayton International via Air France rather than one which would require him to catch another connection in either New York or Washington, he would get a full night's sleep.

It was actually logical and healthy, which made Burt hate it all the more.

He knew he only had a certain amount of time left with his son. That was the primary reason he hadn't wanted to send Kurt to Katrine, though the woman had been begging him for years. She would be able to open doors for Kurt that would otherwise have been denied him. Last year, Glee and Cheerios had taken up so much of Kurt's time that Burt had barely seen him. Soon, college would call, and Kurt had been hinting that he had plans to study abroad.

He was going to lose Kurt to life.

Burt was startled out of his reverie by an insistent tapping on his shoulder. He whirled around in a huff and opened his mouth to deliver a shredding.

"Hi, Dad."

No.

No, this couldn't be his son. His son wasn't this tall. Since when could Kurt look him directly in the eye? His son was skinny, not leanly muscular. Kurt never strayed from his diet! His son didn't dress this way. Where were the crazy patterns? His son never allowed his hair to grow past his ears and religiously straightened it. Why had he kept it wavy? Why were there streaks of blond? His son didn't tan.
Burt burst into tears.

Kurt smiled and gently gathered his father in a loving embrace. "I missed you, Daddy."

Burt choked.

His boy had left and come back a man.

A lost Burt trailed helplessly after his son as Kurt navigated the airport with ease, despite the fact that he had never been there. When he had gone to Los Angeles, the squad had flown out of Columbus.

"How do you know where to go?"

Kurt smiled. "I've been in more airports than I can count in the past three months. Eventually you get a feel for them. The baggage claim should be just ahead."

Burt nodded, heartened when his son took his hand in his own and squeezed reassuringly. Just as quickly, Kurt released the hold and sauntered into the clamoring fray of people desperate to lay their hands on their belongings.

He even moved differently, Burt noted. Kurt used to strut and sashay around, his hips set at maximum sway, but now he moved with confidence and purpose, economically yet gracefully. There was almost a liquidity to his gait. His son prowled.

Kurt reappeared momentarily, triumphant in his endeavor.

Burt stared in bewilderment at the small valise. "Where's the rest?"

"Oh, this is it," Kurt grinned.

"What?"

Kurt chuckled.


"Most of the clothes I took with me no longer fit, Dad. I sold them to a few of the better consignment shops in Paris and London. I actually got back more than I spent on them, and that's not including the conversion factor."

Burt blinked. "What are you going to do for clothes, son? You don't have much time for shopping this week, what with school starting."

Kurt grinned again.

As far as Burt was concerned, there was far too much grinning going on. He wasn't used to such open, honest smiles from his son. He was more familiar with pouts, sneers, eye-rolling, and smirks. Though Kurt had always been careful to check his attitude around him, most of his teenage rebellion was predicated on making his father feel as foolish and unsophisticated as possible, whenever possible. He had no idea how to interact with the young man before him.
"Don't worry, Dad. I had a new wardrobe created and fitted before I left. It's already been shipped here, so I'll unpack it after school is over."

Burt cocked a brow. "Created?"

Kurt nodded. "Most of the clothes are of my own design." He shrugged. "I got bored with following the whims of others and desperately trying to stay on top of the latest fashion." He shook his head. "Who was I trying to impress? Most of the denizens of Lima don't know the difference between Marc Jacobs and Marc Anthony. Why settle for being trendy when I can create my own trends?"

Burt gaped.

"I'm rather excited about my choices. I actually think you'll like them. I decided to stick with simple designs, mostly solid colors, though with a variety of fabrics."

What! No paisley?

"Almost everything fashionable is out of style before the next season even rolls around. It was a waste of my time and money, so I decided on some well-made pieces which are considered classic and never fall out of vogue."

A dazed Burt shook his head to clear it. "Okay, then. Well. Did you want to stop at Starbucks before we leave?"

"No thank you," Kurt politely replied. "After drinking the coffee of some of the finest cafés in Europe, I've come to the conclusion that Starbucks offers swill. And, really, six dollars for a cup of coffee? That's just obscene."

Burt's mind was blown.

Kurt blushed and he smiled shyly at his father. "Besides, you make the best coffee. I've really missed it."

Burt blushed in tandem and allowed his son to lead him to the parking garage.

The two hour ride back to Lima was made mostly in silence. Burt found the quiet unnerving, while Kurt appeared perfectly at ease.

Burt stumbled over questions to ask his son, all of which were answered immediately and effusively, though Kurt offered no more commentary than what was necessary. He was as economical with his words as he was with his movements.

"Your hair," Burt said, unsure of how to continue.

Kurt laughed. "I know. I had no idea the Grecian sun would be so very bright. Thankfully it only streaked the brown, rather than washing it out completely." He patted his head nervously. "Does it look bad?"

"No," Burt said honestly. "It looks terrific. It really suits you."

Kurt smiled, pleased.
Burt sighed. "You were so blond as a kid. Your mom and I were sure your hair would stay that way, like hers. It didn't change until you were six, but every time summer would roll around, you'd still get highlights."

"Well, I haven't been out in the sun for a number of years," Kurt replied.

Burt nodded. "I'm surprised you tolerated it."

"I didn't have much of a choice. When you're exploring the Acropolis, you don't let a little sun damage get in the way."

"You're very tan."

Kurt nodded. "I spent a lot time outdoors. I actually enjoyed it, surprisingly. Still, I was careful and quite liberal with my sunscreen." He frowned. "I'm not sure how much I like the tan, though. It's rather odd, trying to get used to my new reflection."

"It makes your eyes stand out more," Burt said quietly. "You've always had beautiful eyes."

Kurt laid a hand on his father's arm and smiled. "I have your eyes, and they are beautiful. I've always loved them."

A sudden warmth infused Burt and he gently patted his son's hand. "I really missed you," he choked out.

"I missed you, too. I'm glad to be home."

Burt snorted. "You're glad to be back in Lima?"

"Home is wherever you are, Dad."

Kurt's eyes sparkled as his father turned into the driveway. Dawn had broken about half an hour before and ribbons of bright pink and soft orange streaked across the sky.

"You got it," he whispered.

Burt grunted and nodded. "Sure did. Still don't know why you wanted it, though. I thought the Navigator was your baby."

Kurt sighed. "It was, and I enjoyed it very much. Still, it was a little ridiculous. We're a family of two – well, four, if you include Carole and Finn – and the Navigator was too much even for that. Not to mention that the insurance premiums and fuel costs were outrageous. I simply couldn't justify them to myself anymore."

"Son," Burt said warily, "we have money. I hope you didn't give up your truck just for that."

Kurt eyed the new silver Jeep Liberty with anticipation. "Not just for that, no. I think my tastes have become a little more refined, and the Navigator was slightly more ostentatious than that with which I'm comfortable. This is much more economical while still being sporty and offering more than enough cargo room. Why spend more money than necessary? Just because we have it doesn't mean we should waste it."
With that, Kurt hopped out of his father's Ford pickup and bounced over toward his new acquisition.

Burt stared dumbly at the scene and shook his head, convinced his son had been replaced with a pod person.

"What's that?" Burt asked.

Kurt smiled and held up his toy. "It's my new phone. Do you like it?"

Burt frowned. "It's a little…plain. What was wrong with the old one? I thought you liked your iPhone?"

"I did, but I didn't understand how to use most of it. Besides, the state finally passed that law that mandates no texting while driving, and the school is really cracking down on kids texting each other during classes." He shrugged. "Other than making calls and texting, the only other thing I used it for was to update my Facebook status and play music, but I also have an iPod and my laptop. I just didn't see the point of paying extra for features I don't use."

"Son, is something going on? Why are you suddenly so worried about money?"

Kurt grinned. "I'm not. I think I've just finally learned to appreciate what I have and no longer covet the things I don't. I don't need the latest whatsit to be happy. As long as the phone works, what else do I need?"

Burt couldn't fight that logic, as much as he wanted to.

Kurt turned pensive. "Everywhere Grandmère and I visited, I saw the slums. I saw homeless people who lived in boxes and dressed in rags. I saw hungry children and filthy dogs fighting over scraps." He exhaled loudly. "It was terrible, Dad. That kind of poverty…to see it in industrialized first-world nations was shocking. And illuminating. I know we have that here in the States, but I'd never seen it before."

Burt wrapped an arm around his son's shoulders, surprised and disheartened when he realized he couldn't do it as easily as before.

Kurt sighed. "I'm not so naïve that I believe I can just rush out into the world and solve all of its problems, but I like to think I'm a little more deliberate now, that I appreciate what I've been given and what I've earned. I don't need the best of everything. In fact, most of what I have is superfluous. I still like shopping and being able to afford the things I want, but now I have a better understanding of the things I need." He blushed softly. "I think my heart's a little bigger than it used to be." He looked up at his father with bright eyes. "And I like that."

Burt kissed his son's temple. "I do, too."

Kurt smiled. "Good, because there's a charity walk for the homeless next month in Dayton. I'd like to participate and I'd appreciate it if you'd post a sign-up sheet in the shop. Maybe there are some customers who would be willing to sponsor me."

Burt nodded. "Tell you what. Whatever you manage to raise, I'll match."
Kurt blinked. "Really?"

"Absolutely. Now, how about I make us some coffee?"

Kurt beamed. "Great! I'm just going to change and wash my face."

Burt nodded again and watched his son stroll downstairs.

Twenty minutes later, Burt was sitting at the kitchen table, simply enjoying his coffee and the feeling of having his son home. The whole house seemed brighter and larger and more filled with life now that Kurt was back.

Kurt reappeared and calmly prepared his coffee. Burt couldn't help but stare.

"What's wrong?" Kurt asked.

"Is that what you're wearing?"

Kurt looked crestfallen. "You don't like it?"

"I love it!" Burt almost shouted. "You look…you look…"

Kurt gave him a small smirk. "Like a boy?"

Well, Burt knew better than to admit that out loud, but yes. "You just look different," he hedged.

Kurt laughed. "It's okay, Dad. I'm glad you're pleased."

Pleased didn't begin to cover it, but Burt knew his boy was sensitive about his fashion and he didn't want to say or do anything which might alter this very welcome change.

Kurt was dressed in a nice pair of black linen trousers and an oatmeal short-sleeved Oxford with capped cuffs. He had on black alligator Cuban-heeled boots with a matching belt. A camel-colored suede messenger back was slung over one shoulder. A simple but elegant silver wristwatch was his only adornment. The clothes were extremely well-fitted but not so tight that they looked as though they had been sewn directly onto his body.

Burt frowned as he realized that his son actually did have a body, and a rather nice one. Kurt had filled out. There were muscles where hadn't been before.

The body. The clothes. The hair, the eyes, the tan.

Holy shit, his boy was gorgeous.

Kurt had always been pretty, and he still was, but now he was also handsome. He had matured.

Other boys would look at him. Boys would want to touch him.

Burt opened his mouth to deny strenuously that his son was, in fact, seventeen years old. He wanted Kurt to march right back downstairs and put on a pair of footie pajamas with a drop-seat. He was sure he had Kurt's old pacifier somewhere around the house.
Meanwhile, Kurt had drained his coffee mug and placed it in the dishwasher. He grabbed an apple from the bowl on the counter and made his way over to the table.

"By the way, Dad, my maestro in Rome found a new voice coach for me in Kenton. She's expensive, but very well regarded. I think she could make a real difference in my training, which will help with both Glee and my college applications, should I decide to pursue music. I'll pay for the lessons myself, of course. I've already emailed her some files and she's excited to work with me. I've set the lessons up for Sundays, as they'll require several hours at one stretch. I'll email you her name, number, and résumé during study hall today, okay?"

Burt's objections to his son's physicality died on his lips and he nodded.

"I'm going to head out now so I can stop at the office supply store before school. They're open early this week, and I need to stock up on some notebooks and pens. I have Glee this afternoon, but I'll be home by five-thirty to start dinner after I drop by the grocery. Are Carole and Finn still coming over?"

Burt nodded again.

Kurt leaned over and kissed his father's cheek. "I'll see you then. Have a good day!"

"You too," Burt murmured.

Kurt sailed out of the room, and Burt heard the front door close and the new car start a moment later.

He looked around at his empty house, which was suddenly much dimmer.

"Goodbye, son."

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After a quick stop at Staples, Kurt pulled up in front of the house whose address he had programmed into his GPS.

He wondered why he didn't feel anxious or scared, but he didn't. It was a new experience for him and he relished it.

He quickly exited the car and made his way up the sidewalk. He knocked on the door and waited for an answer.

He heard a muttered swear before the door swung open, a furious and red-faced ape glaring down at him.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

"Hello David. I think it's time we had a little chat." Kurt raised a brow. "Don't you?"

Karofsky swallowed nervously.
An hour later, Kurt pulled into McKinley's parking lot.

His talk with Karofsky had gone better than he had expected, given that he was basically blackmailing the other boy. He wasn't one for extortion and felt mildly annoyed with himself for resorting to such measures, but he wasn't about to put up with another year of torture and humiliation simply because Karofsky couldn't deal with his own sexuality.

His grandmother had put the entire matter into perspective during one of their late night discussions. The more Kurt had talked about Karofsky, the more contemplative Katrine had become. Finally, she pointed out that Karofsky's behavior mirrored that of a little boy pulling the pigtails of a girl he liked.

Once Kurt had combated his nausea with a glass of strong port, he gathered his wits and decided on a course of action.

He had no intention of outing anyone – such an action was simply beneath his dignity – but Karofsky didn't know that, nor need he be made aware of it. Thus, some well placed threats, as well as promised legal action, had effectively neutered him. He had told the boy plainly that while his crush was flattering, it was not reciprocated and never would be. Should Karofsky press the issue, the consequences would be severe.

So they had struck a bargain. As long as Karofsky, and Azimio by extension, left him alone, his secret was safe. Karofsky had then grown cocky and, expecting a capitulation, espoused his belief that no one would believe Kurt's word over his own. Kurt had merely stated that while that might possibly be the case, all he had to do was whisper one sentence. Brittany, Quinn, and especially Santana, would take care of the rest.

That had effectively quelled any rebellion.

He expected there might be some reprisals or retaliation later on down the road, but he had contingency plans in place should that occur. He made sure to make Karofsky aware of that as well.

So it was with a light heart and watchful eye that Kurt exited his vehicle and made his way to the front doors. He couldn't believe he was actually excited about the beginning of a new school year, but he was. He had more friends than any year previous, good friends whom he knew would watch out for him, as he would for them.

He hadn't seen nor spoken with Mercedes for the past three months due to his constant traveling and the changing time zones, as well as that the camp which Mercedes had attended didn't have a set schedule to receive phone calls. He had only managed to speak with Tina once and was greatly saddened by her breakup with Artie. He was rather appalled that she had dumped Artie via email and hooked up with Mike, but wasn't about to judge her for her actions. He knew that Tina hadn't been happy with Artie for quite some time; they weren't really compatible as anything other than outcasts, and their relationship had run its course. That said, he still felt she could have handled it better.

Kurt had kept in regular contact with his fellow Cheerios, although his friendship with Quinn had somewhat stalled, due to whatever issues the girl had with Mercedes. He wasn't sure just what those issues were and Quinn wouldn't discuss them, but he assumed they'd work it out on their own. He wasn't going to interfere with his friends' entanglements. He had learned the hard way. He'd only managed to speak with Brittany a few times, as reception in Lima's sewers were spotty at best. He hadn't the foggiest idea what the hell she had been doing down there, and he was pretty sure he didn't want to find out.

Surprisingly, his friendship with Santana had taken off like gangbusters. She was the only other member of New Directions who had traveled extensively throughout Europe, so she was always
ready with a recommendation for a shop or a club or a restaurant that he simply had to visit while he was in whatever city. The more they had talked, the more pretense had simply fallen away and the closer they'd become.

Santana was absolutely the most vicious bitch he had ever encountered, but he had come to appreciate that about her. She was also perhaps the most loyal person he had ever known, at least to those whom she considered true friends. That roster had once included only Brittany, but now his own name was listed and he couldn't help but feel a giddy thrill over that fact. He was so excited to see her in person.

He'd no contact with Finn or Rachel and felt no regret over that. He had finally gotten over his absurd crush on Finn, realizing that most of what he liked about the other boy had been made up in his own head, projecting the qualities of his ideal boyfriend on to Finn, when, in reality, Finn shared almost none of them.

He had come to recognize that there was actually very little he liked about Finn, other than his looks. Not that he believed Finn was in any way a bad person, but they had little in common. Kurt decided it was best they give each other a wide berth and tried their best to get along at outings with their parents. Hopefully Finn would accept that without any qualms, because Carole made Burt Hummel happy and Kurt himself was quite fond of the woman. He wasn't about to let his problems with Finn torpedo their parents' relationship.

As far as Rachel was concerned, Kurt simply didn't like her. He would concede that she was tremendously gifted, but outside of appreciation of her talent, he felt nothing for her but contempt and knew his best course of action was to avoid her completely whenever possible. Of course, that wouldn't work in Glee, but he was going to attempt to be conciliatory in their practices. That said, he would no longer hold back his own talent to placate her, Schue, or anyone else. He would use his full range and show off just what he was capable of achieving.

He hadn't spoken with either Artie or Mike, save reading their Facebooks while en route back to the States.

He wasn't sure what to do about them. He had always been extremely close with Artie, though their friendship had tapered off somewhat once Artie had begun dating Tina. The three of them had been friends for years and he was the odd person out after they had finally recognized their mutual attraction. Kurt knew Artie would want to commiserate with him about the breakup, while Tina would want he and Mike to become closer friends. He was dreading Artie and Tina fighting over his loyalties, so he'd have to be careful how he approached those relationships. He didn't want to choose because he didn't wish to lose either of them, but knew it might happen.

He liked Mike well enough, and certainly appreciated the boy's dancing skills, but they had never held a conversation in their lives. Mike was exceedingly shy, despite his showmanship, his talent on the football field, and being one of the top students in their class. Somehow he managed to balance these three things without alienating any of their fellow students, so he wasn't terrorized for being in Glee, a fact which Kurt envied. Kurt also knew Mike would desperately be missing Matt Rutherford, his best friend for twelve years, who had moved to Pennsylvania after his father was transferred. Maybe he and Mike might become friends, but if it came right down to it, he would choose Artie over Mike.

He'd never spoken with Matt either, but the other boy had always given off a pleasant, nonthreatening vibe. Kurt was rather saddened that he had never heard Matt sing. Both Mike and Matt's vocals had melted so easily into the background that they were difficult to discern from the stronger voices. Once he had learned that Matt was moving, he'd sent him a short but heartfelt
message via Facebook, wishing him all the best. He was surprised when Matt immediately responded. They’d kept messaging back and forth, each conversation becoming more and more personal until they had established a rather good friendship, even if it wasn’t in person. It was nice. Weird, but nice.

As far as Noah Puckerman was concerned, Kurt planned to stay as far away from the other boy as possible and could only hope Puck would reciprocate.

"Well, hello," purred a seductive voice to his left.

Startled, but refusing to show it, he slowly turned to face a fellow Cheerio.

He smiled. "Hello, Quinn."

Her mouth fell open. "K-Kurt?" she whispered.

"You look lovely," he said, leaning over to kiss her cheek. "Of course, you always do."

She blushed, felt herself doing so, and wondered what the hell was wrong with her. This was Kurt! Sure, he looked good. Okay, he looked amazing and sexy as hell, but he was still Kurt!

"I'll see you inside?"

She nodded, dazed.

He chuckled in a low register which shot chills up her spine. She told herself to get it together and get over it, beaming at him and waving her fingers. She was just thankful she didn't have to change her panties. Kurt looked that good.

He saluted her and began making his way past the dumpsters.

"Well, well. Look what we have here," a menacing voice growled.

"Not a brain cell among you?" Kurt suggested.

Azimio blinked. "Look, fag…"

"That's one."

The jock frowned. "One what?"

"I'm keeping a record of every time you and your fellow Simians verbally and physically assault me."

Azimio snorted. "What's the point? Figgins isn't going to do anything to help you."

Kurt nodded. "True enough, which is why I'm taking the matter out of his hands."

Derek Johnson's brow furrowed, his curiosity getting the best of him. "How?"

"I'm going to sue you."

Azimio laughed. "What?"

Kurt smiled. "Since the school district has failed at protecting their students, I've decided to involve the proper authorities. The next time you lay your hands on me or shout homophobic taunts in my
direction, I'll file a lawsuit against you and anyone else involved. Of course, since you're minors, that means I'll be suing your parents."

He gave the pack of jackals a feral grin. "Intentional infliction of emotional distress, slander, defamation of character, creating a hostile environment, assault and battery, and hate crimes. Some of those are felonies. I'll take your houses, your cars, your college funds, and have your parents' wages garnished. You'll be lucky to find accommodations in our town's singular homeless shelter, if you're not being held in a juvenile detention center. You can kiss college and any possible scholarships goodbye."

"You can't do that!" a panicked Brandon Meyers shouted.

"Of course I can," Kurt easily replied, "and we all know that I would. If the courts fail me, though I doubt they will, there are other avenues to explore." He turned to Azimio. "I notice Karofsky isn't with you today. I wonder why that is?"

Azimio's expression was thunderous.

Kurt yawned. "It's fascinating the quality and quantity of information one can uncover when one simply knows where to look. For example, Alex Kellerman here has a nasty cocaine problem. I happen to have pictures of him purchasing said cocaine from the homeless-smelling Brett Winters. It would be a terrible shame if those fell into the wrong hands."

Kellerman paled and quickly fled the scene.

"You're blackmailing Karofsky," Azimio hissed.

"Oh, not just him," Kurt happily corrected. "I have on enough all of you, as well as several others, to make your lives terribly difficult. Case in point: I know that you, Amazon, have a penchant for steroids. One word from me and Coach Sylvester will bypass Figgins altogether and institute a school-wide mandatory drug-testing policy for all athletes. If you're forced off the hockey team, your college opportunities are greatly diminished." He clucked. "And your poor parents. Whatever would they say?"

Fear lighted Azimio's eyes.

"So I want you to ask yourselves just one question," Kurt said, eyeing all of the jocks. "Is harassing me really worth the fallout that will result? Because I can and will ruin each and every one of you — happily — if you force me to do so."

"Fuck this," Johnson said. "Karofsky started all of this, for whatever reason, and it was pathetic then." He shook his head. "Look, Hummel, I don't give a shit that you're gay. Seriously. I've got a cousin who's into girls and she's awesome. You've never done anything to me, and for what it's worth, I'm sorry I was such an asshole. You don't have to worry about me anymore."

Four others mumbled similar sentiments and quickly departed, leaving Kurt alone with Azimio.

"What do you have on Karofsky?"

"That is none of your business," Kurt coolly replied. "He leaves me alone, I leave him alone. It's as simple as that. I gave him my word, and I won't go back on it. If anything happens to me because of you, Karofsky is the one who will suffer, and that will be your fault, not mine."

Rage coupled with a glimmer of respect informed the answering scowl.
"That goes for the rest of Glee, as well," Kurt warned. "Attack any one of us at your own peril." He smiled. "It's a brand new day, Azimio. A brand new day. If you want to survive it, stay clear of me and mine. Your secrets are safe with me and always will be." He glared. "As long as you leave us alone."

He arched a brow. "And just so we're clear, if anything happens to me, I've made provisions for the information I have to be released to the authorities, as well as Jacob ben Israel, so don't go getting any ideas." He leaned in toward the jock, eyes dark and murderous. "Don't fuck with me, little boy. You're in way over your head."

Azimio opened his mouth to retort, but just as quickly shut it. He gave one long, slow nod at Kurt, who returned the gesture.

"How did you find out?" asked a defeated Azimio.

"Private investigators."

Azimio meant to ask another question, but was cut off.

"Money."

Azimio nodded again and backed away.

"One more thing," Kurt said in a low voice.

Azimio sighed and rolled his eyes.

"If anyone has a problem with our little arrangement, let me know." Kurt smiled again, so wide all of his teeth showed. "I'll take care of it."

Azimio was annoyed at the impertinence, but also amused, his mind wandering to all of those he'd like to see attempt to face off with Hummel. In fact, he might just have to engineer such a situation. He nodded again, this time more pleasantly, and took his leave.

Kurt swallowed heavily and released a long exhalation, willing his trembling hands to still. He jumped slightly when slow applause began.

"That was masterful, Mob Princess," Puck said, eyes alight with glee. "Truly masterful."

Kurt merely smiled. "Good morning, Noah."

And then he left, leaving a smirking and bemused Puck staring after him.

"I just don't see the point of school reconvening before Labor Day," sighed a frustrated Rachel. "As happy as I am to return to William McKinley and reestablish my prominence via the glee club and my many extracurricular activities, it seems foolish to open the doors when so many people are still on vacation or planning excursions for the long holiday."

Mercedes rolled her eyes but held her tongue, intent on organizing her locker for maximum efficiency prior to the start of classes. She looked at the picture in her hand – one of her, Quinn, and Beth in the hospital – and debated whether or not to hang it on the inside of her door. After Quinn
had moved back in with her mother, it had become obvious fairly quickly that she was no longer interested in pursuing their friendship, if the many unanswered calls were any indication. It hurt. A lot. Still, she wasn't too surprised. She stowed the picture under a text book.

"We live in Ohio, Rachel," Artie said calmly, "and we have bad winters. They want us to start early so that we don't lose too many days to the eventual snow."

"I'm surprised Kurt's not here yet," Tina said, desperate for a change of topic which Rachel couldn't monopolize, and preferably one which didn't revolve around her own breakup with Artie or new relationship with Mike. And she absolutely did not want to hear any further details of Artie and Brittany's hookup.

Finn shrugged. "His plane didn't get in until early this morning. Burt said that Kurt probably wouldn't even bother going to bed. Knowing Kurt, though, he'll have a lot to do before he's ready to grace us with his fabulous presence."

"Watch your tone," Mercedes snapped.

He held up his hands in a placating gesture. "I didn't mean anything by it! But you know it takes him at least two hours to get dressed and put on his makeup or whatever."

Artie scoffed. "Kurt doesn't wear makeup."

Rachel stared. "He doesn't?"

Artie, Mercedes, and Tina shook their heads.

"You mean his skin just looks like that?" she screeched. "Naturally?"

Finn gaped, his fingers dancing around the zit on his chin he had tried and failed to cover up with tinted Clearasil.

"He's never had a pimple in his life," Artie smiled, "and he never intends to have one, either." He turned pensive. "I kind of hate him for that."

Tina nodded.

"That is so unfair," Rachel pouted.

Mercedes snorted. "He pays good money and spends a hell of a lot of time to keep his complexion flawless. Don't hate because it works."

"What time is Glee?" Finn asked, perusing his schedule and not noticing that it was upside down. "It is today, right?"

Rachel gave a swift nod. "Mister Schuester finally capitulated to my demands that he schedule at least three practice sessions a week, in addition to the block of class time that has been set aside. So we have it first period, and then again after school."

"I hope it doesn't interfere with football," Finn fretted.

Rachel beamed at him. "Don't worry. I made sure to take that into consideration. There will be no conflict."

He grinned at her. "So what are you all planning to sing today?"
Rachel began a long explanation about how she had prepared several selections, according to genre, decade, and relevance to the history of musical theater. Mike arrived during the middle of her diatribe and took Tina's hand, avoiding Artie's angry glare.

"Where's the Puckhole?" Mercedes loudly interrupted.

Finn grimaced. "Stalking Quinn or Santana, I'm sure."

"I don't need to stalk chicks, man," Puck replied, seemingly appearing out of thin air. "They come to me."

Everyone rolled their eyes.

He shrugged. "Besides, I left Quinn in the parking lot, mooning over Hummel."

"Kurt?" Mercedes demanded.

"He's here?" Tina squealed.

Puck nodded. "He has a sweet new ride, too. Guess he traded in the Navigator."

Artie was stunned. "I can't believe he gave up his baby."

Finn frowned. "Burt didn't say anything to me about that."

"Does Mr. H need to clear things with you now?" asked a snide Mercedes.

Finn scowled at her and fidgeted. He'd been trying to suck up to Burt all summer long in apology, but Burt wasn't having it. Finn knew it was Kurt to whom he should apologize, but he was so mortified and humiliated by his own behavior that he was too scared to approach the other boy. Instead, he had tried and failed to do it by proxy.

"What'd he get?" Rachel asked, trying to defuse the situation.

"Brand new Jeep Liberty," Puck said. "Silver. Not as pimping as the Navigator, but still awesome."

"He's walking into school alone?" Tina shrieked.

"Relax, Gothica," Puck snapped, rolling his eyes and ignoring Mike's shoulder punch. "He already met the Dumpster Douchebags. Begged them off, too, putting them on notice." The awe in his voice and in his eyes was bewildering for the others to behold. "It was fucking incredible."

Everyone gaped.

"How?" Mercedes finally asked, her voice a strangled whisper.

Puck grinned. "Blackmailed them. He's got dirt on all of them and told them if they touched him, he'd release the info, as well as slapping lawsuits on all of them and their parents." He tilted his head. "I'm pretty sure at least one of them pissed themselves. Hummel's like Sylvester 2.0."

Rachel scrunched her nose. "That's illegal! Kurt should know better than…"

"Oh, shut up, Rachel," Artie barked. "Why don't you go throw yourself in a dumpster or get locked in a port-a-crapper that gets knocked over? Then you can get back to us on how unfair Kurt was to the poor, misunderstood assholes."
Rachel wisely kept her mouth shut.

"Word," Puck said nodding, holding out his fist for Artie to bump.

Artie looked at the proffered appendage with suspicion before finally complying.

"That's not all," Puck bragged. "The Princess also told them that if they came after anyone in Glee, their ass was grass and he'd be the lawnmower. We're now a protected class."

They simply stared at him.

"Huh," Finn said. Kurt had just easily accomplished what he himself was supposed to have done all of last year. So, he just sucked all that much more and now everyone would have Kurt's back for sticking up for them. Great. Now he had yet one more reason to feel like a complete jackass.

"Why was Quinn fawning over Kurt?" Mercedes asked, a glint in her eye.

"Because dude gave himself a makeover," Puck answered. "No homo, but the Princess looks mighty fine. So damn fine that I'd consider switching teams, at least for one night."

Finn snorted. "Yeah, right."

Puck nodded. "Right."

Finn's mouth went slack.

"Where is he?" Mike asked. All summer long, Tina had raved about Kurt's awesomeness, and apparently the other boy was now tight with Matt, so Mike thought it a good idea to get to know him better. Kurt had always seemed like a cool dude and was an amazing dancer, but Mike had let fear of the judgment of others derail any friendship they might have developed.

Puck shrugged. "Got waylaid by Brittany and Satan." He shook his head. "Don't know what's going on there. I mean, by now I'm used to Brit hanging all over him, but I was shocked as shit when he and Santana starting making out right there on the steps."

"What!" Rachel, Mercedes, and Finn thundered.

Puck nodded. "All kinds of hot, man." He bit his lip. "It shouldn't have been. I mean, it really shouldn't have been. But it totally was. I seriously thought they were just going to fuck right there."

Mercedes scoffed. "Bitch, please."

Puck smirked. "I don't give a shit what you believe, LaBelle. But since you're so pressed, take a look for yourself." He nodded his head toward the front entrance, where Kurt walked through with Brittany and Santana on either arm.

"That's Kurt?" Finn whispered.

"Damn," Rachel breathed, eyes widened to the size of dinner plates.

"He's so hot," Tina whispered. "He was always cute, but now…" Artie stared, nodding. "Uh, yeah, you know, for a guy and everything."

"It's cool, Sit-n-Spin," Puck laughed. "I said I would hit it, and I totally would. Junk or not, the boy's a hot piece."

Artie flushed and scowled. "Stay away from him, Puck. He doesn't need your bullshit on top of everything else." He smirked and raised an eyebrow, still grateful to Kurt for teaching him that particular maneuver in fifth grade. "If he has something on all of the jocks, I wonder what he has on you? I'm sure there's a lot that was just waiting to be unearthed."

Finn winced. He should have been the one delivering that threat, but had been so overwhelmed by a foreign surge of fierce protectiveness toward Kurt, he had been blindsided.

Puck paled dramatically and his mouth moved, though no sound emerged. He stood there, blinking owlishly, as the others immediately flocked to Kurt's side.

Kurt watched the approaching storm with a wary eye, wondering just how the hell Rachel had managed to get to the head of the pack. Brittany looked utterly nonplussed while Santana was mumbling creative Spanish slurs under her breath. It took all of Kurt's willpower not to burst out laughing at her invective. He was also kind of digging how she had stuck her hand in his back pocket and was continually squeezing his ass.

"Kurt!" Rachel howled.

He immediately became alarmed. The fanaticism on her face was heart-stopping. Why on earth why she excited to see him? And she was approaching with the speed of the Bionic Woman.

Santana sighed and released her hold on the Mighty Ass to step forward and slightly in front of Kurt, hands on her hips.

"Seriously, Berry," she snapped. "I can smell your crazy from here. Calm the hell down."

Rachel's face fell slightly and she slowed her roll to a happy trot.

"Kurt!" she gushed. "I hope you've been practicing this summer despite your European adventure, because we have to be prepared for Vocal Adrenaline by Sectionals. Just because the nefarious Jesse St. James is no longer leading them doesn't mean we can afford to slack off, because you know that they'll…"

"Jesus, Barbra," Mercedes bellowed. "Shut up and let me say hello to my best boy." She beamed at Kurt and opened her arms wide. "Hey, baby!"

Kurt smiled and wrapped his arms around her, hugging her tightly. "I missed you, gorgeous," he said, kissing her cheek.

She giggled and blushed, swatting his arm. "You've got guns, boy!"

He quirked a brow. "Exercise is important, you know. I have to be prepared for the lifts in Glee and Cheerios. So, yes, Rachel, I have indeed kept up with my dancing and vocals. Don't worry."

Rachel sniffed. "As if I would have any reason to worry about…"

"I see your enthusiasm for my return has already dwindled."

She shut her mouth and flushed.

"I still have the best guns, right?" Puck asked worriedly.

Kurt shrugged. "In my opinion, yes."

Puck beamed with triumph.
"You're so tan," Tina squeaked at Kurt.

He smiled. "The Mediterranean sun is quite strong. And, yes, before you ask, it also explains the hair. You know I would never use chemicals to treat it."

She nodded. "It's longer than I've ever seen it."

He shrugged. "You know how particular I am about my stylists. Even though Europe offers the very best, Veronica would murder me if I allowed the hands of another to alter my coiffure." He cocked his head. "I'm content to leave it this length for a while. It has volume and I really don't have to do anything to it. It's refreshing not having to worry about it."

Quinn, who had arrived from the other direction during Rachel's stampede, sidled up to him and began carding her fingers through his hair. "You mean this is natural?" she asked in a dreamy voice.

He nodded. "I stopped straightening it, due to the fact that I failed to take into account the difference of European outlets, so the natural wave took over. The longer it gets, the curlier it will become, but I'll cut it before then. Curls are a hassle for which I have little patience." He smirked. "You can stop touching it now."

She shook her head. "No, I really don't think I can."

He laughed and gently pushed her away. "Did you get my email?"

She nodded. "It's a fantastic idea, and Santana and Brittany are onboard. I actually think Sylvester will like it."

"What?" Rachel demanded.

Quinn curled a lip and glared at her. "Cheerios business, and none of yours."

"Kurt," Artie interrupted, "your clothes…"

Kurt beamed. "Do you like them? I'm still a little unsure. Dad liked them, but I don't know…"

"You look hot," Brittany cooed, placing her head on his shoulder.

"High praise indeed," he grinned, kissing her forehead.

"They're not your usual style," Mike ventured.

Kurt turned to his side to face the other boy, holding out his hand, at which Mike blinked before shaking. "Good morning, Mike. I hope your summer was well?"

Mike nodded dumbly.

"I grew about four inches, so obviously adjustments had to be made." He paused. "I guess you could say Europe informed my fashion choices. I decided a classic yet elegant, tailored look was more suiting." He shrugged. "So I designed a new wardrobe and had it commissioned."

Mercedes gawped. "You mean…this is all yours? You designed this?"

He nodded.

"You're very talented," Rachel said grudgingly.
"Thank you," was his easy reply.

He kissed Tina's cheek and exchanged handshakes with Artie and a confused Finn.

Finn found that Good morning, Finn was not as much fun as Well, hello there, Finn Hudson. There was no lilt in Kurt's voice, no flirty eyes or fluttery hands. He didn't like it.

"So were there any cute European boys who caught your eye?" Mercedes asked, winking.

Kurt chuckled. "No comment."

"That totally means yes!" Santana crowed, bumping his shoulder. "Spill, Hummel!"

"No comment," he sang.

She pouted.

Finn felt like someone had stuck a knife in his gut. Kurt was over him. But shouldn't he be happier about that fact?

"Let's coordinate our schedules!" Rachel squealed.

Everyone shrugged and whipped out their timetables.

"I have homeroom with Schuester," Finn noted.

"Me too," answered Quinn, Mike and Tina.

"I have Peters," Rachel sighed.

"Same," Puck and Artie said.

"I have McEntire," Mercedes said, wrinkling her nose.

"Brit, San, and I have Wyatt," Kurt said.

"Yay!" Brittany cheered.

Quinn shot them a jealous look. She knew that if she had been on the squad at the end of last year, Sylvester would have ensured she'd have had homeroom with her friends.

"Math?" Artie asked.

"Algebra II," Rachel, Finn, Mercedes, and Puck said. They were all in same period.

"AP Calc AB," Santana announced.

"Same," Mike and Quinn replied.

"AP Calc BC," said Kurt, Artie and, surprisingly, Brittany.

"How did you two do on the AB exam?" Kurt asked them.

"Four," said a bitter Artie. "I took too long with the second-to-last problem and couldn't finish on time."

"Three," Brittany said sadly, "but it's good enough to place me out of Calc I at OSU."
Almost everyone stared at her.

"What?" Santana snapped. "Brittany's smart."

Kurt and Artie nodded.

"How did you do?" Artie asked Kurt, a slight glare in his eyes.

"Five."

Artie's glare intensified. "You got fives on everything, didn't you?"

"Yes."

Puck stared. "What else did you take?"

Kurt shrugged. "I took the exams for French, Spanish Language, Calc AB, Biology, U.S. History, English Language, English Lit, and Psychology."

"But you weren't even in all of those classes!" Finn protested.

"I studied for them on my own," Kurt replied blandly. "That is allowed, you know. Artie took the exams for Comp Sci and Macroeconomics, even though McKinley doesn't offer those courses."

"Well, we're all taking Chemistry," interjected a shaky Rachel, displeased that she hadn't thought of taking extra exams on which she knew she would've done well. "What classes are you guys in? I'm in the honors class," she smugly finished.

"So am I," said Puck and Brittany.

"Uh, regular Chem for me," Finn said softly, blushing.

"Me too," Mercedes said, obviously uncomfortable. She'd never been good at science.

"I'm in the AP class," Quinn said.

Santana, Artie, Mike, Tina, and Kurt nodded.

"Is everyone sticking with the same language?" Tina asked. "Now that we're juniors, we can switch after we've completed two years of one or the other, but I'm staying with Spanish."

"Me too," Mercedes, Finn, and Puck answered.

"I'm switching to French," Quinn sniffed. "It's more elegant."

"Salope," Santana muttered, at which Kurt smiled. "I'm sticking with French."

"Me too," said Brittany, linking their pinkies together.

"I'm switching to Spanish," said Artie. "French and I aren't really a good mix."

"French," Mike and Rachel answered.

"What are you going to do for a language, baby?" Mercedes asked Kurt. "Doesn't McKinley require you to have three years?"

He nodded. "But since I've received acceptable credit for both French and Spanish, I no longer have
to study a language here. I already know Italian and German, at least enough to hold conversations, though my translations are very rough. The school doesn't offer a Latin program, unfortunately, and I picked up Portuguese and Irish this summer from my tutors." He shrugged. "So I don't have to take a language this year or next, but I've been thinking about learning Chinese."

Mike's eyes lighted. He was about to ask Kurt if he would be interested in his Chinese school when he was interrupted.

"Irish?" Finn slowly repeated. "That's a language?"

"He means Gaelic, sweetie," Rachel said, patting his shoulder. "They also speak it in Scotland."

"Gaelic? Is that, like, for gay people?"

Santana snorted with derision.

"Actually, I didn't mean that, Rachel," Kurt interjected, ignoring Finn's ridiculous comment. "Irish Gaelic and Scottish Gaelic, while similar, are not the same language. The former gave rise to the latter, as well as Manx."

Rachel wanted to argue the point for the sake of it, but shut up when Artie lightly punched her thigh.

"How do you know so many languages?" Finn demanded of Kurt. For some reason, he was furious with Kurt; furious with himself for the realization that as much as he thought he knew Kurt, the fact of the matter was that he didn't know the other boy at all. He just didn't understand why it bothered him so much.

"I have a facility with them, and Spanish, Italian, French, and Portuguese are all related, descended from Latin," the boy answered. "I don't understand why it's so shocking. Noah and Rachel are fluent in Hebrew, Mike in Chinese, and Santana is fluent in Spanish, and basically French as well. For her, the French class will be nothing but review. She's just brushing up for the AP exam. The same is true for Brittany, who's also fluent in Dutch, Danish, and German."

"Huh?" Mercedes intelligently asked.

"Quinn is fluent in Swedish and Polish, and Tina in Korean and Hebrew."

Those mentioned either shrugged or nodded.

"Rachel, Puck, and I were all in Hebrew school together," Tina added.

"We were?" Puck asked.

The girls rolled their eyes.

"History?" Artie asked.

"AP European History." Rachel said promptly, hoping she would share this class with more of her friends. "I know Finn's in it with me." She beamed at the tall boy, who responded with a lopsided grin.

"I'm in that one too," Mercedes said.

Quinn and Brittany both nodded, as did Mike and Puck.

"AP Government and Politics," Artie said.
"U.S. or Comp?" Santana asked.

"U.S.," Artie said. "I didn't think the Comp class was open to juniors."

She shrugged. "Anyone who got a five on the U.S. History exam is eligible. Simmons emailed Kurt and me and told us that we wouldn't get much out of it, but would give us study guides if we decided to take the U.S. Government exam."

"Kurt and I," Finn automatically corrected, looking inordinately pleased with himself.

Rachel winced.

"Wrong," Puck said. "Direct objects don't take subject pronouns."

Santana smirked at Finn, who frowned.

"What's a direct object?" He turned to Kurt for an explanation, making Rachel frown.

"I'm sure Rachel can explain it to you," Kurt smoothly replied.

Finn felt slighted, but Rachel beamed at him and happily began rattling off more grammar rules than he could ever hope to comprehend.

"How'd you know?" Mercedes asked Puck.

"Noah was in the AP English class," Kurt said.

"Since when do you call him Noah?" she demanded.

A curious Puck also looked his way.

"It's his name," Kurt said, effectively shutting down the interrogation.

"I'm in Artie's class," Tina said quietly. They looked at each other with a mixture of excitement, glad they wouldn't be alone in the class, and wariness.

"So the rest are electives?" Quinn asked. She wrinkled her nose. "Or the compulsory classes that should be electives?"

The others nodded.

"I've got two study halls," Kurt complained. "I don't see why they couldn't just let me leave campus early."

Several envious looks were leveled at him.

"Dude," Puck said, "shut up."

Kurt blushed. "Sorry. That was obnoxious."

"Well, at least all of us will have at least one Glee clubber in the core classes," Rachel grinned.

A few uttered halfhearted nonsensical rumblings, but they were all pleased.

"Glee's up first!" Finn cheered.

Brittany applauded. "I hope I get to sing today! Are we drawing names again? That duck keeps
"hiding from me."

"Did everyone complete their assignments?" asked a bossy Rachel.

They all mumbled that they had.

"What are we going to do about replacing Matt?" Quinn asked. "With only eleven members, we're ineligible to compete at Sectionals."

"I'm sure people will be lining up to join!" Rachel enthusiastically replied.

The Cheerios among them exchanged eyerolls, as did Puck and Tina.

"Why wouldn't they?" asked a defensive Rachel.

Several of the other girls began arguing with her as Kurt and Mike's phones trilled. Both boys withdrew their respective cells and glanced at the screen.

"Where's your old phone?" Mercedes asked Kurt.

"I decided to downsize," Kurt replied, before he and Mike both burst out laughing.

"What's so funny?" asked a testy Mercedes.

Kurt shot her a look of annoyance and she backed off.

"Text from Matt," both he and Mike answered.

"Since when are you friends with Matt?" Mercedes asked.

"What is your problem?" Kurt calmly asked her.

Her eyes widened, surprised that he didn't attack her more forcefully. She didn't know why she was trying to provoke him, but she couldn't seem to stop herself. "You've just changed so much," she said softly.

"Am I supposed to apologize?"

She glared.

"I don't have time for this," Kurt said. "If you determine why you're so bothered by the fact that I've changed my manner of dress or have friends of whom you are unaware, we can discuss it at lunch. Otherwise, I need to prepare for my classes."

"Whoa," Puck whispered.

The others backed away, Santana smirking all the while. All of them were so inured to Mercedes' shrill demands on Kurt's time, they were stunned when he stood his ground and called her out with such confidence and ease.

"I don't like this new you," Mercedes said baldly.

Kurt tilted his head. "You mean you dislike that I don't spend my every moment in pursuit of your approval."

She grunted and flounced away, slowing down when she realized he wasn't coming after her. She
glanced over her shoulder with startled eyes before again facing forward and stalking toward her homeroom.

"Are you okay?" Artie asked Kurt, who smiled.

"I'm just fine, but I appreciate you asking. Thank you, all of you, for staying out of that disagreement."

"Aretha's pissed," Puck said.

"Well," Kurt began, "that sounds like a personal problem, and not one of mine."

He turned around and began placing books into his locker. He loved her, he truly did, would gladly die for her, but their relationship had grown so close that it bordered on romantic. Mercedes treated him as though he were her boyfriend, her property. As much as it pained him, and it did, some distance would have to be injected between them.

The others exchanged surprised and worried looks.

"Um, excuse me," said a nervous voice.

As one, they all turned around to face Emma Pillsbury, looking curiously at the bewildered and overly blond boy standing behind her.

"Welcome back, all of you," she said, smiling anxiously. "Kurt, may I speak with you for a moment?"

"Of course, Ms. Pillsbury." He looked to his friends. "I'll see all of you in Glee."

"Hello Booty-full," Santana purred at the new boy, who suddenly looked alarmed.

Kurt laughed. "Boundaries, Santana. You don't need another restraining order on your record."

"Oh, my!" whispered a startled Ms. Pillsbury.

Santana mock-huffed at Kurt before linking pinkies with Brittany and strolling away, Artie rolling at Brittany's other side. Soon, the others departed.

"How may I help you?" Kurt politely asked the guidance counselor.

She grinned at him, now more at ease. She and Kurt had always been friendly, if distant, but she thought him a wonderful boy. She probably should have told him that before, she fretted.

"This is Sam Evans," she said, indicating the boy now standing next to her. "He's a new transfer student, formerly of Lincoln High in Tennessee."

Kurt put forth his hand. "Hello, Sam. My name is Kurt Hummel. Welcome to McKinley."

"It's nice to meet you," Sam said shyly, marveling at how soft the other boy's hand was.

"Kurt is a junior like yourself, Sam," Emma continued. "He's in the top three of your class, sings in Glee Club and, rumor has it, will soon be announced as the next head cheerleader. He was also on the football team last year."

"Briefly," Kurt qualified.
"Kurt, since you have two free periods in your schedule, I was hoping you would help Sam find his way around the school," Emma said.

Kurt nodded. "I'd be happy to oblige."

Sam couldn't believe this kid's manners. He dressed and spoke like an adult. He was also surprised by how high Kurt's voice was; not that it was in any way unpleasant, just unusual. His voice had a musical quality to it as well, therefore the fact that he was in the glee club wasn't surprising. The cheerleader thing certainly was, but looking at the boy's physique, Sam could see that it would lend itself well to the sport.

"Thank you, Kurt," said a grateful Emma. "I've had Sam's schedule changed so that he's in your homeroom. That way you can check in with each other in the mornings."

Kurt nodded.

"Also," Emma said hesitantly, "I know that you've signed up for the Peer Mentoring program, for which I'm extremely thankful, as many of the upperclassmen did not." She looked depressed. "I've assigned Sam to you. Sam has authorized me to tell you that he's mildly dyslexic, so he will most likely require tutoring in a few subjects."

"Probably all of them," Sam mumbled, blushing profusely.

"Hey," Kurt said softly, "please don't be embarrassed, Sam. There's nothing shameful about having a learning disability. You've taken steps to correct it, I'm sure, and you're reaching out for help. I really don't know how you could ask much more of yourself." He smiled. "Besides, I'm sure we've both suffered classmates who purposefully remain ignorant and probably aren't nearly as intelligent as you are."

Sam blushed harder, this time with pleasure.

Emma beamed at Kurt. "You're such a good boy, Kurt. Thank you so much. I knew I could trust you."

Kurt colored slightly. He was sure she hadn't meant it in a condescending manner, though she had sounded as though she were addressing a toddler or a puppy. He nodded.

"Sam, do you have your books?" he asked.

The other boy nodded. "All of them. I haven't been to my locker yet," he replied. "I've been in the administrative office or with Ms. Pillsbury since I arrived."

"That reminds me," Emma interjected, "I had Sam's locker placed next to yours, Kurt. Is that acceptable?"

"Of course," he answered. "I think I can take it from here, Ms. Pillsbury."

She smiled widely and nodded before scampering back to her office after handing them two passes which excused them from homeroom.

"She's nice," Sam said offhandedly.

"Last year I got drunk and threw up on her shoes after calling her Bambi," Kurt deadpanned.

Sam burst out laughing. "Seriously?"
"Liquid courage has consequences," Kurt replied, "but, yes, she is very nice. A little skittish, perhaps, but she means well."

"Is she a germophobe or something?"

"I believe she has obsessive-compulsive disorder," Kurt said. "I can't be certain, but it's likely. I myself have a mild form of it, though I've had behavioral therapy to lessen the symptoms."

Sam stared.

Kurt arched a brow. "Surprised?"

"Yeah," Sam admitted. "I mean, you just seem so together and you're a top student and involved in all kinds of stuff."

Kurt grinned. "Over-involved, some would say. I have a tendency to obsess, but I've been getting better at handling the signs, so hopefully I won't regress." He cleared his throat. "Why don't you let me have a look at your schedule so I'll be able to direct you as to where you need to go."

Sam nodded and handed it over before turning to fiddle with the combination on his locker. "I'm probably going to forget this by next period," he sighed.

Kurt looked up from the other boy's schedule. "Well, if you trust me, why don't you tell me your combination? If you need it later, I can just text it to you."

"Thanks!" He rattled it off and Kurt committed it to memory. "Should I give you my number, too?"

Kurt nodded and they exchanged phones, inputting each other's information.

After they returned the other's phone, Kurt looked back at Sam's schedule. "Study Hall first period? That's rather poorly planned, although," his look turned thoughtful, "I suppose it would help in completing any unfinished assignments prior to class."

Sam grinned. "That's how I'm looking at it."

Kurt playfully rolled his eyes. "I'll take you by homeroom so we can give our passes to Ms. Wyatt. She's very nice and is a terrific teacher. She's the Chair of the Science Department and teaches Chemistry and Physics."

Sam nodded and followed Kurt down the hall. "So what's your schedule like?"

Kurt wordlessly withdrew it from his pocket and handed it over.

Sam scanned it quickly. "Wow. You're, um, really smart, aren't you?"

Kurt made to place his hand on Sam's shoulder, but quickly stopped himself. "Sam, please don't feel self-conscious around me. I'm in advanced classes because I was in all kinds of afterschool and extracurricular programs when I was younger. Honestly, sometimes I'm not sure if I'm intelligent or just overly prepared."

Sam gave him the side-eye, sincerely doubting his claim. From what he had discerned from their brief interaction, the dude was a serious intellectual or something. "Do both your parents work?" he asked with sympathy. "Mine do, so for years, I had to take care of my little brother and sister."

"No," Kurt quietly replied. "It's just my dad and me. My mom died when I was eight."
Sam looked stricken. "Oh god, I'm so sorry," he said, wincing. "I have a real tendency to stick my foot in my mouth."

Kurt waved him off. "No worries. You couldn't have known. It's just a difficult subject for me to discuss. She's been gone half my life, but sometimes it feels like it was only yesterday." He swallowed. "There are some days that aren't so bad, and there are others which make me think I'll never survive the sadness."

Sam placed his hand on Kurt's shoulder and gently massaged it.

Kurt looked at him and gave him a watery smile. He just as quickly pulled himself together.

Sam marveled at this ability. He wrung his hands. "Can I ask you something?"

"You may."

Sam smirked. "Um, I was just wondering…"

"Yes, I'm gay."

Sam exhaled. "Sorry. I didn't mean you were obvious or anything, but I'm not too good with words and I didn't know how to ask without it being awkward. Because I'm pretty damn awkward."

Kurt chuckled. "It's fine."

"Is it hard for you? Here in this school, I mean?"

Kurt halted in his tracks and pulled Sam to the side of the hall.

"Sam," he said quietly, "are you gay?"

"Bi, actually," Sam whispered, staring down at the floor. "I prefer to be open about it, but at my last school…" He shuddered.

"I understand," Kurt said. "I can't lie and say McKinley is an advertisement for the No H8 campaign. I've been bullied relentlessly for a number of years."

Sam dropped his head back against the wall and sighed. "Fuck."

"I can't really counsel you one way or the other," Kurt said. "I understand and appreciate your desire to be out, but I can't say that I would recommend it. Unfortunately, I'm one of those gays who couldn't be closeted if I tried. I know I'm more than obvious and always have been." He paused. "I'm not telling you to hide who you are. This is a situation you'll have to judge for yourself. But whatever you decide, I promise that I can and will give you my full support."

Sam bit his lip. "I can't…you don't know what that means to me."

Kurt smiled ruefully. "I do."

Sam nodded and blinked several times. "I saw you have Glee Club first period. Just to make sure I'm on the right track, that's a singing club, right?"

Kurt nodded. "There were twelve of us, but my friend Matt Rutherford moved to Pennsylvania during the summer, so we're one member short. Unfortunately, we need twelve to qualify for competition, so we'll be attempting to recruit some new members. Sadly, Glee Club isn't highly regarded among our peers."
"Are you guys any good?"

Kurt laughed. "Well, I'm biased, but I rather think so. We won Sectionals last year, but were shut out at Regionals. We have the raw talent, but we do need some work, particularly on our choreography."

Sam nodded.

"Do you sing?" Kurt casually asked.

Sam blushed. "I like to, but I don't know if I'm actually any good. I, uh, don't really enjoy singing in front of other people. My family says I have a nice voice, but then I guess they kind of have to, right?"

"I guess that depends on the family involved," Kurt said, grinning. He fell silent for a moment. "If you'd like, you could probably sit in on our rehearsal this morning and see if you have any interest. No pressure, honestly, and you wouldn't be expected to perform. We had a summer assignment to prepare a song about something that happened on our vacation, though we probably won't get to everyone today."

"I'd like that," Sam said shyly.

Kurt nodded. "Here's our homeroom," he said, pointing at the door. "We'll go in so I can introduce you to Ms. Wyatt and then we'll drop by Ms. Pillsbury's office to get you a pass to miss your study period."

Sam nodded happily and followed Kurt into the classroom.

Ms. Wyatt paused from taking roll to look up at the late arrivals. "Good morning, Kurt," she smiled. "I assume you have a pass?" she asked teasingly, arching a brow.

He clutched his heart dramatically. "You wound me, Ms. Wyatt. I would never part from you if given the choice."

She rolled her eyes and held out her hand for the passes, but was all but knocked out of the way by Brittany.

"Kurty!" She then proceeded to press a scorching kiss to his lips.

Sam's mouth fell open.

Once he was allowed to pull away, Kurt did and sighed. "Brit, we've talked about this."

Her bottom lip wibbled. "But I missed you."

"Sweetie, we just saw each other ten minutes ago."

She sighed dramatically and draped herself over him. "Like sands through the hourglass…"

Santana began laughing her ass off.

"Not in school, Brit," Kurt said gently yet forcefully, disentangling himself from her grasp.

She pulled at her ponytail. "So that means after Glee this afternoon, right?"

"We'll see," Kurt said, blushing as more classmates began snickering.
"Okay, Dolphin!" She bounced back to her seat and smiled charmingly at everyone, waving.

"Dolphin?" Sam whispered.

"Later," Kurt hissed.

Ms. Wyatt was desperately trying to swallow her laugh, but ended up snorting instead, so severely that her eyes began to water. "And who is this gentleman with you?" she asked Kurt.

Kurt pushed Sam forward. "This is Sam Evans. He's a new transfer and will be in our homeroom. Say hello to the class, Sam."

Sam gave a small wave to the room. "Hi."

"I'm Sam's Peer Mentor, so I'm showing him the layout of the school," Kurt added.

"I bet that's not all you're showing him!" Jason Peterson piped up, confused when several jocks and Santana Lopez began yelling at him to shut up, though Santana used more colorful language.

Kurt merely raised an eyebrow. Apparently word had spread about his deal with Azimio and the others, though not to everyone. Well, they'd all learn soon enough. The information he had on Peterson was more than explosive and, as soon as he had confirmation, he'd be happy to release it, just to be a bitch. And because it was the right thing to do, of course.

"I have no problem showing you to detention this afternoon, Mr. Peterson," Ms. Wyatt said coldly. "You can embrace it with open arms for the next three days."

Peterson flushed heavily and slumped down in his seat.

"I'm sorry for the interruption, Ms. Wyatt," Kurt said stiffly. "If you'll excuse us, we need to speak with Ms. Pillsbury."

Ms. Wyatt nodded sharply, still glaring at Peterson. "I'll see you in Chemistry, Kurt. Good to meet you, Sam."

"Thank you, ma'am," Sam mumbled, before allowing Kurt to guide him from the room.

Once the door shut behind them, Sam released a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

"It's okay," Kurt said calmly. "To be fair, you might receive some flak for being seen with me, but just explain to whoever gives you grief that I was assigned to be your mentor. You had no choice in the matter. Feel free to tell them you despise me."

Sam gaped at him before scoffing. "Kurt, I'll admit that I was surprised that asshole was so…blatant, especially in front of a teacher, but I'm not going to…to deny you or something. You're the first person my age I've met in this town, and you seem like an awesome dude. I'd like to think we're going to be really good friends, and I don't care if people have a problem with that."

He was distressed by how shocked Kurt appeared. Damn, didn't this kid have friends? Well, besides that hot blond who'd been macking on him. But who wouldn't want to be friends with him? He then remembered the crowd around him when Pillsbury introduced them. They had all seemed pretty tight, but now he wondered about that.

"By the way," Sam said smoothly, "why the hell did that girl call you a dolphin?"

Kurt burst out laughing and shepherded Sam toward the guidance office, explaining as they walked.
Kurt shuttled Sam into the choir room, after securing a pass from Pillsbury, whom they had run into in the hall, which would excuse the boy from his first period study hall and delivering it to Mr. Combs, the monitor. Although rehearsal was not set to start for a few minutes, they were the last to arrive and Kurt could feel Sam tense up at the sea of unfamiliar faces. He gently placed a hand against the small of Sam's back, relieved when the other boy again began to breathe.

Finn was immediately on alert. Who the hell was this Ken doll and why was Kurt touching him? Didn't the boy know Kurt was gay? Didn't he know what would happen to both of them if the wrong people saw them together? His most distressing thought, however, was that this other boy might be like Kurt. Might be gay. Might have wanted Kurt to touch him. Might like Kurt back.

He tightened his jaw and threw a vicious glare at the stranger, who simply looked confused. Why wasn't Blondie scared of him? Well, he'd learn soon enough. Finn was not about to let some yahoo cracker hurt Kurt.

Sam took a good look at Finn and thought the dude probably bled vinegar and water, immediately dismissing him from his mind, though he moved closer to Kurt just to piss the guy off even more.

"Kurt?"

"Good morning, Mr. Schuester," the boy said formally. "This is Sam Evans, our new transfer student. I'm his Peer Mentor and am showing around McKinley. He has expressed curiosity about Glee Club so, with your permission, I thought he might sit in on our practice to determine if he has an interest in joining us."

Will nodded enthusiastically. "Of course. Welcome, Sam! And thank you, Kurt, for reaching out to tell other students about New Directions." He sent a pointed look at the other members, who either shifted uncomfortably in their seats or rolled their eyes.

Kurt nodded as Will and Sam exchanged pleasantries.

"I signed up for that program," Santana complained. "How come Trout Pout wasn't assigned to me?"

"I would imagine because Ms. Pillsbury didn't consider a detailed guided tour of the school's janitorial closets to be an efficient use of time," Kurt drawled.

She snickered.

Rachel shot to her feet and pointed an accusing finger at Sam. "He could be a spy!"

"Sam," Kurt said calmly, "please allow me to introduce you to Rachel Berry, the co-captain of New Directions."

Sam's eyes widened and he turned toward Kurt. "Seriously?"

"Way to roll out the welcome mat, Berry," Quinn hissed.

Santana snorted. "She saves that for Finn and the foot of her bed."
"Santana," Kurt said before Will could scold her.

She huffed and made puppy eyes at him until his lips twitched. Satisfied, she crossed her arms across her chest and kicked back in her chair.

Will observed this with fascination.

"I would apologize for Rachel," Kurt said to Sam, "but she's always like this."

Several people sighed, nodded, or both.

"He really could be a spy!" the girl insisted.

Kurt bit his lip forcefully in a painful bid to hold his silence.

"Say it," Tina said through gritted teeth. "Whatever you were you were going to say, Kurt, say it, or she'll just keep going."

Kurt sighed and shot a look of apology at Will, who appeared perplexed.

"Rachel, in case you missed my announcement – which wouldn't be surprising, as you rarely consider the words of anyone other than yourself – Sam is a transfer student from Tennessee. That is, he will be attending McKinley for the next two years. This is a high school, Rachel, not Cloak and Dagger. I would ask you to remove your head from your behind, but we might all be killed by the resulting sonic boom."

Puck and Santana burst out laughing, as did Artie and Mike, who then glared at each other.

Rachel gaped as her entire face turned beet red.

"Kurt," Will warned.

The boy held up a hand. "I apologize, both to you and Rachel. I was out of line; but you must admit that she was, as well. We are in need of a twelfth member to qualify for Sectionals. I discussed this with Sam, who was intrigued and graciously agreed to consider joining our club. Rachel was rude, combative, and unwelcoming to a new student. This attitude will in no way help us recruit new members."

For some reason, those words hurt Rachel more deeply than his insult.

Will slowly nodded. "I agree. Rachel, I understand your concerns, and they are legitimate, but hurling baseless accusations is not only obnoxious, but poor sportsmanship. Please apologize to Sam."

She huffed and stormed out of the room, purposefully knocking into Kurt, who fell to the floor.

"Kurt!" both Sam and Finn yelled.

Finn jumped to his feet to help his friend, only to be frustrated when Kurt was already safe in Sam's arms.

"Thank you, Sam," Kurt said to the boy as he stood, before nodding at Finn. "Thank you, Finn."

"Are you all right, Kurt?" Will softly asked.

"I'm just fine, thank you. Sam, please don't judge us all by Rachel's behavior or my interaction with
her. We simply don't get along very well. She will return in five minutes and apologize, and will probably give you cookies tomorrow. Admittedly, her *I'm Sorry* cookies are delicious."

Sam blinked. "Is she crazy?"

"Yes," several chorused.

"No," Finn said in a small voice.

"Mr. Schuester," Kurt began, "perhaps it would be best to introduce Sam to the other members while I catch my breath."

Will nodded uneasily and led Sam over to the front of the risers as Kurt gingerly deposited himself in a chair.

"Are you sure you're okay?" asked a concerned Mike.

Kurt smiled. "I'm fine. I was just surprised and had the wind knocked out of me. I should apologize to her again. I often let her get the best of me, to both of our detriments."

Mike shook his head. "Kurt, she was really out of line. You only said what the rest of us were thinking. She's not always right, and she needs to learn that."

Kurt was astonished. "Thank you, Mike," he finally whispered.

The other boy nodded kindly.

Kurt noted Mercedes' worried expression, as well as the fact that her stubborn pride would not allow her to walk over and inquire after him. He sighed. He glanced at Santana, who was glaring at the door with rancor. He caught her eye and subtly shook his head. She rolled her eyes and dismissed him. He sighed again, knowing that she would do something to avenge him to Rachel and would not be dissuaded from whatever action she had planned.

The next thing he noticed was that Sam had taken a seat next to him and had placed a hand on his shoulder. He gave the boy a weak smile and then he felt a hand on his other shoulder. He looked up into Will's eyes.

"Okay?"

Kurt nodded and discreetly shrugged the hand off.

Will sighed and crossed over to the front of the room.

"Oh," Kurt said, startled out of contemplation, "Mr. Schuester, I told Sam that he wouldn't be expected to perform today. I sprung this on him, and he's unprepared."

Will nodded. "That's fine, Kurt. Sam, you're welcome to return this afternoon or tomorrow to audition, if you're so inclined."

Sam blushed. "I could do it now, if you'd like."

Will's brows rose. "If you're certain, we'd be glad to listen. Unfortunately, the jazz band isn't joining us today, so you'll have to sing acapella."

Sam stood and looked around nervously.
"You've got this," said a confident Kurt.

Sam smiled down at him before approaching Puck. "Dude, could I borrow your guitar?"

Puck quirked an eyebrow, considered the request, and finally shrugged. "Yeah, okay."

"Thanks."

"Whatever."

Sam, guitar in hand, moved over to stand next to Will, who shuffled back toward the wall. "Um, does anyone play piano?"

"I do," Kurt said.

Sam beamed. "Care to accompany me?"

"Of course," Kurt nodded, standing and walking over toward him. "What will you be singing? I want to make sure I'm familiar with it."

Sam leaned over and whispered into his ear.

Kurt blinked. "Outstanding."

Sam's mouth fell open. "You really know it?"

Kurt winked. "Don't judge a gay by his stunning wardrobe."

Sam, and several others, burst out laughing.

Kurt then took his place behind the piano, waiting for Sam's signal.

Sam cleared his throat several times and rolled his neck in an effort to loosen himself up. Finally, he nodded at Kurt, who began playing the opening measures. Sam was surprised that Kurt had selected the right key without being told his preference. Wow.

"Ever since I lost you, baby," Sam softly sang, looking at the floor, "I've been here and there, looking for some peace of mind. Can't find it anywhere."

Sam's voice was gentle, Kurt thought, neither weak nor strong, but pleasant and refreshing, like an autumn breeze. There was a crispness he greatly enjoyed. Sam's phrasing and diction were flawless, which wasn't always the case with many country songs, but Sam was paying due homage to the original artist, Trisha Yearwood, for whom Kurt had always felt a deep appreciation. He believed she would have been pleased by Sam's interpretation.

He hated this song as much as he adored it. Despite its romantic implications, it reminded him painfully of his mother. She had been much on his mind lately. He didn't think he'd ever get over her death. He wasn't even sure he wanted to try. Holding on to the pain for some reason allowed him to hold even more tightly to her, though he knew it was unhealthy. He just didn't care.

"I went down to Tunica, played me a little blackjack. Saw a wino on the corner, gave my winnings back."

Will was surprised, happily so. Sam was so far proving to be a great find, and he made a mental note to congratulate and thank Kurt once again for bringing Sam to their attention. He leaned back against the chair and decided simply to enjoy the performance. He could only hope Sam would agree to join
New Directions. He also had a feeling that Kurt would play an important role in that decision.

Santana fought to pay attention. Hot Lips was adorable and had a sweet voice, but she was more concerned with Berry and how to pay the bitch back for going after Kurt. That shit was just not on, and she wasn't going to abide it. She had been sick of Rachel last year, hogging all of the solos and disparaging the talent of everyone else. Santana knew that she herself was one of the better singers in the club, and while she might not be putting out CDs anytime soon, Kurt and Mercedes were easily in Rachel's league, if not beyond it. So if the girl thought they'd spend another year placating and deferring to her every whim, she was in for a rude awakening.

"If it was just money, baby, I could make it," Sam continued, entering the chorus and raising his gaze to stare sightlessly above the heads of the people before him, "but living without you, can I take it? All I see ahead of me is just melancholy blue."

Quinn felt her heart melting into a puddle of warm happiness, despite the inherent despair of the song. Sam had a beautiful voice, in her opinion, and she would never miss the opportunity to hear Kurt play. He always infused so much passion into his performances, whether vocal or instrumental. His fingers became the music, adding layers of feeling even to the most emotional of songs. Brad was a gifted pianist, but it sometimes sounded as though he were playing by rote, completely divorced from the song's meaning. He just didn't possess Kurt's ardor.

Finn squirmed in his seat. As much as he didn't want to admit it, Sam was good. Very good. He didn't know if Sam was as good as him, since Sam was singing in a different key. Sam's voice was clearer, he thought, more nuanced. It was probably a good thing Rachel had left. Had she stayed, she would have gotten ideas. He was really mad at her. Okay, so maybe Kurt had been a little over the top, but he was Kurt and he had apologized, and Rachel had been a complete bitch to both Kurt and Sam for no good reason he could discern. And then just pushing Kurt over like he was in her way or something. What the hell? Not cool.

Tina was sitting with her elbows on her knees, chin in her hands, as she listened to the beautiful ballad. She could tell from the accompaniment that it was a country song, a genre with which she wasn't very familiar. She liked some country songs, mostly the ones that crossed over to the pop charts. She would ask Sam or Kurt after the performance for the name of the original artist and look them up on iTunes. She figured whoever they were had to be very good, or they wouldn't have come to Kurt's attention. As eclectic and varied as his musical tastes were, he was also picky and generally avoided trash. She also thought there was some kind of energy between Sam and Kurt. She couldn't be positive, of course, but she liked it. She'd have to keep a close eye on them if Sam ended up joining the club.

"'Cause I ain't got no future without you," Sam sang, his voice tender and ringing with sorrow.

Artie didn't know why Sam had chosen this song, only that it must have meant something deeply personal to him. The lyrics were stark and beguiling, as he found a lot of country music to be. There was something about the genre that produced songs which immediately drew one's attention and encouraged them to invest in it. Many country songs were musical stories, giving voice to universal emotions in a particular yet thoughtful way.

He was trying very hard not to cry. Few people other than Kurt and Tina knew of his obsession with ballads, of how they were unable to unlock him from the darker emotions he tried so hard to suppress. He would listen to them for hours, finding comfort and release in their pain and despair. Though they weren't an exact fit, the lyrics reminded him of his relationship with Tina. He didn't know how he was going to live without her, even though he was now, apparently, dating Brittany, for whom he cared a great deal. But she wasn't Tina. He knew he wasn't a very romantic guy. He
tried, he did, and it wasn't as though he was a soulless automaton. He had just never discovered how to verbalize the turbulent emotions that swirled within him on a minute-by-minute basis. So he shut them away and tried not to consider them.

Puck thought the song was pretty, so therefore he pretty much hated it. That said, New Kid could play the guitar pretty damn well, and it'd be nice to have another dude like that in the club. Of course that also meant Sam was just more competition for solos Puck himself would never get, but he wasn't too pressed. He actually didn't give much of a shit about solos. He just liked to campaign for them because it pissed Rachel off and made Finn feel insecure, which was, like, the most awesome double play ever.

Except for when he had simultaneously nailed Santana and Olivia Parker. That'd been hot.

Also hot was the chemistry between New Kid and Princess. They were giving off some seriously sexy vibes in his opinion. He wouldn't be averse to watching them fuck. Hell, given how tasty the Princess was looking, he'd join in. But just for one night. One night of gay sex didn't make you gay. He'd read that somewhere. On a men's room wall, he thought.

"I went down to Austin, lots of beautiful people there," Sam crooned. "Could have had a better adventure," he shrugged, "I just didn't care."

Brittany thought Sam was hot, kind of like a mix between Puck and Finn, but blond. Still, he wasn't as hot as Kurt. No one was as hot as Kurt in her eyes, except for Santana, but that was different because Santana was a girl. Despite what some idiots thought, Kurt was very much a boy. She knew from first-hand experience.

She wondered if Sam was a dolphin, because he and Kurt would look really beautiful if they were sweaty and naked and moaning, their arms and legs entangled. Maybe Sam was half-dolphin like she and Santana were? That would be neat. Then she and Kurt could play Sammy-in-the-Middle. Suddenly her panties were wet. That was weird. She decided to enjoy the feeling and quietly went somewhere else in her head, taking derivates of polynomial functions.

"Got a job in California, they sure liked my style." Sam's projection increased, his voice purposefully breaking on the last syllable. "But there's somethin' 'bout that California sun. It reminds me of your smile."

Rachel quietly reentered the room, shame plain on her face, unsurprised to see the furious glares of Santana and Mercedes immediately fall upon her. She swallowed heavily, castigating herself for being ridiculous and offending someone she didn't even know, as well as physically assaulting one of her fellow club members, someone she had hoped she might one day call a friend. Kurt had been mean but right. She hadn't meant to run into him so hard, but as she pushed past him, she had heard him fall to the floor and, mortified, she'd fled, rather than stop to apologize and help him.

She leaned against the wall and closed her eyes, trying to drown herself in the song. Sam had a nice voice. She would need to hear several more performances before she reached an informed opinion, but his tone would be an excellent addition to the club if he could be convinced to join, which might not be possible after she had gone all Xena, Warrior Princess on his ass. Well, more like Callisto.

"If it was just money, baby,..."

Everyone, including Sam, startled when Kurt joined in on the reprise of the chorus, matching Sam note for note, only one octave above Sam's own. He wasn't creating a harmony, but a hauntingly gorgeous interplay on the melody, his voice high and so clear that it ricocheted around the room, yet he somehow managed to keep himself from overpowering Sam's vocals.
Sam almost lost his pacing as he turned to glance over his shoulder, his own eyes filling as he saw the tears slipping down Kurt's cheeks. He was going to do everything in his power to show Kurt his appreciation and amazement for his generosity and ability.

"...I could make it. But living without you, can I take it? All I see ahead of me is just melancholy blue. 'Cause I ain't got no future without you," they sang, in perfect sync.

Sam took a deep breath, Kurt's masterful fingers dancing up the piano as they approached the bridge and crescendo.

"Now and then, I go back to Biloxi whenever I feel brave. Visit that little country church down there…"

Sam poured power into his voice, tightening his vibrato and slightly adjusting his tone to make it fuller, warmer, so that he could keep up with Kurt rather than forcing the other boy to hold back. Kurt stunned him once more by somehow knowing what he was about to do and yet again matching him.

And it was perfect. They were perfect.

Rachel gasped softly and covered her mouth with a hand.

Kurt and Sam then simultaneously stopped playing their respective instruments.

"Lay some flowers on your grave," Sam sang in a whisper, though it carried, as he once again stared down at the floor, his bangs falling into his eyes.

Quinn's own eyes watered, as did those of Mercedes.

"Wow," Mike breathed, eyes wide.

Sam and Kurt then resumed their playing and Sam once again took over the vocals.

"You sure got a hold on me, I don't know what to do. I ain't got no future."

He looked up and again stared straight ahead. "I can't see my future," he sang, wailing the third word and closing his eyes.

The instrumental again stopped as Sam's eyes snapped open.

"Without you."

Kurt performed the dénouement, somehow managing to infuse the notes with longing and anguish, but also with a finality that was as striking as it was depressing.

When it was over, Kurt nimbly hopped off the piano bench and came to stand next to Sam, who was surprised there were no tears on the boy's cheeks. There wasn't even a trace that he had been crying.

The audience stared at them for a long moment.

"Hell yes!" Mercedes suddenly screamed.

Then all of them were on their feet applauding, hooting and hollering, and wolf-whistling. Even Puck, who figured, what the hell?

Kurt looked over at Sam and smiled. "You're fantastic."
Sam blushed heavily but beamed. "Thanks, but what about you? Dude, your piano skills are sick! That was better than the original recording!" His eyes appeared to lose focus. "And your voice," he said softly. "You're incredible."

Kurt flushed and turned away, though he had a small, pleased grin on his face.

Quinn and Santana shared a smirk. Oh, yeah. Hevans was so on. Or it would be, before they got finished with them.

Finn felt something clawing in his stomach, like those dying people in Aliens. He knew he should go over there to welcome Sam and congratulate Kurt, but he just couldn't. He didn't know why, but his feet simply refused to move.

"Guys, that was phenomenal!" raved a rather teary Will, standing behind both boys. "Truly an impressive performance. What a way to start off the new term!" He paused as Kurt and Sam mumbled their thanks. "Sam, I'm sure I speak for all of us when I say we'd love for you to join New Directions."

"Thanks," Sam repeated, ducking his head. "Can I take the night to think about it? I'd like to see some of the others perform, just to gauge how well I'd fit in here, and talk it over with my parents. Even if you can't use my voice, I'd be happy to play guitar if anyone needs me to."

Will blinked. Was this kid serious? Not use his voice? "Of course," he said, somewhat stiltedly. "It's always good to think things over before committing yourself to anything. I would, however, appreciate it if you could let me know for sure by tomorrow."

Sam nodded.

"That's fine," Will said, smiling brightly and, he hoped, winningly. He turned back toward the piano and began shuffling through sheet music, already planning out numbers that would feature both Sam and Kurt. He didn't know where the hell Kurt had been hiding that voice – he'd thought he had known everything Kurt could do – but he wanted more of it, especially for competition.

Rachel slowly walked forward and stared deeply into Kurt's eyes. He looked back with equal focus.

"Bygones," he finally said.

She smiled tearfully. "Thank you. And my apologies, Sam. There was an incident last year that has, unfortunately, made me incredibly paranoid and hesitant to…"

"I accept," Sam said, smiling and cutting her off.

She nodded sheepishly. "You really have been practicing," she said softly to Kurt. "You were spectacular."

Kurt softened and nodded once. "Thank you, Rachel. It means a lot to me that you think so. I've been training all summer."

She frowned, alarm bells sounding off in her head. "Training."

"I received several weeks of private instruction and have been practicing on my own throughout the summer."

"Where did you train?" she asked meekly, fearful of the answer.
"Rome."

Sweat broke out across her forehead. "That's nice," she said, trying and failing for nonchalance, completely bewildered by the fact that Kurt had mentioned this only in passing, as if it were nothing remarkable. Nor was he rubbing it in her face.

That could only mean that his training had been successful, that his confidence in his own ability had only grown, that he had probably mastered vocal techniques that were far beyond her current training and level of skill, and that he would be her greatest competition, more so than he had already been. Even more upsetting was that he didn't appear to consider her competition at all.

Last year, Kurt's arrogance had been galling. Now, his confidence was terrifying.

But the worst possibility was that Kurt was simply no longer interested in competing with her. That would be horrible. She depended on their rivalry; she thrived on it. His constant challenges had driven her to be better, to achieve more than she had believed she could, despite her own irrepressible confidence. She needed Kurt to force her to prove herself. She needed his approval.

But what if he no longer needed hers?

"Anywhere in particular?" she asked, voice shaky.

"Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia."

They all turned as Will choked, the sheet music falling from his hands and gently scattering across the floor.

Rachel's eyes bulged. "Oh."

"Kurt, how in the world did you get accepted there?" Will asked.

"Whoa," Sam said. "That was pretty offensive."

Will's eyes widened and he shook his head furiously. "I certainly didn't mean that the way it sounded. I apologize, Kurt. I was just so thrown. I didn't mean to offend you."

Kurt smiled pleasantly, if vacantly. "No offense taken."

"Who the hell is Cecilia?" Puck demanded. "And is she hot?"

Quinn, Mercedes, and Santana rolled their eyes and sighed.

"The Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia is one of the world's oldest music conservatories, Puck," Will explained, his accent far inferior to Kurt's own. "It's considered to be Italy's national academy of music. It's one of the finest places one can receive musical education."

Puck blinked and then shrugged. "Okay." He turned to Kurt. "So how'd you like it, Princess?"

Kurt laughed. "I enjoyed it immensely, Noah, thank you for asking."

Puck nodded and slung his arms across Kurt's shoulders. "So, did you get your cherry popped this summer, babe?"

"Puck!" Finn and Will shouted.

Kurt raised an eyebrow, then rolled his eyes as Finn tackled Puck to the floor.
"Don't talk about Kurt that way!" Finn screamed. "Don't talk about him. Don't touch him. Don't even look at him!"

Puck and Finn rolled together across the floor, shouting obscenities and insults at each other, as the rest of the group either tried to separate them or egged them on.

Rachel was shrieking at Finn as Will tried to pull the two boys apart, only to trip and fall to the ground for his efforts. Rachel quickly helped him up.

"Finn Hudson," Kurt hissed in a low, dangerous voice.

Sam shivered. So did Santana, but for an altogether different reason. A slow smile spread across Quinn's face.

Immediately, Finn released Puck and sprang to his feet, looking sheepish and abashed. Puck hauled himself up and glared at him, muttering promises of vengeance underneath his breath.

"Finn Hudson," Kurt repeated.

Finn hated that he loved the way Kurt said his full name. He had missed it this morning. He didn't know why he had done what he had just done. He only knew he had to keep Puck away from Kurt, otherwise Kurt would become as tainted as Quinn.

"Sorry," he whispered.

"I'm sorry, too," Kurt said. "I'm sorry that Sam had to witness this ridiculous and vulgar display of stupidity. I'm sorry that we, as a club, have obviously learned nothing from last year's travails. Were Sam truly a spy as Rachel feared, he wouldn't have to lift a finger against us, as it's apparent that we're intent on causing our own implosion."

Finn, Rachel, and several others blushed.

"We are exceedingly fortunate that Coach Sylvester was not here to see this exchange, otherwise you and Noah would find yourselves suspended and we would be down two more members."

Finn and Puck guiltily looked down at the floor.

Will couldn't decide if he was angry that he had lost control of the room or if he was curious as to why he simply hadn't put Kurt in charge last year. The boy was certainly doing a good job of handling his classmates, far better than he himself ever had. That was embarrassing. And the kids had never listened to Rachel.

"And just so we're clear, Finn," Kurt added, "while I appreciate your attempt at defending my honor, no matter how inappropriate or unnecessary, I believe we can both agree that it's a little late for you to be my knight in shining armor."

"Kurt…"

"Further," Kurt interrupted, "Noah was simply teasing me, much in the same manner Santana and Mercedes did this morning. He wasn't trying to offend me. He's my…” he trailed off, uncertain, before snapping his mouth shut.

"What?" Mercedes demanded, glaring furiously at Puck.

Kurt looked nervously at Puck, who was just angry.
"Just tell them, Princess!"

"Oh my god!" Quinn exclaimed. "Are you two together?"

"What!" Finn roared.

Kurt blinked and started laughing hysterically. "Y-You th-think we're d-d-dating?" He doubled over and wheezed.

Puck, who had been chuckling, suddenly frowned. "It's not that funny, Princess."

Kurt looked up at him, gaped, and began laughing anew.

"Hey," Puck whined. "Come on, man. It's not so impossible to believe. I'm a stud."

Kurt wiped his eyes and pulled himself together. "You're also straight, Noah," he said, rather fondly.

Puck shrugged. "Maybe I'm evolving. I could be bi or something, right?"

Kurt shook his head, much amused. "Oh, Noah. I don't think so."

Puck smirked in reply. "Maybe you should kiss me to find out for sure."

Kurt batted his eyelashes. "But after that, I'd have to cut off my lips. However would I sing?"

Sam and Santana snickered.

"You could recycle them," Puck volleyed. "With lips that big, maybe you could turn them into suitcase handles."

"To carry the bags underneath your eyes?" Kurt shot back.

Puck growled, but soon started sniggering.

"So...you're not dating?" Finn slowly asked.

Kurt and Puck simultaneously rolled their eyes. "No," they intoned.

"Then what were you going to say?" Mercedes asked Kurt. "What is he to you? Why do you keep calling him Noah? And when did you become friends with Matt?"

Kurt frowned. Apparently Mercedes' unrequited crush on Matt had either never been extinguished or had reignited after the boy had moved away. In either case, he wasn't impressed with her jealousy and was in no mood to placate her.

"Why shouldn't he be friends with Matt?" barked a suddenly defensive Mike. "What? Matt isn't good enough for him or something?"

"That's not what I meant!" she trilled.

"Then what the hell were you trying to say?" he demanded.

"She doesn't like Kurty having friends other than her," Brittany said.

Kurt winced. The statement was true, but he wished Brittany hadn't announced it to the entire room.

"That's not true," Mercedes denied.
"Yeah, it is," Brittany challenged. "You were mad that Puck and Kurty were getting along this morning. You were mad when you found out Kurty was friends with Matt. You gave me and San dirty looks when Kurty walked into school with us, and you did it again when Sam walked in to the room with Kurty. If you weren't friends with Tina and Artie, you'd hate them too. You're jealous."

Quinn was nodding right along with Brittany's tirade, which made Kurt frown.

Sam, Santana, and Puck exchanged glances. Finn was cringing, knowing Brittany's assault against Mercedes was applicable to himself, as well.

With each sentence, Brittany had advanced closer and closer toward Mercedes, until she was finally yelling right into the other girl's face.

Santana cleared her throat. "Brittany."

Brittany shook her head. "No. She's still mad at Kurt for staying with the Cheerios. She's mad that we all like him, and that Coach does too."

"That's enough now, honey," Kurt said quietly.

Brittany whirled on her heel to face him. "She's mean, Kurt. It's not fair."

He shook his head. He had to put a stop to this immediately. He walked over and gathered a crying Mercedes in his arms, sad when she tried to push him away, but relieved when she finally relented and hugged him back.

"Brittany," he began, "Mercedes is not mean. She's just worries about me and is very overprotective. Those aren't bad things."

Brittany was bewildered. "But why does she need to protect you from us? We're your friends!"

Kurt sighed. "Darling, you've never been slushied, let alone been slushied multiple times a day, every day, for months on end. Yes, the Cheerios are now my friends, and I'm proud to call them such, but you know they used to slushy Mercedes and me, as well as Rachel and Artie."

Sam wondered what the hell frosty goodness had to do with anything.

Brittany nodded, tears in her eyes. "Some of the Cheerios are mean, but not all of us. I never hurt you, and neither did Santana nor Quinn."

"That's true," Kurt said, "but when you've been bullied as badly as we have, it can be very hard to trust people, even if you do like them, because you always wonder when they'll turn on you. And as much I love Quinn, she did bully Rachel."

Quinn flushed. Rachel was stunned Kurt had just called out her friend on her behalf.

Brittany sniffled. "That's sad." She flew at them and hugged Mercedes. "I'm sorry," she said to the other girl. "I'm sorry I was mean. I just don't want you to take Kurty away from me."

Mercedes swallowed heavily and hugged her back. "I wouldn't do that, and I'm sorry, too. I get really defensive about Kurt. He's my best friend. I just don't want anyone ever to hurt him again. Think about how you would feel if people treated Santana the way they treated Kurt."

Brittany pulled back, fire in her eyes. "I'd kill them."

Mercedes nodded.
"Sorry again," Brittany said weakly.

"Me too," the other girl said.

They hugged once more.

"Well, this was fun," Puck sneered, whimpering when Kurt smacked him upside his head. He pouted before making kissy faces at the other boy, grinning when Kurt laughed.

"So what is going on with you two?" Quinn asked them.

Puck smirked and pulled Kurt to him. "The Princess and I are currently involved in the world's most epic bromance."

Kurt blushed as he became the recipient of several hard, searching looks, including ones from Sam and Will. Finally, he nodded.

"Noah is my friend and wouldn't hurt me."

Puck swelled with pride.

Finn gaped at Kurt. "How can you say that? It wasn't that long ago that he was throwing you in dumpsters!"

"Wait, what?" Sam demanded.

"Excuse me?" Will asked at the same moment.

Kurt ignored them. "And you were standing right there beside him, Finn. Unlike you, Noah came to me and apologized, and I accepted."

Everyone turned toward Puck, who glared back with fierce determination.

"Any animosity between Noah and myself is in the past, where it belongs," Kurt said. "We've made our peace."

"So why didn't you tell anyone?" asked a curious Santana.

Puck rolled his eyes. "The Princess was worried about this," he said, waving his hand about the room. "He knew this would happen. And even though I don't give a crap, he didn't want to see the jocks turn on me because I was hanging with the school fairy."

"That's a slur!" Rachel cried.

Kurt smiled. "It's not. It's just Noah. It's no different from Santana calling me Tink or Rainbow. It's affection, not malice. And, as Noah tolerates me calling him the Scourge of Humanity and a host of even more creative epithets, I'm willing to suffer his inanity."

Puck nodded happily.

"How could you?" Finn barked at Kurt, voice sharp with betrayal. "You're supposed to be my friend."

Kurt stilled. "I was your friend, Finn. You were the one who was uncomfortable with that."

Finn flushed. "You know why."
Kurt nodded. "I had a grossly inappropriate crush on you. Rest assured, that time has long since passed. Believe me, it now mortifies me far more than it ever did you."

Finn's fists curled. "You know what he did to me."

Kurt sneered. "And you know what he did to me. I chose to forgive him because he asked, because he was honestly contrite. It had absolutely nothing to do with you. Not everything does, you know." He shook his head. "This discussion is over. My friendship with Noah is not open for a public dissection. If you have a problem with it, deal with it on your own time. We still have performances to get through and we're wasting precious moments arguing old hurts."

He turned to Sam and sighed. "I'm just so sorry, Sam. If I'd had any idea that you would be walking into this, I would have encouraged you to run far, far away."

Sam was feeling somewhat overwhelmed by the encounter session he had just witnessed, but his brow furrowed. "Why? You didn't do anything wrong."

That frank statement quelled many, particularly Finn, Puck, Mercedes, and Rachel, who were now embarrassed they had thrown childish fits for no good reason.

Will cleared his throat. "Once again, Kurt is correct. We've lost fifteen minutes and will have to carry over some performances to this afternoon and tomorrow morning. Sam, you're welcome to return for this afternoon's session, as you haven't yet been given an opportunity to see what we're supposed to be doing here."

The others shifted nervously.

Will then handed Rachel, Puck, and Finn each a piece of paper.

Puck rolled his eyes and Finn swore under his breath, while Rachel studied the paper in confusion. "What is this?"

"Notice of your detention," Will answered. "You each physically assaulted a fellow student, and you, Rachel, verbally harassed another. You have three days of detention with me after school this week."

"But…football," Finn whimpered.

Sam perked up. "We'll schedule it around practice," Will affirmed.

Puck shrugged. "Whatever."

Rachel gaped. "I've never had a detention in my life!"

Will glared at her. "Then I guess it's true what they say: there's a first time for everything."

Defeated, she threw herself sullenly into the nearest chair.

"I wouldn't blame you if you wanted to leave," Kurt quietly said to Sam.

"Are you staying?" the other boy asked.

Kurt nodded. "I have to."
Sam shrugged. "Then I'll stay too."

Kurt blinked. "Really?"

"Why not? I'm pretty sure I'm either on painkillers or that this is the craziest reality show ever."

Kurt, Santana, Quinn, Artie, Tina, and Mike laughed.

Sam prepared himself to listen attentively to the four randomly selected vocalists who would shortly be performing their songs. Apparently the theme was Summer Vacation. That was certainly open-ended. And lame.

Mr. Schuester decided to draw said names from a hat which made everyone groan and hiss upon its appearance, reminding them again that, as the jazz band wasn't present that day, they either had to sing acapella or provide their own backing tracks. He indicated the iPod dock atop the piano.

Rachel tried to bypass the process and nominated herself to go first, explaining that she had prepared several appropriate selections for the assignment. For some reason, she had stressed the word *appropriate*. Sam didn't understand why, but figured there must have been some back story there, considering the way several people glared at her.

He didn't know what to think about Rachel. He didn't really like her, but he certainly didn't hate her. She was just *there*, like a mildly annoying headache you know will eventually go away but that you have to put up with in the meantime. Maybe, if he decided to join, she would calm down and they could possibly become something like friends. It was interesting watching her interact with the others, mostly because she didn't. Oh, she *talked* to them, but only after they had first addressed her, usually via insult or thinly-veiled threat, which Sam didn't think was very cool either.

Rachel really only *spoke* to Kurt and Finn. Finn was obvious, because, as Sam had learned, they were dating. He didn't even want think about that.

But Rachel also had some strange fixation on Kurt. Anytime she said *anything*, she would word it as a general statement, but her eyes would dart toward Kurt, as if waiting for him to interrupt, comment, or dismiss her. It was utterly bizarre.

But Kurt never offered a reply. He merely sat there, quietly pondering who knew what. The more he ignored her, the more frustrated Rachel became, which, in turn, caused Finn's anxiety to grow.

Sam wouldn't have thought Kurt would ever crush on someone like Finn, though he reflected that he himself didn't yet know Finn very well. What he did know, he didn't like. Finn appeared to be slightly violent and more than a little homophobic. What had Kurt found attractive about that? Granted, Finn was handsome, but no more so than Puck or Mike in Sam's estimation.

The relationships among these people were confusing, and not only because they shared a lot of history. He could accept Kurt and Puck's friendship easily enough, even though it was weird, because he didn't really understand their past. They did look strange, though, sitting together and happily chatting. Maybe it was the mohawk. Or maybe it was because they were flirting outrageously with each other, just because they could and they knew it was upsetting some people. Still, Sam thought it had been pretty damn cool of Puck to swallow his pride, admit that he'd been an asshole, and apologize for it.
And Kurt had forgiven him because Kurt was absolutely perfect and beautiful and smart and funny and talented and had a truly **epic** ass and…

Sam shook his head to clear it, once again silently cursing having a complexion which heated up like the sun when he experienced any mild emotion. Okay, so he had a little crush on Kurt. It wasn’t like he could help it. Hell, he couldn’t understand why someone wouldn’t have a crush on Kurt.

He knew that a lot of it was probably hero-worship because Kurt was the first kid he’d met in Lima and had been so kind and helpful to him, as well as nonjudgmental. And another huge part of his crush was based solely on looks, sure, but Kurt was smoking hot, so whatever.

And it wasn’t like he was the only one. Brittany was obviously crushing on Kurt, knowing and not caring that Kurt was gay. It was actually kind of nice, how accepting Brittany was, not restricting herself or anyone else to perceived social norms. He still couldn’t figure out what the deal was with Brittany, Artie, and Santana, though.

Santana scared him stupid. He’d known girls like her before, girls who ate souls like candy and whose tongues were as sharp as their fingernails. He hadn’t minded her suggestive comments; in fact, he was rather flattered. The girl was gorgeous, after all. Still, something had stopped him from flirting back, probably some part of his lizard brain which had recognized and feared a much more powerful predator.

But she had a wicked awesome sense of humor. He hoped they would be friends. He sure as hell didn’t want her for an enemy.

Her relationship with Kurt was pretty interesting, as well, mostly because they communicated nonverbally. They didn’t even rely on sneers or eyerolls or smirks. They would look at each other with blank faces, yet he could tell they totally knew what the other was thinking. Creepy, but still cool.

Artie, Tina, and Mike were all very nice, down-to-earth people, yet Sam sensed an awkward tension among the three of them. It was pretty obvious that Artie, despite apparently dating Brittany, was hung up on Tina, and therefore resented Mike. He didn’t know if it was just a crush or if Artie and Tina used to go out, but the looks of sorrow Artie shot at Tina and the angry glares he leveled at Mike spoke for themselves. Tina and Artie were both close with Kurt, and it seemed like Mike was trying to get to know Kurt better, perhaps to impress Tina.

Sam couldn’t stop himself from staring when Mike’s t-shirt had ridden up as he stretched, revealing an amazing set of abs. Sam was pretty darned proud of his own abs, but Mike was like, totally shredded. It was intimidating for some reason. Mike was also really, really hot.

But not as hot as Kurt.

Sam desperately wondered what Kurt's abs looked like. Kurt wasn't very muscular, but he was incredibly toned. Besides, the epic ass was so perfect that it just wouldn't be **right** if Kurt also had epic abs. He didn't even especially care about the abs. He just wondered if the rest of Kurt's skin was as soft as his hands.

Sam closed his eyes as his mind drifted off to a Happy Place, one in which Kurt was wearing very little, yet he politely applauded as Rachel finished performing her rendition of *Summer of ’69*. Sam was pretty sure there was nothing ironic about the song choice, but considering whom it would have referenced, he was relieved.

Rachel beamed at Finn and bowed grandly before skipping back to her seat, reveling in the meager
applause. Apparently they were the stars of the club, and while Sam could appreciate Rachel's talent, he hadn't felt anything while she had been performing. Sure, she had the pipes, but everything about her style just screamed generic.

Sam was also annoyed with Mr. Schuester for just allowing Rachel to go first, even though her name had been the third drawn. He hadn't even fought her, and Sam could only deduce that he capitulated to her often. That was a little pathetic.

Mercedes sauntered up the center of the room like she owned it, and Sam couldn't help but admire her confidence. He didn't really understand her deal with Kurt, but they loved each other a lot, he could tell. He could also tell that Mercedes was a little bit in love with Kurt, just enough to be territorial when it came to anyone else circling Kurt's waters. He was just wondering when it would be his turn to be interrogated. Because he definitely was going to keep circling Kurt.

From the moment the girl opened her mouth, Sam was in awe. Mercedes wailed away, each soulful note sending shivers up and down his spine. He had always been drawn to that type of voice: powerful, but honeyed. He loved country music as a genre – as well as pop, rock, blues, and hip-hop – but his favorite artists included Adele, Jill Scott, Rebecca Lynn Howard, Jennifer Hudson, Amy Winehouse, Anggun, Taylor Dayne, Faith Hill, and others of that skill set: girls with big voices.

He couldn't stop staring at Mercedes. She had total presence. He couldn't have taken his eyes off of her if he wanted to – and he didn't.

"Wow," he breathed. "She's incredible."

Kurt nodded happily. "She is."

Sam mouthed the words to the hymn as Mercedes gave them meaning and life, and he was the first on his feet, whistling through his fingers, when she finished. She looked over at him, startled, as if she had expected him not to like her.

The open appreciation on Sam's face gave Mercedes pause. At first, she thought he was perhaps trying to impress Kurt or placate her, but she could tell that he had truly enjoyed her performance. She had also noticed his polite if distant response to Rachel's song. She felt warmed that Sam preferred her over Rachel, even though she knew it made her petty. She hoped that if Sam did join the club, perhaps he would be yet another voice to insist that, while Rachel was talented, she didn't have to be the lead on every song.

She beamed at Sam and bowed her head in thanks and recognition. She also noticed that once she had, Sam's eyes immediately returned to Kurt.

Oh.

Oh!

She caught Santana's eye and the other girl subtly nodded.

Was her baby boy finally going to get his man? And a damn fine looking man Sam Evans was. If she wasn't so happy and excited for Kurt, she'd be jealous.
Hell, who was she kidding?

She was jealous, just as Brittany had accused. She had tried and tried to get over her crush on Kurt, which was why she had been so frustrated when he had kept after Finn, knowing his crush was as hopeless as her own. She had admired his tenacity, though she knew it was futile, and she had somewhat resented his persistence, because it had seemed to egg on her own. She knew she needed to let it go, let him be who he was meant to be, but it was just so damn hard. If only he wasn't gay, he would be the perfect boy. Of course, he was the perfect boy; just for another boy. She suppressed a sigh.

She was going to lose him if she didn't quit her nonsense. His words to her earlier that morning had stung, but only because they had been so true. She had been upset that he hadn't sought her approval for his new hairstyle or his new wardrobe. She was bitter and jealous of his new friendships with Puck and Matt. She was furious that he had stayed with the Cheerios and was now one of their most popular members.

There were so many demands on his time and she was terrified it was only a matter of said time before he cut her loose, so maybe she had been trying to provoke him to do it sooner, to make it a clean break. But then, as she had made the lonely trek to homeroom, she had realized that Kurt had always put her first, above everyone and everything else save his father. Why was she trying so hard to antagonize him? Why was she trying so damn hard to throw away the best friend she had ever had?

But what would happen to their relationship when Kurt started dating? He would put his boyfriend first – as he should, she realized; as she herself would – but even the idea made her anxious, which was probably why she had reacted so negatively to Kurt and Puck's bromance.

As Mike walked up to the front of the room, Mercedes kept her eye on Kurt and Sam, suddenly realizing how adorable they looked together. And how fucking gorgeous they were together. She was reminded that it was Kurt who had brought Sam to the meeting. Sam had only stayed because Kurt was remaining. She supposed that also meant that perhaps Sam had only agreed to attend at all because he wanted to be with Kurt.

Nice.

And, of course, Kurt was completely oblivious. She forced her eyes not to roll. Sweet Lord, she hoped his earlier words to Finn were true and that Kurt was finally over that blockhead.

Next on the list was getting herself over Kurt. She wouldn't let go of him – she could never have survived that – but she had to let go of the idea of them ever being anything more than friends. Otherwise she would lose him, through her own machinations and delusions.

Mike looked out nervously at the audience. Granted, they were his friends – or some of them were – but he had never really performed for them before; not vocally, at least. He missed Matt so much right then, knowing the other boy would have insisted they perform together, Schuester's rules be damned.

He also felt vaguely jealous and resentful of Kurt and Puck's new bromance. Not just because it was weird that it was them, but because it only reinforced his own sense of abandonment. Of course,
Matt hadn't really abandoned him – he had definitely not wanted to leave – but Mike felt abandoned anyway.

They had tried everything not to be separated. They hadn't been separated since they were five. Their families had even vacationed together. Both he and Matt had tried to convince their respective parents to let Matt move in with the Changs. They had even begged on hands and knees, but that plot had failed, not that they had really been expecting it to work.

He knew that there some people in the school who thought he and Matt were lovers, but neither of them had cared, knowing the haters were just jealous because they didn't have true friends of their own. If he and Matt had been girls, no one would have said anything, but because they were boys, they were automatically gay.

He could never truly comprehend everything Kurt had been put through, but he felt he had a glimmer of understanding. That was why he and Matt had never participated in the bullying of Kurt – not only because they knew there was nothing wrong with being gay, but because bullying people was lame and pathetic, and usually said more about the insecurities of the bullies rather than those of the victims. Still, their fear of being bullied themselves had kept them from being friends with Kurt, even though both he and Matt had always liked the boy.

He had been glad when Kurt and Matt had hit it off over Facebook and he was, with Tina's urging, looking forward to establishing his own friendship with Kurt. But now there was Puck with whom he would have to contend. And Sam, too, it appeared.

He dropped his iPod into the dock and cued up the music.

He felt Artie's silent judgment, knowing the other boy was just waiting for him to hit a sour note or miss his cue or something. Mike didn't blame him; he'd be sulking too if he had been stupid enough to lose an awesome girl like Tina.

He refused to feel sorry for Artie. The boy hadn't treated Tina well – not as well as she deserved – and he hadn't started anything with her until after she had broken up with Artie. Yes, she had gone about it all wrong – dropping a guy via email was pretty cold – but he didn't regret being with her.

He also knew that Artie had a killer voice and Mike didn't want to embarrass himself, which was one of the reasons had chosen the song he had. He figured if he was singing in Chinese, the others would not only not understand him, but would be thrown off by the differences in the tonality of the language. So if he missed a note, his ass was covered. Sometimes being Asian was even more cool than people realized, like when someone stopped you to ask for directions and you could just pretend you didn't speak English.

Heh.

Tina smiled broadly at him and he gave a small grin in return, losing himself in the rhythm as the music began to play. Yeah, Tina wouldn't know that he was actually singing to her about finding your true love in the warm winds of summer, but neither would anyone else. So he could sing a saccharine song, be as sappy as he wanted, and not have to feel embarrassed. He was sure when he told Tina about it later, she'd reward him with sweet Asian kisses.
them knew what the hell her boyfriend was singing, but she could feel the sincerity and emotion behind the words, which meant he was probably singing about her or their relationship.

He really was the sweetest boy.

She glanced at Artie, more out of habit than longing, and felt terribly guilty. She knew, and Kurt had confirmed, that she had hurt him in one of the worst ways imaginable. Dumping him in an email was just low, no matter how you cut it. She knew she had no good excuse other than that she had been trying to spare herself some guilt, but instead had only increased it.

She sighed softly.

It wasn't that she didn't love Artie; she had loved him more than she had ever realized.

Unfortunately, she'd had this realization while they were at their most emotionally distant. That was when she had also figured out that she had loved the idea of Artie slightly more than Artie himself. That was just wrong and unfair to both of them.

She knew she shouldn't have let their relationship progress as far as had while holding back so much of herself. She had tried hard to be the perfect girlfriend, to make up for the lie over her faked stutter, that she had begun to lose herself in the process, to lose sight of her wants and her goals and her dreams. She hadn't been fair to either of them.

As much as she loved Artie, she hadn't much liked herself while she was with Artie. She knew that it had been her problem, that a lot of it had been her own fault, but she also knew they couldn't have gone back. Neither one of them had it in them to start again.

So she had decided it would be best to end things. And she did, in the most cowardly way possible, which only reflected how cowardly she had been throughout the entire relationship.

It was a bitter lesson, and perhaps Artie had paid the greater cost.

She and Artie had only become friends through Kurt. Artie had been Kurt's best friend throughout kindergarten and elementary school, but they had been separated for middle school, where Kurt had met her. They had become very close very quickly, and while she had known about Artie, she had never met him until they were all freshman at McKinley.

There had been an immediate attraction between them, though they had never done anything about it at the time. The summer before their sophomore year, Kurt had distanced himself from them and begun hanging out with Mercedes, believing he was a third wheel. But once they didn't have Kurt to buffer them, they hadn't much talked to each other at all.

In a really weird way, Kurt was like Harry Potter, Artie was Ron, and she was Hermione. Of course, she had always known that Ron and Hermione would end up together, even though they really shouldn't have, so she supposed she should have seen the inevitable breakup coming. At least there'd be no kid named Hugo to worry about.

Finally they had begun dating, and while they had a lot in common, they didn't talk very much about things which mattered, including the things the other did that bothered or hurt them. So the anger and bitterness had grown until it had eclipsed the love they had felt for each other.

Everything with Mike was different. Yes, it was new and exciting and all of the wonderful things that came with a nascent relationship, but it was also different because it was more equitable and because Mike was simply more mature than Artie.
Granted, Artie may have been more intelligent, but he was somewhat emotionally stunted. He had so much rage and resentment locked inside of him because of his condition, and she certainly couldn’t blame him for that.

What she did blame him for was allowing that rage to build up until it became explosive and then taking it out on the people who loved him the most. He had done it with her, and she had seen him do it with his parents. She was sure he’d never try it with Brittany, knowing that either Santana or Kurt – or both of them – would kill him. Also, Brittany wouldn’t have been able to stand it, and Tina was guessing Artie knew that. Brittany might turn out to be actually be very good for him.

The only one who ever escaped Artie's emotional outbursts unscathed was Kurt, and that was because he simply didn't tolerate them. The one time she had seen Artie attack him, she had reached the conclusion that Kurt Hummel was perhaps one of the most frightening people she had ever had the privilege to know.

The way Kurt had simply bent himself in half at the waist to stare deeply into Artie's eyes, the way he had hissed about his dead mother, his sexuality, his strained relationship with his father, his hopeless crush on Finn, the way he was verbally and physically assaulted on a daily basis – not just in school, but in town, on vacations, over the phone – had shut Artie up immediately.

Kurt hadn't raised his voice, hadn't been argumentative or defensive, and he hadn't been pitying, knowing that Artie hated pity more than anything else.

He had told Artie that he knew what it was like to be judged on appearances. He knew how it was to be ridiculed because you were smarter than your tormenters. He knew what it was to experience those parental looks of disappointment, the ones that were supposed to be secret but were always seen. He knew what it was not only to think but expect that he would be alone for the rest of his life.

And then he had pressed his forehead against Artie's and said what the hell makes you think you're so goddamned special?

In the five years she had known Kurt, she'd never heard him swear.

Artie had laughed and then broken down, sobbing.

When she'd tried to comfort him, he had pushed her away, not unkindly, and she had watched, stupefied, as Kurt rolled Artie over to the sofa and locked the brakes of the wheelchair, before lifting the other boy out it and placing Artie in his lap.

Kurt had held Artie and sung to him. He had reminded Artie that he had been the only one of his friends who had stood at his side when his mother died, and there was nothing in the world, not even Artie's own self-loathing, that would drive him away.

Kurt had cooed and whispered words lost to anyone but the two of them. Kurt had held tight to Artie, even when the boy was alternately striking him and desperately clinging to him.

Kurt had looked over Artie's shoulder at her and told – no, she remembered, ordered – her to leave, and she had. She hadn't even thought twice about it, because after watching them together, she knew that she would never be strong enough to allow Artie to be as weak as he would sometimes need.

But Kurt was.

Most of the club, Mercedes included, were ignorant as to how much Kurt and Artie loved each other. Tina knew they would die for one another. Their relationship wasn't showcased, wasn't paraded around. It was subtle and, Tina thought, incredibly beautiful.
She knew Artie wouldn't survive without Kurt. She knew he was looking at colleges in New York so that he wouldn't again be separated from Kurt.

In many ways, Kurt was Artie's true love. Not in a romantic sense, but they had a connection so deep that it could never be severed unless one of them died, and probably not even then.

She wanted that for herself. She hoped she might find it with Mike.

She had noticed that morning that Kurt had been particularly reserved around her and Artie. She knew he expected them to force him to choose between them.

She could never do that to him. Not only did she love Kurt too much, but she knew she would lose, and she didn't want to lose Kurt anymore than Artie did. She could only hope Artie wouldn't try to take advantage of Kurt's loyalty. She didn't truly believe he would, but the possibility scared her.

She blinked rapidly and jumped to her feet when Mike finished his song, applauding so fiercely that the palms of her hands stung.

She would talk to him at lunch about everything she was feeling, and she knew he would listen.

Kurt waited patiently for Tina to finish rewarding Mike with soft coos and gentle looks before making his way over.

"Mike, you were wonderful," he said, attempting to gush discreetly. "I had no idea you could sing that well! I wish you and Matt had made yourselves a little more well known last year. I think we all missed out on something."

Mike blinked and a slow blush spread across his cheeks.

"I'm sorry if this sounds ignorant," Kurt continued, "but were you singing in Mandarin or Cantonese? Or perhaps Wu or Xiang? We discussed this morning that I was interested in learning Chinese, but I really don't know that much about the language or its various dialects."

Mike shot him a huge smile. "That you know there is a difference between Mandarin and Cantonese – heck, that you know the names of any of the linguistic subdivisions – makes you far less ignorant than you'll ever know. And I was singing in Mandarin, by the way. I was actually going to talk to you about this at lunch. When I was younger, I attended Chinese school so that I could learn proper grammar and how to read and write the script. If you're interested, I still have some books and can put you in touch with one of the instructors."

A happy, giddy smile stretched across Kurt's face, and suddenly Mike just got it. Kurt Hummel was frigging adorable. Once he trusted you enough to lower his defenses even slightly – and they were some seriously hardcore and justified defenses – Kurt was just a really nice, decent guy. It would be almost impossible not to like him.

"Thank you, Mike," Kurt chirped. "I'd appreciate that very much."

Mike nodded and watched as Kurt returned to Sam, who appeared anxious at being left behind. He bent down and whispered in Tina's ear.
"Does Sam like Kurt?"

She giggled. "I think so."

"That is so cute!"

She cuddled up against him. "So are you."

He looked over his shoulder when he heard a cell phone go off and watched as Artie retrieved a text message. Artie then shot a brilliant smile at Kurt, who blew him a kiss which Artie reached out and caught.

Mike swallowed heavily. He would probably never mean to Kurt what Artie did, just as Kurt could never replace Matt, but he was definitely looking forward to calling Kurt Hummel his friend.

Will had been observing Kurt with quiet wonder.

He was so surprised to see Kurt reaching out to others, stepping beyond his comfort zone to embrace the people around him.

Sam was one thing; he had been assigned to Kurt. That they got along – very well, from what he could see – was just gravy.

Puck was something else entirely. Will would never have believed that the boy would experience such a crisis of conscience, let alone actually attempt to rectify his past misdeeds. He swallowed guiltily as he flashed back over every time he had walked past Kurt and Puck by the dumpsters, never knowing that Puck had been throwing Kurt inside them.

Because he hadn't wanted to know, he silently admitted. If he had, he would have felt compelled to address it. As long as he was able to deny it, as he denied so many things, he was safe.

But now all he could see was Kurt's sad and angry eyes, waiting, hoping, that his teacher would do something to help him, but ultimately knowing that he wouldn't.

Kurt had forgiven Puck, was forming a friendship with Mike, had apparently grown very close with his fellow Cheerios, and still held close ties with Mercedes, Tina, and Artie. In fact, it appeared Kurt was becoming friends with everyone but Finn and Rachel.

Rachel he could understand, but what had happened between Kurt and Finn?

The bottom line was that Kurt was becoming the fine young man that Will had always known he would be.

And he had had nothing to do with it.

That hurt, but he only had himself to blame.

It was time to make some changes as to how he ran this club.
Santana stalked forward to the front of the room, dropped her iPod into the dock, spun around on her heel, and glared.

"Right. So we're supposed to sing about something that happened to us over break, but instead, I'm going to sing about what I learned while on break. Actually, I had begun thinking about it after I watched Quinn go through all the crap the creeps of this school threw at her last year. The more I thought about it, the angrier I got."

Quinn raised an interested brow.

Santana snorted. "Then that whole Madonna thing. I still don't know what that was about. And why the hell was Kurt singing *What It Feels Like for a Girl* with the other guys? He's the only boy I know who actually treats women *right.*"

Will nervously cleared his throat and looked down at the floor.

"Probably because he doesn't want to sleep with us," she mused. "How unfair is that? The guy we all want is the one we can't have."

"Yeah," Brittany said sadly.

"Word," Mercedes nodded.

"At least we get to look at him," Tina said, smirking.

"Perhaps there will be nudity in the future," Quinn grinned.

"Quinn!" Rachel squealed.

Brittany smirked. "You don't know what you're missing."

Puck quirked a brow. "And you do?"

She smiled with satisfaction. "I dated him last year. He's going to make some boy a very happy dolphin."

Kurt released a cough of surprise and stared down at his lap, blushing.

Finn looked at Kurt with jealous anger, while Mike was looking at Kurt with simple bemusement. Puck looked curious, Artie proud, and Sam discreetly gazed at Kurt with subtle yearning.

"Um, Santana?" Kurt softly asked.

She shook off the lustful stare she had leveled at him and shook her head. "Yeah, so Madonna's a complete badass, but singing her songs doesn't help us if we don't feel like we could *be* her. We all put on fronts just to get through the day, and I finally figured out that I do too, even if I hate it and kind of hate myself for feeling that's it necessary. So that's what I want to sing about.

"Also, shoutout to Tink for finding me this song. I didn't know what the hell to do or where to look, so I called and whined at him while he was sitting in the middle of *La Traviata* in Vienna. Not only did he take the call, he knew the perfect song right away and emailed me the mp3 as soon as we hung up, because he's just got it like that. Which is why he's awesome, and everyone who isn't him or Brittany sucks."
Kurt dropped his face in his hands and groaned as Brittany happily cheered and thanked Santana, who smirked at both of them.

Santana cued up her music and, as the gentle melody began to play, the others realized that she had also prerecorded her own backing vocals in a slightly higher key than that in which she usually sang. She began swaying her hips, in perfect time with the soft but persistent percussion.

"I've seen it all, I've soaked it in," she began, singing with a gentleness which surprised those familiar with her usual style. "I've taken breaths in worlds you've never been. I've tasted kisses under influence. It was beautiful, but there was no suspense."

Puck was startled. What was she trying to say? That their hookups hadn't meant anything to her? Not that they had meant much to him either, but he had always believed the opposite was true for her. Santana had certainly been possessive of him whenever he began sleeping with someone else. But did that mean she had been jealous, or had she merely been fulfilling some perfunctory role which others expected of her?

There had never been any mystery about their relationship; they had simply used each other because both of them enjoyed sex.

He wasn't hurt, exactly, but he also got the sense that he didn't know her as well as he thought he did, and that was surprising. He had thought he knew her better than he did anyone else. That he didn't bothered him.

"Do you know what it feels like for a woman when the love is right?"

Though posed as a question, the slight tinge of desperation infused within it transformed it into a bid of passionate entreaty. She was demanding the entire audience, male and female alike, reconsider their stance on love, to discard selfish desires and traditional mores and think about what love meant to real women, not romance novel heroines or characters filtered through the male gaze.

Brittany bit her lip, her eyes filling with tears, and spared a guilty glance at Artie.

As much as she liked him, and she really did, he wasn't Santana. No one was and no one ever could be, but until Santana was ready to admit that they were real, that it wasn't all some grand titillation, she couldn't sit around and wait for her. Singing a song wasn't enough. Sweet lady kisses and whispered declarations of love weren't enough. Even the linked pinkies weren't enough.

Until Santana could walk through the front door of McKinley proudly holding her hand, declaring to all and sundry that, yes, what they all knew was true, she couldn't be with her.

She had always understood what Kurt had been put through and that for which he longed. In the end, it wasn't about sex – it wasn't even about sexuality – it was about acknowledgement. It was about the right to take pride in yourself and the person with whom you were in love.

And why should that ever be considered a bad thing?

People were stupid.

"Do you know what it's really like, when you brave the fight and come home alive, when you're a
Finn thought about his mom, his awesomely cool mom who had been so lonely for almost as long as he could remember.

That is, until Burt Hummel.

Finn had always assumed Kurt had hooked up their parents in a bid to get closer to him, but for the first time he realized that perhaps Kurt was merely saddened to see the empty look in his father's eyes that Finn often saw in those of his mother.

Wow. Had he really misjudged Kurt that badly?

Sure, if their parents were dating, Kurt probably would have been spending a lot more time with him, but there was no way Kurt could have orchestrated their parents actually liking each other, let alone wanting to spend their lives together.

He had spent his entire life watching his mom trudge off to a job she despised so that she could provide for him. He had listened to her as she cried softly into her pillow at night, whispering for his father, his dead father whom he had never known and never would.

He had tried to be a good kid, to do the right thing and make his mom proud of him.

He knew he wasn't very smart. He did okay in school; not as good as he could, but enough to scrape by without being thought of as a complete dunce. He played stupid to blend in, to appear vacuous and nonthreatening, but he wasn't dumb. He had more common sense than most people realized – and more common sense than many people possessed.

He knew right from wrong, though he himself blurred the lines when it suited him, which he knew was bad. He tried to win games to impress his mom and make her proud of him, but it was hard to do when the rest of the team, Puck and Kurt excepted, sucked.

But it never seemed like enough. Oh, it was more than enough for his mom; she had told him that and he believed her. But it wasn't enough for him. He knew he wasn't doing his best, and somehow that made him feel as though he were cheating his mom, like he was just throwing away everything she had sacrificed to give him. Or worse, that he was throwing it back in her face.

Kurt would have been a much better son for Carole Hudson. Kurt was smart – scary smart – and he was so damn brave, braver than any kid Finn knew, braver than any kid should ever have to be. Kurt had perfect manners and used big words in their appropriate context. Kurt picked out perfect gifts for all occasions and remembered important things like birthdays and anniversaries. Kurt was just so much more thoughtful than he himself was.

And then he remembered how angry and alone and scared and abandoned Kurt had felt when he had begun hanging out with Burt.

Finn hadn't understood it at the time. Didn't Kurt realize that he'd never had a dad?

But now he realized that Kurt had been scared of losing his sole remaining parent. Finn could only imagine how he would have felt if Kurt had latched on to Carole in the same way he himself had to Burt. He could only imagine how Carole would have reacted if Kurt had said something as heinous and hurtful as he had said to Kurt.

Maybe he was dumb, after all.
Santana's eyes suddenly appeared to breathe fire as the percussion grew louder and an electric guitar entered the melody. Her look, generalized to the entire room, hardened.

"I've walked the line. I've been undermined. Put on a skirt, even when it hurt, just to satisfy. I've learned to abide. Not allowed to cry."

The girls in the audience suddenly sat at attention, their eyes just as bright as Santana's own, and they began to nod in understanding and commiseration.

Will was stunned.

Santana was communicating the female condition far more effectively and candidly than he had been able to muster last term with what, he now realized, was that utterly patronizing and misogynistic Madonna performance. Despite the inherent anger within the song, there was also a keen sadness and an unfortunate acceptance of the lot of women in life, of how they had learned to play the androcentric system out of necessity, not desire or ironically.

He thought of Emma, and of Terri and Shelby and Sue, and, not for the first time, felt ashamed for how he had treated them. Despite their flaws, despite their own machinations, he had wronged them. And though some of them had wronged him first, or in turn, he had no good excuse for his own actions. He had taken advantage of his privilege without second thought because he had felt it was his right.

And then he considered how he treated the girls of the glee club.

He deferred to Rachel not because she was right, not because she cared about others, not even because it was easier than assuming the lead himself, but because he had feared the club would fall apart without her.

He had abandoned his role as teacher for that of mediator, allowing Rachel to turn the club into her own personal fiefdom, one in which the other members were held hostage to her whims and desires.

When was the last time he had let a girl other than Rachel sing lead on a song performed in competition? He couldn't even remember, and that sickened him.

Yes, Rachel was phenomenal, but so was Mercedes. Santana had had a few throwaway lines at Regionals, and Tina had had none, even though both girls were incredibly gifted.

The voices of Quinn and Brittany weren't as strong, but they were gentle, bordering on angelic, having an ethereal quality that would lend itself well to so very many songs.

Why hadn't he featured them? Why hadn't he told them how much he appreciated them and what they brought to the table?
Had he been so invested in winning that he had forgotten altogether the purpose of the club?

How could he stand before them with a straight face and preach about self-acceptance and expressing their individuality when he didn't allow them to do so when it truly counted?

He was a complete hypocrite. He was honestly surprised they hadn’t quit.

And it wasn’t limited to the girls, either.

Kurt had shown earlier during Sam’s performance that he was far beyond the talents of the majority of the club and could easily rival Rachel in ability.

But Will had ignored him because he had been uncomfortable. He had feared that featuring Kurt in competition would lessen their chances of winning, simply because the boy used a register that was on par with that of a girl.

He knew other show choir leaders who would gladly kill to have a genuine countertenor in their grasp, while he had all but thrown Kurt away.

And while Puck sang in a lower key, he would also be classified as a countertenor. Finn was lead tenor, and he was good, but he was also untrained and lacked the tonality of Artie, also a tenor. Mike bordered the line between tenor and baritone, and could be a real contender if he dedicated himself. He didn't even know what Matt's range was or in what key he had sung. Sam, if he could be persuaded to join, would only enrich the overall sound and would certainly challenge Finn.

"I understand I need to be a man, just to survive," Santana spat.

Finn, Puck, Mike, and Artie flinched.

Mercedes stood up and started swaying with the music, quickly joined by Tina.

"Do you know what it's really like for a woman when the love is right? Do you know what it's really like when you brave the fight and come home alive, when you're a woman?"

Sam thought Santana had a really awesome voice. She didn't quite have the power of Mercedes or Rachel, but he could certainly see that it was more than possible if she trained harder. She also had this really cool tone that the other two didn't. His mind restlessly searched for the right word to describe it. It was sexy and spicy, kind of fiery, but also cool and controlled.

Sultry.

Santana had a sultry voice, and it was beautiful. The passion she infused into it, the way she could access her emotions in a split second to demand the audience feel what she felt – that was her real power.
"I can change your world. I can give you life. I can sing you lullabies at night."

Quinn felt her eyes tear as she thought of Beth. The pain was lessening, but it would never leave her completely. She hoped it never would. She couldn't stand to lose yet another part of her baby, of herself, even if it was painful.

"I can see your eyes before they flicker blind. I can rescue you in the nick of time. Oh!"

The audience was struck by that line and their minds began racing.

If they were in danger, who would they trust unabashedly to have their back? Who knew them so well as to anticipate their every thought and move? Who did they trust more than any other?

Finn thought of his mom. Puck thought of both Quinn and Santana, as well as his little sister. Artie and Mercedes thought of Kurt. Kurt thought of Mercedes, Santana, his father, and, oddly, Coach Sylvester.

Rachel thought of her fathers, but not Finn. Brittany thought about her dolphin and Santana. Quinn thought about Kurt and, strangely enough, Finn. Mike thought of Matt. Tina thought of Kurt and Artie.

Santana thought of Kurt and Brittany. Sam thought of his mom, his little brother, and, with a blush, Kurt.

Will didn't know if there was anyone in his life who he could call in the middle of the night, someone of whom he could ask anything and know they would deliver. It was a sobering realization.

The bridge approached, and Santana took a deep breath.

"Don't you know?" she wailed powerfully, turning the last syllable into an extended and key-changing melisma.

"Damn!" Mercedes whispered. "That's right, girl!" she shouted.

Santana's lips curved into a feline smile. "What it feels like for a woman when the love is right? Do you know what it's really like when you brave the fight and come home alive?"

The others began enthusiastically applauding.

"Yes, I'm a woman," she cooed with defiance.

"I'm a woman," she finished, voice rising beyond what the others thought was the upper limit of her range.
Santana stood there and accepted their accolades as her due.

She had impressed herself with her performance, and that the others were also moved was terrific, though she didn't much care. She had just wanted one chance to show what she could do, to prove herself capable both to them and to herself.

She was proud of herself. It was a relatively new experience for her, and she relished it.

As the applause slowly dwindled and the audience returned to their seats, Kurt raised his hand and waited to be acknowledged.

Will shook himself out of his stupor and nodded. "Yes, Kurt?"

The boy stood and cleared his throat. "Mr. Schuester, I move that we consider short-listing this song as our ballad for Invitationals."

Rachel automatically opened her mouth to object, then reconsidered and shut it.

The others nodded.

"All of the girls should participate," he continued, "and perhaps the boys, with Mike leading, could work out a supporting dance routine to help illustrate the message of the song."

Mike beamed.

"But Santana should sing lead," Kurt finished.

Rachel grimaced but held her tongue.

Santana blinked. "Really?"

Kurt turned to face her. "Santana, you were a revelation. There is absolutely no one who could sing that song better than you."

She gasped softly before a huge smile overtook her face.

Will was surprised at Kurt's assertiveness, perhaps because the boy was not lobbying for himself or Mercedes. "All in favor?" he asked the room.

Every hand shot up, including that of Rachel, though Sam understandably abstained.

Will nodded, pleased. "Motion carried. I'll put it on the list."

Santana bounded over to Kurt and thrust her tongue down his throat.

The only surprise was that Kurt kissed her back just as fiercely.
Whenever I use songs in stories, I like to post the title and the artist. Many songs will be used in this story, and almost all of them can be found on YouTube, even if there isn't an official music video.

"Melancholy Blue," as performed by Trisha Yearwood, is available on her album "Inside Out."

"Woman," as performed by Tina Arena, is available on her album "Songs of Love and Loss."
Santana finally pulled her mouth away from Kurt's own, rearing back her head and sharply gasping. Panting heavily, she stared into his placid eyes and realized that while he had enjoyed the activity, he'd had no real physical response. He'd liked kissing her, but he wasn't aroused. The only thing that bothered her was the fact that she wasn't bothered.

It wasn't as though she had believed she could turn him straight or bisexual, or that she would be his singular exception to his affirmed sexuality, but she supposed she had counted on the fact that her unparalleled ability to satisfy a man would elicit something other than a pleasant smile and slightly red cheeks.

She wasn't hurt, nor was she annoyed or disappointed. She was merely curious. She also wanted him even more than she had previously, which, for her, was quite a lot. She was frustrated that she couldn't have him, but also realized that if she could, he'd hold very little allure for her. What she had said before her performance was true: it sucked that the one guy she truly wanted would never be hers. It wasn't because he found her unattractive or that he didn't like her. It wasn't because they weren't friends or had nothing in common. It was just who he was, and that person was completely and biologically unavailable to her.

That said, the boy had serious skills; he was a total natural. Brittany hadn't been exaggerating when she'd claimed he was the best she'd ever had.

She hadn't regretted kissing him just then, nor had she regretted kissing him that morning before school. She would never regret kissing Kurt Hummel, and she would definitely be kissing him again. He made her feel safe and wanted and cared for in a way no man would ever be able to replicate. She almost hated him for that.

He tilted his head and smiled gently at her. "I love you, too."

She hugged him for a long moment, something she had never done with another guy. Embracing another had always seemed too intimate, too revealing, far more than any act of sex. She had never been a very tactile person and could tell that Kurt wasn't either, which was how she knew he would understand that she simply required comfort and had no further agenda. It was simply one more reason she loved him. She didn't say the words, but she knew he didn't require them.

She had never been one of those girls who equated sex with love. She knew one was a biological urge and the other a concoction of emotion and a variety of factors which could never be properly
investigated or explained. She was sexually attracted to him not just because he was gorgeous but because of who he was, because of what he meant to her. Outside of Brittany, she'd never before had that experience and it was as frightening as it was compelling. Kurt Hummel was a heady mixture of the sacred and the profane. Somehow, she knew that he would alter her life in some incredible fashion that was at once both tangible and divine.

She was almost looking forward to it.

"See?" Puck asked, posing the question to the entire room. "I told you guys when I saw them making out this morning: hot. It shouldn't be, but it totally is."

Rachel had blinked several times during the course of the kiss, just to ensure she was actually awake and not having a seizure. She glanced over at Finn, who was red in the face and slightly pouting, and she wondered just why that was. She knew Kurt's crush had caused Finn to question many things, but she didn't think his sexuality was among them. She still didn't, so it must have been something else.

Or was it someone else?

She knew that Finn and Santana had a single date last term but, as far she knew, as far as Finn had told her, nothing had come of it. She believed him then and she believed him now. Santana was just too obvious and too forward – too strong – for Finn. That could only mean that it was Kurt's behavior which Finn found so troubling. But why?

She knew that people tended to desexualize Kurt. Yes, he was gay and therefore made some people uncomfortable, but he was rarely regarded as being a sexual creature. He was cold, aloof, and indifferent. His crush on Finn had been the exception, not the rule. Still, there was also something about Kurt that made you want to protect him and safeguard his innocence, as though he were some poor orphaned waif. But was he really so innocent? Regardless of his sexual orientation, Kurt was still a teenage boy.

She wondered if Kurt derived any sexual satisfaction from kissing women. Brittany had happily announced last term that she and Kurt had made out, more than pleased by his performance. Rachel had doubted that Kurt's experience had been similar, but perhaps she'd been wrong. Why would he continue to kiss girls if he didn't like doing so? Sexuality was fluid, after all. Perhaps Kurt enjoyed kissing girls, as long as it was contained within certain boundaries. Regardless, he was in rarefied company. It wasn't often that Brittany or Santana extolled the prowess of anyone other than themselves or each other.

Finn decided that watching Kurt and Santana kiss was rather like rubbernecking: you knew you should look away but, for whatever reason, you just couldn't. He didn't know why they were doing it. It wasn't as though Kurt could get anything from it, no matter how obvious it was that Santana was happy to offer him whatever he wanted. It was weird and unsettling to see Kurt in a sexual light, even though he knew nothing would happen between Kurt and Santana, or Kurt and any girl.

Was that why he'd reacted so strongly to Sam, because of the possibilities the other boy represented? Of course, he was assuming things. Sam didn't seem gay, but outside of Kurt and television, Finn didn't really have any experience as to what being gay meant. Kurt was pretty stereotypical, but Finn knew that didn't necessarily mean anything.
He flashed back on his hookup with Santana last term. He had slept with her, but hadn't made out with her. Whenever he had tried to kiss her during their time together, she had pulled away and refused. It had made him think of Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*, when she had told Richard Gere that she didn't kiss on the mouth. Not that Santana was a prostitute, but she was a champion athlete in the sexual Olympics. She hadn't wanted him to kiss her. He had seen her kiss Puck before, but that had been, in his estimation, a battle for dominance or a warning to other girls seeking to encroach upon her territory, not a sign of affection. The only other person he'd seen Santana kiss was Brittany, and everyone knew what was going on there except for Santana.

Mercedes regarded the kiss with solemn eyes, angry with both Kurt and Santana for no real discernible reason. She couldn't understand it. She hadn't minded when he had made out with Brittany last spring, so what was the problem now? She knew it wasn't going anywhere, that it was likely organized for some reason she didn't yet know. She also wasn't jealous; as badly as she was crushing on Kurt, her feelings for him weren't very sexual. Yes, he was gorgeous, but she had never really imagined them being intimate. The thought of it almost made her burst into hysterical laughter.

She supposed she thought that Santana was using Kurt for some reason, perhaps to make Brittany jealous. Although when she spared a glance at the blond cheerleader, it was apparent that Brittany was jealous not because Santana was making out with someone else, but because *Kurt* was. That brought an entirely different and strange connotation to whatever the hell was going on.

Mike, Tina, and Artie were simply amused, and not a little turned on. Puck was correct: Kurt and Santana kissing *was* hot. The reasons behind it weren't compelling enough for them to consider.

Rachel cleared her throat. "The bell rang a few seconds ago."

Kurt and Santana disentangled themselves from each other and retrieved their belongings. He gave her a soft look which she almost returned, kissed Brittany's cheek, and took Quinn's hand.

He was going to have to talk with Quinn, probably sooner rather than later. She had been pulling away from him, discreetly of course, but she should have known that he would notice anyway. He hadn't wanted to interfere in whatever problems she was having with Mercedes, but sensed he would have to swallow his reticence and address it. The last thing he needed was two more of his friends at each other's throats.

His summer had been so relatively free of drama that he found he was ill-suited to deal with it now, as well as slightly resentful to be presented with so much of it upon his return. He couldn't believe he had once thrived on drama and gossip. After being away from it for the past few months, he found he hadn't missed it; indeed, he viewed it now as a waste of time. He would have preferred to stay out of his friends' issues, but knew that option wouldn't be available to him for very long. He would either be forced to step in, or they would drag him in without his consent.

He kissed Mercedes' cheek, could tell she wanted to say something about Quinn but would hold her tongue until they were free to discuss it, and promised to see her at lunch. He whispered into her ear and she rolled her eyes and nodded at his request.

"Of course," she said, affronted that he felt he even had to ask.

He gave her a grateful smile and watched as she sauntered from the room.

He raised a brow when Noah tried to hug him but allowed it, briefly, before shooing the other boy away. Never would he have pegged Noah Puckerman as a touchy-feely guy, but it was apparently the case. He himself wasn't that type of personality, though he sometimes wished he was. Of course, it wasn't as though there had ever before been a line of people waiting to offer him physical affection.
He then smiled at Mike and Tina, bent over to whisper something to Artie, nodded at Finn and Rachel, and crossed back to Sam.

Kurt waited until everyone but his fellow Cheerios had left the choir room.

"Are you ready to go?" he asked Sam.

Sam nodded.

Kurt smiled. "We're going to walk you to your next class."

Sam blushed lightly. "You don't have to do that."

"Yes, we do," Kurt insisted. "First, you don't know where the classroom is located. We have our respective math classes now, which are also taught in the science wing; you're right on our way. Second, it's imperative that you be seen with us, so that when certain people first lay their eyes on you, they understand that you're untouchable."

Sam's eyes widened. "What do you mean?"

"Darwin's law rules this school, Hot Lips," Santana said. "Only the fittest survive. In the junior class, that means myself, Tink, Brit, and Quinn. Everyone knows who we are. We're the Four Horsemen, the leaders of our class, for both the right and the wrong reasons. Further, no one messes with the Cheerios, and we're the four most important members. Once you're seen leaving this room, word will spread that the new kid might also possibly be a new Gleek. Glee is not a popular or respected club here."

He nodded. "Kurt warned me."

Quinn raised an eyebrow. "And you came anyway?"

He shrugged diffidently, slightly coloring. "It sounded cool."

She smirked. It was more likely that Sam simply wished to spend more time with Kurt. "Further, being seen with two unattached Cheerios will up your stud reputation and negate any rumors about you being in Kurt's company. Because there will be rumors."

Sam soured. "I don't give a shit."

Santana cocked her head. "Impressive."

Brittany and Quinn nodded.

"I appreciate the sentiment, Sam," Kurt said softly, "but please trust us when we tell you that first impressions matter. You cannot allow these people any more fodder than absolutely necessary. Rumor spreads faster in this school than social diseases in underdeveloped nations."

Santana snorted and Quinn coughed.

"Undoubtedly," he continued, "you were seen this morning in the administrative office and with Ms. Pillsbury. Rumors have already begun that there is a new upperclassman at McKinley. You were next seen with me in homeroom, which narrowed it down to the junior class. By now, word has spread to all upperclassmen that I'm your Peer Mentor. When you leave this room, a host of new rumors will spread like wildfire.

"They will see you and they will talk. They will see you in my company and they will talk. They
"Will see you in the company of Quinn and Santana and they will talk. The dueling speculation as to whether you're being romanced by me, or by Santana or Quinn, will efficiently neutralize the more vocal and sinister aspects of the resultant rumors."

"Is this real life?" Sam demanded.

Santana laughed derisively. "No. It's high school."

He sighed. "So how do we do this?"

Kurt nodded. "Brittany will exit first. She's universally liked and will draw the least fire. Santana will follow. They always travel together, so no one will question it. You will leave next, with me directly behind you and Quinn guarding the rear flank."

"I'd love to guard your rear flank," Quinn purred.

He grinned and rolled his eyes.

Brittany frowned. "Do you know you just arranged that order by hair color?"

Kurt nodded. "Of course. Power differentials are important to consider."

She shrugged and twirled her ponytail around a finger. "Okay! I'll leave now. See you out there!"

She skipped out of the room, Santana following.

Sam took a deep breath.

"Gird your loins," Kurt drawled.

Sam tried not to blush and left.

Kurt adjusted his posture and then stuck his nose in the air and a sneer on his face before trailing after the other boy. Quinn chuckled darkly and gave chase.

Will stared after them, blinking owlishly. "What the fuck goes on in this school?"

Sam had thought Kurt was being ridiculous, until he stepped out into the hallway.

Santana and Brittany were patiently waiting for him, and he could tell that the students in the immediate vicinity were curious to see for what or whom the cheerleaders were waiting. As soon as he exited the choir room, the loud din of voices immediately dwindled to a dull roar and Sam felt scrutinizing eyes upon him. He shuffled his way toward Santana, who looked at him with cool eyes.

He then heard whispers break out and turned to see Kurt – an aloof and guarded Kurt – approaching him, with an arrogant Quinn following.

Wow. Kurt really hadn't been kidding.

"Ready?" Kurt whispered under his breath.

"What do I do?" Sam mumbled.
"All five of us are going to turn to the left and walk down the hallway together, side-by-side. Look straight ahead, but say nothing. Acknowledge no one. Don't let them smell fear. We're right here with you."

Sam nodded tightly.

"Do keep up," Kurt further advised, "but don't try to mimic our walk. It will do you no favors, and I don't think you could get the hang of it right off the bat."

Sam was bewildered but nodded again. "Is the hallway big enough?"

Kurt smirked. "Just watch." He paused. "We're a go."

Immediately he and the Cheerios turned on their heel with perfect precision, and Sam raced to turn with them.

Santana and Brittany linked pinkies, Kurt and Quinn interlaced their fingers, and Sam felt somewhat bereft that none of them were touching him, though he had to admit to himself that he did feel protected in their care.

Suddenly, Sam realized that he was in Mean Girls: Lima.

Kurt and the girls took their first step and a shockwave went off, with people parting for them like the Red Sea, albeit one under the command of the Bitches of Eastwick. Some kids even pressed themselves tightly against their lockers and squeezed their eyes shut in fear, which Sam found both humorous and disturbing.

He blinked owlishly, already half a pace behind. He scrambled to catch up and noticed that Quinn, Kurt, Santana, and Brittany were walking perfectly in sync with each other, leading with the same legs, their hips rolling as if oiled and set on maximum sway, their gait quick but not rushed. It was a strut that screamed power, control, and complete disinterest. It was masterful.

They passed a trio of Cheerios who immediately moved to the side and sent worshipful eyes at Kurt and Quinn, who acknowledged them, if only barely. Sam spied Puck lingering suspiciously at the end of the hall and wondered what he was plotting. When they reached him, Puck smirked at Quinn, or perhaps it was Kurt, and blew a kiss. It was impossible for Sam and the other people watching to determine if the kiss was intended for Quinn or Kurt, especially as both of them smirked in the exact same manner at the exact same moment, setting off another shockwave of whispers, on which Puck must have counted.

"This is freaking me out," Sam whispered.

"Don't let it," Santana hissed. "It's all a game, Hot Lips. Take your cues from Kurt and you'll be just fine. He won't steer you wrong."

"But why are we doing this?"

"Kurt is making sure that any possible gossip about you is tightly within his grasp. I can guarantee you that, as of right now, there are five discussion topics concerning you. First is that you're gay and dating Kurt. Second, you're bisexual and dating Kurt or me or Quinn. Third is that you're straight and possibly using Kurt to get close to Quinn or me. Fourth is that you've joined Glee. Fifth is that you're a stone-cold fox and we're all banging you."

"We should definitely do that last one," Brittany loudly whispered.
Sam choked. He'd had no idea that when he'd walked through the doors that morning that he'd entered Sweet Valley High. Not that he was in any way familiar with the series, of course.

"Breathe, Sam," Kurt reminded him. "It's the nature of beasts when a new lion is introduced into the pride. They want to know with whom he'll mate; it determines everything for them. Curiosity will peak at lunch and we'll take it from there. Until then, there's at least one Glee student in every one of your classes. They'll look out for you. Be cordial with them, but not overly friendly. Sit near them, but keep a minimum distance of at least two desks."

"Uh."

"Mercedes and Puck are in your math class; gravitate towards them. Finn and Rachel are also in that class. Acknowledge them, but don't let them draw you in. If you do, Rachel will use you to boost her meager popularity. Finn is already jealous of you and is very territorial where Rachel is concerned."

What? Finn was jealous of him? Why?

Quinn snorted. "He's territorial where you're concerned, as well," she said to Kurt.

_Oh_. Sam felt a streak of perverse pleasure at the thought of Finn viewing him as a rival for Kurt's affections. Was that why Finn was so homophobic, because he liked Kurt? But that didn't make much sense at all. Finn had seemed so wary and mistrustful of Kurt during Glee, even if he had been possessive.

Sam wondered just what had happened between Finn and Kurt. There was something there, he knew, something more than just the crush to which Kurt had earlier alluded.

He thought about asking one of the other kids in Glee, maybe Artie or Tina, but he had the feeling they either didn't know or wouldn't tell him. Plus, it would make him look nosy or like a creeper. He didn't want them thinking he was a douchebag. Not to mention that they probably would tell Kurt he had asked, and Kurt would want to know why. Sam doubted he could pass it off as simple curiosity. He didn't want to make Kurt aware of his crush until he could ascertain that it was more than superficial. As much as he liked Kurt, Sam had to keep reminding himself that he didn't really _know_ Kurt. He certainly didn't want to repeat his Lincoln High experience. He shuddered.

Kurt hummed. "Another reason to avoid him. Puck and Mercedes will act as backup. Puck is extremely popular because he does what he wants and doesn't care what people think of him. Mercedes isn't popular per se, but she is well-known. Generally, people try not to anger her. Finn and Rachel won't bother you as long as you're with Puck and Mercedes. Mercedes usually sits in the middle of a classroom and Puck in the back. Sit two desks behind her and two desks in front of him. Rachel sits in the front to maximize her chances of being noticed and usually drags Finn with her."

"This is unbelievable," Sam muttered.

"Welcome to McKinley," Quinn sang.

Sam felt Kurt's arm brush against his and calmed down.

"Don't worry," Kurt said. "I'll take care of you."

Sam ducked his head. "I know."

Quinn and Santana smirked.
Sam sat in his new math class absolutely terrified.

He hadn't cared that Finn had given him the evil eye upon entry. If Finn actually believed he was intimidating, he also probably believed in Santa Claus. He figured Brittany believed in Santa Claus but, from her, such a belief would be charming. He found Finn to be, for whatever reason, extremely irritating.

Sam knew he was being irrational. He had no real reason to dislike Finn, other than the scene that had presented itself during the Glee meeting, and he really knew nothing about whatever weirdness obviously existed between Finn and Kurt. All he knew was that Finn rubbed him the wrong way.

Rachel had enthusiastically greeted him and he had been polite in reply, if cool. Her smile had dimmed somewhat and she ducked her head, and Sam felt a flash of guilt. Then he noticed her peeking up at him from between her lashes and that was when he realized that he was being played. She had wanted him to feel badly for hurting her, even if he hadn't intentionally done so; that is, if he'd hurt her at all.

Wow. He had to give her credit; she was good. He bet she was used to getting her way and had no qualms about making herself look like a kicked puppy to achieve that end.

He had shot her a look of mild respect, which caused her to smirk, and turned abruptly toward the back of the room, nodding at Mercedes, who smirked back at him, quite pleased that he had caught on to Rachel's game all by himself. Sam felt as though he had just passed a test he hadn't known he was taking, nor did he care about the grade. It wasn't like Rachel was subtle. Puck looked up, eyed him, offered him a fist to bump, and then went back to doodling obscenities on his desk with a fine-tipped Sharpie.

Sam did as Kurt had instructed, placing himself between Mercedes and Puck, waiting for the class to begin. He watched as an array of students trickled into the room and was surprised that every possible subset appeared to be represented. Preps, geeks, nerds, dorks, Goths, jocks, gearheads, and cheerleaders.

Christ, was Ferris Bueller next?

The teacher finally walked in and Sam knew it was Game Over. He could tell just by looking at the dude that the guy had no interest in being there at the moment, or in teaching in general. He'd gotten pretty good at identifying such people. He was there for the paycheck and nothing else. Sam couldn't exactly hate on him for that, but he also had the feeling that the guy was a crap teacher, which would totally suck, especially as he would be needing extra help, or, at the very least, understanding.

Then the shame started.

As kind and accepting and so damn lovely as Kurt had been about his dyslexia earlier that morning, it had been long ago ingrained in Sam to be ashamed of his disability. He knew it wasn't true, wasn't right, but before he had been diagnosed, his elementary school teachers had all but called him stupid right to his face. And he had believed them, because what else could've explained his poor grades? He had never really released those feelings, bottling up the shame and the anger and the rage and the disappointment into a tight little ball, letting it settle right in the middle of his chest.

He perfectly understood the rules after they were thoroughly explained, but once he sat down to study or do his homework, the text in the book would start swimming and then he would transpose
numbers all over his worksheets. He knew how to work the equations, he could follow all of the processes, but one wrong number, and the entire answer was marked as incorrect. His old teachers had been able to tell that he understood how to do the work, how to do the proofs; they could go through his work step-by-step and see that he had performed the operation flawlessly. Except for one number. Their willingness to grant him partial-credit had kept him from failing. What really sucked was that he actually liked math; it just didn't like him back.

The panic attacks had started in fifth grade, with an absolute harpy of a woman named Miss Mitchell. She had been fresh out of college, with her shiny education degree, and thought she held all the answers. She dressed like a constipated Quaker schoolmarm, with her mouse-brown hair piled high in a loose topknot on her head. It was always slightly crooked, and Sam used to spend entire class periods trying to calculate how much of a breeze was required to knock it loose.

She had hated him. She had taken his failures badly, believing they reflected on what she presumed to be her sterling, if untried, record. She would call on him in class, even though she knew it took him longer than other students to work out an answer. And she had been so snide about it, so smug. That was when the other kids had cottoned on to the fact that there was something different about him, and then the laughter had started. It had never really stopped.

After she had gotten her kicks humiliating him, she would sometimes go one step further. Whenever she taught a new lesson, she would force him to go up to the board and then solve something which he had never before worked. The chalk would shake in his hand and screech across the blackboard, when he wasn't repeatedly dropping it. He would break out into a cold sweat and sway with nausea. He would hear the laughter, sense the unspoken judgments. It had been pure torture. He had started faking sick so he could skip the class, and then he started faking to skip entire days.

Finally, almost at the end of the year, the school counselor had him tested for various learning disabilities. Eventually he had been diagnosed with dyslexia. He knew he should have taken comfort in that, that it had a name. That there were steps he could take to compensate or even overcome it. That he wasn't stupid. And he had gained some measure of peace, until he had explained to Miss Mitchell that he had dyslexia.

"Everyone has their little excuses," was all she had said.

He'd never gotten over it. He'd never been able to block out her voice, which haunted him to this day whenever he had to take a test, or read a book, or stop to consider anything. It was her voice that told him he was talking too long to work a problem, that he was inverting steps even when he wasn't, that laughed derisively at him as he frantically punched the keys of his calculator, that ridiculed him when he tripped over certain letters as he tried to sound out a word in his head.

It was her voice that told him constantly that he was dumb and would never amount to anything.

He hated her voice.

His mother still tried to comfort him, repeatedly telling him that most likely Miss Mitchell had felt guilty for not recognizing the signs of the dyslexia herself, that she was sure the woman now regretted how she had treated him, but Sam knew better. The one lesson Miss Mitchell had taught him that he had no trouble understanding was that some people were just cruel. They had no specific reason for being such, and they never apologized for who they hurt; rather, they relished their pathetic victories, smug in the superiority they believed they possessed.

He'd had to get some therapy and medication for the panic attacks, which had slowly lessened in severity, but had then morphed into a more generalized anxiety disorder. It now only got really bad when he had to take tests, and then he would freak out, depending on how much of his class grade
depended on exams. The effects were exacerbated by certain subjects. The one good thing was that, since his dyslexia was documented, he was allowed more time for exams and sometimes got to take them away from other students, since he was easily distracted when in a panicked state. He was glad that Ms. Pillsbury had made arrangements for him.

At any rate, the takeaway lessons of fifth grade were, for Sam Evans, that you should never presume to know someone, and that you should never, ever judge another for being different.

It wasn't a popular view to hold, especially in certain circles; particularly in schools, where conformity was preached and individuality punished. Regardless, he had clung to his principles. Thankfully, so had his parents. When he had come to them three years later and admitted that he sometimes liked guys, they weren't upset. They weren't even fazed, as far as he remembered. They had worried for him, of course, and warned him to trust implicitly those he let get close to him, but they had never judged him.

Sam tried very hard not to judge other people. He paid attention to his instincts when certain people pinged his radar, but he generally avoided those people rather than engage them. Finn and Rachel had pinged pretty loudly. He didn't hate them or anything. He didn't think they were evil. He just didn't care for them. If he decided to join Glee, he would have to deal with them, and he would be polite and courteous, but he really didn't want to be their friend.

Puck seemed cool, if a little defensive. Same with Mercedes. Santana was a bitch, but she was forthright about it, which counted for a lot as far as he was concerned. Brittany was a sweetheart. Quinn was an unknown quantity. He thought Mike, Artie, and Tina would make good friends, but he was a little weirded out by the as-yet-unnamed drama he sensed amongst them.

And Kurt…Kurt was just a really cool dude.

What was not cool was this teacher, Mr. Parks.

Mr. Parks had a whiny, nasal voice which sounded cultivated to be as grating as possible, and he actually seemed to resent the students who had shown up for his class.

Great.

Sam felt the flop sweat begin.

Fifty minutes and several pages of diligent, untidy notes later, the bell rang and Sam heaved a small sigh of relief.

Parks was just as bad as he had feared. He was apparently fascinated with minutiae and dwelled far too long on ridiculous things, going off on tangents about higher-level mathematics and Sam could only assume the guy was bitter because he was stuck teaching the general Algebra II class instead of Trig or some honors course or something. He also glossed over the important stuff, telling the class to reference the textbook, which was dense and unhelpful and, of course, selected by him.

Sam knew this class was going to suck big time for the entire year.

He sensed someone at his side and looked up to see Puck staring down at him.
"Princess asked me to take you to your next class," he said, shrugging. "What Princess wants, Princess gets."

Sam looked around and noticed that Finn and Rachel were already gone. Mercedes was taking her time packing up her things, watching his interaction with Puck. Once noticed, she sent a small wave in his direction and flounced away.

"Mr. Evans."

"Fuck me," Sam muttered under his breath.

Puck snorted. "I'll wait outside."

Sam nodded and cautiously approached the teacher's desk. "Yes, sir?"

Parks seemed surprised and appreciative of his manners. "I just wanted to let you know that I've discussed your…problem…"

Sam tried not to flinch.

"…with Emma Pillsbury," he continued. "We have made all of the necessary and required accommodations."

Sam caught the stress on the word required. What was this dude's problem? It's not like Sam was creating extra work for him or anything.

"I'm sure you understand that I simply don't have the time to tutor individual students," Parks droned, "but if I can be of any assistance, please let me know."

In other words, don't bother me. Ever.

Sam nodded. "Thank you, sir."

The man looked up over his glasses and scrutinized Sam. "Ms. Pillsbury has informed me that you have a Peer Mentor who will also be acting as your tutor?"

Sam nodded again. "Yes, sir. Kurt Hummel." He frowned when the teacher grimaced at the name.

Fuck.

"Mr. Hummel," the man began, "is an exceptionally bright young man." His tone was begrudging. "However, I'm sure you know how that type of…person…can be."

Sam frowned more deeply. "Type of person, sir?"

"Homosexual," Parks hissed, leaning closer, his eyes darting around the room.

Sam opened his mouth.

"Deviants, you know. I saw how that…boy…pranced around last year, disgustingly chasing after that poor dullard, Finn Hudson. It was shameful." He shook his head and glared at Sam. "If Hummel is in any way inappropriate with you, or you fear for your safety, inform me at once and action will be taken."

Fear for my safety? What? Sam thought.
He could feel the blush creeping up his neck and knew he had to get the hell out of the room before he punched the guy in his obnoxious face. He nodded once, turned on his heel, and swept out of the room, sure that Parks thought his discomfiture was caused by Kurt Hummel and not his words.

Sam wanted to kill things.

Sam stormed blindly into the hall, pushing roughly past students who stopped and glared at him, though they said nothing. He dimly heard Puck shouting after him, but he couldn't stop. He couldn't think.

"Evans!" Puck shouted, clapping his hand hard down on Sam's shoulder. He spun Sam around and winced at the furious look on the other guy's face. "Whoa, dude. You okay? What the fuck did Parks say to you?"

Sam was silent for a long moment. "I have dyslexia," he finally said.

"Okay…"

"Parks knew Pillsbury had assigned me a tutor."

"Yeah?"

"Kurt's my tutor."

"Right…"

"Parks started talking smack about Kurt."

Puck's eyes narrowed dangerously. "What the hell did that douche say about my boy?"

Sam pulled Puck to the side of the hall and whispered the conversation verbatim.

"Son of a bitch," Puck hissed. "What are you going to do?"

"Report him," Sam said flatly.

Puck whistled. "Dude, you got big ones, I'll give you that. But that could, like, totally backfire on you. Parks is a dick, always has been. You report him, he'll make your life miserable."

Sam shook his head. "I don't give a fuck. I can't have that kind of poison around me." He sighed. "Look, Puck, Kurt's the first kid I've met in this town. He's been so damn good and…and nice to me. He showed me around, told me he'd help me with whatever, didn't make me feel stupid for having a damn disability. That means something to me. I can't…I couldn't just sit there in that class, day after day, and look that asshole in the face, knowing he'd trashed Kurt behind his back and I'd done nothing about it."

A gleam of respect shone in Puck's eyes.

"Don't tell Kurt," Sam added. "I don't want him upset over this. That fuckhole isn't worth Kurt's time."
Puck nodded hesitantly. He didn't want to keep shit from the Princess, not the least of which was because the Princess had a knack for ferreting out secrets. So, he'd have to be a really good actor and hope Sam was, as well. "I won't."

Sam nodded. "Pillsbury picked me up in Figgins' office this morning. Can you tell me where her office is?"

"I'll take you. I'm skipping next class anyway. English Lit is lame. I'll get the notes from Quinn or Chang."

Sam dropped his eyes. "Thanks, Puck."

Puck shook his head. "Don't thank me. This is your first day here and you've already got this place and its people figured out. The Princess…Kurt is a good guy. You're sticking up for him. That's a big deal. He's a good friend to have."

"I know."

Sam knocked briskly on Ms. Pillsbury's door and waited for a response.

"Come in," she demurely called. Her docile tone sounded even more nervous than usual.

Sam walked in and startled upon seeing Mr. Schuester. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt your conference."

"Hello Sam," Emma said warmly. "You weren't interrupting anything. Mr. Schuester was just leaving," she added, her voice somewhat harsher.

Will opened his mouth, blinked, and then closed it again. He sighed and turned to leave, nodding his head at Sam.

"Please sit down," Emma told Sam, who complied. "What can I do for you?"

Sam began having second thoughts. He had been so enraged at Parks that he had automatically sought to punish the man, but he also didn't know if he could trust Ms. Pillsbury. She was nice, he thought, and seemed concerned for the students, but that didn't necessarily mean anything. He had learned the hard way that, when push came to shove, faculty members would often back up each other before they did the students.

"You can talk to me, Sam," she said gently.

He sighed and bit his lip, staring into her huge eyes and considering her statement. He *wanted* to trust her, he did. His instincts said that he could, but he had been wrong before. He didn't want to start off a new year in a new place on a bad foot. He didn't want to repeat last year's experience. Still, he knew his words to Puck had been true: he wouldn't be able to stomach sitting across from Parks for an entire year. That gave him an idea.

He took a deep breath. "Is it possible for me to switch into another math class?"

Emma was surprised, but not terribly so. Parks was someone she absolutely loathed, a teacher in name only who had no real concern for or understanding of his students. Will was concerned, but
played favorites. As much as she didn't like Sue, Emma knew the woman would go the wall for her kids, though she didn't really like any of them, which was why she excused so much of the woman's ridiculous behavior.

"Did something happen?" she carefully asked. Judging from Sam's resulting grimace, something had.

"He kept me after class," Sam said slowly. "I didn't get the impression that he was thrilled with having to deal with my disability."

Emma repressed a sigh. She certainly wasn't shocked, but also sensed there was a lot Sam wasn't saying. "Are you sure that's all?"

Sam glared sullenly at the floor.

Emma twisted her hands nervously. "Sam," she began, "I'm aware of what happened at Lincoln." She winced at his sharp intake of breath. "Not everything of course, but the general idea. I want you to know that will not happen here. I simply won't allow it. But if Mr. Parks made you uncomfortable for any reason, I need to know."

He narrowed his eyes. "So anything I tell you won't be kept confidential."

She tilted her head. This was verging into some sticky territory. "If you ask me to keep something confidential, I will, unless it places you or someone else in harm."

He frowned. "Physical harm?"

What the heck had that man said to Sam? Emma silently fumed. "Any kind of harm, Sam." She wanted him to trust her, but couldn't accomplish that by lying to him.

Sam sat silent for a moment, debating with himself. "You know I'm bisexual," he finally said.

She nodded swiftly. "I do. And there is nothing wrong with that, Sam," she said, her voice fierce.

"I know," Sam immediately countered.

She arched an eyebrow. "Do you?"

"Yes," he said emphatically. "I've never been confused about that. I'm not self-loathing."

She nodded.

He sighed. "Parks knew I had a tutor. He wanted to know who it was."

Emma saw where this was going and she wasn't pleased.

"When I told him it was Kurt, he made some...comments."

"I see," Emma said coolly. And she did. It was confirmed when Sam repeated said comments.

"I don't want Kurt to know," he rushed to add.

"I can appreciate that," she said, "and I'm sure Kurt would too, but he's been dealing with this for a long time, Sam. The discrimination against him isn't just limited to students, and Kurt is aware of that."

Sam glared at her. "And it's just allowed."
She sighed. "Sexual orientation doesn't have protected status in Ohio, Sam," she said sadly.

"Terrific," he spat.

She drummed her nails on her desk. "There's another algebra class that meets at the same time as you have study hall. I can put you in that and make your second class your free period."

Sam thought about that, but then realized the conflict. "That wouldn't work if I joined Glee."

"Are you considering doing that?"

He shrugged. "I auditioned. Mr. Schuester wants me to join."

"Why are you hesitating?"

"I like most of the kids," Sam cautiously said.

"Are Noah and Santana giving you problems?"

Sam's eyes widened. "What? No, not at all. They've both been really nice to me."

Emma's own eyes widened in response.

"Kurt probably asked them to be," he said offhandedly, "but I like them."

"Kurt asked Noah to be nice," she said slowly, "and Noah complied?"

Sam nodded. "Yeah, they're friends."

She was utterly baffled. "I see. So who…"

"Finn and Rachel."

She blinked. She was only surprised that she wasn't more surprised.

"Finn actually attacked Puck because Puck is friends with Kurt."

"I'm sorry, what?"

"Yeah. And as soon as Kurt and I walked in to the room, Rachel started accusing me of being a spy and out to destroy her or something. When Kurt defended me, she got all huffy and stormed out, but not before purposefully knocking him to the floor."

Emma sighed and shook her head. "Please tell me Will actually did something about this," she muttered.

"He did."

Emma gave a startled blink. She didn't know if she was more startled that she had said those words aloud or that Will had actually punished his golden couple.

"Are you going to tell Mr. Schuester what I told you?" Sam asked rather defensively.

She shook her head. "I don't see the point. He handled the matter. There's no reason for me to interfere. I still don't understand why you're hesitating to join, however. Are you afraid how the other students will perceive you for being in the glee club?"
Sam shrugged. "I could care less about them. Don't get me wrong, I want friends; I want to be liked. But I don't want to be liked by people who would look down on me just because I enjoy singing. I don't have time for that."

Emma wondered if Sam was a unicorn. He certainly was unique, at least as far as her experience with other McKinley students was concerned. For some of them, the biggest worry on their small minds was if they would be invited to so-and-so's party. Sam was one of those rare students who could possibly do well in several groups. He knew his own mind and didn't apologize for it, but also was concerned about the feelings of others, a rare combination in high school.

"So what are you worried about?" she finally asked.

"Honestly? Rachel and Finn kind of creep me out. She's incredibly intense, and he seems stupid by choice. Finn makes me a lot more nervous than Rachel does, and he was really upset that Kurt and Puck are friends. From everything I've heard about him and Kurt, I'd think he'd be glad."

Emma averted her eyes. "So you know about that."

"That Kurt had a hopeless crush on a homophobic jackass?" Sam shrugged. "Doesn't appear to be a secret."

She had the absurd urge to giggle but managed to quash it.

"Also," Sam continued, "Mr. Schuester doesn't seem to be the one who controls things in that club."

Emma agreed, but couldn't do so outright, so she merely leveled a bland look at him, fairly certain he saw through the weak attempt at subterfuge.

He chuckled darkly. "Yeah. I promised Mr. Schuester that I would let him know for sure by tomorrow. If the only other math class I can get into meets at that time, I think my choice is pretty obvious."

Emma bit her lip. "There's one other option, but I'm not sure how you'll feel about it."

Sam raised an eyebrow.

"The Honors Algebra class meets at the same time as your current algebra class. They use the same book, but work through it at an accelerated rate. However," she said carefully, "in my opinion, Ms. Colby is one of the best teachers McKinley offers, and I'm sure she wouldn't look down on you for your dyslexia and would be more than happy to work with you."

Sam debated the idea for several moments.

"I honestly believe you will do well," Emma continued. "I know you're a smart boy, Sam. You have a learning disability, yes, but that has nothing to do with your intelligence. Your previous scores in science and language arts are quite above average. I know you have trouble with spelling, but that's a cosmetic issue, not one that indicates your ability to comprehend and analyze." She paused. "And you would have Kurt's help, of course," she added slyly, looking for a clue.

Sam shook his head. "I don't want have to depend on him that much. He's in all kinds of advanced classes, and then there's Glee and the cheerleading thing. I don't want him to think I want to be his friend just so that I can use him."

"Well, Ms. Colby does run a tutoring program. She offers an online seminar to advanced mathematics students, and they receive credit and community service hours for tutoring their
classmates. You could receive tutoring from one of them if you find it necessary. I believe both Quinn Fabray and Artie Abrams are part of that group."

Sam brightened. Quinn seemed alright, although he couldn't know for sure, but he did like Artie. He nodded. "Let's do it."

After Emma filled out the appropriate paperwork and signed it, she then had Sam sign it and advised him she would file it with the administrative office. She printed him a new schedule just as third period was wrapping up. She wrote him a pass to excuse him from Chemistry, advising him that both Mercedes and Finn were in his class and he could get the notes from one of them. He quickly decided on Mercedes.

"I have to meet Kurt," Sam said, standing up. "He'll worry." He hooked his bookbag over his shoulder and shuffled his feet. "Thank you, Ms. Pillsbury. Thanks for listening and actually doing something to help me. It's nice to know that students here have a teacher they can count on."

He rushed out of the office, leaving a gaping Emma staring after him.

She felt tears rush to her eyes.

No student had ever before said anything like that to her. She wanted to make sure she lived up to it.

Her eyes narrowed. And now it was time to do something about Daniel Parks.

"Where were you?" asked an anxious Kurt.

Sam grinned. Kurt had missed him! "I was with Ms. Pillsbury. I wanted to make an adjustment to my schedule."

Kurt frowned. "Why? Did something happen?"

Sam noticed Puck eyeing him warily and decided to go for broke. He widened his eyes dramatically until they brimmed with innocence. "Is Parks always so mean?"

Kurt instantly went on the offensive. "Did he say something to you?"

Sam wanted to dance a jig of glee. Protective Kurt was too cute.

"He talked to me about my dyslexia," Sam said in a small voice, toeing the ground. He kind of felt like a dick, lying to Kurt this way, but he figured it was worth it. There was no reason to have Kurt be upset or feel bad about himself because of one ignorant and bigoted teacher.

Kurt glanced nervously at Puck.

"I told Puck," Sam said, catching the look. "He wanted to know why I was so upset after class. He was really awesome about it, telling me not to let Parks get to me."

Kurt shot Puck a brilliant smile, looking so proudly at the other boy that Sam felt a glimmer of jealousy, which was only compounded when Puck blushed lightly and ducked his head.

"I told him that Parks has always been a douche," Puck said, trying to get the conversation back on
the track Sam had established.

Kurt gave a swift nod. "Unfortunately, that's true. The man has no real interest in being an educator, other than building up his pension." He hung his head. "I feel badly that I didn't warn you."

"Hey," Sam said softly, "please don't be upset, Kurt. I appreciate everything you've done for me, but I don't expect you to hold my hand through all of this."

Even though Sam would've really liked Kurt to hold his hand. Kurt colored slightly and Sam wondered if Kurt wanted to hold his hand. He startled. He hadn't ever considered that his crush might be mutual. The idea both awed and terrified him.

But what if Kurt just thought he was a creeper? Shit!

Puck rolled his eyes. *Kiss him!* he mouthed to Sam, who flushed.

Great. Either Puck was telepathic, or Sam had been even more obvious than he had feared.

He cleared his throat. "Anyway, I don't have to deal with Parks anymore. I went to talk to Pillsbury, and she moved me to the honors class."

Kurt brightened. "That means you'll have Ms. Colby! She's a wonderful teacher."

"And hot," Puck added.

Kurt rolled his eyes. "Didn't she turn you down flat?"

Puck shrugged. "That just made her hotter."

Kurt sighed with feigned impatience. "Noah, you're ridiculous."

"You love me anyway."

Kurt sniffed. "That is beside the point."

Puck beamed. "You love me!"

"As I would an incredibly annoying brother," Kurt nodded.

"Aw, we're totally bros, man!" Puck said happily. He reached over and poked Kurt in the stomach, stunned when Kurt released a peal of laughter. "You're ticklish!"

"I'm not," Kurt snickered, before scowling and pushing Puck away from him.

"You so are!" Puck grinned. He ducked around to Kurt's other side and wiggled his fingers against the boy's ribs. "Tickle, tickle, tickle!"

Kurt shrieked. "Stop that!" he scolded Puck through his tears of mirth.

"No!"

"Noah!"

"I can't believe the perfect Princess is so common as to be ticklish! What else can you do?"

Kurt glared. "I can join unholy forces with Santana and make your life miserable."
Puck gave a spastic shudder. "Seriously, what the hell is going on with the two of you?"

Kurt grinned. "Santana is my opposite sex life partner."

"But the two of you together is really scary, man," Puck whined. "Like, someone should call Buffy or something."

Kurt arched a brow. "You're familiar with Buffy?"

Puck's mouth fell open. He glanced at a much bemused Sam, looked back at Kurt, and then ran away.

Sam laughed. "You'd never know how goofy that guy is from looking at him."

Kurt shrugged. "He has the bad-boy thing going on, but it's more of a front than not. It's nice to see him so relaxed, especially after last year."

"What happened?" Sam asked.

Kurt shook his head. "Please forgive me; I shouldn't have spoken. It's not my place to say."

Sam nodded slowly. "I respect that."

Kurt smiled. "Thank you, Sam." He cleared his throat. "Are you ready for your history class?" He turned around to follow Puck's path down the hall.

Sam hurried to catch up. "I'm nervous," he confessed. "It's my only AP class, and I want to do well, but my dyslexia makes me a little paranoid."

Kurt nodded. "I suppose that's understandable. I really can't speak to your difficulties, but for what it's worth, I think you're very intelligent. I may not have observed you in an academic setting, but I believe I'm a good judge of character. I took the class my freshman year and did well on the AP exam, so you're welcome to borrow my notes if you think they'll be of any use. Mr. Rice is a good teacher, though he is a stickler for details."

Sam nodded. "If you're sure you wouldn't mind, I'd like to take a look at your notes. Usually I get so busy trying to write down everything the teacher is saying, I end up falling behind and missing important information."

"I understand," Kurt said. "I myself have fallen into that trap before. Mr. Rice's lectures are verbose and dense, though nothing he says can't be found in the textbook. It's just a matter of knowing where to look." He began rummaging through his messenger bag and emerged with a small tape recorder. "I use this to tape my vocal exercises so I know where to focus my efforts. There's a new tape and fresh batteries already loaded. Use this to tape your lecture and transcribe it into your notebook. That way you won't miss anything."

Sam took it gently, his fingers brushing over Kurt's own. Both seemed startled by the contact.

"Thanks," Sam whispered. "I really appreciate everything you're doing for me, Kurt. I just hope you don't think I'm taking advantage of you or anything."

Kurt waved a dismissive hand. "Don't be ridiculous, Sam. You're in a brand new school and don't have the advantages as those of us who have been here for two years. I'm more than happy to help." He smirked. "That doesn't mean, however, that I would be averse to having you accompany me on some performances for Glee, even if you don't end up joining."
Sam nodded enthusiastically. "I'd love to." He paused. "I'm surprised you haven't said anything more about me joining."

Kurt shrugged. "I don't want to pressure you. I promised I wouldn't do that, and I don't want you to think that our friendship is contingent upon you joining the club. I'm your friend because I want to be, and for no other reason."

Sam felt himself blushing again and silently cursed himself for it. "Thank you, Kurt."

Kurt nodded and stopped before a classroom door. "This is where I leave you. Puck, Rachel, Finn, and Mercedes are in that class, as are Brittany, Quinn, and Mike. You should consider sitting near Mike or Quinn. They both excel in history and would be, I'm sure, more than happy to help you. I'll bring you a copy of my notes tomorrow."

Sam nodded, pleased. "Thanks again, Kurt. What do you have now?"

"My government class. After that is my first free period. I'll probably hang out in the choir room and practice. Noah will take you to your Spanish class and I'll come by and pick you up after so that we can go to lunch."

"Okay," Sam said cheerfully. "See you later!"

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Sam entered the classroom and noticed that he was one of the last students to arrive, though the teacher was not yet present. He momentarily debated where to sit. From the layout of the room, he imagined there would be a lot of group work involved and he didn't want to get stuck with kids who wouldn't pull their own weight. He noticed that Finn and Rachel had already huddled up, and Mercedes looked unhappy to be seated with them. Quinn, Brittany, and another cheerleader had formed a triad in the middle of the room.

"Sam!"

He looked around and saw a cheerful Mike waving him over toward an empty seat; Puck was seated on the other side. He heaved a quiet sigh of relief, smiled winningly, and made his way over.

"Hey dudes."

Mike nodded and Puck held out a fist to bump, with which Sam complied.

"I was wondering if we'd have any classes together," Mike said. "This is supposed to be a good one."

Sam nodded. "That's what Kurt told me. He's going to lend me a copy of his notes."

The din that had been echoing around the room abruptly quieted.

Mike stared. "Kurt is going to give you his notes?" he slowly repeated.

Sam looked around nervously. "Um, yeah. That's what he said."

"Wow," Puck murmured, shaking his head.
"Is something wrong?" Sam asked.

"Kurt never lends his notes!" shrieked an outraged Rachel.

Sam turned around to look at her, slightly unnerved by the evil glare Finn was leveling at him.

"Well," Sam drawled, "I guess I'm special."

"I bet you are," Finn spat.

"Oh, hell no!" bellowed an outraged Mercedes, who, along with Puck and Quinn, stood up and glared at him.

"Kurty lends me his notes all the time," said a confused Brittany, "and he doesn't even get mad when I spill Kool-Aid on them."

Sam stood up and looked at Finn. "Look, dude, I don't know what your deal is with Kurt, but I could care less." He noticed Quinn and Puck nodding along with him. "I'm sorry that you're such a homophobe, but what can I do about it? Have you considered seeking professional help?"

Mike and Brittany snickered darkly.

"I'm not homophobic!" Finn barked. "Just stay away from Kurt!"

"I don't think so," Sam replied, growing angrier by the second. "I don't know who you think you are, but unless I've missed some special announcement, you're not Kurt's social secretary. So why don't you worry about your own shit and leave Kurt's friends alone?"

"Shut up!"

Sam rolled his eyes. "Riddle me this, Hudson. Kurt doesn't like you. He's not your friend. Yet you threw a bitch fit this morning when you found out Kurt and Puck are friends. You nearly wet your pants when Kurt and Santana made out. From everything I've seen and heard, you don't like Kurt either. You don't want him around you. He freaks you out. Now, I can only deduce it's because he's gay, which, by the way, is incredibly lame of you. So I kind of have to wonder why you're trying so damn hard to keep people away from Kurt when you don't want him anywhere near you."

Finn's mouth moved at an exaggerated speed, though no sound emerged.

Sam held up a hand. "Dude, cancel my subscription. I'm over your issues."

As Finn puzzled over his words, Sam sat back down and began chatting with Mike, while a delighted Puck sneered at Finn.

Quinn noted with satisfaction that several students, who were not friends with anyone in Glee, looked at Finn with everything from minor irritation to outright disgust. Apparently more people liked Kurt than anyone realized, or were at least unbothered by him. They would probably never tell him so, but she supposed it was a start.

She also recognized Sam's strategic move. He had just openly allied himself with Kurt, and thus with Puck and Santana, whose exploits with the other boy were most likely already being texted to the masses. Coupled with the fact that Sam had been seen with Kurt and Santana in the halls, as well as herself and Brittany, Sam had inadvertently joined a clique, even if he didn't end up joining Glee. It would become apparent to the school that Glee had Sam's back and that he was in tight with the Cheerios. Those who were afraid of Puck, which was pretty much everyone, would leave Sam
alone, too fearful of retaliation. All of this had the bonus of elevating Kurt's own status – and Kurt wasn't even aware of it!

Further, Sam didn't seem to care who he pissed off. He defended his friends at the slightest provocation, had no qualms about doing so, and didn't care whether people liked it or not. That was pretty damn sexy. Now she just had to get Kurt and Sam to be sexy together.

The next thing of which Sam was aware was Mercedes, Brittany, and Quinn nabbing three empty chairs at the adjoining desk. As presumably all of the students, despite several empty desks, were now present and accounted for, he guessed the seat assignments would remain this way for the year. He did notice that Mercedes and Quinn were giving each other a wide berth. The cheerleader who had been abandoned by Brittany and Quinn looked ready to burst into tears, especially when she had no choice by to sit with Finn and Rachel.

"Okay, white boy," Mercedes said, eyeing Sam, "you just scored some major points with the Hummel Harem. But just so you know, word will soon spread that you defended Kurt."

Sam shrugged. "Don't care."

Quinn and Brittany smiled.

"You don't?" asked a surprised Mercedes.

"Why should I?" Sam demanded. "I don't care what Magilla Gorilla thinks about me. It's pretty obvious that he's a huge douchebag. The only thing I don't get is what the hell Kurt ever saw in him."

"Kurt told you about that?" Quinn asked.

"He said in Glee this morning that he'd had a crush on Hudson, but I haven't pressed him for details, if that's what you're asking. I'm not suicidal."

Mercedes and Puck smirked.

"So are you going to join Glee?" Mike asked Sam, who turned pensive.

"I don't know," a reluctant Sam finally said. "Are all meetings that…"

"Batshit crazy?" Puck supplied.

Sam nodded.

"Pretty much," Brittany chirped. "As much as fun as it is, there's lots of drama."

"I'm thinking about it," Sam said. "I have to let Mr. Schuester know by tomorrow and I want to discuss it with my parents first."

A few of them wanted to press the issue, but were quelled by Puck's glare.

"Hey, why did Parks keep you after class?" Mercedes asked Sam.

Sam averted his eyes. "I'm switching to the honors class. Ms. Pillsbury thought it was a good idea and I agreed."

"Lucky," Mercedes said enviously.
"Why don't you switch too?" Sam asked, smiling. "It'd be nice to know another person in there."

Mercedes looked thoughtful.

"They use the same book, but just go at an accelerated pace," he added.

"I'd like to," she confessed, "but math has never really been my friend."

Sam shrugged. "Mine neither, but it will look good on your college applications, and apparently there's an awesome tutoring group if you need help."

"I'm a tutor," Quinn said stiffly, noticeably avoiding Mercedes' eyes. "I'd be happy to help you, Sam. Artie's a tutor, as well."

Mercedes, who hadn't noticed Quinn's reluctant admission, nodded. "I'll speak to Ms. Pillsbury." She rolled her eyes. "Not to mention the bonus that it would get me away from Tweedledee and Tweedledum over there," she added, glaring in Finn and Rachel's direction.

Puck decided he would switch as well, though he didn't give voice to his plans. Leaving Rachel and Finn to fend for themselves in the algebra class made him want to giggle.

"How was your new calc class, Brittany?" Quinn asked.

"It was fun!" the girl enthusiastically answered. "It's nice to have a class with Artie and Kurty. I get to sit between them, so I'm pretty sure that means we'll eventually have a threesome. Do you guys like Mr. Donovan?" she asked Quinn and Mike, who exchanged a look.

"He seems to know the subject well," Quinn said carefully, mind boggling at the possibility of a Kurt/Brittany/Artie hookup. Arkurtanny? Kartinny? Brikurtie? She shook her head to clear it.

"He's just really intense about math," Mike added.

Brittany nodded. "Yeah, he can be scary, but calculus is tons of fun, so just concentrate on that!"

"I had no idea you were such a math nerd, Brit," Puck drawled.

She nodded. "Math is so interesting! Everything makes sense, and as long as you follow the rules, you always get the right answer! And there's only ever one answer." She frowned. "Well, as long as you're taking the absolute value. Plus, there are imaginary numbers! And you don't get yelled at for using your imagination!"

She beamed at the startled and bemused faces.

Mr. Rice then sauntered in and immediately began taking roll.

Sam noticed about halfway through the lecture that he had developed an academic crush on Patrick Rice. The man was smart, scary smart, but wasn't arrogant or obnoxious about it. He reminded Sam of Kurt.

He had impressed Sam almost from the beginning of the class, which was run as though it were a college course. After taking roll, Mr. Rice had spoken a little about himself. He looked about as old
as Mr. Schuester, but was so much hotter, and had an undergraduate degree in History as well as a Masters in Education. Sam couldn't believe the guy would actually want to teach at a dinky little school in Nowhere, Ohio, but he apparently loved his subject and enjoyed sharing what he knew with students.

Plus, Rice was working on getting his doctorate at OSU. He had even presented the class with a full and detailed syllabus for the semester, outlining course objectives, exam days, dates papers were due, and his expectations of the students.

Sam had always done reasonably well in history classes. He had problems with dates and small details, but he liked learning about the past and how it informed the present. He wouldn't go as far as to say he was passionate about history, not like he was about literature or biology, but it was one of his favorite subjects. He thought with a teacher like Mr. Rice, he might actually do well in the course. His anxiety about being enrolled in an AP class was therefore somewhat diminished.

Kurt's idea of recording the lecture had been a good one, and Sam was a little embarrassed that he had never before thought of it. He was taking good notes, in his opinion, but knew he had missed some key points. His memory was above average, but he was usually so busy berating himself for what he deemed his own stupidity, by the time he went back to add to his notes, he had forgotten what he had meant to add.

He'd try to transcribe the tape and integrate it into his notes before school let out so that he could get the recorder back to Kurt. He was pretty sure his mom had one he could borrow. He briefly thought of hanging on to Kurt's recorder on the pretext of starting a conversation with the other boy and thus guaranteeing more time spent in Kurt's company, before deciding that was too pathetic.

Maybe he should find a way to show Kurt his abs?

He forced himself to focus once more on the lecture and not wonder as to whether Kurt might find him cute.

As soon as the bell rang, Puck was at Sam's side after announcing to the others that he was taking Sam to Spanish class. Mercedes wanted to walk with them, but abruptly fled when Puck told her he needed to talk to Sam about jock itch.

Sam looked at Puck and blinked.

"Dude," Puck whispered, "you need to work on your game face, okay? The last twenty minutes of class, you totally looked like you wanted to blow Rice."

Sam flushed scarlet. "Oh god. Oh, my god."

"Chill, bro," Puck hissed, holding up his hands. "It's cool if you're into dick. I've got your back."

"Uh, thanks," Sam said nervously, "but I'm bi. I just…good teachers get me hot." He hung his head in embarrassment. Actually, he had been daydreaming about Kurt and Mr. Rice...and himself.

Yeah, he was pretty dirty. And horny.

Puck rolled his eyes. "Shit, there are pairs of socks that get me hot. Don't worry about it." His brows
gathered. "So, bi, huh? How'd you figure it out?"

Sam's eyes widened. "Are you…?"

Puck shrugged. "Don't know. I mean, it's not like I'm desperate for dick or anything, and I know I could get it if I really wanted. I've just never looked at guys that way before. Still, it doesn't gross me out. I'm actually kind of curious, so maybe that means something?"

Sam studied the earnest look on Puck's face and realized the other boy was serious. He didn't want to come across as mocking or condescending, nor did he want to say something that would get Puck angry at him or close off avenues of communication.

"It could just mean that you're an awesome dude who judges people on their merits and not who's in their bed," Sam said quietly.

Puck blinked owlishly. No one had ever called him awesome and meant it. Usually people only said nice things about him because they were scared of him or wanted to fuck him. It was a little disconcerting. He felt confused, yet proud of himself, like he did when he had gone to apologize to Kurt for all the shit he'd put the little guy through.

And Kurt had fucking accepted.

Puck had been positive that Kurt would have just laughed at him or gotten his dad to shoot him or something, but Kurt instead had invited him into his home, fed and watered him, listened to what he'd had to say, and then forgiven him.

And Kurt Hummel, despite being absent for the entire summer, had somehow turned into one of the best friends Puck had ever had. That it pissed off Finn was just a bonus.

"It's weird," Puck confessed. "Like, I can't picture myself getting down with another guy, but when I think of Kurt…"

Sam choked.

Puck smirked. "Relax, bro. I'm not making a play for your boy."

"He's not mine," Sam said quickly.

"But you'd like him to be," Puck guessed.

Sam hesitated. "I'm attracted to him, sure, but it's too soon to know if anything will come from it. I mean, I like him. I really like him. He's probably going to be my best friend." He sighed and bit his lip. "I don't want to screw that up."

Puck nodded thoughtfully. He and Santana had once been best friends, but then they had started sleeping together. It had changed everything. He still loved her in a way, and would totally put down anyone who tried to hurt her, but most of the time he couldn't stand to be around her, and he knew the feeling was mutual. It was kind of sad.

Sam sighed. "You were saying something about Kurt?"

Puck was startled out of his musing. "Oh. Yeah. When I think about the Princess, I can actually picture us going on dates and stuff. You know, like grabbing dinner or a movie, bowling. Shit like that. And I don't get it. I fuck girls; I don't date them. So why do I want to date the Princess?"
Sam arched an eyebrow. "You do know that everything you just described doesn't have to be a date, right? You could do all that with Kurt as friends."

Puck's mouth fell open. Wow. He hadn't thought about it that way. He felt like a retard. Or Finn.

"You don't have to justify wanting to be Kurt's friend, Puck," Sam said gently. "You don't have to date him to hang out with him. It's pretty obvious he considers you a good friend. I don't think he'd even bother to acknowledge you if he didn't want to hang."

Puck blushed. He did like Kurt, but he had also felt like their friendship was contingent on him changing who he was, even though Kurt had never said anything like that. In fact, he was pretty sure Kurt would kick his ass if he changed his personality, even though Kurt himself had changed some over the summer. Still, it wasn't a bad change, more like Kurt had...grown into himself. Pretty cool.

"You don't have many friends, do you, Puck?" Sam asked. "True friends, I mean."

Puck was silent for a long moment, wondering why the fuck Evans would ask him that and how he should answer, before deciding just to be honest. He finally shook his head.

"I know the feeling," Sam said. "When you find one, you want to hang on to them with everything you've got. They open doors to possibilities you never considered, and you don't think you could handle it if they shut those doors in your face. Friends can really make you vulnerable."

Puck figured out pretty quickly that Sam was no longer talking about Kurt. He guessed that Sam had been through some really rough shit, or someone had dicked him over in a major way. That wasn't cool.

What was cool was how Sam had gone to bat for the Princess repeatedly in the past few hours. Sam liked Kurt and hoped Kurt liked him back, but he was also really afraid of Kurt hurting him. Puck could understand that all too well.

"Do," Puck said, before exhaling loudly, "do you think we...could be friends?"

Fuck. Princess had made him vulnerable. Sneaky gays who were out but were still emotionally sneaky.

Sam gave him a small smile. "I thought we were."

Puck kind of wanted to cry, but he didn't, because he wasn't a girl. He was a badass, and he'd beat the shit out of anyone who claimed otherwise.

It would be nice to have friends, though, Puck decided. Real ones. Ones who wouldn't make him feel inferior without even trying. Ones he wouldn't fuck over because he was so damn jealous all the time. He really fucking hated being so goddamned lonely, even though he knew it was his own fault.

In the light of this new spirit of friendship, Puck refrained from telling Sam that he thought about kissing Kurt probably more than was healthy for a straight dude.

Sam and Puck walked into the Spanish III classroom laughing hysterically and shoving playfully at each other, much to the surprise and amusement of the occupants.
Mercedes simply looked confused, not understanding why or when Puck and Sam had become friends and worrying what Kurt would think of this development. Had they been laughing at him? If so, she would have to snip their gonads. Suddenly, her mind filled with devious plots against Kurt. What if Puck was faking their friendship just to make Kurt vulnerable? What if Sam was part of it and pretending to like Kurt to get close to him?

Finn looked both hurt and annoyed, which Sam neither understood nor cared about. He waved to Tina, and he and Puck went over to join her.

"Hey boys," she smiled.

"We're studs," Puck corrected.

She rolled her eyes. "Well, one of you is. How's the first day going, Sam?"

"Pretty well, thanks." Sam grinned at both her question and Puck's mock outrage. "It's a lot to take in, but so far everything is working out okay. How are your classes?"

She shrugged. "About what I expected. There's not too many surprises. Sometimes I wish I lived someplace bigger, you know? Where the curriculum was more advanced, or at least more interesting. Choices here are a little limited, but still better than in the rest of the county high schools."

Sam nodded. "Yeah, but there can be drawbacks to living in a large city, too. Lincoln, where I used to go, was huge. We had over four thousand students. The whole place was like one big factory, churning out drones. Most of the time, teachers didn't even bother to learn our names."

Tina winced. "That sucks." She leaned closer. "Not that the teachers here are all that great, but there are some really decent ones."

"Like Rice?" Puck suggested.

Sam managed not to blush. Tina was not so lucky.

Puck raised a brow and leered at her.

"He's really hot, okay?" she said defensively, fluttering her fingers. "I don't even like History all that much, though I do well in it, but Mr. Rice just makes it…better."

"You mean with that sweet bubble butt of his?" Puck prodded, bumping Sam's shoulder.

Tina scowled at him. "Why are you doing this?" she demanded. "Are you trying to piss me off?" She smirked. "Or is that you finally realized…" she trailed off and then startled. "Oh, wow. Did you?"

Puck blinked. "Huh?"

"Nothing," Sam said forcefully, glancing at Tina, who nodded quickly and smiled.

Puck rolled his eyes. "Whatever." He turned to Sam. "Thanks, but it's cool. Gothica here is good people." He shifted closer to Tina. "I don't know. Maybe? I'm trying to figure it out."

The corners of her mouth pulled upward. "There's more of us than you know. If you ever want to talk, just ask Kurt for my number."

Puck stared at her. "Really?"
"Which one are you asking about?" she purred.

"Um. Both?"

"The answer is yes. To both." She looked at Sam. "You too?"

"Yeah."

She nodded. "Hurt Kurt and you will know pain. And all I can say is that you better pray that Mercedes or me gets to you before Artie or Brittany gets the chance."

"It's not like that," Sam growled. "Why can't I just be his friend? Why is everyone trying to push me into something I'm not even sure I want? You don't know me, you don't know how I feel about this, and you don't even know what Kurt thinks about it all. Stop interfering."

Tina reeled back, eyes wide. "You're right," she finally said. "You're so right, and I'm sorry. I was out of line." She sighed and shook her head. "It's just that…"

"We want the Princess to be happy, you know?" Puck asked in a low voice. "It's really his turn, and if the dickbags of this school would just wake up to the fact that he's not out to convert or molest them or something, maybe he'd finally get his shot with someone who could make him happy. And," he looked down at his desk, "and you seem like a good guy."

Sam released a long, slow breath. "Look, I appreciate what you're trying to do. I appreciate that Kurt is your friend and that you're trying to help both of us, but I'm not ready to be in a relationship with anyone right now. I just want to be his friend, and from the signals I've picked up, that's all Kurt wants too. Yeah, we like each other, and there've been a few hints that maybe – maybe – it could go somewhere, but we're both…keeping our distance. And I don't think it's about fear of rejection. It's something else." He soured. "Or maybe it's because we've known each other for about four hours."

Tina and Puck had the grace to blush. Well, Puck scowled.

Will cleared his throat and Tina, Puck, and Sam all turned and regarded him with wide eyes. Slowly they came to the realization that they were the subjects of intense scrutiny. They hadn't been overheard, they were sure, but Puck and Sam could sense Finn's hostility, and Tina was already switching off her phone before Mercedes' first text could be received.

They scrambled to set up their materials.

Sam just hoped Mr. Schuester was a better Spanish teacher than he was a glee coach.
Sam was divided on Schuester's abilities as a teacher. The man clearly knew the material and could communicate it well to those who were interested, but he tried so hard to get everyone involved that he ended up begging students to participate and sought answers through leading questions. As knowledgeable as he was, he had no real control over his class. Further, Schuester knew it and resented it. He was angry at his students for slacking off and angry at himself for allowing it.

Sam thought it was ridiculous. This was third-year Spanish, not aftercare. He suspected Schuester was one of those teachers who didn't like to fail anyone, regarding his students' failures as his own. It was nice that the man was so caring and concerned, but Sam worried that the laziness of his fellow classmates would impact his own grade. A large curve had both its good and bad points. On the one hand, if he bombed a test, it wouldn't be the end of the world; on the other, he didn't like the idea of grade inflation because he was obsessed with carefully monitoring his scores, using them as accurate and reliable indicators of how he was faring in a course.

While Spanish was not among his favorite subjects, he was a fairly good student of the language. Reading was difficult enough for him, even though it was one of his favorite activities and he indulged whenever possible despite his disability, but to do it another tongue was all but impossible within the confines of a fifty-minute class. That said, he was almost fluent, thanks to his listening comprehension skills.

Where many people were visual, Sam was aural; if he wasn't under pressure and had enough interest in the subject, he could hear something once and usually remember it, and then build upon that information. It was why he was so skilled with the guitar, though he had never taken lessons. His Spanish vocabulary was extensive and he could easily hold entire conversations. It helped that he'd had a Latina babysitter when he was young and both of his parents were working.

Translations were what brought him down. As long as he had enough time to complete the exercises, he was just fine, but when he felt rushed, he started misspelling words or omitting them entirely. He was a walking contradiction. He was smart, but academic situations afforded him little to no chance to shine. It depressed him more often than not, while simultaneously driving him to excel as much as he possibly could, thus doubling the stress under which he put himself. He assumed that Pillsbury had spoken with Schuester regarding the dyslexia and was once again glad for her help.

Sam noted with little interest that Schuester was most focused on the other kids in Glee, as if they could save the class from interminable worthlessness. Mercedes was perfectly adequate, but it was obvious she was bored out of her skull; she had no interest in the language but was required to take it. Tina was good but it was apparent she hated being called on when she wasn't prepared. Schuester tended to ignore her when she raised her hand, but would then single her out when participation was at a standstill. Sam didn't know how Schuester could miss her glares of doom, but it seemed like Schuester missed a lot of things. Tina would sullenly hiss her answers and her accent was atrocious. Sam couldn't tell if it was purposeful or not. He rather thought it was.

Puck was the opposite; he spoke beautifully, but more often than not had absolutely no clue what the hell he was saying. At least, that was how it appeared. Again, Sam wondered if Puck was simply playing Schuester. He had the feeling Puck played everyone just for shits and giggles and didn't care if they caught on or if it upset them. He really was a badass, and Sam admired him for it. He could never bring himself to be so confrontational and uncaring, though there were moments – days, really
where he longed that he could. Regardless, he had the feeling that Puck was a hell of a lot smarter than people gave him credit for being.

He noticed that Hudson had cornered Schuester and was flailing over the assignment. Schuester was kind, concerned, and so very helpful. It was apparent to anyone conscious that Hudson was Schuester's favorite student. Hell, if Sam didn't know better, he would've thought there was something going on between them. Bile splashed the back of his throat at the very idea.

Thankfully the classwork exercises were vocabulary based, so he quickly filled out his worksheet, though he took some time to make sure everything was properly spelled, tried not to proofread obsessively, and then zoned out. It was no surprise to him that most of his thoughts revolved around Kurt.

Sam had always been comfortably bisexual. He was attracted to both girls and boys, and what he had told Pillsbury was true: he wasn't self-loathing. He had never felt as though his sexuality was abnormal or perverse. He had had a girlfriend his freshman year and a boyfriend in his sophomore, though he hadn't gone very far with either of them; mostly kissing and some light petting. Luckily, both Miranda and Caleb hadn't been very interested in taking things further. He had loved them, he supposed, or had felt a very strong affinity with them, and had parted with each on good terms. He still considered them friends and they spoke often.

Unlike most of his peers, he was in no rush to lose his virginity. He had seen what had happened to his old friends once they started having sex; most either became obsessed with having more, or the sex itself often caused relationships to falter because the participants weren't emotionally or psychologically ready to engage in it.

His parents had always impressed upon him that having sex was more than just two bodies fitting together; that, though it felt wonderful, it was supposed to be more than a physical release. Sam knew that he was perhaps somewhat more emotionally mature than most people his age, but he somehow knew that he wasn't prepared to have sex, nor did he want the pursuit of having it to take over his life. During his freshman and sophomore years, five girls in his rather large circle of friends had become pregnant. Three had abortions, one gave her child up for adoption, and the fifth had kept her baby, though she had dropped out of school. Three other friends had contracted sexually-transmitted diseases; sadly, one of that number had contracted HIV.

He didn't understand how people could have unprotected sex in this day and age. It simply made no sense to him. When he eventually had sex, even if his partner was also a virgin, he would demand they used protection.

He was fairly certain that what had befallen his friends had also dampened his desire for sex. He'd never really felt the urge that his other male friends often talked or bragged about. Sure, he jerked off a hell of a lot, and it felt pretty terrific; that was enough for him. He often fantasized about things he would like to do and the people with whom he would enjoy doing said things, and he'd been presented opportunities to act out those fantasies, but he was in no rush.

Most of those fantasies had always involved men and women equally, usually people he barely knew or those he had no chance of ever getting. A frequent fantasy involved him being the meat in a Brangelina sandwich, even if Brad had been looking pretty haggard lately. It made him wonder if Angie was a succubus. She was still smoking hot, though, so he'd have gladly risked it. He'd always be Team Jolie.

He sighed softly.

No one, neither boy nor girl, had ever affected him as much as Kurt Hummel. And in just…he
looked down at his watch…over four hours? What the hell was *that* about?

Sam didn't even know why it was happening. He'd never been so pressed before. He was no Don Juan, but he could usually control himself and his reactions around people to whom he was attracted. He barely knew Kurt, but there was this excitement about just being in his vicinity that was enthralling and intoxicating. It was also worrying. He didn't want to rush things with Kurt. Of course, he was putting the cart before the horse. He had no definitive proof that Kurt even found him attractive, let alone was interested in him.

He didn't know if he believed in love at first sight; not that he thought he was in love with Kurt, but he definitely felt connected to him. The more time he spent with Kurt, even though it was just snippets of mostly unimportant conversation, the more he craved Kurt's company. But he didn't want to become obsessed with the other boy or anything. He didn't want to be creepy.

And then he realized that he didn't even know if Kurt was seeing someone. It was possible Kurt had a boyfriend or was dating someone secretly. Even if that wasn't the case, there could be someone on whom Kurt had his eye. Maybe Puck.

That would be a real bummer, because Sam liked Puck, but not enough not to fight him for Kurt.

Jesus, what the hell was he thinking? Fighting, physically *fighting*, another boy over the affections of yet another boy? When did his life become a Lifetime movie adapted for the Logo channel?

Sam also thought about the fact that he hadn't popped a single boner over the admittedly hot girls McKinley had in spades, particularly in Glee. Quinn was beautiful, almost a Barbie doll come to life, and she had the same cool and aloof thing going on that Kurt did; Sam had to admit that, for whatever reason, he found that appealing. Tina was just adorable, but he had figured his lack of response to her was from the fact that she very clearly had a boyfriend, and whatever the hell she had going on with Artie.

Santana was drop-dead gorgeous, but she frankly terrified him. Even if he was interested in making a move, he'd be too scared of how she would react. Not to mention she seemed more interested in making out with Kurt than with anyone else. Brittany was perhaps the sweetest girl he'd ever met, even though he sensed she could be a real bitch when the situation warranted, but she was with Artie; of course, there were the looks she shot at Santana and her obvious desire to cling to Kurt like a spider monkey. And Mercedes had tits and ass for days. Of course, she also seemed to be hung up on Kurt. Rachel was pretty and pretty high-maintenance; a relationship with her probably would have ended in a murder-suicide, and he honestly didn't know which of them would be more likely to pull the trigger. Thank god Finn had claimed her.

As hot as all of them were, he hadn't reacted to them, not even to those who he believed were available. It was a strange and curious realization simply because it had never happened to him before. He *always* noticed how girls looked and how he would look *with* them. But he hadn't this time.

So he thought about the boys.

Puck was Grade A beefcake, and Sam could tell from the boy's attitude and presentation that Puck had probably fucked his way through most of the school. It was hard to reconcile that with the sweet and goofy persona Puck donned when around Kurt. Finn was handsome but bland. Mike was super hot and had amazing abs, but part of what Sam liked so much about Mike was that the boy was obviously devoted to Tina. It was sweet, but not cloyingly so. They just seemed to fit well together.

Sam thought Artie was really hot; being a dork himself, nerds and geeks tended to turn him on. His
ex-boyfriend Caleb was one of those geek-chic guys, though he had more of a hipster vibe than the McFly thing Artie had going on. The wheelchair wasn't a deterrent, either. If he hadn't first laid eyes on Kurt, if Artie were into guys at all, he would've strongly considered making a move.

The other boys he'd seen in the school were all generic.

Sam supposed he should just add his name as a perspective member to the Hummel Harem, as Mercedes had termed it.

Kurt was just stunning, and Sam thought part of the allure was that Kurt shouldn't be so attractive. His features shouldn't go together, but they did, so very well. The wide feline eyes, the color of which Sam could never hope to name; the nose whose tip was slightly out of proportion with the bridge; the sharp cheekbones; the prominent chin. And those lips.

Kurt's body was tight. Hell, he couldn't even imagine just how tight Kurt was, but he sure liked thinking about it.

Legs.

And the ass was seriously stellar. Like, there were no words to describe the awesomeness that was Kurt Hummel's ass. Sam knew his own ass was pretty sweet. It was tight and firm and perky. But Kurt's ass was all of those things, plus it was full. It was just there, begging to be groped and licked and bitten into like the succulent entrée that it was. Sam just wanted to bury his face in it.

Whoa. New kink.

Awesome.

All of this didn't even take into account the flawless skin – and it was flawless. A freckle here and there, which only added to Sam's desire to reach out and run his hands over that skin. Especially the skin which covered that long, milky expanse of slender, graceful gazelle neck. He wanted to run his tongue up that neck and suck on it like a fucking vampire.

He silenced a groan as blood pooled into his crotch, his cock standing up at full salute and demanding attention.

He had it so bad for Kurt.

What the hell was he going to do about it?

Finn considered himself a pretty decent actor when he really made an effort.

He had feigned confusion over the Spanish assignment – well, his confusion was mostly feigned – and cornered Mr. Schuester for some individual attention. There was nothing unusual about this, and he had been positive Mr. Schuester would capitulate as he always did. He felt kind of bad for taking advantage of Mr. Schuester, but it was necessary if his secret plan was to work.

After pretending to pay attention for about ten minutes, Finn nodded happily, indicating he now understood the exercise and then asked Mr. Schuester if he could use the restroom. Schuester nodded and handed him a pre-made pass, and Finn hurried out of the room.
He had to find Kurt. He had to make things right between them.

After Sam had bitched him out in History, Finn knew he needed to start backpedaling immediately before word got back to Kurt, who was already furious with him. Finn just didn't understand why Kurt was so angry. Why didn't Kurt realize that Puck was dangerous and would only hurt him? Why didn't Kurt understand that hanging all over Sam would get the guy killed? He didn't care about whatever Kurt had on the jocks to make them back off; they'd only look for a new target, and Sam was the perfect opportunity.

It was nice that Kurt had brought Sam to Glee Club, and Finn knew they really needed to get Sam to join, to take Matt's place, so they'd be eligible for Sectionals. Sure, he was a little worried that Sam would steal some of the spotlight, but that was okay, as long as they could compete.

But, oh no, Kurt couldn't have just let that be the end of it. He'd had to sing with Sam. Yeah, okay, they had sounded awesome together, but two boys singing? Okay, it hadn't been a love song or a duet or anything, but what if someone had looked in? What if someone had seen them and told everyone that Kurt and Sam were dating or something? Sam would get all upset and quit before he even started.

Of course, the problem was that Sam might not do that. He actually thought he and Kurt were friends. How could Sam be so blind? Couldn't he see that Kurt was obviously in love with him? How could he stand to have Kurt touch him and sit next to him and sing with him and look at him and…

Finn was so jealous. He was majorly jealous, and he was looking to take it out on someone. As usual, that person was Kurt.

He sighed. He was such an asshole. No wonder Kurt was always mad at him. Other than the brief touch when they had entered the choir room, it was Sam who had been fawning over Kurt. It had been Sam who looked at Kurt with big doe eyes and those stupid pouty lips. It had been Sam who had stood at Kurt's side as Finn had made a complete asshole of himself over Kurt's friendship with Puck.

And, seriously, what the fuck was that about? Puck hadn't even allowed Quinn to call him Noah. What the hell was going on there? How could Kurt have just forgiven that dickhead?

But that didn't even matter. It was Sam Evans who was the real threat. But why did he feel threatened? Kurt had been nothing more than perfectly nice. Kurt hadn't looked at Sam with lovesick eyes, the eyes that used to linger on Finn himself every day, the eyes that haunted his dreams even now.

He stopped in the middle of the hallway and breathed heavily. He wasn't gay. He wasn't. It was just…it was Kurt. Kurt was so damn confusing.

Kurt made him feel so many things that all Finn felt was tied up in knots. And Kurt was taking everything from him! Kurt had taken Quinn, and now Puck. Who was next? Rachel?

He snorted. He knew very well that Kurt and Rachel would never be friends; Kurt simply didn't like her. But Kurt was acting so differently. Sure, he had insulted and argued with Rachel, but he had apologized. Finn couldn't remember the last time Kurt had apologized for anything. And Rachel was
the one who had really been out of line. Kurt had been so mature and so…so commanding.

Hot.

No!

And Finn knew Kurt really hadn't taken anything away from him. Kurt hadn't become friends with Quinn until long after she and Finn had broken up. Finn and Puck had never really bothered to repair their friendship; they'd just slapped a Band-Aid over it and left it alone, hoping it would heal in its own time, but instead it had just festered. In truth, he really had no use for either Quinn or Puck. But he sure as hell didn't want them anywhere near Kurt. They would just use him and hurt him as they had Finn himself. Yeah, okay, Puck couldn't get Kurt pregnant, and Kurt would never date Quinn, so it wasn't like she could cheat on him, but it was the principle of the thing!

Why did they like Kurt more than they ever had him?

Even their brief interaction in the choir room had screamed how much Puck liked Kurt. Other than Mrs. Puckerman and his own mother, Finn had never heard anyone call Puck Noah. Even Gracie, Puck's little sister, called him Puck. Puck had been just fine with casually touching Kurt, even seeming to crave it. It had been obvious just how relieved Puck was that Kurt had forgiven him for the past bullying, and when the hell was the last time Puck had sought forgiveness from anyone? Puck legitimately liked Kurt, had stood up for him and wanted to…to care for him, like Kurt was his little brother or something.

Finn gasped. Kurt was supposed to be his little brother!

But he hadn't done such a good job of taking care of Kurt. Because Kurt scared him.

"I'm not gay!" he hissed insistently.

And he wasn't. It was just Kurt. It was only Kurt who made him question. It was Kurt who had put all of these thoughts in his head. It was Kurt who had made him start wondering about things he had never considered. He resented Kurt for that.

He hated Kurt for that.

He did hate Kurt.

He hated Kurt for looking the way he did. He hated Kurt for having a voice that could sing anything. He hated Kurt for having money. He hated Kurt for being so damn smart. He hated Kurt for always knowing just the right thing to say, whatever the situation. He hated that Kurt always had the best comebacks, and probably a dozen more he never uttered. He hated Kurt for the way he got under Rachel's skin in a way Finn himself could never accomplish.

He hated Kurt for having Burt.

He hated Kurt for having friends – real friends – who loved him and protected him and always had his back. He hated Kurt because Quinn and Puck were better friends to Kurt than they had ever been to him.

Hell, Santana liked Kurt.

Fuck, even Coach Sylvester liked Kurt!

And…and he liked Kurt. He just didn't want to.
And now, with Sam's arrival, he realized he didn't want anyone else to like Kurt either. Not that way. Not ever.

What was he going to do?

The only things he had going for him were Rachel and Glee Club. Well, not so much Glee as the fact that he was Schuester's favorite. It gave him the chance to shine in a way that football, no matter how good he was at it, never had. He knew his voice was good, but it wasn't the best. It just sounded the best with Rachel. Not that anyone else had ever really sung with her. He was worried Sam might take that from him.

He hated Sam.

The thought of Sam touching Kurt, putting his filthy hands on Kurt, made him want to puke.

Why hadn't he ever thought about this before? Of course some boy would eventually like Kurt, but he honestly hadn't thought it would happen while they were all still in Lima. And Sam did like Kurt, Finn could tell; even if Kurt, and maybe even Sam himself, didn't realize it yet.

And why wouldn't Kurt like Sam back? Sam was nice and funny and probably smart and could sing well. Sam obviously cared enough about Kurt to stand up for him and didn't care what anyone else thought about it, which was cool. Finn knew he didn't have those kinds of guts. He hated Sam for having them.

And Sam was hot. There were no two ways around that. Sam was exactly the kind of boy Kurt liked and, if that weird letterman jacket was any indication, Sam was also a jock, probably for football, which meant there was a chance Sam might take that away from him too.

Sam would take everything: Glee, football, his friends, and Kurt.

Just like Puck had taken Quinn, the baby, and Kurt.

Just like Quinn had taken Puck, the baby, and Kurt.

Finn had nothing. He was nothing.

Kurt was supposed to love him forever! Kurt was supposed to be the one true thing in his life that didn't change, that would always be there for him. Kurt was supposed to be his constant.

And maybe that would've happened, if not for that horrible night in the basement.

Finn shoved his fist in his mouth to stifle the sob.

Why had he done that? Why had he put it all on Kurt? He knew it was wrong, that it wasn't fair. And he knew that if he had just talked to Kurt, explained how confused he was, that Kurt would've backed off, been the best friend that he had been all year long, and would've helped him through it all. He knew he had been sending Kurt mixed messages, that he had kept the other boy dangling on a string, waving hope in front of him like a carrot. And he had done it because he could.

But Finn Hudson didn't talk. He pushed. And he had pushed Kurt away, because he couldn't stand wanting and needing Kurt so damn much.

And now Kurt had moved on.

Kurt had said as much. He had said that morning in Glee that he didn't love Finn anymore, that he
was embarrassed he ever had, and Jesus, that had hurt. Apparently, Finn Hudson was just incredibly easy to get over.

Not that he blamed Kurt. He really didn't. He knew it was all his own fault.

But that didn't make it hurt any less.

And now he would spend the year watching Kurt be best friends with Puck, best friends with Quinn, and possibly more with Sam.

He had to stop it somehow. He had to get Kurt back.

As much as he hated Kurt at that moment, Finn hated himself more.

Finn stole down the hallway toward the choir room in what he assured himself was a very stealthy manner. He knew Kurt had a free period at this time and was sure the other boy would put it to good use by rehearsing. Finn had been startled by how good Kurt had sounded singing with Sam.

Kurt always sounded good, of course. He and Rachel were the only members of Glee who didn't partake in vocal warm-ups. They just opened their mouths and sang perfectly, flawlessly, and always on key. It was sort of irritating. Kurt would often warm up, though, probably in a bid, Finn thought, to placate Mercedes. Also, Brittany had trouble paying attention and staying on key if Kurt wasn't there to keep her on track.

Kurt thought it was cute; Finn thought it was diabolical. He'd seen the smirks on Brittany's face when Kurt would come over and correct her posture or press his palm against her stomach to open her diaphragm.

Even Finn wasn't that clueless. He'd never believed that Kurt was, either, though he seemed to have a complete and total blind spot where Brittany was concerned. She had him completely wrapped around her finger and Kurt was none the wiser. Finn was almost positive that if Kurt were straight, or even bi, he'd be with Brittany and no one else.

It was cute how naïve Kurt could sometimes be. He acted all superior and glamorous, but he could be a total spaz or would get all flustered and red and adorable when something unexpected happened.

Finn grimaced at the thought and then frowned.

Kurt didn't seem like that now, though. He was so different. Finn wondered what the hell had happened to Kurt over the summer.

He knew about the trip to Europe, but didn't know what Kurt had seen and done while away. Kurt had said during Glee that he had studied voice at some Italian school whose name made Rachel look like she was fighting diarrhea. Finn hadn't understood what the big deal was; he still didn't. Kurt sounded, to him, the same as he always did: awesome. But Rachel was real smart about vocal stuff, so he could only assume she had detected some improvements in Kurt's voice. He was sure they would only make her more paranoid.

Finn knew Kurt had been to a bunch of different countries, but he couldn't remember which ones.
Some of them sounded so weird that he was pretty sure their names were made up. But now he wondered what else Kurt had learned, other than Portuguese and Irish, which Finn still didn't believe was an actual language. Maybe it was for leprechauns.

Kurt kind of looked like a leprechaun. Well, before the summer he had. Now he looked all...

_Fuckable._

Stupid brain.

Why had he never known Kurt's hair was naturally wavy? He had seen Kurt's hair in the locker room after a shower. It hadn't been wavy then. Well, maybe a little. He'd always tried not to look at Kurt too closely in the locker room, just in case any of the other jocks saw him looking. Damn, maybe that was why Kurt was always fussing with his hair, trying to keep it straight. That was stupid. Wavy hair was awesome. Especially on Kurt. And the streaks of blond were amazing, even more so because they were natural. Quinn streaked her hair to make it more blond. That was maintenance; Kurt's hair was glorious. It looked like it belonged in some painting of an angel or something.

Finn had envied Quinn her opportunity to run her fingers through Kurt's hair. He bet it really _was_ as soft as it looked. Given the way Quinn had been purring like a contented kitten, he imagined so. He wondered if Kurt's hair still smelled like coconuts and lime.

The tan was the most major thing, though. Mostly because he couldn't help but picture what Kurt had been wearing – or not wearing – to get such a dark, even color. A tan that was all over, because it went up his arms and what was exposed of his chest was just as dark. He wondered if Kurt had worn shorts. He had never seen Kurt wear shorts. Had Kurt worn short-shorts?

Probably any shorts would be shorts on those long legs Kurt had. He couldn't even imagine what had compelled Kurt to go out into the sun. Finn had always wondered if Kurt was a secret vampire, given how pale he was. But considering Kurt hated all things _Twilight_ and didn't sparkle without the aid of body glitter, he supposed not.

Unless it was all some elaborate ruse to lull the citizens of Lima into a false sense of security. Hm.

The clothes were amazing. Finn could easily believe that Kurt had designed them. They all but reeked of class and elegance and _Kurt_, and he looked much better in them than he did in his Dolce and Cabana or whatever. Before, Kurt had always looked like he was trying too hard, and Finn could never figure out why. Sure, Kurt looked good in those clothes, but it wasn't like any secret homos had been creaming their jeans over his latest scarf.

Wait. Had there been?

Finn gnashed his teeth.

Sneaky gays! Why couldn't all gays be like Kurt?

Whoa. Evil happy thoughts.

_Stop it!_

Kurt looked like he had grown…into himself. He seemed more at peace with himself, and thus with everyone and everything around him. He didn't get as ruffled as easily. Old Kurt would have been shrieking right along with Rachel during that fight Finn had with Puck during Glee.
Kurt smelled different, too. Finn had never known what Kurt's old cologne was, but it had smelled good, like wood chips and flowers. Spicy and pretty, which pretty much summed up Old Kurt.

New Kurt smelled like pink grapefruit and freshly-mown lawn and something else Finn couldn't quite identify. It smelled fresh and clean, like after a thunderstorm, but when there was still the odor of lightning in the air. Ozarks? Ozone? Something.

New Kurt smelled like citrus and grass and lightning. It was delicious. It had taken everything Finn had inside him not to lean over, stick his nose against Kurt's neck, and inhale deeply. The only reason he hadn't was because he thought Kurt might have kicked him in the nuts. Even if Kurt hadn't, Santana definitely would have.

New Kurt was a lot more calm. New Kurt didn't let Mercedes bait him anymore. New Kurt made out with Santana. New Kurt was blackmailing his tormenters to end both his bullying and that of Glee. New Kurt was making friends with new kids. New Kurt didn't argue with Rachel, but instead made comments which were carefully crafted to allow her to hang herself out to dry. New Kurt's voice was much more controlled and smooth. New Kurt spoke with a musical cadence that was slow and drawing instead of breathless and overexcited. New Kurt hardly smirked or rolled his eyes or snorted or scoffed or mumbled clever insults under his breath.

New Kurt looked you right in the eye and was perfectly pleasant, even when he was angry with you. It reminded Finn of his mom's favorite show, *The Closer*. Kurt was just like Kyra Sedgwick on that show, but without the southern accent. Like, Kurt could totally smile at you and say *thank you so much* and it really translated to *fuck off and die, you useless sack of elephant shit*. Old Kurt had always been classy if snarky, but New Kurt had a patience and tolerance that were shocking, even if they were feigned.

New Kurt shook hands easily, rather than warily. New Kurt had eyes which were no longer guarded, but vaguely distant, like he wasn't hiding anymore, but rather waiting to be found. New Kurt grinned a lot more, and they were genuine smiles, not faked or pained. New Kurt now only called him *Finn Hudson* when he was in trouble, like his mom did, in a tone that was mildly scolding rather than flirtatious.

New Kurt appeared to have complete control of himself and no longer felt the need to control everything around him.

New Kurt had grown up, and Old Finn was feeling very much left behind. He also had the sense that New Kurt would no longer tolerate old friends who never learned their lessons.

New Kurt didn't want him, and Old Finn still needed to be wanted.

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Finn swallowed heavily and pressed his ear to the choir room door, listening for any signs of life. He closed his eyes and pictured Kurt moving around the space, hips wiggling and hands fluttering, eyes alight with mischief and pride as they always were when he sang.

That was the primary reason why Finn preferred Kurt's voice over Rachel's. Both were justifiably proud of what their voices could do, but Kurt wanted the audience to experience the song *with* him; he wanted them to feel what he felt. Lyrics were important to Kurt. He chose his songs carefully to communicate something about him, about someone else, or about what he perceived as the human
Rachel wanted people to realize how good she was – and she was; damn good – but her performances were just that. They were showcases for her voice, and while she made faces and crazy eyes when she sang, she was always somewhat removed from the song itself, like she was hiding something. It was weird, and a little spooky.

Finn startled out of his thoughts and shook his head to clear it.

He was going to go in there and demand that New Kurt start acting like Old Kurt. No Puck. No Quinn. No Santana. No Sam. No other boys. Well, except for Artie. Finn wasn't sure Artie's junk actually worked. Brittany said it did, but she also said that she could cast Harry Potter spells with her ruler.

What was he doing again?

Getting Kurt back. Right!

But what was he going to do with Kurt once he had him?

He bit his lip.

There was the rub.

Yeah, he knew Shakespeare. So?

Finn carefully and gently pushed open the door to the choir room, stopping just before the hinges would start to squeak. He knew how the door worked. He knew how to spy.

Kurt was sitting behind the piano, staring off into space.

Finn frowned, puzzling over what to call the look on Kurt's face. Kurt didn't look sad or angry or happy; Finn knew those looks. Kurt also didn't look upset or depressed or scheming. He didn't look lost or evil or innocent or like anything, really, but neither did he look blank.

Kurt looked...thoughtful, Finn supposed, like he was remembering something, but there was a trace of something else. Restlessness?

Idly, Kurt's fingers plinked at the keys.

Finally, Kurt sighed quietly and stood up. Finn backed away and pulled the door shut slightly.

He watched as Kurt rummaged through his messenger bag and withdrew his iPod.

Kurt was going to sing! He loved listening to Kurt sing. He just hated that he always felt forced to look bored and uninterested when doing so. Finn quickly decided he'd rather listen to Kurt sing than have an awkward conversation which would probably end in Kurt being mad at him. Kurt could be mad at him some other time. Kurt was usually mad at him anyway.

Kurt dropped his iPod in the docking station and stood before the piano, facing out at the empty room.
Some kind of cool whistling noise erupted from the speakers. Finn didn't know what kind of instrument could make that sound, but he assumed it was a woodwind. Probably one of the more obscure ones for which the band program didn't offer students instruction. It was quickly joined by the strumming of a guitar and a gentle percussion that had Finn's fingers itching to learn.

Finn didn't recognize the song. Of course, he didn't know most of the selections Kurt chose. He didn't really like Broadway. This didn't sound like a Broadway song, though. It sounded surprisingly adult, like something his mom would listen to. He'd always appreciated that Kurt's musical tastes were more varied and eclectic than Rachel's own.

An electronic keyboard joined the melee and Finn leaned against the jamb of the door and waited for Kurt to begin.

"Better not tell her..."

Finn blinked and told himself to forget how seductive Kurt sounded. He tilted his head. Her?

"...that I was your lover."

Finn's eyes bulged and his mouth fell open. What?

"Better not make her jealous of me," Kurt continued, his voice husky and slightly rough as he dipped into his chest voice, which he now regrettably realized he had not trained nearly as well as he had his head voice.

He rarely used his lower register because the notes got away from him too easily and he abhorred not being in control. However, it suited the song and he was alone. He knew he didn't sound bad, just different.

Jealous of whom? Of Kurt? What?

Finn began panicking.

No.

No, this absolutely could not be happening.

"Better convince her there was nothing between us. I'm not those initials in your diary."

Kurt absently wondered why the song – its lyrics, rather – were so easy for him to sing. He didn't feel awkward or exposed or even slightly choked. There was a modicum of guilt, of course, but he
had really done nothing wrong; neither of them had. They had both been single at the time, despite each having feelings for other people. They hadn't intended to hurt anyone, and indeed no one had been hurt.

Miraculously, they had also somehow managed not to hurt each other – no small feat.

They had parted willingly and civilly, if not necessarily as friends. Too much existed between them after those weeks together.

In a very profound way, the separation had been welcomed and somewhat of a relief, though there were still occasional pangs of longing. Kurt thought perhaps there always might be.

After all, he imagined that everyone wanted to be able to look back on their first time with tenderness and fondness. He was one of the lucky ones who would always treasure that experience, thankful to the one with whom he had shared it. It had been the right thing and the right feeling at the right time with the right man.

His first sexual experience was one of the few things Kurt Hummel, in his rather short and bleak life, did not regret, and it had inspired him to make other gratifying and pivotal changes in his life and how he chose to live it.

Finn doubled over with agony, careful not to let the door slip from his grasp, lest its closure signal to Kurt that he was being watched. It was so rare to catch a glimpse of Kurt unguarded, exposed, that Finn knew if his presence were discovered, not only would Kurt never forgive him, Kurt would take to avoiding him at all costs, most likely after making some creative and horrifying threats.

He forced himself to breathe slowly, in and out through his nose. His mind raced, telling him repeatedly that he was overreacting, that the song meant nothing, that not everything sung was autobiographical, but he knew that, in this case, it was a lie.

Kurt had slept with someone over the summer. Kurt had had sex. Kurt had lost his virginity, and not to him.

That was why Kurt had changed, because his world had, as had Finn's own after that…thing…with Santana.

He flashed back to Puck's obnoxious interrogation of Kurt during rehearsal, and it was only now that Finn realized Kurt had never answered the question.

Finn was surprised by the tears painfully pricking at his eyes. He had tried and tried and tried to convince himself that what he felt for Kurt wasn't love, that it wasn't even lust. It was something that hadn't been created or born or nurtured. It was just something that existed, like God, or Paris Hilton. It was present, but could be ignored.

He couldn't love Kurt. He was supposed to love Rachel.

But he hadn't been able to ignore it for a very long time now. He had tried so hard to ignore Kurt, and it had worked for a while, but then it had exploded like a supernova or Lindsay Lohan's police record.
Finn knew what it meant that Kurt had had sex, because he felt he understood how Kurt viewed sex. They might not have had a lot in common, and, though they had never discussed it explicitly, Finn had somehow known that sex would matter to Kurt, as it did with him, as it should have had for him, but he had wasted his first time. He had slept with someone for the sake of it, not because he was in love with his partner. Christ, he didn't even like Santana. But she had been there, she had been willing, and he had been horny.

There had been no fireworks, no white noise or blackouts of pleasure. There had just been the completion of a biological urge and an enormous letdown and sense of disappointment.

It wouldn't have been like that with Kurt. Or Rachel, probably.

Right. He loved Rachel. He was pretty sure that if he just kept telling both her and himself that, he would eventually start to believe it. Nothing could happen with Kurt. He'd made that clear by shooting his mouth off in the basement.

But that didn't stop him from wondering how Kurt's affair had started, and how it had ended. Or if it had ended at all.

What if it hadn't? What if Kurt had a...a boyfriend? Some smarmy European dude with three first names and olive skin who lived in a castle and wanted to keep his claws in Kurt. Kurt, who was so sweet and so naïve and so rich and so...no longer innocent.

Kurt had had sex.

Finn's mind reeled.

"But if you slip and my name comes up, don't deny that you knew me."

Finn dimly began registering the words of the song, no longer caring whether or not they were directly applicable to Kurt's Secret Gay Affair. Because he was pretty sure they were. And if he was hearing right, Kurt had done the nasty with a dude who had a girlfriend. That was just mind-boggling. It was so not Kurt. Not after all the vitriol Kurt had spewed about the cheating ways of Puck and Quinn.

Of course, Kurt had forgiven them for screwing over his supposed best friend. Not that Kurt had ever called him his best friend, and, if truth be told, Mercedes was Kurt's best friend. Though they hadn't seemed so chummy this morning. But Mercedes was always so bossy and possessive of Kurt. Honestly, Finn didn't know how Kurt could stand her.

Finn saw red once more. Puck and Quinn were responsible for this! They were to blame for turning Kurt into some...some harlot! Obviously when Finn had lost his nut and blown up at Kurt, he had turned to Quinn and Puck for comfort, and they had corrupted him with their foul and devious ways! That was probably why Puck had been hanging all over Kurt that morning. Puck must've known that Kurt had gotten laid, and now he figured Kurt would be all his for easy sex.

It was never more apparent that Puck needed to die.

Still, how could Kurt have slept with some guy who had a girlfriend? Not only was it abetting adultery, but Kurt had told him once that he didn't believe in bisexuality, that it was just a buzz word people used when they couldn't face who they really were.

Did that mean Kurt had changed his mind about that? Because if that was the case, then maybe... No.
"Just leave out the white nights, the moon in your window; the break in your whisper, the promises after."

There were moments late at night when Kurt closed his eyes and could still hear him panting in his ear, could still feel him moving atop his body. In those moments, Kurt had never felt so free and unencumbered, yet so safe and protected.

He had felt beautiful in those hours, that handful of days which had seemed to stretch into eternity, though both knew their time together was limited and would never be repeated. In those hours, Kurt had known the words slipping forth from His mouth were little more than incredibly lovely lies, spoken wishes of secret truths which would never come to fruition, and he had accepted them as such.

He didn't begrudge the falsities, but instead acknowledged that, had they found each other in another time and place, perhaps they would have had a chance. He had preferred not to dwell on such maudlin thoughts, however, choosing instead to focus on the hot, lush mouth before him, on the compact muscles gliding beneath his searching fingers, on the silken skin which glowed like cultured pearls in the moonlight seeping through the foulard drapes, billowing out from the French windows.

He had learned that promises were made in desperation or exaltation, having little meaning in the moments in between, yet he harbored no malice. Once he had that realization, everything else had fallen into place, and he had understood that life wasn't quite as hard as he had been making it out to be. In the end, all anyone could truly call their own was their choices, so he had chosen love, for that was what they had shared. Fleeting, yes, but real all the same.

His acceptance of this had triggered acceptance in his lover, and then hands had become words and they had no longer needed to speak.

"Better not tell her why you love Spanish dancing. Don't bother to say that it's hot in the summer in Madrid."

It must have happened in Madrid, Finn surmised. He knew Kurt had traveled extensively throughout Spain, but he just couldn't understand how Kurt could have met someone, let alone found time to have sex with him, during so brief a sojourn, especially as he had been accompanied by his grandmother and his tutors. Had his grandmother known how Kurt was spending his nights? Had she approved? Had she not cared?

He watched as Kurt moved about the room. Finn recognized the dance, courtesy of Rachel's
relentless lectures, as the tango, the most passionate of Latin dances. Had Kurt danced the tango with his...whatever the hell the guy was supposed to be? Kurt's talent and flexibility had never been as showcased as they were in this moment. The way his hips moved, as though independent of his body, the way he flowed from one position into another like water, was breathtaking, though Finn found it obscene and obscenely ugly.

He noticed that Kurt's hands were raised slightly above his neck, as if grasping the shoulders of an invisible partner. But what Finn couldn't figure out was why Kurt didn't look sad. He just looked nostalgic, as though he was remembering something wonderful yet finite.

So maybe Kurt and Mystery Date were over? Well, that was good. Right?

Yes.

"Mmm, let it all go now, like smoke from a candle, like the trace of a song that you hear in the wind."

There were only remnants of feeling left, as though their time had been quilted together but with missing pieces, stitches frayed and sloppy, yet sturdy. He didn't feel as though anything was amiss, however. He didn't feel as though he had loved and lost, because he had never expected to find love, any romantic form of it, at that point in his life. Were he honest with himself, he had never believed he would ever find love, that he would allow himself to do so.

Once free of Lima, though, he had greedily embraced everything the world had to offer. Indeed, he had realized that nothing was really offered; it was seized.

His first night in Paris, dead on his feet and longing for sleep, he had dined with his grandmother, who had given him a hard, searching look and demanded to know if he was happy. He hadn't answered right away; not because he didn't wish to, and not because he had been in search of sympathy, but because he hadn't known what happiness was. Could it be qualified? Could it be contained and measured, and, if so, against what?

He hadn't been happy in a very long time. In fact, he didn't know if he ever had been. He debated whether his treasured memories of his mother constituted happiness, finally deciding that, were that the case, happiness was steeped in blissful ignorance. But did that truly represent happiness? No, he had told himself.

So he had told Katrine as much. No, he wasn't happy, and he didn't know how to change it.

She had scoffed and told him quite plainly that people chose happiness. You couldn't expect it, you couldn't demand it; you had to choose it. You had to wake up in the morning and decide that happiness would be yours because you would not allow it to escape your grasp. One was happy because one wanted to be happy. It really was just that simple.

And he had found that to be the case. It had taken him a few days of wrestling with the concept, of the utter banality and brilliance of it, to appreciate its simplicity and elegance. The next morning, he had woken up and decided to be happy. He had decided that Finn wasn't worth the heartache and the strife, that he had inflated the other boy's qualities to the extent that no one could ever live up to them, and his heart lightened and he had felt that first glimmer of happiness.
As he toured les Jardins de Luxembourg, he had decided that Glee Club would ultimately be little more than a footnote on his high school transcripts, so there was no point in wrestling Rachel for control of it. The sun shone just a little bit brighter at that recognition, and that elusive happiness began to take root.

As the days bled into weeks, as he attended lectures at the Sorbonne and classes as Le Cordon Bleu, as he traveled across the Channel and explored every bookshop in London and ate far too many chips and perfected a posh accent, as he crossed into Ireland and then up to Iceland, back down into Scotland and then England once more, before returning to France via Calais, as he had opened himself to new ideas and new perspectives and new influences and new teachers and new people, he had excised those parts of him that had been born from and responded only to pain.

It had hurt to let those pieces go. At first, he was convinced that if he released them, there would be nothing left of him at all, until he finally understood that it was those parts that had been holding him back for years. It was those pieces, fashioned by despair and fear and self-loathing, that had programmed his behavior, had determined his response to everything from what to have for dinner to a reply to a morning salutation to how he answered the phone.

And as he shed those parts of him, he began a literal growth spurt, as though he were unfurling from the crouched and deformed creature he had allowed himself to become, and he also began shedding those clothes, those ridiculous clothes, that he had worn like a bright, fashionable suit of armor. He no longer needed them, and they no longer fit.

Then there was new clothes and new countries and a new attitude and a new life.

Finally, there was happiness.

Finally he could look at his mother's pictures without bursting into tears. He still cried, of course, but mostly because he had been blessed with a mother who had loved him with everything she had, and that was her greatest legacy. She would have been appalled had she seen what he had allowed himself to become: a bitter, lonely little boy with a poisonous wit who was so busy lamenting what he didn't have, that he never stopped to appreciate what he did.

His memories of his mother were no longer bitter, but instead had become bittersweet. He would always miss her, would always want her back, and would always remember her with some gentle trace of sadness, but he had let go of the anger and the survivor's guilt.

Finally he could sing with everything that he was and everything he knew he could be. He wasn't competing with Rachel. He wasn't trying to impress Mr. Schuester. He wasn't trying to gain Finn's attention. For so long, he had viewed singing as his only available avenue of self-expression; as his discount therapy, so to speak. He had focused so hard on finding the perfect song, on arranging it to suit his needs, on adapting the lyrics to reflect his situation, on perfecting his vocals to win the approval of others, that he had somehow allowed himself to become Rachel.

He had been trying so long and so desperately to be the perfect singer that he had forgotten the absolute joy of singing. He had forgotten what it felt like to wake up in the morning and wanting to burst into song, simply because he had woken up.

He had taken the little things for granted and blown the unimportant out of proportion. His entire life had been out of proportion, and that was why he had been unhappy for as long as he could remember.

Katrine had been right: it was a conscious choice to be happy. It wasn't easy, either. You had to be willing to let things go, including parts of yourself that you had previously used to identify yourself.
You had to be willing to excuse the faults of others unless you wanted to be held to your own impossible standards; an uneasy feat, to be sure. You had to look deep inside yourself, past your own layers of defense and subterfuge, to the person who lurked underneath, the one you tried so hard to hide from everyone, including yourself, and you had to come to know that person. You had to want to know that person. You had to learn to love that person.

And, yes, sometimes love hurt, but you were a better person for having loved.

Kurt Hummel became a better person.

Kurt Hummel became happy.

And then Kurt Hummel had gone to Madrid and found an altogether different type of happiness. It had been short-lived, but nevertheless true and wonderful in its brevity. He had come to be thankful for that time, rather than rueful that it had ended. It had been, overall, a positive experience.

Those had always been of short supply in his life. He was glad they were beginning to accumulate.

"Leave out the tears and the laughter. She won't need to know…"

Judging from the song, Finn guessed that Kurt's Euro Trip had also resulted in the loss of his lover.

Lover. What a queer word. Not queer as in gay, but as in strange.

It was a weird word. It was even weird to say. It sounded so old-fashioned. Who addressed someone as their lover, anyway?

My sexy lovahhh.

He sure hoped that Kurt's unnamed and probably unsexy lover was still in Europe and would remain there forevermore. He didn't want some douchebag Spanish viscount skipping across the Pond to take Kurt away from all of this. He also hoped that Kurt wouldn't pout and mope over said douchebag. It had been bad enough that Kurt had been moping over him last year. He didn't want to spend another year watching Kurt being miserable all the damn time. Not the least of which was because it would mean that Kurt still had feelings for the mysterious viscount.

No, Finn decided it was best that Kurt move on from his summer romance. He would help the little guy with this. Not that Kurt was so little anymore. Especially not where it counted. Because he had seen Kurt in the locker room and...yeah. Brittany hadn't been exaggerating. Kurt would make someone a very happy dolphin. And as long as that dolphin wasn't Sam or Puck or anyone in the Lima vicinity, Finn would be happy.

Finn was sure that with just a little more time, he would come to a decision and either admit that he considered Kurt more than just a friend, or they would all go off to college and he'd never have to deal with it. Maybe their parents would just get married and then Kurt would be his brother and all of the strange feelings would go away. Because incest was just nasty. Unless your last name was Winchester and you starred on a CW show.

Not that Finn watched that show.
There was a guy named Sam on that show. Suddenly, Finn didn't like that Sam either.

Sam was a stupid name, and it didn't go well with Kurt. What would people call them? Skurt? That was just pathetic. The only thing worse would be if they became known as Kum. Ew.

Kinn was so much cooler. Even Furt was acceptable, if marginal.

Hevans, his brain hissed at him.

No! That was too cute, too sweet.

Ugh! He could just imagine all the Cheerios referring to Sam and Kurt as Hevans and squealing about how cute they were and how they had enough lips between them to satisfy a small country.

He wondered if Sam's lips were real. He was sure they couldn't possibly be as soft as Kurt's. Not that he had ever kissed Kurt, but he had shaken Kurt's hand, and it had been amazingly soft, so it stood to reason his lips would be even softer. Big, beautiful, soft lips.

He wondered if Kurt had given head to his summer lover. The thought sickened him only slightly less than Kurt's cherry being popped. That is, if Kurt had been the catcher. What if Kurt had been the pitcher? Finn couldn't even imagine that possibility. Still, he didn't know for sure. He didn't think he'd ever be comfortable enough to catch anything other than a football. The whole idea scared him, but didn't necessarily sicken him.

That was some pretty dangerous thinking.

And now Kurt knew all about gay sex. Like, he had first-hand experience.

Kurt was experienced.

Kurt had…given himself away.

Finn knew he had to get out of there before Kurt saw him. He also knew he was going to have to put on the acting performance of his life. It would be the greatest role he ever played, pretending not to know what Kurt had done, pretending to be uncaring and untroubled. Kurt would take one look at him and know something was wrong, so Finn would have to avoid the other boy.

But lunch was next period. How could he calmly sit and enjoy his peanut butter and pickle sandwich while sitting across from Kurt? And Kurt was sure to bring Sam along, not to mention that Puck would probably be there, as well, hanging all over Kurt.

Finn couldn't risk it, he knew. He'd have to skip or sit at another table. But that meant explaining to Rachel why didn't want to sit with Glee. If he lied to her, she'd see right through him.

What was he going to do now?

Leave, idiot! his brain howled. The song is almost over.

Panicked, Finn went to pull the door closed, but the knob slipped right out of his sweaty hand. He quickly wiped it on the front of his jeans and then tried again. Mercifully, it worked.

"That I'd die for your love. That I still love you."

Finn raced the bathroom to vomit.
The song Kurt performed in this chapter was "Better Not Tell Her," by Carly Simon, and is available on her CD "Have You Seen Me Lately?"
Tina startled Sam out of his lascivious thoughts about Kurt and a gallon of honey. She snapped her fingers in front of his face, a slight smirk on her lips. He had been so preoccupied by his fantasy that he had missed Finn's return to the class, the homework assignment, and the ringing of the bell.

"Rice?" she asked. "Or was it Kurt this time?"

He frowned. So she wanted to play. Okay. "No. You, me, and Mike on a waterbed filled with Jello."

She raised a brow. "Not bad. What flavor?"

He blinked. "What?"

She grinned. "I may be bubbly and dress like Death, but I'm not a nun, and there's always room for Jello. Also, for future reference, that myth about Asian men is just a stereotype."

He snorted. "Good to know. Did you need something? Oh, and grape by the way."

She nodded. "Excellent choice. The bell rang. Puck is waiting for you. Finn, Mercedes, and Schuester are staring at you." Her lips quirked. "Can you stand up, or do you need some cover?"

He grunted. "I have a bookbag."

She shrugged diffidently. "As you wish."

"Why do I get the feeling I'm one of the privileged few to have seen this side of you?"

"Because you are. Don't think Brittany was the first girl to have made out with Kurt."

He arched a brow. "Sweet. Pics?"

"If you're lucky."

He laughed and shook his head. "You're very good at this. You should write novels."

"I settle for fanfic."

His eyes widened. "Really? What fandom?"

Her own eyes became guarded. "Buffy."

"Awesome. OTP? Please don't say Spuffy."

She soured and shuddered. "Hell no. Cordelia and Xander for het, Angel and Lindsey for slash."

"Nice!" he said brightly, holding his hand up.

She grinned and gave him five. "Ready to go? I imagine your mentor is waiting for you."

He blushed; he knew it and cursed himself for it. Tina caught it and he cursed her too.
"I'm sorry I was so pushy before," she said quietly. "I know how it is to be rushed in to things. Take your time. Kurt's worth waiting for."

The corners of his mouth pulled upward. "Yeah, I figured that out." He narrowed his eyes. "Is Finn still looking over here?"

"Of course," she said, rolling her eyes.

He offered his arm. "Then might I have the pleasure of escorting you to the hall?"

She smirked and threaded her arm through his. "You're good. Not up to Kurtana levels of inducing fear and paranoia, but you have definite potential."

"High praise."

"Indeed."

They strolled out of the room together, Mercedes smiling as Finn scowled and Rachel peered at them speculatively.

When they entered the hall, Sam suddenly had tunnel vision.

"Hi, Sam!" Kurt brightly chirped.

Sam beamed. "Hey. How was your rehearsal?"

"It went very well, thank you," Kurt replied, nodding his head. "Are you ready for lunch?"

Sam decided now would be a good time to flash a little skin and see what resulted. "I'm starving," he said in a low voice, rubbing his stomach and purposefully bunching the bottom of shirt in his hand, exposing his abs. He noted with glee that Kurt's eyes widened slightly, as did those of Santana and Quinn, who immediately looked at Kurt to judge his reaction. Apparently both girls had cottoned on to the fact that he was interested in Kurt as more than just a friend. Hopefully, they would be allies.

But Kurt had no reaction. He merely smiled pleasantly and wrapped an arm around Brittany. "Let's head to the cafeteria, then."

"Subtle," Tina hissed.

Sam flushed. That hadn't worked out very well. Did Kurt not like his abs?

Quinn looked at Santana, nodded, and then went to join Kurt and Brittany to provide a distraction.

"Nice try, Hot Lips," Santana said under her breath, "but Tink doesn't recognize when guys are flirting with him. Probably because it's never happened."

Sam's mouth fell open. "Seriously?"

She nodded once, gruffly. "Still, it was a good plan. You'll definitely have him thinking about you and your awesome abs."

Sam bit his lip nervously. "Then why is he with Quinn and Brittany, ahead of us?"

Santana shrugged and turned to Tina. "Ideas?"

Tina shrugged in tandem. "Probably thinking about whatever song he's just sung. You know how
Kurt is after a performance."

Santana nodded.

"How is he?" Sam asked.

Tina frowned. "Judgmental. Kurt knows he's good, but he doesn't realize how good. Rachel has tons of confidence in her ability, but Kurt doesn't, despite the fact that he has the largest range of anyone in the club and more versatility than all of us combined. He's probably analyzing every note and measure, looking to see where he can improve."

"He's a little obsessive about it," Santana agreed, "even though I've never heard him miss a note." She frowned. Except for that one time he missed a note. Her eyes lighted with sudden knowledge.

Sam remembered earlier in the morning when Kurt admitted he had obsessive tendencies. He supposed that there were worse things to be consumed with than a musical performance. "I hope he sings this afternoon. I really want to hear him on his own, hear what he can do."

"It's a trip watching everyone else watch him sing," Santana said, ending with a snort.

Tina nodded. "Listen and pay attention to what he does, but look around at how the others react to him."

Sam frowned. "How do you mean?"

"Rachel loves listening to him sing," Tina said. "She'll never admit it, and probably has no idea that she stares at him like he's a delicious dessert into which she just can't wait to sink her teeth. As much as she hates how talented he is, she can't get enough of him."

"Is she jealous of him or something?"

Santana cocked her head. "Not exactly. I think she finally realized at the end of last year that he's a much better vocalist than she is. She's...okay, never repeat this or I'll rip your sac off like a paper towel, but she's a really good singer. Her problem is that she has no imagination and she sings everything just like the original recording. It gets pretty boring after a while."

Tina nodded. "Kurt rearranges the music and will even rewrite lyrics if he feels it will suit him. His ability to interpret a song is what sets him ahead of the rest of the pack. He can sing the hell out of a song, but what's most important to him is communicating to the audience what the song is saying. He doesn't make it all about him."

Sam nodded slowly. "I get that. When he sang with me this morning, it was like he just knew when to come in and in what key to sing to maximize the sound of our voices. He filled in all the stuff I was missing."

Santana gave him a smirk of approval. "You've just caught on to something that most of the club misses. See, Kurt makes a big deal about him being more than just Rachel's backup singer because he wants more solos. Don't misunderstand me – he should definitely have them; we all should – but what almost no one gets is how much Kurt is needed in the background."

Tina picked up the argument. "He can sing anything, Sam, in almost any key. His range is that large. He might not have the power of Rachel, Mercedes, or Santana..."

"Or you," Santana interrupted.
Tina startled, blinked, and then smiled shyly at the other girl. "But you can put Kurt in any part and he can do it, and do it perfectly. Those songs where we need a greater bass, he can slip into that role effortlessly, and in the next number, he can sing soprano like Sarah Brightman."

Sam's eyes widened. "What's his normal range?"

Tina shrugged. "Honestly? I don't think anyone really knows. He classifies himself as a countertenor but, like I said, he can sing every part, from men's bass to women's soprano. I just think he's most comfortable being a countertenor, so he's shoehorned himself there. The problem is that there aren't many songs written for countertenors."

Sam frowned. "Why is that a problem? Any song can be arranged to suit the preferred key of the vocalist."

Santana smirked. "Allegedly."

And Sam got it. "I see."

Tina nodded. "Second thoughts about joining?"

"Totally," Sam admitted. "I mean, I like all of you. Well, most of you. But I don't want to be under Rachel and Finn's thumbs, and it's pretty obvious they're the ones in charge."

Santana grimaced. "Hudson's barely in charge of tying his shoes. He does whatever Rachel tells him, and she does think of herself as the Queen of Glee. We've been trying to change that, but if we don't manage it soon, I'm out." She sighed. "I love that club, I really do, but if she doesn't climb down off her pedestal soon, I'm going to push her off and then leave. It's just not fun anymore."

Tina snorted. "Says the girl who just a solo at Invitationals."

Santana halted in her tracks and gave an exaggerated blink. "Holy shit. I forgot."

Tina laughed, not unkindly. "I so understand. Remember when Schue gave me the lead for True Colors and Rachel stormed out, threatening to quit? The song wasn't even on the roster for a performance. It was just rehearsal."

Sam's mouth fell open. "Are you serious?"

"Completely."

Santana shook her head. "I still can't believe Schue actually gave me a solo."

"Technically he didn't," Sam pointed out. "Kurt did."

Santana blinked again, and then turned to Tina, who looked similarly stunned.

"Wow. He did, didn't he?" both girls asked.

"And Rachel didn't argue with him," Tina added.

Santana grinned viciously. "This is going to be the best year ever."
Mercedes had rushed out of the classroom, not wanting to be trapped into accompanying Finn and Rachel to the cafeteria. This suited Finn's plans just fine. He needed Rachel alone so that he could drop some unsubtle hints and have her figure out a plan of action. She was good at that.

"What's wrong?" Rachel asked in a worried voice. "You've been upset ever since you returned from the bathroom. Are you sick?"

He was sick, but the stomach pains had mostly left him. "I passed by the choir room on the way back," he said carefully.

"Did you see Kurt?" she asked casually, though her eyes shined with blatant curiosity.

He nodded. "He was singing." He paused. "I think something happened to him this summer."

She was immediately on alert. "Something bad?"

Finn bit his lip, trying to determine how best to play this. "I'm pretty sure he met someone."

"A boy?" she asked excitedly.

Finn twitched. She wasn't supposed to be happy about this! "If I was interpreting his song right, the dude he met had a girlfriend."

Rachel pouted. "That's sad," she said quietly. "When will Kurt meet someone who can like him back?" She sighed.

Finn flinched, but covered. "Kurt slept with him," he blurted.

Her eyes bulged comically. "What?" she hissed, sidling up to him. "How do you know? Did he tell you?"

Finn shook his head. "That's just what I got from the song."

Rachel frowned. "That's not very helpful. Just because he was singing some song doesn't mean the lyrics were necessarily about him."

Finn gave her a pointed look. "When's the last time you heard Kurt sing something that wasn't personal?"

She bit her lip and slowly nodded. "What was the song?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. I didn't recognize it. It didn't sound like the stuff he usually sings, and his voice was different, too. A lot lower."

Rachel's panic went into overdrive. Kurt must have been using his chest voice. She wondered how much he had trained it, because if he was approaching the point where he could access his entire range in full voice, she would be in trouble.

She tilted her head. Unless of course she allied with him and pushed Finn into the background. But she couldn't do that. Could she?

Finn hid a smile as he watched Rachel form an unspoken agenda. He didn't know just what that agenda was, nor did he care, as long as there was a chance Kurt would be kept from Sam and/or Puck.
Rachel's mind was racing. Though she would never admit it publicly, Kurt was a much better singer than Finn, with whom she often had to restrain her full potential when she sang. He just wasn't capable of keeping up with her.

But Kurt was.

Song titles flitted through her head, featuring her and Kurt in the lead roles. She had the power, and Kurt had the range and charisma. Kurt could also dance. In point of fact, he was a better dancer than she herself was, but she would only improve if she was forced to keep up with him. Finn was a disaster on the dancefloor. The other boys who could actually dance had to dial down their performances so as not to leave him behind.

They could finally be winners. If New Directions won Regionals with herself and Kurt leading the company, not only would Glee be safe, but she'd have a partner who would spur her to new, dizzying heights of greatness. That was compelling.

But what to do about Finn? He was as tempestuous as she was. If he lost the lead, there was a good chance he would quit. Of course, if Kurt could convince Sam to join, the blond boy could easily step into Finn's newly-diminished role. And they would still need a replacement for Matt.

But Finn would also likely break up with her. She didn't want that to happen.

Still, artists sometimes had to make sacrifices for their medium. Going through something so traumatic would probably add depth to her performances.

Of course, she loved Finn. She had fought long and hard for him and wanted to be with him. However, she was keenly aware that they would most likely not last beyond senior year. She was planning to go to New York and she doubted Finn would leave Ohio.

She was sure Kurt was planning to go to New York, too. It only made sense.

Huh.

She shook her head and forced herself to pay attention to what Finn was saying.

"I'm worried about him, Rach. He looked so out of it. What if his heart was broken? What if this dude hurt him or something?"

Rachel was horrified. "You mean," she looked around the empty classroom and lowered her voice, "you think Kurt was raped?"

Finn's eyes widened to the size of banjos. He certainly had not thought that, but now he did and he wanted to throw up again. If that had happened, he would fly to Europe, find the mysterious Spanish viscount, and murder him slowly and painfully.

He shook his head dumbly. "But Kurt was singing about love and stuff," he softly protested.

"Stockholm syndrome," Rachel said decisively.

Finn didn't know what that meant, but it didn't stop him from panicking. This was going way too far and putting ideas and scenarios in his mind that he most definitely did not want there. "No. Kurt would have told someone. Mercedes, or something."

"Kurt only got back into town today," she countered, "and Mercedes was out of touch with everyone for the whole summer."
Finn frowned. That wasn't true. He knew that Quinn had gone to see Mercedes at her bible camp a few times.

"And he's so different now," Rachel continued. "He looks different, and he dresses differently, and he's so distant with everyone. You saw how he was with Mercedes this morning."

Finn refrained from saying that he didn't understand why anyone would want to be friends with Mercedes. He was still angry at her for knowing about Beth and convincing the entire club to keep the truth from him.

"But he's just as tight with everyone else," he argued. "Artie and Tina and Brittany. He's close with Santana now, too," he added, grimacing. "And he's trying to become friends with Mike."

Rachel nodded reluctantly. "And, of course, there's Sam to consider. They're obviously friends, even if they only met a few hours ago."

She watched carefully for Finn's reaction and was not disappointed. She saw the jealousy and possessiveness in his eyes, but misinterpreted it. She believed Finn was feeling territorial about his position in New Directions. This merely confirmed her earlier supposition that Sam was a very talented boy and therefore belonged with them. If even Finn could sense Sam's ability, they desperately needed Sam to join.

"Noah is what most concerns me," Rachel admitted. "He was all but pawing Kurt during rehearsal."

She sighed. "If Noah honestly wants to be friends with Kurt, that's terrific. Maybe it will convince more than one jock to leave Kurt alone for good, blackmailing aside. But I just don't trust Noah with Kurt. He's very manipulative and Kurt can be gullible about some things."

Finn nodded furiously. He was also annoyed that she too referred to Puck as Noah. He was pretty sure Puck had never okayed that, but had probably encouraged Kurt to use his first name. What an asshole.

"I don't think Kurt was…you know," Finn finally said, simply unable to posit something so horrible happening to his friend. "He doesn't seem sad or upset or anything." He frowned. "In fact, he seems a lot happier. At peace with himself, or something."

Rachel gave him a hard, searching look, though her anxiety was not resolved, believing Finn was in denial. "That's true," she finally admitted, "and we shouldn't jump to conclusions, but that doesn't mean that things went well with his summer love. We should keep a close eye on him."

Finn smiled and nodded.

Perfect.

Quinn, Santana, Brittany, and Tina entered the cafeteria just behind Kurt and Sam, who were chattering away happily and oblivious to everyone else. Santana noticed some people, mostly other girls, give her boys the stink-eye. She hid her smirk. She could all but smell the stench of jealousy. It was no secret amongst the female population of the school that there were many girls who fantasized aloud to anyone who would listen that they'd like a shot at Kurt.

Now Sam had presented himself as a hot, new stud who hung with the most popular Cheerios. His
all but mandated air of mystery was already driving a few people batty. He was a transfer student with no known history, presumably romantically unattached, with a tight body and some awesome lips. The girls were probably heartbroken and horny at the idea that Sam was already with Kurt.

Santana wanted to encourage those rumors without outright admitting anything. She'd have to work on doing just that.

She was startled out of her thoughts when Puck sauntered up, draped an arm over Kurt's shoulders, and began talking animatedly with both him and Sam.

Santana blinked. "What."

"Right?" Tina hissed. "Puck and Sam are boys now. They were like that in Spanish too."

Santana pulled back, bringing Tina with her. "Is he doing it for Kurt, or because he likes Sam as a friend? Because if it's the former, Kurt will see through it and be pissed."

Tina shrugged casually. She wasn't going to say anything about Puck's possible sexual identity crisis, nor would she out Sam. "Don't know, but they've bonded or something. I'm pretty sure I heard them babbling about football when they came in to the classroom, so Sam probably plays. Maybe he's going to try out for the team."

Santana liked this development. For one thing, Puck needed some friends; he'd always been sidelined with Finn and their relationship could best be described as dysfunctionally symbiotic.

Second, the football team sucked big time and she was really getting tired of cheering for a pack of losers. It was exhausting.

Third, if Puck and Sam became friends, Kurt would reap the benefits of two bodyguards who got along with each other. Awesome.

Kurt was pushing at Puck, trying to dislodge him, but Puck was having none of it. When he went so far as to reach up in an attempt to give Kurt a noogie, the other boy had had enough, grabbed the offending hand, and promptly spun around and held it tight against Puck's own back.

"Awesome!" Sam cheered.

"No touching the hair, Noah," Kurt chided. "We've discussed this."

"Shit, dude!" Puck yelped. "That fucking hurts!"

Kurt immediately released him. "I'm sorry, Noah. I didn't mean to exert so much pressure."

Puck winced and rubbed his wrist, catching Kurt's baleful eyes. "No sweat, babe. I just didn't see it coming. Wicked move, by the way."

Kurt smiled shyly and ducked his head.

"Homos!" someone called out.

Kurt's head swiveled around like he was possessed and he scanned the crowd to determine who had commented. "I find it ironic that most of the alleged men who take such issue with me are the same ones who could never hope to get an actual date with a woman themselves," he said loudly. "Of course, I don't have that problem."

Two tables of Cheerios burst out laughing and cheered him on, alternately cooing and catcalling at
him.

Satisfied, Kurt strolled over toward the lunch line, an amused Sam and an amazed Puck trailing after him. Luckily, Brittany had the presence of mind to start a round of applause.

Sue Sylvester looked on with what could have passed as pride, but was probably just gas.

Even Azimio had to admit, if only to himself, that Hummel's comeback had been one of quality. Especially since it was true. He smirked.

Things just got interesting.

Several minutes later, the entire glee club had gathered at their usual table. Sam had immediately staked out a chair next to Kurt, while Artie and Puck fought over who would sit at his other side, which greatly pissed off Mercedes, Santana, and Brittany.

Kurt himself settled the argument. "Hi, Artie."

Artie smiled up at Puck smugly and rolled himself next to his friend. "What's up, bro?"

Kurt raised an eyebrow before laughing and shaking his head. "How are you doing?"

Artie shrugged diffidently, but Kurt was an expert at reading his friend's body language. He nodded.

"How was Europe?" Artie asked.

Kurt leaned over and whispered for a very long time into Artie's ear. As Artie's eyes grew to unfathomable proportions, almost everyone else at the table strained to overhear whatever information Kurt was imparting, Finn and Rachel in particular.

"Really?" Artie quietly asked.

Kurt nodded. "We'll talk later."

"You bet your ass we will."

Mercedes was perturbed. "What's the big secret?"

Kurt opened his mouth but was cut off by Artie. "Apparently my boy's growth spurt wasn't just limited to his height."

It took several seconds for everyone to glean his meaning, and many flushed spectacularly.

"Interesting," Santana purred.

"Pics or it didn't happen," Tina chimed in, smirking devilishly at Kurt.

He glared at her in mock outrage. "You just want to see me naked again."

She nodded. "Yes."

"You...you've seen Kurt naked?" Finn carefully asked Tina.
"Sure."

"So have I," Brittany beamed. "It was awesome. Like porn, but better."

"When was this?" asked a wide-eyed Mercedes.

Tina shrugged. "We had to help him out of his unitard."

"Unitard?" Puck blankly repeated.

Brittany nodded. "When we did Single Ladies."

Tina rolled her eyes. "It's not that big a deal. He's seen us topless."

"Dude!" Puck crowed at Kurt, who laughed.

"I've seen the goodies of most of the female club members, Noah."

"Not mine," Santana lamented.

Kurt nodded, his eyes sparkling. "True enough, but yours are the only ones I've ever groped. You took my manual virginity, Santana."

She tented her fingers and rested her chin atop them. "Excellent."

"That's not fair," Quinn said, pouting. "You've made out with Britt and San. When is it my turn?"

"Is there a queue?" Santana demanded.

"Yes," Kurt replied. "I'll get back to you."

She nodded and turned around in her chair. "Hey, Gardner!" she bellowed, addressing the nominal leader of one of the Cheerios tables. "Hummel's taking appointments for make out sessions. Spread the word."

Angela Gardner gave her a thumbs up and leaned forward, debating this latest development with her teammates. Several of the jocks looked upon the scene with curiosity and jealousy.

"I wasn't serious, Santana," Kurt scolded her.

She shrugged. "Too bad. Even if it never happens, the possibility that it might will have them fapping for the next three months."

He flushed heavily and poked listlessly at his salad, stabbing with his fork a particularly troublesome piece of lettuce.

"That's not all you're eating, Kurt," Artie said.

"I have some fruit for later," Kurt objected.

"You also need protein."

Puck opened his mouth, but Kurt held up a hand. "Say it and I'll superglue the locks of your truck."

Puck glared at him and pouted, crossing his arms defensively across his chest, a strategic maneuver designed to maximize the appearance of his guns.
"Do you have an eating disorder or something?" Sam whispered to Kurt, who was startled.

"Absolutely not," he said with mild vehemence. "I just don't wish to subject my body to the lacking fare which most people our age shovel into their gaping maws with abandon."

Sam smiled and nodded, pleased that he had found another healthy eater and yet something else he had in common with Kurt.

Several of the collective looked down speculatively at their lunch trays.

"You eat like a bird," Finn said offhandedly to Kurt.

Kurt raised his brow. "And you devour empty calories the way the Black Plague ate up entire European villages, but I've given up discussing it with you."

Finn smiled, glad to reestablish some of their banter.

Kurt turned to Sam. "My father is dating Finn's mother," he explained, "so we often have meals together. Finn and Carole are coming over tonight, in fact. I have to go to the grocery store after Glee."

Sam mentally cheered. Even if Finn wanted Kurt, he could never have him. He also wondered if some of the friction between the two was merely an exacerbated case of sibling rivalry, with each boy wondering how to adjust to this new dynamic.

Finn looked uneasily at Kurt. "What are you making?"

Kurt rolled his eyes. "It has red meat, so you'll enjoy it."

"Sweet!"

"You cook?" Sam asked.

"He should really have his own show," Artie interjected. "His skills are sick. Everything he makes is delicious, even the healthy stuff I normally wouldn't touch."

Kurt smiled at Artie, and then blinked. "That reminds me!" He bent over and rummaged through his messenger bag, finally reemerging with an elaborately wrapped package. He handed it to Sam. "Please pass this down to Rachel."

Sam complied, handing it to Mercedes, who stared at in confusion, before passing it along to Tina, who then gave it to Mike, who delivered it into the hands of a shocked Rachel.

"You got me something?" she asked, unable to hide her surprise.

Kurt frowned. "Of course I did. I have several gifts for each of you, but I had them shipped here and haven't had time to unpack and wrap them yet. I just sent Matt's to his new address. I should have them ready for all of you tomorrow."

Squeals of excitement broke out, even from the other boys.

"Yours I'll have to deliver, Tina," he added. "They're too cumbersome to bring to school."

She beamed at him and nodded. "Thank you!"

Rachel looked down at the present for several long seconds, really not comprehending what was
happening.

"I picked this up last night in the Marais, right before I headed to De Gaulle, so I had the shop wrap it for me," Kurt elaborated. "I know it's gauche, but I was in a hurry."

Rachel said nothing, instead inspecting the wrapping. Was it an antipersonnel device?

"Open it, Berry!" Santana commanded with barely-concealed fury.

Hesitantly, Rachel did, her eyes bulging and lighting with joy when she tore the wrapping from the cover. "Oh, Kurt!" she gushed. "Thank you!"

He grinned. "You're very welcome."

"What is it?" Puck asked, frowning.

"A book?" Finn asked.

Kurt nodded. "It's a collection of traditional Israeli meals prepared with vegan ingredients." He looked at Rachel. "I knew you read Hebrew, so I figured this would be put to good use. It's not in print in this country, nor is it available as an import, so I'd hoped you hadn't already possessed a copy."

She clutched the cookbook dramatically to her chest, her eyes shining. "I don't! I've never even heard of this before!" She was beyond thrilled. Not only had Kurt thought enough about her to get her a gift, but he had personalized it especially for her, based on what he knew she liked. "Thank you so much," she repeated.

"I'm glad you like it," he said, smiling shyly. "Maybe we can exchange recipes sometime."

"Yes!" she said, nodding furiously.

"I also picked up a copy for your mother, Noah," Kurt said. "I know she loves Jewish food, and these recipes are actually good for you. I think you'll like them."

Puck tried to hide his small smile, but was unable to accomplish it. "Thanks, Little Dude," he said quietly, feeling quite light and fluffy when Kurt smiled at him. Sam's words came back to him and, for the first time, he began to believe that Kurt truly did like him.

Kurt cleared his throat. "I plan on having a sleepover this weekend. It would probably be easiest if I gave the other girls their presents then, rather than toting them to school and having to make several trips to various cars."

"A sleepover?" Mike asked.

Kurt nodded. "Tina, Brittany, and I have sleepovers all the time, as do Mercedes and myself. Quinn has been to a few of them, as well. So I thought I'd get everyone together in one place." He turned to Artie. "You too, if you're interested."

"Halo?"

Kurt sighed. "If I must."

"You must."

"Where will everyone sleep?" Santana asked, naturally and rightly assuming she was invited.
"My bed can sleep four comfortably, and five in a pinch," Kurt answered. "The couch folds out into a queen-sized bed, so probably three or four can share it. I also have inflatable mattresses."

She nodded. "Acceptable, as long as I'm in your bed."

He rolled his eyes. "As if I'd trust you with anyone else."

She smirked at him.

He nodded. "We'll have to plan in advance. I absolutely insist that Artie either sleeps with me or in the sofa-bed. I won't have him trying to maneuver himself up and down off the floor."

Artie smiled and looked down at his empty plate.

"Where will I sleep?" Puck demanded.

Kurt's eyes widened. "You? You want to come to a sleepover at my house?"


Kurt bit his lip. "I'll have to check with Dad. Artie's the only boy who's allowed to stay the night."

He frowned. "Of course, the whole matter is dependent on how Quinn feels about this."

Quinn shot him a heartfelt look of gratitude, thankful that he had considered her feelings and placed them above his fledgling friendship with Puck.

"It's fine with me," she said, surprising several.

Kurt grinned. "I'll ask Dad tonight, then. I doubt he'll have a problem with it. Sam, you're more than welcome if you're interested and your parents agree. I'll give you the number to the landline so they can talk to my father if they have any questions."

Sam smiled and nodded. "Sweet! Thanks."

"You too, Mike," Kurt added. "I'll be Skyping Matt, so you'll get a chance to talk to him as well, and maybe we could further discuss my desire to learn Chinese?"

Mike cheerfully nodded and thanked the other boy.

"Finn, since you and Carole usually spend the weekend at the house, would you mind picking up Rachel on your way? You know how parking can be a nightmare on my street."

Rachel made Guppy Face. Kurt was inviting her to his house?

"Sure," Finn answered, shrugging.

Kurt tuned the both of them out and turned to Mercedes, Tina and Brittany. "I've had my room redecorated since you've last seen it, so I'll want you to critique it."

The girls nodded in unison.

Finn blushed and looked down at his lap, knowing he was the reason Kurt had felt a redecoration was necessary.

"You live in the basement, right?" Santana asked Kurt. "How will we get Wheels down there?"
"Kurt can carry Artie up and down the stairs," Tina said.

"You can?" a dubious Puck asked Kurt.

"I'm deceptively strong."

Mercedes rolled her eyes. "Okay, Dr. Addy," she said, grinning goofily at him.

Kurt laughed.

"There's a ramp with access to the basement door," Artie said. "Kurt had Uncle Burt put it in for me when he moved down there."

Kurt nodded.

"What?" Finn asked blankly. "Where is it?"

Kurt raised a brow. "You've been in the backyard, Finn. You've never seen it? There's a path from the driveway that goes around the side of the house and continues to the back."

Finn shrugged sheepishly. "I've mostly just checked out the pool."

Kurt smiled and Finn was happy to see it wasn't condescending.

"Oh, and for those interested, bring your swimsuits," Kurt said. "The weather should be glorious, but even if it turns cold, the pool is heated."

"Righteous," Sam said.

Kurt turned to him. "Really?"

Sam blushed but smiled. "Tubular?"

Kurt sniffed. "That's where I draw the line."

"Noted."

"Does this mean we get to see you in a swimsuit, Princess?" Puck asked Kurt, flirting outrageously.

"If you're lucky," he snapped back.

"The blue one," Brittany said dreamily. "You have to wear the blue one."

Kurt shifted uncomfortably, a slight blush creeping up his neck. "I don't think that would be appropriate for mixed company, Brittany."

Mercedes snickered. "Baby, you do realize that we, as girls, are the mixed company?"

Kurt blushed harder.

"Why wouldn't you wear it?" Santana demanded of Kurt. "What is it? A Speedo or something?"

"Yes," Tina and Mercedes answered.

"Wear it," Santana and Quinn ordered Kurt.

Sam popped a boner at the idea of Kurt in a skimpy Speedo. The thoughts he was having in his head
were, as Brittany had earlier said, better than the best porn he'd ever seen. He sneaked a glance at Puck, who appeared to be in a similar state. Maybe Puck wouldn't make a play for Kurt as he had claimed, but Sam didn't plan to count on that. He'd have to be ready.

"Are you sure you can handle seeing me in all my glory, Princess?" Puck purred at Kurt.

Kurt scoffed. "I've seen you in the locker room, Noah. I know what you're working with, and while it is indeed impressive, I'm sure I'll be able to control myself."

Puck frowned at the way Kurt had bristled. "I didn't mean it like that, babe," he insisted. "Jesus, it not like I think you're some kind of predator or something. I was just kidding." He looked very unsure of himself and vaguely guilty.

Kurt's face cleared and he smiled. "I was only teasing."

But he hadn't been, and Puck and everyone else knew it. An eerie silence descended over the table and Finn felt horrible. It was his fault Kurt was so defensive. It was true that both he and Puck had changed in front of Kurt in the locker room, as he had in front of them, and there had been no issues. His freak-out in the basement had just been so wrong on so many levels, and he had obviously hurt Kurt far more than he had ever realized.

"Does this mean we can share a bed?" Puck asked Kurt, smirking.

Kurt's raucous laughter rose from the table and extended past its boundary. "I don't think I could handle waking up to your glory, Noah."

Puck's chest swelled with pride. "Not many could."

Santana and Quinn laughed derisively. Puck scowled.

"Not nice," Kurt chided them.

Quinn rolled her eyes.

"So?" Santana asked.

Kurt sighed and shook his head. "That brings up another point, though I'm somewhat hesitant to mention it and I please ask that you don't be offended, but I would prefer being able to tell my father that those of us who are dating won't be sharing a bed. It's certainly none of my business what any of you choose to do, but I ask that you don't do it in my house."

"That's fair," Brittany said, eyeing Artie with a smirk.

"Absolutely," Rachel said, still struggling to overcome her shock at the invitation.

"Cool with me," Mike said, shrugging, and looking at Tina, who nodded. They weren't at that stage yet.

"We're not dating, Princess," Puck drawled.

Kurt laughed. "Be that as it may, Noah, I wouldn't feel comfortable sharing my bed with any boy other than Artie."

"I didn't know you guys were so close," Finn said carefully.

"Best friends since kindergarten," Artie said proudly.
Everyone other than Sam, Tina, Mercedes, and Brittany stared.

"Really?" Quinn asked.

Kurt nodded. "Yes, of course. I don't even remember life without Artie in it." He shot the other boy a fond look which Artie warmly returned. "We're the white, half-gay and half-Jewish version of Matt and Mike."

Mike burst out laughing. "That's pretty awesome."

For once, the look Artie shot him wasn't filled with malevolence.

"Yes, we are," Kurt agreed. "That's why Artie and I are usually in the same classes. I was explaining to Sam this morning that I was in all kinds of afterschool and extracurricular programs when I was younger, and Artie joined me for a lot of them, particularly the academic ones."

Artie nodded, then sighed. "Kurt has the language skills. I've tried, but for some reason, my brain's not wired for it. I barely learned the Hebrew necessary for my bar mitzvah. I'm technically better in math, but Kurt is just behind me. He's better at biological sciences, while I prefer the physical ones. Kurt's better in art and lit, and I like economics, computers, and the social sciences."

"We tie in history," Kurt added.

"You did better on the AP exam," Artie said, pouting.

Kurt nudged him with a shoulder. "Don't be mad," he said quietly.

"I'm not," Artie promised. "It doesn't really bother me. I just can't figure out how you did it."

"I had Santana."

"Any way you want me, baby," she growled.

"Promises, promises," Kurt said, smiling. "I was lucky to find you last year. You've got to be the best history student in the school."

She shrugged. "I'm going to be a lawyer. I need to know that shit."

"You want to be a lawyer?" asked a surprised Mercedes.

Santana nodded. "My dad's one."

Kurt laughed. "Besides, Santana getting paid to argue with people? It's fate."

Santana tossed her hair and preened.

"Ten minutes," Quinn announced to no one in particular. "Half of us have AP Chemistry, right?"

Kurt, Artie, Mike, Santana, and Tina nodded.

"I call Kurt for lab partner," Mike said.

Santana and Artie scowled at him.

"You'll pay," Quinn promised him. "Yes, you will." She sighed. "I call Artie. If he's as good at physical science as he and Kurt insist, I'll need help. I like biology better."
"Me too," Puck said.

Sam nodded. "I have Bacteriology next."

Puck's eyes lighted. "Sweet! Finally a lab partner who won't suck."

Sam grinned and they high-fived.

"I have AP Art History," Brittany tinkled.

"Me too!" Rachel said enthusiastically.

Santana was not happy about this development.

"What do you have, Sweetness?" Kurt asked Mercedes. "It's your lit class, right?"

She nodded. "Brit Lit. I looked through the text. I'm not impressed."

Kurt's brow furrowed. "You guys are using the Foster?"

She grimaced and nodded again.

He clucked his tongue. "It's adequate, but I don't see the point of holding a literature class in which you read excerpts but not the entire book. Why didn't you take the AP class?"

She sighed. "I wanted to, but it filled up too fast, even though they offered two sections this year." She looked really depressed.

"That's ridiculous," Kurt insisted. "Lit is one of your best subjects and you have the grades to be in the class. Go talk to Doherty. She teaches both sections and is the chair of the department. She might be able to oversubscribe you. If not, I'll help you with Brit Lit and prepare you to take the AP exam."

Mercedes had perked up considerably. Literature was one of the few subject she truly enjoyed and in which she excelled. She didn't know if it would help her later in life, but she had been really upset that she hadn't been able to get into the AP class.

"What do you have for last period?" Mike asked her.

"Psychology. Not a fan."

He shrugged. "It's an elective. You were going to talk to Pillsbury anyway, so transfer out and join the Shakespeare seminar instead. It's supposed to be awesome, and MacKenzie is a really great teacher."

"Good," Sam said, heaving a sigh of relief. "I'm in that one, too. I've read the canon, but I'm still nervous about the class."

"You've read…all of Shakespeare?" Tina asked him, her eyes bright with admiration.

Sam nodded. "I enjoy reading." He smiled happily when he felt Kurt's hand squeezing his knee in a show of support.

Finn was feeling more and more lost. He was in both the Brit Lit and Psychology classes Mercedes was considering abandoning. He knew none of the other club members were in the classes, so that meant he would probably be very much alone.
Kurt looked at Mercedes. "If, for whatever reason, you can't transfer out of Psychology, I'll give you my notes. I took the AP course and did well on the exam. They should be helpful to you, and if you decide you want to take the AP exam, I'll give you my prep books. I know you'll do well."

Sweet Jesus, she loved her boy. He always had her back, and no one gave her more confidence. He was the only one who really knew that most of what many assumed was confidence was merely bravado, but Kurt knew just what to say and how to say it to motivate her. He was like her own personal guru.

"Thanks, baby," she smiled.

He waved her off, but winked. "Minorities have to stick together."

"I know that's right!" Puck and Mike said.

Tina, Brittany, and Santana nodded.

Rachel, Artie, and Quinn smiled.

"You're not a minority," Finn said to Quinn.

She sniffed. "I certainly am, as is Brittany. Blonds are decreasing in number, and given the ridiculous and prejudicial stereotypes about our intelligence, we need as many allies as we can get."

Brittany nodded imperiously.

"Am I the only one who's not a minority?" he wondered.

"I'm sure there's some deficit yet to be catalogued," Santana said wryly, smirking at Rachel's scowl, "separate from all the others, of course."

Finn smiled winningly. "Cool! What about Sam? He's not a minority."

Sam opened his mouth to say that, yes, he was, and more than one type, but Kurt cut him off.

"There's nothing remarkable about minority status, and many who claim it would prefer it unnecessary. Now, I need to get some books out of my locker, and I'm sure Sam does too, so we're going to go. Mercedes, if you're going to talk to Ms. Pillsbury after school, I'll advise Mr. Schuester that you'll be running late."

She nodded.

"I can tell him, Kurt," Artie said. "He's my last class of the day."

Kurt frowned. "They didn't put you with freshman, did they?"

Artie shook his head. "There's enough juniors switching to Spanish that Schue offered it as its own section."

"Is anyone we know in there with you?" Kurt asked.

Artie shrugged. "I don't know."

Kurt bit his lip. "And no one else has a language at that time."

"I'll be fine, Kurt!" Artie protested.
"Artie, it's a general course. That means jocks. They should leave you be, but I don't like the idea of you being alone with them, especially since none of us will even be in that wing." He cocked his head. "I have a free period. I'll walk you to and from the class."

"That's completely unnecessary!"

"You would do it for me."

Artie shook his head. "Yes, I would, but that's not the point. You can walk me to the class, since we'll both be coming from Chemistry, but it's ridiculous for you to leave the choir room to come and get me, only to have to walk all the way back. I'll just stay with Schue."

Kurt rolled his eyes. "He's always late for Glee. He probably goes to his office in between."

Rachel refrained from mentioning that Schue was often late because she made him late, sidelining him in the hall to pitch different songs.

"Do you guys do this often?" Puck asked hesitantly. "Travel in packs?"

Kurt, Mercedes, Tina, Artie, and Rachel nodded.

"Multiple targets are harder to overtake," Rachel said sadly.

Kurt smiled sardonically. "And no one draws more fire than me."

Artie squeezed Kurt's arm in support, as Tina and Mercedes looked at him sorrowfully. Puck, Quinn, Finn, and even Santana flinched guiltily.

"The English department is the next hall over," Quinn said. "I'll go pick up Artie."

"Me too," Sam and Mike said.

"You guys don't have to do that," Artie said, certainly not thrilled by Mike's kind if unwanted offer.

"Please?" Kurt asked him. "It would make me feel so much better."

He then unleashed The Eyes.

Sam and Santana gaped at their sheer power.

"Not the Eyes," Artie moaned, shielding his own with a hand. "Unfair play."

Kurt ratcheted them up to Doom Level.

"Holy shit," Puck murmured, fascinated.

Mercedes shook her head. "This is how he gets everything he wants. One look, and even Ann Coulter would adopt him. Only Sylvester is immune."

Kurt's eyes were impossibly large and incredibly blue. They were also shiny and dewy, reflecting every emotion possible and looking as though he was on the verge of tears. It was masterful, and Artie was putty in his hands.

"You know I'm going to make you pay for this," Artie growled.

Kurt fluttered his lashes. "I look forward to it, you big, strong man."
"No flirting," Artie scolded.

Kurt pouted spectacularly, even jutting out his lower lip until it looked ready to fall off.

"Why can't I ever say no to you?" Artie lamented.

"Because I'm your very best friend in the entire world, I know all of your secrets, and your father likes me better," Kurt smoothly replied.

"He does not!"

"He does, and you know it. I think he's a sneaky gay."

Artie burst out laughing. "My father is not gay, and even if he was, he'd have better taste than to chase you!"

Kurt sniffled and somehow managed to squeeze a perfect, single tear from his left eye. "Do you find me ugly, Artie?" he whispered in a tremulous voice. "When did you stop loving me?"

Artie raised a bemused brow. "Is it Oscar season already?"

"Don't make me sing the song, Artie. You know what happens when I do."

Artie stilled and paled dramatically. "You wouldn't."

"Of course I would. When have I ever relinquished the chance to perform?"

This provided the perfect segue for Santana. "How about when you purposefully blew that high F?"

Kurt and Artie whirled their heads in her direction so fast that many were surprised said heads didn't pop right off and roll out into the hall.

"What?" Rachel whispered.

"Is that true, baby?" Mercedes asked, shaking her head. "Why would you do that?"

Kurt glared at Santana, who swallowed heavily. There was nothing playful about the look; instead, it was loaded with malice and she knew she had pissed him off big time. She had merely wanted to get Rachel back for shoving him to the floor that morning during Glee, but she had miscalculated. Badly, it appeared.

"Inappropriate," he hissed at her.

She had the grace to blush and look down at her hands. He was furious and would no doubt make her pay. She could all but taste his rancor.

Kurt exhaled slowly through his nose. "Rachel, it doesn't matter. I wouldn't have won anyway."

"Bullshit," Puck denied. "I was going to vote for you until that note."

"Me too," several others chorused.

"It does matter, Kurt," Rachel insisted. "I want to compete with the best, and that's you. I don't want to win by default. I don't want to be the first runner-up who's pressed into service by necessity."

"You didn't even want me to sing that song," he challenged.
She blew a raspberry. "Oh, please. I just said that so you'd feel forced to compete. If you had won honestly, I would have accepted it…eventually." She smirked. "Although I'd have probably tried to convince you to make it a duet."

He snorted. "Tried and failed."

"Why?" she demanded, her eyes now hard.

Kurt was quiet for a long moment and looked down at the table. "My father received a Phone Call."

Rachel immediately registered the capital letters, as did Sam. After a beat, so did the others.

"Who?" Sam hissed.

Kurt laid a hand on his shoulder. "It's okay, Sam."

"The hell it is," Puck thundered. "Who the fuck was it?"

"Tell me, Tink," Santana barked. "I'll have them neutered."

"It doesn't matter," Kurt insisted. "He graduated last year, and I no longer have to deal with him."

"You should have told me, Kurt," Finn blurted.

Kurt raised his eyes, his gaze ensnaring the other boy. "Why?" he asked, so innocently that it was like a knife in Finn's gut.

He knew Kurt was right. He wouldn't have done anything, even though, at that time, his friendship with Kurt was perhaps at its strongest. "I'm sorry," he finally whispered.

"It's alright, Finn. Truly."

Finn shook his head. It wasn't. Not at all.

"Why didn't you tell me, baby?" Mercedes beseeched.

"Or me?" Artie asked softly.

"Because there was nothing you could have done," Kurt answered simply. "What happened, happened. That's the end of it. Even if I had told you, it would have been after the fact and nothing would have changed."

"We could have competed again," Rachel said. "I know what those phone calls are like, Kurt. I've certainly received enough of them," she said, voice teeming with anger.

Sam frowned. "Why?"

"I have two gay dads," Rachel said, shrugging, and for once not offering more commentary than what was required. "I would've understood, Kurt."

Kurt said nothing.

"That's why, isn't it?" Quinn asked softly. "You didn't want anyone to feel sorry for you."

Artie sighed and shook his head. "Pity is not the same as sympathy, Kurt. You know that. We've been over that."
"I'm not going to break, Artie."

But Artie was unconvinced. He was fairly certain that one day Kurt would break, despite his new attitude and approach to life. Kurt just held so much inside of himself, far too much for one person, but Artie was determined that he would be there when it happened. No one would ever hurt his friend again and go unpunished.

"How did you know?" Mike asked Santana.

She shrugged. "I think the better question is why didn't any of you? He's hit that note plenty of times both before and since. He can hit higher. I can't be the only one who figured it out. Surely Schue knows."

Kurt nodded. "He does. He wasn't happy with my reasoning or my decision, but he accepted it."

"You can hit that note in full voice?" Rachel asked.

He nodded again.

"And you can go higher?"

He nodded once more.

"What your upper limit?"

Kurt's nose scrunched. "That I can reach without squeaking? High A over C."

She felt faint. There was no one in the club, not even her, who could hit that note on their very best day. She believed she had understood everything Kurt could do, that she more than anyone understood who he was, but now she realized she had barely scratched the surface.

"Wow," Brittany whispered. "That's really, really high."

Kurt shrugged, obviously uncomfortable.

"We better get to our lockers," Sam said, nudging him.

Kurt shot him a grateful smile and nodded. "See you all later."

They stood together and wandered away.

"This doesn't happen again," Puck vowed. "I'm tired of this shit."

Santana nodded fiercely. She was down for whatever the Puckhole wanted to do. She didn't like him when she wasn't fucking him, and really not even then, but he was good. Not up to her level of sheer destruction, but he was skilled at forming plans. She just took them to the next level.

"High A over C," Rachel dumbly repeated, shaking her head. "Incredible."

"Kurt's spent a lot of time and money to get dirt on the jocks so they'll leave us alone," Mercedes said. "Sooner or later, they'll rebel. We have to be ready. We have to protect him."

"We will," Mike said. Several looked at him. "He's my friend."

"Since when?" Finn asked.
"Since now," Mike barked back. "If you'll notice, Hudson, Matt and I never stood with you and Puck when you were throwing Kurt into dumpsters."

Finn looked away and Puck flinched.

"It wasn't because he's gay," Puck said softly.

"Then why?" Tina glowered.

"Because he's better than me," Puck responded simply.

"That's pathetic, even if it is true," Quinn said, sneering.

"You never stopped me," he countered. "You never said anything. You never tried to help him. I'll own my shit, Quinn, but you own yours. Kurt called you out this morning. The way you treated Berry was only marginally better than how I treated him."

She flushed and stared down at the floor, more furious at herself and her inaction than at Puck's charge.

"I never helped him either," Mercedes quietly admitted. "He took hits for me, he protected me, but I didn't return the favor. I was too scared."

"He's always gotten it the worst," Tina whispered, tears slipping down her cheeks. "It's not fair."

Santana looked at Brittany. "You're plotting."

Brittany blinked but said nothing. She just smiled.

"Creepy," Finn whispered, shuddering.

"Awesome," Artie and Santana murmured.

"You okay?" Sam asked.

Kurt smiled, an honest smile. "I am. I'm not as fragile as my friends believe, Sam. In truth, some of them are far worse off than I've ever been. My bizarre crush on Finn aside, I'm not one to live in denial. I see things for what they are...and what they're not. I've been hurt, yes, but I know that people hurt me out of ignorance and fear. I don't excuse them for that, but I recognize it. I know that not every place is Lima. I know that one day I'll find someone and be happy, but I also know that if, for some reason, that doesn't happen, I'll be okay. I'm not self-loathing or suicidal, and I never have been. You don't have to worry about me."

"Isn't that what friends do? Isn't that what you just did with Artie?"

Kurt blushed lightly. "Point taken."

Sam cleared his throat heavily and looked down at the floor. "I'm really glad you're my friend, Kurt."

"I'm glad we're friends, too," Kurt whispered.
The next two periods passed without incident and, as promised, Quinn appeared at the end of Artie's Spanish lesson to collect him and shepherd him to Glee. Sam and Mike were directly behind her, and Sam took one look at Artie and wondered if Kurt had been right to worry.

"Everything cool?" he asked the other boy.

Artie rolled his eyes and ran a hand through his hair. "It's fine. I just had to partner with an idiot for the classwork exercise, and he was running his mouth about Puck and Kurt."

Quinn frowned and tilted her head. "What did he say?"

Artie sighed. "Apparently the scene at the beginning of lunch did not go unnoticed and the rumor is that Puck and Kurt are dating."

She smirked. "Puck's going to love that. No, seriously, he'll love it."

"And," Artie continued, "Sam is trying to steal Kurt from Puck, but is also making a play for you, Quinn, probably in an effort to get under Puck's skin even more."

"So I'm a beard now?" Quinn asked, vastly amused.

Artie sank lower into his chair. "Whoever said boys don't gossip had no idea what they were talking about. The football team is like one big coffee klatch. There are rumors about Puck and Kurt, Sam and Kurt, Finn and Kurt, Santana and Kurt, Sam and Quinn, me and Tina, me and Brittany, Mike and Tina, Finn and Quinn, Finn and Rachel, and even Finn and Schue. Also, Santana has apparently taken a hit out on me for stealing Brittany from her, and Tina is a secret racist who dumped me because I'm not Asian and because Mike is really her cousin and she has an incest kink."

Mike and Quinn stared dumbly at him.

"Yeah," Artie continued. "For a club that's so universally despised, the rest of the school seems to have nothing better to talk about than us."

Sam's eyes were the size of dinner plates, but at last he had some insight into the inner workings of New Directions. So he had been right in assuming that Santana and Brittany were a thing, or had a thing. Artie and Tina had dated, but she had dumped him and was now with Mike. He was slightly disconcerted that people he didn't even know were debating his sexuality, and he was more than a little pissed off that anyone would believe he would use Quinn or anyone else in such a way, but he figured that, overall, he had gotten off pretty lightly.

"Anything else?" Quinn asked lightly.

Artie frowned. "Nothing about Beth, Quinn, I promise. If there had been, you'd have had to pick me up from the nurse's office or Figgins."

Her eyes widened, never having guessed that Artie had any feelings about her one way or the other, but the idea that he might possibly consider her a friend, or at least someone worth defending, made her happier than she had been for several weeks.

"Thanks," she whispered, smiling.
Mike shook his head at Sam, who was about to ask several questions. Sam promptly shut his mouth.

"They have names for us," Artie added.

Quinn rolled her eyes. "Quelle suprise."

"No, I mean portmanteaus. They put us into couples or trios and assign us names."

"What."

He nodded. "For example, you and Puck are Quick, which is actually somewhat clever, especially when compared to Fuinn or Finchel."

Quinn curled a lip.

"Tina and I are Tartie, which is, well, cute, I suppose. Mike and Tina are Cha-Ching, and there's even an accompanying hand gesture."

"Seriously, what the actual fuck?" Mike demanded, torn between laughter and outrage.

"Kurt has quite a collection," Artie said, "as he's been paired with each of us. This is like the worst game of MASH ever." He shook his head. "Kurt and I are Kartie; Kurt and Puck are alternately Purt, Puckurt, or Pummel..."

"This is ridiculous," Sam muttered.

"Sam and Kurt are Skurt, Kum, or Hevans. Then there's Kinn or Furt, as well as Kurtana, Kurtina, Kurtanny, Kurbrittina, Kurtbrittana, Kurtinn, Kurtcedes, Kurchel..."

"What about me?" Mike demanded. "I want Kurt action. Apparently it's awesome and everyone is doing it." He grinned. "You all know me. I'm such a joiner."

Artie actually laughed, grateful for the levity. "You and Kurt are Chummel, which is pretty cool, especially during Shark Week. It's certainly better than Murt, which sounds like a Muppet that didn't make it past the drawing board."

Mike snickered.

"I made some notes," Artie added, handing them over to Quinn, who read them avidly.

"They don't really believe Kurt is sleeping with all of us, do they?" Sam asked, his voice a low growl. "That he's some kind of whore?"

"No," Artie said vehemently. "It's mostly because he's changed so much since last year and they don't know how to react to him. Kurt was always seen with me, Tina, or Mercedes. Rachel would flit in and out, because she really had nowhere else to go.

"Brittany and Kurt dated last year – and they really did date. He took her to dinner, to the movies, introduced her to his father, and they made out. Brittany had never really dated anyone before, and decided she liked it. She especially liked Kurt. She latched on to him pretty fiercely and never let go, so people became used to the, uh, Kurtanny."

Mike nodded. "And then Quinn became friends with Mercedes, and naturally Kurt was a part of that, so the Kurtinn makes sense." He smiled. "See, everyone believes that Kurt and Rachel are the same person, just with different equipment, kind of like how they view Puck and Santana. But for those of us who know everyone involved, Kurt and Quinn are far more similar than almost anyone else."
Quinn smirked and nodded, pleased with the comparison, and turned to Artie. "What's troubling them the most?"

He blinked. "The Kurtana. People are scared."

She nodded again. "They should be. I know I am."

Mike and Artie nodded.

Quinn bit her lip. "And Puck and Kurt? People really believe they're dating?"

Artie shrugged. "I doubt it. It seems like most people just think Puck's tired of nailing cheerleaders and moms, so he's making a play for the gay boy. Of course, since Kurt was seen making out with Santana, that's just added fuel to the fire, which I think might have been deliberate on Kurt's part. He's always been devious, but never so forward." He tilted his head. "It's very interesting. I'm intrigued, yet fear for my safety."

Quinn laughed.

"Some people are saying that Kurt is an innocent victim, caught between two predators. Others insist that Kurt and Santana are actually together and Puck is jealous, so he's trying to steal Kurt to teach Santana a lesson. Another rumor is that Kurt and Santana were both in love with Brittany, who broke their hearts by choosing me, so it only makes sense that they're now together. And it just gets more bizarre from there. It no longer matters that Kurt's gay; it's much more interesting for the masses for them to imagine him as some kind of evil omnisexual entity. As much as they claim his being gay bothers them, they're fascinated by him and are not beneath imagining him with anyone and everyone."

Mike blinked. "For the past two years, Kurt's been given nothing but shit for being gay. He was bullied for it even before he came out. Now people believe he had a relationship with Brittany and is dating Santana? Really?"

"Are they saying Kurt's bisexual?" Quinn asked.

Artie shifted in his chair, his mouth pulled into a moue of disgust. "There are different explanations. Some say that Kurt took advantage of Brittany, who's retarded."

"What?" Quinn hissed.

Artie nodded, his face furious. "Another is that Kurt and Santana are actually witches who cast a series of spells to have people fall in love with them."

Sam began laughing, slightly hysterically. "This is like The Crucible, but even more fucked up."

Artie quirked a brow. "And I haven't even gotten to the devil-worshiping angle yet."

Sam quickly sobered. "Good lord."

Artie sighed and nodded. "Then there's the rumor that Kurt is actually straight, but plays gay to lull hot girls into a false sense of security before he makes his move. Another is that Kurt is bisexual and hates himself for being attracted to women, which is why his voice is so high and why he used to wear his designer clothes: because he thought being a girl would make him not want them anymore."

"I can actually feel my IQ dropping," said a dazed Quinn. "Let's go."
Quinn entered the choir room, pushing Artie ahead of her. Sam and Mike followed.

Puck, Finn, and Kurt, attuned to Quinn's moods, immediately noticed her displeasure.

"What's wrong?" Finn asked.

She merely held up Artie's sheaf of notes, which included charts and Venn diagrams.

Kurt surged forward and snatched them out of her hand, his eyes scanning the paper. He promptly burst out laughing. Immediately, he was joined by Puck and Santana, who were soon shortling and reading aloud various segments.

"Cha-Ching?" Tina repeated, voice dripping with disdain.

"I like Finchel!" Rachel exclaimed.

Finn grinned at her. Everyone else rolled their eyes.

"I vote for Pummet," Puck said, looking at Kurt, who shook his head.

"Furt is better than Kinn," Finn said slowly, debating the merits of each in his mind.

"Another reason it would never work," Kurt said under his breath, which set Puck and Santana off anew.

As one, their eyes found the rumor that suggested Brittany was retarded. They released a simultaneous and harmonious growl.

"Someone's going to pay," Kurt hissed.

The other two nodded tightly.

"So what should we do about this?" Mercedes demanded.

"Nothing," Kurt said. "Acknowledging it in any way will only lend credence to their beliefs or inspire a new set of rumors."

"Does this mean we're not making out on the steps tomorrow?" a sorrowful Puck asked him.

"Or at any other time," Kurt pleasantly agreed, nodding.

Puck sighed dramatically.

"Maybe you and I should make out," Quinn suggested to Kurt. "Like I said at lunch, it's really my turn."

Kurt chuckled. "If we really wanted to play this game, we would have to raise the stakes."

"Suggestions?" demanded an interested Santana.

Kurt tilted his head. "I don't know," he finally said, shrugging. "We would either start rumors of our own design, crafted for maximum confusion, or draw names from that accursed hat and make out
randomly. For example, what would people say if they arrived at school tomorrow to discover me groping Mike by his locker, or Tina making out with Santana?"

"I'll play," Mike said gamely. "It would serve them right."

Kurt eyed him and licked his lips. "Your abs are perhaps the most impressive in the school."

Mike grinned.

"They are not!" Puck howled, lifting up his shirt. "Check these out!"

"Mike's are better," Kurt said flatly.

To put the entire matter to rest, Brittany leaned over and raised Mike's shirt. "I agree."

Several people nodded.

"Of course," Kurt continued, "Mike never before had to contend with Sam."

Sam blushed and looked down at his feet, pleased Kurt had indeed noticed.

Mike frowned. "I want to see."

"Dude," Finn said, "that's pretty gay."

It was like someone had sucked all of the oxygen from the room.

Before the inevitable explosions could be set off, Rachel huffed.

"Shut up, Finn," she said crossly.

Bewildered, he complied.

Kurt just shook his head. Finn simply couldn't help himself and, at this point, he no longer took offense.

"Best butt?" Santana asked him.

"Matt," was his immediate response. "Or possibly Sam now."

Mercedes, Quinn, and Mike nodded. Even Puck had to concede, silently, that Kurt was right.

"Kurt," Tina insisted.

"What?" he asked.

She stared at him. "You have the best butt."

"I do not," he replied.

"Uh, yeah, you do," Santana interjected, rolling her eyes. "Maybe you haven't checked yourself out, though I don't see how you could refrain from doing so, but your ass is incredible."

Sam forced himself to remain silent.

"I concur," said a demure Rachel.
Finn threw a vicious glare at her. She dismissed it.

"Whatever," Kurt said airily.

"Best rack?" Puck asked the room.

"Mercedes," Kurt and Sam answered.

"Brittany," Santana and Artie replied.

"Quinn," Puck and Finn said.

"Tina," said Mike and Brittany.

Tina shrugged. "Santana."

Rachel flushed darkly. She had always been insecure about her chest, and Finn's lack of defense greatly perturbed her. The other girls were alternately flattered and disgusted.

Santana had an evil smile on her face. "Biggest…"

"No," Kurt said, shutting her down.

"Not fair," Mercedes countered.

He sighed, grabbed Sam's hand, and led them over to a couple of empty chairs, Sam beaming behind him all the while.

"You're not really going to do this," said a nervous Finn to Santana.

Rachel raised a brow. "Why ever not? You seemed to have no problem with debating the merits of the female anatomy. Are you afraid you won't…measure up?"

Santana was impressed and reluctantly said as much. Rachel nodded. "Well," Brittany began, twirling a lock of hair around her finger and staring off into space, "I've slept with Puck, Mike, Artie, and Matt, and I groped and made out with Kurt. My expert analysis proves that Kurt has the biggest cock out of the five of them."

Kurt released a horrified squawk and buried his face in Sam's shoulder. Sam's face was steadily turning a violent magenta for myriad reasons.

Puck shrugged. "It's pretty big," he agreed. "He and Hudson are about tied. All the guys have seen it in the locker room, and while they might give Princess a lot of shit, it was never because he's lacking in the crotch."

"Noah!" Kurt hissed.

Puck blinked in confusion. "Dude, what's the big? Having a huge dick isn't a bad thing, especially for a gay guy, right? I mean, won't that get you a lot of ass?"

"Oh, my god," Kurt mumbled.

Tina was thoroughly enjoying this and wanted to make that known. "Well, Artie and Mike aren't lacking, either."
The two mentioned looked at her, looked at each other, and then promptly looked at the floor.

"I'm uncomfortable," Finn whimpered.

"As am I," Kurt staunchly declared. "Let us never speak of this again."

The girls looked at each other. They would definitely be speaking of this again. Often, and in public. But for now, they were content to let it go.

"There's such a thing as too much togetherness," Sam lightly offered.

"It's merely a teambuilding exercise," said a blithe Rachel.

The other girls giggled and nodded.

Will bustled in and smiled at everyone. "Hey guys! What are we talking about?"

"Nothing," Kurt, Finn, Artie, and Mike all said flatly.

"Okay," Will began, "let's try and get through as many performances as possible so we don't have too much to carry over to tomorrow. Sam, Rachel, Mercedes, Mike, and Santana: I want to commend you all once again on how wonderful you were this morning, and I sincerely hope that energy carries us through the rest of the day. I also have some ideas about next week's assignments, but more on that tomorrow."

He paused to make sure the others were with him. At their collective nod, he gathered a large breath and continued.

"For the sake of brevity, I've decided to retire the Hat temporarily and just randomly pick the order of our next performances." He smiled at the cheer the kids threw his way. "So, take it away, Brittany!"

"I won!" the girl happily proclaimed, bouncing out of her seat and bounding toward the center of the room. "Kurty?"

He nodded, stood, and made his way behind the piano.

"Kurt's going to play the piano for me!" Brittany unnecessarily announced. "He's my gay boyfriend!" She frowned. "But he also played the piano for Sam. Does that mean Kurt and Sam are boyfriends?"

"No, Brittany," said several amused people, Sam and Kurt not among them.

"Okay! Kurty also helped me prepare a little, but it was hard because Europia is far away, and the sewers didn't give my phone many bars. I chose this song because a lot of people think they know me, but I realized this summer that most people really don't. They think I'm one thing, but I'm another, like a Rubik's Cube or a transsexual."

Many people blinked. Will coughed.

"Okay, Kurty, do it!" She blinked. "I had a dream like that once."
He shook his head, smiled at her, and began the opening measures, which prematurely announced the selection to those already familiar with it. The choice was, they thought, surprising, but then they thought about Brittany's words and wondered perhaps if they were among those who didn't truly know her.

"I am not the person who is singing," she whispered, staring forlornly at the ground. "I am the silent one inside."

Her voice itself was quiet, but not in her usual way. Brittany would never be accused of having a powerful voice, but it was sweet and gentle, and it fit very well into various groups within the overall club. The voice she was currently using, however, was one that screamed despite its gentility. It was harsh and yearning and seeking acknowledgment.

"I am not the one who laughs at people's jokes," a tinge of derision and desperation resonated in her tone as she looked up and out into the audience. She shrugged. "I just pacify their egos."

Several wondered how much of that was true. So often, Brittany appeared lost or confused or just unable to grasp the punchline or takeaway lesson. But perhaps she had no such trouble. Perhaps she merely filled a perfunctory role chosen for her a long time ago.

Finn's eyes looked upon her knowingly. Her returning stare suggested to him that she knew far more about him and his motivations than he ever would or even could about her own. It was disconcerting.

"I am not my house, my car, my songs. They are only stops along my way."

Many wondered as to her ultimate destination. Brittany never spoke about what plans, if any, she had for the future. She had revealed this morning that she had tentative plans to attend OSU, insofar as her AP score would place her out of preliminary calculus. But what was she planning on studying? What were her favorite subjects, other than math? Santana had informed them this morning, with Kurt and Artie backing her up, that Brittany was indeed smart. What were her grades? What were her goals?

Those who only occasionally found themselves in her orbit had no idea. They were rather ashamed of that. They had dismissed her as easily as everyone else had, perhaps to their own detriment.

"I am like the winter, I'm a dark, cold female," a small smile filled with a knowledge which could almost be deemed gnostic appeared on face, "with a golden ring of wisdom in my cave."

Her face turned pensive and her eyes donned their trademarked vagueness, only now there was a wariness encroaching upon it, as if she were fighting with herself to determine exactly who she was and what she felt.

"And it's me who is my enemy. Me who beats me up. Me who makes the monsters. Me who strips my confidence."

Her delivery was staccato, short and pointed, and perfectly enunciated, underscored with a sibilant hiss.

"Oh."

Brittany had somehow actually managed to sing a sigh and make it the most beautiful, and painful, sound in the world.

She turned, averted her eyes, and stroked the top of the piano. "I am carrying my voice."
She pressed her hand to her chest. "I am carrying my heart." Her voice cracked slightly.

She pirouetted. "I am my carrying my rhythm."

She pressed her palms together and looked heavenward. "I am carrying my prayers."

It was all a show, the others realized. Brittany was posing, mimicking those facets of her personality which were so often exploited, either by herself or others. They only saw what she wanted them to see.

Mike tightly pressed his lips together and opened his eyes wide in an effort to halt the tears slipping from his eyes.

Quinn didn't even know she was crying.

"But you can't kill my spirit," she sang tauntingly, almost a warning, shaking her head and a cunning smile on her lips. "It's old and it is strong. Like a mountain, I'll go on and on."

Unlike many people who had never been tested, Brittany Pierce knew her own strength and that of which she was capable, and she was so much more than people knew or what she allowed them to believe. But she was tired of being that person. She was tired of so many things. She was tired of pasting a smile on her lips and nodding blithely at whatever someone said about her, themselves, or another person.

She was tired of playing the peacemaker and the negotiator. She was tired of denying who and what she wanted because it wasn't socially acceptable. She was tired of putting herself on a shelf and waiting for others to make the next move, to play with her when they were ready and it suited them.

And as much as she loved her, Brittany was tired of Santana most of all.

She didn't know if things would be better with Artie, but she sincerely doubted they could be worse. She could never love him the way she did Santana, but she knew Artie would never hurt her, and that was what she needed right now. She didn't feel bad about using him; he was using her for the same reasons. And that was okay; it really was. Mutual dependence didn't necessarily have to be destructive, and sometimes the strongest thing you could do was admit your loneliness.

"But when my wings are folded, this brightly colored moth blends into the dirt upon the ground."

Most of them didn't know her because they had never tried. Only Santana and Kurt had pulled back the veil and demanded from her the same scrutiny with which they paid to the world around them.

But where Santana had run once she had glimpsed the truth, Kurt had just held to her that much more tightly, and that had made all the difference. From him she had learned courage. She had learned that choosing yourself wasn't always selfish. And she had learned that no one could take your power unless you ceded it to them.

"And it's me who is my enemy. Me who beats me up. Me who makes the monsters. Me who strips my confidence."

But that was over now.

"And it's me who's too weak, and it's me who's too shy to ask for the things I love."

Her tone became angry and combative; defiant, in a way, as though she was chastising and
criticizing herself for her weaknesses, whatever they might be. There was an awareness in Brittany that suddenly shined through, yet was a mystery to almost everyone but her.

"And it's me who's too weak, and it's me who's too shy to ask for the thing I love."

The shift from plural to singular did not go unnoticed, nor did the pointed way in which Brittany patently avoided looking at Santana, who sat rigid and unmoving in her seat.

Artie chewed on his lip nervously.

"But I love. But I love. But I love."

She chanted the words in a monotone, as if they were a mantra, as though she was attempting to convince herself that she did love, that she knew how, and that she deserved the right.

"But I love. But I love. But I love."

She ended the last word in a melisma that many didn't know she was capable of performing.

She took a deep breath and suddenly her chest just opened and this incredibly amazing voice broke free and burst forth from her mouth.

She flung her arms wide open and looked up at the ceiling. "I am walking on the bridge, I am over the water." She tilted her head at an odd angle and finally looked at Santana, who was unable to tear herself from the penetrating and probative gaze. "And I'm scared as hell, but I know there's something better. Yes, I know there's something better!"

Her voice soared throughout the lyric, but particularly on the last word, which she stretched beyond the allotted beat and turned into a fermata that was all but screamed, though Kurt easily kept up with her. Indeed, he seemed to be channeling her anger, his fingers now pounding the keys as though they had personally offended him.

Brittany's voice was loud and impossibly full, actually slipping beyond her control and spiraling out, wild and free, and in that moment she was more Brittany than she had ever been in her life. She didn't regret the tears that now coursed down her face.

"Yes, I know. Yes, I know. Yes, I know."

The notes slid up and down a scale of which only Brittany was aware, creating a haunting counterpoint to Kurt's accompaniment. The chanting this time was frantic and slightly crazed, her voice raspy, but all the more beautiful because it was so honest and naked, stripped of all artifice. She was laying herself bare before them, flaying them alive in the process, yet they were left to wonder if she was singing to them or to herself.

"But I love!"

Just as it appeared as if Brittany were about to become completely unglued, Kurt entered the arena, his voice deep and smooth and soothing.

"And it's me who is my enemy," he sang, his intonation and interpretation completely different from Brittany's own, startling the audience and confounding them anew.

Brittany was suddenly refocused and re-energized, Kurt's presence reining her in. She looked over at him and beamed. "But I love!"
That was impossible to misinterpret.

He must have chosen this song for her, they realized, as he had chosen Santana's. It was such a Kurt song, with lyrics certainly applicable to him and everything to which he had been subjected.

But it didn't feel as though that were the case and they weren't giving enough credit to Brittany, which was something about which the song had warned them.

This performance was all her and Kurt was merely her backup. In fact, it seemed as though his entrance into the song had been timed perfectly, as if he had sensed when she would need him the most, and of course he had ridden to her rescue.

Suddenly their friendship was seen in an entirely new light.

"Me who beats me up," Kurt sang.

"But I love!" Brittany countered, singing over him and winding her way around the piano until she was beside him, looking down upon him.

"Me who makes the monsters," he insisted.

"But I love!" she railed at him.

"Me who strips my confidence," he quietly reminded her.

She shook her head and held up her hands, as if pushing him away. "But I love!"

She ended the final word in a key-changing melisma as she raised her voice three half-octaves in rapid succession, until she hit a note that even Kurt seemed astonished she could make in full voice.

"My god," Will whispered.

It was impossible to discern if Brittany and Kurt were singing to each other; to the audience; or if they were portraying one person with a divided consciousness, an ego battling its accompanying subconscious.

Who was Brittany, really, and who was Kurt? How much of one was in the other? How much of all of them contained remnants of one another?

"And it's me who is my enemy," Kurt sang, though his voice now sounded unsure.

"Oh!" she danced away from him, shaking her head, as if blocking him completely out of her mind.

"Me who beats me up," he returned much more quietly, looking at her and frowning.

"Oh!" She extended and sustained the simple syllable over several keys against the driving and relentless pounding of the piano, reaching a crescendo that was self-imposed, in a series of wails that were guttural and primal, as if they were being pulled from her throat by an unseen force. She was bent at the waist, her hands clutching her stomach. She sounded like a dying animal, or perhaps one who was fighting the pain to emerge triumphant on the other side of it.

"Me who makes the monsters, me who strips my confidence." Kurt's voice was nothing but a whisper, until it finally faded away into nothing.

Brittany straightened, her tears now dry. "But it's me. And it's me."
Kurt suddenly removed his hands from the piano and there was a pointed silence.

"I'm Me!" Brittany happily finished.

Chapter End Notes

The song performed by Brittany in this chapter is "Me," by Paula Cole, and is available on her album "This Fire."
Brittany threw herself into Kurt's arms. "You were right!" she chirped at him. "Singing makes you feel better. Thanks, Kurty."

He held her tightly to him, knowing her words were more for their audience than them, but that was okay. Brittany was in the beginning stages of her metamorphosis, just as he was. He was thankful and relieved they had each other to help them through the process.

"I love you," he whispered into her hair.

She hugged him back, hard. "I know. I love you, too. It's nice to hear someone tell you that."

He pulled back slightly, smiled, and nodded. "It is."

They were so caught up in one another they paid no credence to the fact that the rest of the club were studying them as though they were slides beneath a lens.

Will didn't know what to say. He could think of no words of praise which wouldn't sound trite, and were he to exclaim that he'd had no idea Brittany could sing so well, it would merely beg the question as to why he didn't know, for which he had no good answer. He wondered if Kurt had chosen the song for her and, despite Brittany's opening announcement, how much Kurt had helped her prepare. The utterly spectacular performance simply reeked of Kurt's influence, but it was just as probable that Brittany had spent the past year studying him closely and wanting to emulate him. She had certainly chosen a worthy idol.

"Brittany," he said softly, "you are a truly gifted vocalist. The way you interpreted and personalized the lyrics, the way you performed the song and made us feel what you felt, is inspiring. Thank you for sharing it with us."

Her brows gathered and she appeared to be thinking long and hard on his words. Finally, she blushed and averted her eyes. "Thank you," she whispered.

She then kissed Kurt full on the lips and scampered back to her seat next to Artie. Kurt shook his head fondly at her and then retook his own seat between Sam and Santana.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

"Don't be," Santana said quietly. "Thank you for doing that for her."

"I would never want to hurt you."

She turned and smiled at him, though it was pained. "You didn't. Neither did she. I hurt myself." She pressed her lips together and held them for a moment. "I'm not as brave as you, Tink. I'm not ready to be what she needs. And if I try and force myself to be that, she'll be the one to get hurt, and I'll have done that to her. I can't face that possibility yet."

He took her hand in his own. "You don't have to do anything for which you're not ready. These things should never be rushed and should be done only when the time is right for you. If you're meant to be together, then you will be, and I'll be there cheering you on."
She cleared her throat and looked away. "At lunch, after you left, we were talking." She swallowed. "I never helped you."

He frowned. "I never expected you to. It wasn't your responsibility."

"I'm going to be there for you now," she vowed.

"Thank you," he smiled. "I appreciate that, as long as you know that I'm not your friend because I want something from you."

She laughed sardonically. "You're the only one who doesn't. I don't even know who I am anymore."

"I do. You're Santana Lopez, and you're a bitch. Don't reject that out of hand. There's nothing wrong with being a bitch, Santana. You have more integrity than almost anyone I know. Don't lose yourself as you explore other parts of your identity. Hold tight to it. Hold tight to me. I won't let you fall."

She smiled and gripped his hand more tightly. "I'm sorry I let slip what I did."

He shrugged. "Bygones. Honestly, I'm surprised the others hadn't already figured it out. Rachel certainly should have. It's just not important enough to keep it a secret anymore. I wish the conversation hadn't taken place in the cafeteria, but I don't regret that it's out. Let it go."

She nodded and glanced at Brittany, who was happily entwined with Artie.

Kurt noticed the other club members, with the exception of Sam, were in a state of shock. They had yet to commend Brittany's performance, which greatly annoyed him, so he started his own round of applause, glaring at the others until they joined in. Slowly, they did.

Rachel was stunned. She'd had no idea Brittany was as compelling a vocalist as she was a dancer. Her singing had been more than a little rough, but the searing honesty of her voice had been astonishing. It had been impossible to take your eyes off her. She had demanded and received complete attention. She would never be in the league of Rachel herself, or of Kurt or Mercedes, but there was certainly far more to Brittany Pierce than that for which anyone had been looking.

Except for Kurt.

And Kurt had also brought them Sam.

Clearly, Kurt Hummel had some kind of supernatural musical ear, and she wanted to know more about these mysterious powers.

Will was thinking along the same lines. "Kurt, I have to thank you once again for taking initiative and helping your fellow club members. Your accompaniment with Sam this morning was phenomenal. Your song choice for Santana was absolutely exceptional. And your performance with Brittany just now was incredibly poignant."

"Thank you, Mr. Schuester," the boy said.

"Did you select the song for her?"

Kurt shook his head. "No."

Brittany frowned. "Yes, you did." She looked at Mr. Schuester. "Kurty asked me what I was feeling. He talked to me for almost an hour about all kinds of things and then he asked me what I wanted my song to say. I didn't know songs said things. Then he explained that lyrics weren't just words, that
they sounded better when you meant them, when they say something about you. So he gave me a list of ten songs, and I listened to all of them, and then we narrowed it down to three. I asked him which one he thought I should sing, but he wouldn't tell me until I picked one. So I picked that one and then Kurty told me that was the one he had in mind. So he kind of did pick the song for me."

Kurt had begun sinking lower and lower in his chair from the moment she had begun speaking, and by the time she had finished, he was blushing.

"He picked mine, too," Puck piped up.

"And mine," Quinn said.

A flare of jealousy once again shot up Finn's spine.

Will considered Kurt for a long moment. "How do you do it?"

Surprised by the frankness of the question, Kurt sat up straight in his chair and frowned. "I don't know that I really do anything, except talk to people and listen to them. As much as I love singing, I enjoy it most when I'm moved. When I'm so overwhelmed by emotion, whatever that emotion might be, nothing is more comforting and cathartic for me than singing." He shrugged. "I really don't see the point of singing something in which you don't believe. It's meaningless and hollow, and that's always apparent to the audience."

"Do you think that about me?" Rachel interrupted.

Kurt bit his lip. "Do you really want to know?"

"Yes," she said immediately.

He looked at Will for permission, since their conversation had just essentially been hijacked once again by Rachel Berry. Will rolled his eyes and nodded.

Kurt gathered a breath. "Okay," he said slowly, ignoring the other club members as they eagerly leaned forward. "Rachel, you're a gifted singer. You're enormously talented. No one questions this."

Startled, Rachel reared back and her eyes darted around the room, waiting for someone to protest Kurt's statement. Instead, she was stunned to see several nods of agreement.

"The problem," Kurt continued, "is that you're completely unoriginal in your song choices. You select pieces that will best showcase your voice, and that is, of course, incredibly important, but you have no connection with the music itself and it shows. Most of the time, your renditions are exact copies of the original recordings. You do nothing new or innovative, which frankly surprises me, as I know you well understand music theory and your vocabulary is superb. You could rearrange the music or rewrite the lyrics as I do, but there's apparently no interest on your part."

He cocked his head. "Consider this: you're in a music store and you're debating between two new releases. One is by Barbra Streisand and the other is by Rachel Berry. The tracks are exactly the same. The lyrics and arrangements are exactly the same. Everyone knows that Rachel Berry sounds like a young Barbra Streisand. But would you rather shell out fifteen dollars for Rachel Berry or for Barbra Streisand?"

She blinked owlishly.

"You're not doing yourself any favors by mimicking your idol. You come off as an automaton, like Vocal Adrenaline. I think, in your heart of hearts, you know this. You were amazing with your
performance of Don't Rain on My Parade at last year's Sectionals, but you yourself were much more amazed by Mercedes' ballad because her passion and talent moved you. You try so hard to be the new Streisand, and I honestly don't know why. What's so wrong with being Rachel Berry? I find her much more interesting."

Rachel gasped as her hand flew to her mouth and tears filled her eyes.

"As cheesy are your performances with Finn are," Kurt added, "they're where you most shine, because your love for him, your love for each other, comes through loud and clear. It doesn't matter if it's an eighties power ballad or a show tune; through the emotions you have for, and share with, Finn, you invite the audience to share them with you. You come alive. You're at your most honest, and that makes all the difference."

She looked down at her hands, now folded primly in her lap. "Thank you, Kurt. I…I needed to hear that, and you may have to remind of it more than once."

He smiled. "I can do that." He hesitated only briefly and then decided to go for broke. "There's one more thing I'd like you to consider."

She looked up and nodded, her eyes intently curious.

He exhaled. "Here in this room, when it's just us, your dominating approach, while extremely insufferable, is essentially bearable. That's not the case when we're competing."

Rather than being angry, she was confused. "What do you mean?"

He frowned. "You scoffed when Mercedes and I joined the Cheerios, but I don't think you truly understand what it means to be part of a group. When we're standing up on a stage performing for our lives, we're all being judged, not just you. If you sing lead on every song, what do you believe the judges must think of the rest of us? We're not Vocal Adrenaline. We don't have dozens and dozens of members to create an entire wall of sound that can back up a single voice. In a group as small as ours, every voice counts. Every voice needs to be heard. If they're not, then we're not a show choir. We're simply background, and we'll be judged accordingly."

"I…I never thought of that," she said, hanging her head.

"The rest of us have." He sighed lightly. "I'll freely admit that we've taken the wrong approach in addressing the situation. We have all been rude to, and combative with, you. I especially am guilty of this, but you need to understand something, Rachel: part of being a team captain means that you actually have to listen to your teammates and consider what they have to say, even if you don't like it or don't agree."

He raised a brow. "You're the captain, but ultimately, this should be a democracy. Not only does it hurt our feelings when the rest of us are continually denied our moment in the spotlight, but it actually hurts our chances as a group."

She nodded. "I understand. I don't like it – I really don't like it – but I understand. I'll think about what you said."

He nodded in kind. "I hope you do. As much as we need you, Rachel, don't forget that you need us just as much. We can't compete without twelve members, and if you chase even one of us off, we become ineligible and then Glee simply goes away."

He shook his head. "If the minimal funding we have is lost, it will be reabsorbed into Coach Sylvester's budget and she will never again relinquish it. That not only means we won't have Glee,
but neither will the students who come after us. And you will be responsible for that."

His eyes were beseeching. "So, please, the next time you storm out of a room, I want you to consider that, when you come back, you might find no one waiting for you, as well as what that means."

Rachel flushed horribly and stared down at the floor. She had opened herself up for this and thus had no one to blame. She certainly couldn't blame Kurt.

She also had to give him more credit than she would've liked. He hadn't been rude. He hadn't insulted her. He hadn't even raised his voice. Gone were the shrieks and the pouts and the responding screams.

He had remained perfectly calm and completely rational. He had presented his arguments in a straightforward manner. His logic was unassailable, and no matter how much it might have pained and angered her, she could formulate no response that wouldn't rightly be considered weak, petty, or childish. If she behaved that way now, after everything he had just said, it would only further serve to validate his argument.

She nodded to indicate that she was processing his words.

Kurt nodded in kind and then stared straight ahead, refusing to register the looks of shock and incredulity on the faces of his friends. He had said nothing which he didn't truly believe, nothing he hadn't planned eventually to discuss with her, but he hadn't considered doing so in front of the others. However, she had forced his hand and he had no intention of backpedaling or kowtowing to her ever again.

Santana and Mercedes were absolutely floored. Never had they believed that Kurt would actually say those things to Rachel, and certainly not in the calm manner which he just had. They had also never conceived she would listen to him.

Quinn had a small smile on her face and was unable to force it away, so she dropped her head and allowed her hair to swing forward and fall over her neck, essentially hiding her from view.

Mike blinked dumbly at Kurt and wondered just who the hell the other boy was. He wondered if anyone knew who Kurt Hummel was. Tina merely gaped, her head swinging back and forth between Kurt and Rachel as though she were watching a demented volleyball game.

Finn had no idea what to say and for once allowed wisdom to reign over his problem with premature articulation. He said nothing and was enormously pleased with himself for doing so.

It was all Puck could do not to come in his pants. He'd always been attracted to bitches – hence his dalliances with Quinn and Santana – but never had he been turned on so much by a stone-cold logical argument. The Princess was dead sexy when he was acting large and in charge.

Brittany, still sitting in Artie's lap, was smirking in Kurt's direction, so proud of her dolphin that she was almost fit to burst. She couldn't wait to see what he would do next. Artie was thinking similar sentiments.

An overexcited Sam was all but vibrating in his chair.

Will stared long and hard at Kurt, shaking his head slightly. He had missed many things and mishandled so many others. He just hoped Rachel would heed Kurt's words, thereby allowing Will himself to reestablish some control over how the club was run.

"We should continue," he said.
The others nodded.

"Volunteers?"

Quinn gazed around the room, sighed, and raised her hand. "Since Kurt chose my song as well, I'll take my turn. I just hope I can live up to the hype," she said, smiling at Brittany, who beamed back.

Will nodded and gestured for her should come forward.

She began walking toward the center of the room, her iPod clutched in her hand, when she thought better of it. "Kurt? Would you mind?"

"I'd be honored," he demurred, standing and following her. He brushed by, squeezed her shoulder in support, and once again took his place behind the piano.

Quinn turned and regarded Puck warily. "I don't suppose you'd like to accompany us?"

Puck stared at her, blinked, and slowly nodded his head, grabbing his guitar and making his way to the front. For once, he didn't strut or saunter, but appeared hesitant and nervous.

Quinn stood on her toes and whispered into his ear. He startled but nodded, and went to confer with Kurt on the key arrangement.

She turned to face the others and cleared her throat delicately. "Like Brittany and Santana, I too asked Kurt for advice. I had a vague idea of what I wanted to communicate but, admittedly, my knowledge of music is limited and I was having difficulty coming up with a song which reflected my thoughts."

She frowned. "Both Kurt and Brittany were correct when they explained his process in selecting music. It isn't so much that Kurt's tastes are eclectic, but vastly diverse. He listens to all of it, every genre, and he has total recall of everything he hears. He thinks in music. He scores everything. He has a soundtrack for...for..." She fell silent for a brief moment. "For life," she finally finished. "Just as he has an outfit for every occasion, he also has a song."

She ran her tongue over her lower lip. "Last year was difficult for me. You all know that and the details don't bear repeating." She noticed Sam's blank face and decided there was nothing to gain from lying or prevaricating; she was sure there were any number of people outside the club who would be more than happy to run their mouths in an attempt to sink their claws into him. "I had a baby," she said.

To his credit, he didn't look shocked or appalled, or even judgmental. He just gave a careful nod which contained such a wealth of comfort and understanding that it almost stole her breath. It was really a shame he was so head over heels for Kurt, or she would have given serious thought to pursuing him.

She ducked her head. "I was so busy trying to blame everyone but myself, I missed out on a lot of things." She turned and looked over her shoulder at Kurt, who was still conversing with Puck. "But I also found things for which I'd never thought to look; things I never knew I needed, but nonetheless had been in front of me the whole time."

Finn glared at her and Mercedes looked anxious, but Quinn ignored them.

"I learned a lot, too," she continued, "about myself, about others, and about forgiveness. It starts with forgiving yourself for not being perfect; you can never be who everyone wants or needs or expects. You have to be what you want and what you need." She shrugged diffidently. "In the end, the only
expectations that matter are the ones you set for yourself. Whether or not you have the temerity to achieve them is what's most important. We are our own worst enemy."

Several of those in the audience shifted uncomfortably in their seats in a meager attempt to deflect her very truthful words.

"Talking about all of this with Kurt helped, as did talking with Mercedes and Brittany. We spend so much time worrying about who likes us and who hates us and who fears us, that we never get around to liking ourselves, and if you don't like yourself, you certainly can't expect anyone else to like you."

Rachel averted her eyes, Finn absently scratched the back of his neck, and Sam looked down at his shoes as if they had all the answers to the mysteries of life. Tina shot Quinn a considering look, feeling a kinship with the other girl which surprised her. Santana was more than bothered by Quinn's soliloquy but refused to show it; she simply sat in her chair and stared at Quinn appraisingly.

Artie wondered if the real Quinn Fabray was the girl now standing before them or if she was simply a new version of her previous identity. Had she indeed gained wisdom or was this just more artifice? He found he wanted to know the answer, and hoped it was the former.

Quinn was silent for a moment. "I didn't like myself very much. There wasn't much to like," she said quietly. "I really didn't even know who I was. All I knew was who I was supposed to be, and I tried so hard to be that person that I lost sight of everything I once thought was so important." She raised her gaze. "Change is hard. It's not easy, and it shouldn't be. Nothing worth anything is." She shook her head. "I don't pretend to have all the answers, but I feel like I'm getting closer and closer to the person I want to be, and I like her."

She frowned. "But when I walked in here this morning, I saw the stares. I heard the whispering. I felt the judgment. People are treating me like I once treated them, and for that, I have only myself to blame. So I'm owning that. I wasn't a nice person. I was only kind and generous when it benefited me or when it didn't matter, and I realized that no one judges you more harshly than you judge yourself."

Several people nodded.

"So this song is about what happened to me last year and what I learned from it, and why I began to ask myself for forgiveness."

She turned and nodded at Kurt, who began to play. Quinn entered right on cue, her eyes fixed on the ceiling and arms held aloft.

"Heaven bend to take my hand, and lead me through the fire," she began, her sweet voice fueled with more emotion than many had ever before heard from her, though they were hard-pressed to qualify precisely just what that emotion was.

A solemn Puck, eyes trained on his guitar strings, gently began strumming.

Quinn brought her hands together and bowed her head. "Be the long awaited answer to a long and painful fight."

After she had first discovered she was pregnant, she had blamed God for allowing it to happen, for not looking after her and protecting her. She had been a good Christian. She had attended church every Sunday for as long as she could remember, as well as Sunday school and Bible camp. She was active in the Youth Service and the choir, and had fundraised more than all of the people her age
And, unlike most of her peers, she actually believed. She believed in God, in His grace, and in His benevolent and ceaseless love. She had truly believed she had been saved.

And then she was no longer safe, because she hadn't been safe. She had slept with Puck because she had been tired of playing it safe. She had paid for that. She would be paying for it the rest of her life, and that onus belonged squarely on her shoulders.

It was a long and difficult realization that had been made only after she had looked into Beth's eyes. Her child was a miracle. She might not have been conceived in love or wedlock, but her child was a gift from God. God had not abandoned her; she had abandoned Him.

"Truth be told I've tried my best, but somewhere along the way, I got caught up in all there was to offer."

She hadn't been a good Christian. She might have had entire biblical books memorized and she had proselytized perhaps more than she should have, but she had been so mired in the dogma of her religion that she had neglected the spirit of her faith.

She had been judgmental. She had judged those who did not share her faith, people like Puck, Rachel, Artie, and Tina. She had judged Kurt because of who he was and for not being ashamed of it. She had judged people of color as being inferior to her. Those were the lessons she had been taught by her father, and she had always been daddy's little girl. Until she no longer was.

She had been critical and hypocritical. She had been cruel because she could and because she had believed it was her right. But she hadn't been right; she had just been self-righteous.

She might have tried her best, but she hadn't tried to be her best.

"And the cost was so much more than I could bear."

But, in the end, it had been the Negro and the faggot who had saved her, and for no other reason than they had believed it was the right thing to do. It had been, and still was, very humbling. How it galled her that she had ever thought of Mercedes and Kurt in those terms. She looked at her past behavior with deep shame.

"Though I've tried, I've fallen. I have sunk so low."

The sadness in her voice, the deep ache, affected the others greatly. Like Brittany, Quinn didn't have the strongest singing voice, but there was a quality, a purity of tone, that recalled the best of Kurt and Artie. Quinn's voice was warmer than Brittany's own, and though she had shown last year with her performance of It's a Man's Man's Man's World that she could offer a soulful delivery, what she was accomplishing now was a deftness of interpretation, a real and thorough understanding of the power of words.

"I messed up," she sang mournfully, her tone both self-critical and defensive. "Better I should know."

It was better that she now knew. She knew that she couldn't be perfect. She had tried to be her father's princess. She had tried to be Sylvester's golden girl. She had tried to be the Ice Queen of her class. And she had failed at all of them.

She was glad. There had been no pride, no sense of accomplishment, in being a bitch for the sake of it.
Santana and Kurt were bitches by right in that they never flinched in the face of adversity. They might hurt, they might even bleed, but they picked themselves up and dusted themselves off, affixing sneers to their faces and going on about their business. They told the truth, always, regardless of who it hurt, even if that person was themselves, because, for them, the pain of honesty was so much easier to bear than that of hypocrisy.

A lot of people didn't understand that – they didn't want to – because if they were forced to examine Kurt and Santana's motivations, they would be forced to examine their own, to admit that they were collaborators.

Quinn shook her head. "So don't come round here and tell me 'I told you so'."

She didn't need the judgments, helpful or malicious, of others; she was more than capable of judging herself, and the person she had judged had been found lacking. She was working on that. She would never go back to being that horrid, vapid girl who had believed accoutrements were so much more important than associates.

Her eyes found Finn and she smiled sadly. "We all began with good intent, when love was raw and young."

She had loved him. Perhaps not in the way she should have, and perhaps not in the way he had deserved, but she had loved him. And he had loved her, insofar as he understood what love was, not that her comprehension was any better.

She had also wronged him in the worst way possible, and she knew she had to apologize for that, honestly and sincerely. He deserved at least that much, and there was no absolution without restitution.

But she also deserved an apology. Yes, she had lied to him, had been unfaithful to him, and had abandoned him emotionally. But he had done all of that to her, as well. He had cheated on her with Rachel; not to the degree that she had with Puck, but infidelity in any form was still infidelity. And where she still felt tremendous guilt for lying to him, even though she had shown no outward sign of it, she didn't believe he had ever experienced any contrition for his illicit relationship with Rachel. As hypocritical and judgmental as she had been, Finn was just as bad.

For that matter, Rachel too owed her an apology for chasing after a boy who, for all intents and purposes, had been committed to someone else. Dating Finn was Rachel's ultimate triumph over Quinn's bullying, and for that, Quinn couldn't begrudge her victory. Much. She had been horrible to Rachel and had manipulated Kurt into similar behavior, although he had his own issues with the girl. Frankly, she thought Kurt, more than anyone, had the right to torment Rachel. Of course, she also thought that Rachel enjoyed it, which was simply bizarre and not a little twisted.

"We believed that we could change ourselves, that the past could be undone," she sang, shaking her head.

What Quinn had loved most about Finn was she believed he wasn't her father. He wasn't a hypocritical, misogynistic, racist, homophobic, bullying creep. But it had turned out that he was several of those things. She had overlooked them because he had played his cards carefully and close to the vest, and she hadn't wanted to acknowledge that she had willingly entered into a relationship with a younger version of her father.

But Finn was misogynistic, despite the fact that he had been raised by a single mother whom he absolutely respected. That was something Quinn didn't understand, because she had met Carole Hudson, had lived with the woman, and the most appropriate adjective to describe her was fearsome.
Carole was sweet and very kind, loving and demure, but she also had a backbone of steel and an iron jaw. No matter how many hits she took, she got right back up and gave even harder than she was given. Quinn wasn't surprised that Carole and Kurt got along as well as they did.

So it begged the question as to how Finn had turned out to be such a sexist pig when he had a mother like Carole. She could only assume that Carole had never seen that side of her son. It wasn't even that difficult to believe. Finn had a different face for every occasion, and he was careful about which one he donned for a particular audience. He might not be the most intelligent boy, but he was certainly conniving, and very cunning. She knew because she was those things as well. She figured if Carole ever found out half the things Finn had done, she would ensure he was laid up in the hospital for several months, followed by several years of house arrest.

"But we carry on our backs the burden time always reveals..."

Finn was a hypocrite. He had cheated on her without a second thought and had covered it up. He still hadn't admitted to it, despite the fact that he continued to carry a cross and beat his breast over her affair with Puck.

Finn was misogynistic. He had demanded sex from her for the better part of their relationship, with the rejoinder that he expected it because they were going steady and that she should comply because he wanted her to. That she had never given in was more a testament to her desire to punish him than her morals.

She didn't know if Rachel was sleeping with him, though she rather doubted it. What was so hurtful and infuriating was that she didn't think Finn would ever pressure Rachel the way he had her. Maybe he had learned his lesson, or maybe Rachel was stringing him along. She supposed it didn't really matter; it was no longer her problem.

Finn was a bully. Standing at the side of the dumpster and holding Kurt's jacket while the others tossed the boy in like he was trash didn't negate the fact that Finn was an active and willing participant. He had body-checked Kurt into lockers. He had helped nail Kurt's patio furniture to his roof. He had thrown pee balloons at Kurt and had helped deface his locker and his textbooks. He had made hurtful comments and homophobic slurs. And, again, he had apologized for none of it.

"...in the lonely light of morning, in the wound that would not heal."

Quinn knew what had happened in Kurt's basement. She hated Finn for destroying Kurt's belief that people could change if you just loved them enough, but it had been a needed lesson. She also thought it was very telling that Kurt was the only person Finn had ever bullied. She only wondered why more people hadn't posited that.

What she hated most about Finn was that she still loved him. She figured a part of her always would. He had been her first love and would always have a piece of her heart, but it was also a piece she didn't want returned. She was no longer that person and had no desire to be. She wished him happiness, as long as it wasn't at the expense of someone else. Not even Rachel.

"It's the bitter taste of losing everything I held so dear."

Against her will, her eyes flitted toward Puck, who was steadfastly ignoring her. She didn't necessarily blame him, but neither did she believe she deserved to be the object of his anger. He had never been in love with her; he had simply convinced himself that he should be because she was pregnant with their child. He had wanted to manufacture a relationship based solely on an accident.

They had never even liked each other, tolerating the other only to placate Finn. She still didn't know
why she had slept with him, save for the fact that he had been there and she had been lonely. She didn't blame him for her poor decisions. She could have said no. She should have said no. But she hadn't, and they had both paid for their shared disregard.

"I've fallen."

She had hurt him badly with her rejection, but she had known, even then, that she would have hurt him more in the long run by trying to force feelings that had never been there. Conversely, Puck had deluded himself into thinking they were star-crossed lovers in the vein of Romeo and Juliet, the problem being that those two idiots had ended up dead. Had she known that her dismissals and denials would only further his dissociation from reality, she would have just stopped speaking to him altogether.

He had made an effort to change his ways, which had been more than she had expected, but his heart had never been truly in it. He had been going through the motions because he had needed to prove to himself that he wasn't his father. What he had yet to realize was that he had already proven that by the fact that he had supported her as much as he had. He had opened his home and perhaps a portion of his heart to her, but in the end, she had merely felt like an incubator for what he really wanted.

"I have sunk so low," she sang, surprised when Kurt and Puck added backing vocals. She was further startled by how well they sounded together. She had never sung with either of them, nor had they with each other, but they sounded as though they had been doing it for years, creating a perfect harmony that was effortless. Granted, the arrangement wasn't particularly challenging; neither she nor Puck had the vocal chops Kurt possessed, but they had created a pleasant union.

She would never have let Puck raise their child. She had never doubted that Puck loved Beth, that he would have moved heaven and earth to care for her properly, but he ultimately would have failed. Even Puck had known that, though he hadn't been able to admit it until after she had been born. Their inability to provide for their child had been due to their age and immaturity, not a lack of authentic love.

"I messed up. Better I should know."

Despite the fact that the pregnancy had ruined her life, she didn't regret it. In many ways, she was grateful. The life she had been living to that point had been perfect and perfectly joyless. She had been popular because people feared her, not because they liked her. She had had friends, some of whose names she had never even known, that she had never particularly liked. She had championed causes in which hadn't believed to make her uninterested father notice that she was alive. Despite the fact that she had never been proud of him, she had always yearned for him to take pride in her.

Having Beth had forced her to shift priorities and make hard decisions she wouldn't have had the courage to attempt prior to the pregnancy. She had learned that, unlike her mother, she didn't need to define herself through a man. She had learned that friends were the family you chose for yourself. She had learned that some people were just toxic and needed to be excised from your life like tumors. She had learned to rely on others, that she could rely on them. She had learned that trust and friendship were far more important commodities than popularity and superficial acceptance. She had learned that she was so much stronger than she had ever believed.

And she had learned all of those things because of Beth, and there would have been no Beth without Puck. So, yes, she was grateful to him as well.

"So don't come round here and tell me 'I told you so'."

Quinn was intrigued by Puck's nascent friendship with Kurt. There was a genuineness to it; neither
had the interest to feign it. The fact that Puck had owned up to his mistakes and had apologized for them greatly impressed her. She wondered if he was as changed by Beth as she had been. She hoped so. She truly did want Puck to be happy.

But she was also concerned. Knowing firsthand how Puck operated when in a relationship, she could see familiar signs: the flirting, the overt solicitousness, the flattery. Puck was naturally charming, and when he was in pursuit of someone, that charm worked overtime.

Kurt didn't seem particularly charmed, though he returned Puck's volleys and rejoinders with equal or greater force. Perhaps she was misjudging the situation and Puck and Kurt were merely trying to one-up each other, some strange version of Chicken which she didn't really want to understand. Regardless, Puck was displaying an openness and a sincerity with Kurt that she had never before witnessed from him. He was also less guarded and defensive with Kurt than he had ever been with her, or even with Finn. It was welcome and appealing, but she worried that one or both of them would be hurt. Their interactions with each other seemed a little more personal and intimate than that between people who were just friends.

She didn't believe Puck was gay, but he did like sex and would try anything once. Kurt wasn't stupid enough to allow himself to be used that way, but the entire affair had the potential to spin dangerously out of control and blow up in their faces. She'd have to keep a close eye on them, perhaps recruit Artie's assistance. It was more than obvious that he would do anything for Kurt, and it appeared entirely mutual.

"Heaven bend to take my hand, nowhere left to turn," Quinn sang, her voice an impassioned plea, as she remembered how grateful she had been to Mercedes, and later to Kurt.

Though she had never told Mercedes, and she doubted Kurt would have wanted to hear it, they had reaffirmed her belief in the existence of God. That these two people, who had owed her nothing, especially after how she had treated them, had been so compassionate and so concerned for her safety and well-being, had been one of her life's few true blessings.

It was very upsetting that she no longer felt close to Mercedes. She knew Kurt had sensed the tension, and she rather thought Sam had as well. She hoped it would be resolved, and for the better, soon. However, she wasn't holding out much hope. As much as she liked Mercedes, there were some aspects of her personality that were offensive, as she imagined there were aspects of her own which turned off others. She should just grow a set and talk to the other girl, but Mercedes physically intimidated her; not to mention she still felt she owed Mercedes for her kindness. Mercedes had never asked or demanded anything in return, but Quinn still felt she had a debt to settle, and was therefore putting off a discussion that was desperately needed.

"Lost to those I thought were friends, to everyone I knew." Her voice grew even more quiet, more solemn, though it now carried a resonance that had been missing previously. She had somehow managed to imbue an air of profane holiness into the room, as though she were whispering a confession to a pastor.

"Oh, they turn their heads, embarrassed, pretend that they don't see, that it's one misstep – one slip – before you know it. And there doesn't seem to be a way to be redeemed."

Those lines hit Santana hard, much more than she would have expected, even though she had known they were coming. She noticed that Quinn's eyes had turned toward her and Brittany, and she had to admit – silently, of course – that the girl had cause. She hadn't been a good friend to Quinn during that time, and Brittany had followed her lead.

Of course, she and Quinn had never really been friends. At best, they had been allies, but only when
absolutely necessary. Still, it bothered her that she had continued to fuck Puck despite knowing he was having a kid with Quinn, who had been disowned by her own goddamned parents. She certainly wasn't above rubbing salt in someone's wound, but she had perhaps been a little too extreme. Besides, it wasn't like Puck had ever made her come, so why had she been so pressed? For all of his alleged prowess, Puck was totally vanilla and a little boring in bed. He was just lucky he had a big dick.

And, okay, maybe Quinn's baby drama had scared her a little, because it could have happened to anyone, including her. Sure, she was a regular Safety Girl, but mistakes happen. You slip up and forget to take a pill. Condoms tear. Tubal ligations suddenly reverse themselves.

And Quinn had gotten the shaft, in more ways than one. Yeah, Sylvester had told all of the Cheerios to treat Quinn as unwanted as her pregnancy, or like Jennifer Aniston, but they had done it not because they feared Sylvester, but because they reveled in the misfortune of others. Santana was a proud bitch, but that was just lame.

Not that she regretted anything. She was just rethinking some stuff lately. Whatever.

"Though I've tried, I've fallen. I have sunk so low. I messed up. Better I should know. So don't come round here and tell me 'I told you so'."

Quinn let the note die away, giving way to Puck's chord progression, which gently tapered off and left Kurt playing the final notes.

She was very pleased with the performance. She wasn't one to expose herself through song like Kurt or Rachel, but she had found the overall experience to be somewhat transcendent. She felt lighter, happier, and perhaps just a bit wiser. It was not a song she would ever have chosen for herself, but she was so glad that Kurt had sent it her way. He really did have a gift, aside from his vocal talent.

She smiled politely at the applause, turning to thank both Puck and Kurt. Puck appeared uncomfortable, but she didn't know exactly why and knew better than to ask. She gently kissed his cheek, shocking him into a stupor. He nodded and wandered back over to his seat, looking heavily in thought.

She hugged Kurt hard, always surprised that he could take the force with which the other girls all but tackled him, and felt herself steady. Kurt had an enormously calming influence on his friends, almost as if he himself was some kind of narcotic. Once in his company, you craved more and more contact until you reached the point where being separated from him was slightly painful. She had missed him terribly over the summer; she couldn't even imagine the separation anxiety Mercedes, Tina, and Artie had experienced.

"Thanks," she whispered into his ear.

He smiled. "Anything for you."

She knew he meant it. She wouldn't have believed it from anyone else.

"That was lovely, Quinn," Will said kindly. "Your voice is maturing beautifully and your range has improved. Thank you for sharing something so personal with us. I don't know if you were uncomfortable, but if you were, I certainly couldn't tell from your performance. You were absolutely riveting."

She blushed lightly and murmured her thanks, unused to such effusive praise. She walked back to her seat and ignored the pensive look Finn shot her way. She assumed it was what passed for
pensive in Finn's world. He could have just been constipated.

Will shook his head. "Kurt, I really don't know what to say. Your ear for choosing material is obviously a resource I've badly neglected. The performances you've mined from your friends have been exquisite."

"Thank you, Mr. Schuester," he said softly. "Your words are appreciated, though inaccurate. I may have assisted with song selection, but I didn't coach them. Their performances are their own."

Will nodded, charmed by Kurt's newfound modesty. The boy was probably underestimating his contributions, especially considering the incredulous looks – or, in Santana's case, the scoff – they shot in his direction, but Will found that much more palatable than the grandstanding Kurt would have indulged in last year, or as Rachel would have now.

He had planned on calling upon Puck next, but one look at the boy caused him to rethink that option, so he instead opened up the floor. "We have yet to hear from Puck, Finn, Artie, Tina, and Kurt. Who would like to go next?"

Rachel urged Finn forward, but he looked reluctant. Puck still looked lost. Tina and Kurt looked at each other and silently debated. Artie took the opportunity and hesitantly raised his hand. Will nodded his approval.

"Excellent, Artie. Show us what you've got."

Artie slowly rolled himself forward, his face somewhat closed off. Tina and Kurt immediately recognized the look, knowing he was anxious and a little shy. They wondered what he was planning. Each hoped it was something that wouldn't end up with Artie in tears.

Artie dropped his iPod into the dock, cuing up the track. He cleared his throat and looked at the other club members. "All of you know, probably more than I'd like, some of what happened to me this summer." He paused. "I thought a lot about what to sing today, but almost everything I considered would have made me look like a victim or a jerk, so I had to refocus."

Tina released a sigh of quiet relief. Had Artie humiliated himself either in a bid for sympathy or revenge, she never would have forgiven herself. Once again she rued how shabbily she had handled their breakup, acknowledging that Artie had every right to be angry.

"We sing a lot about love in this club," Artie continued, "but usually only one type of it. As I worked through my collection looking for the right song, I realized how many love songs aren't just necessarily about romantic love. They can be sung to express love for a parent, or a sibling or child."

Rachel nodded importantly and was about to lecture on that very point, but Artie didn't give her the chance.

He smiled slightly. "Or a friend. So I decided to sing about my best friend, the one person who means more to me than anyone but my parents. He's always been there for me, even when I was too stupid or self-absorbed to want him there. His love for me has never wavered. He's the kindest, most caring, and most generous person I've ever known, and I'm glad that other people are finally seeing him the same way I always have. He's stood at my side for as long as I can remember. He's my one constant, and if there's one thing I know for certain, it's that I was meant to learn from him. So this is for Kurt."

Kurt blinked owlishly, his lips pressed together tightly as he struggled not to cry. Artie had never sung to him before. No boy had ever sung to him before. No one other than his mother had ever sung
to him before.

The room was suddenly filled with sunny piano chords, bright guitar riffs, and a driving percussion that was somehow cheerful. A few recognized the song, including Kurt, who swallowed heavily and felt a blush break out across his cheeks, though he couldn't keep the goofy smile from his face.

Sam immediately began tapping his foot and nodding his head in time to the music, once again ruminating on how awesomely cool Artie was. Tina was beaming so hard she thought her face might crack. Brittany wondered how soon she'd have to wait for that threesome with Artie and Kurt. Santana thought that, perhaps, Wheels was less objectionable than she had been led to believe; Brittany certainly could have done worse.

"I was nurtured, I was sheltered; I was curious and young," Artie sang, his voice soft and wistful as his mind drifted back twelve years to his first day of kindergarten, where he met the shiniest, prettiest boy he had ever seen.

Even then, Kurt had commanded attention. If you walked in to a room, your eyes immediately landed on him; if Kurt entered a room, people would stop and stare, and up until about sixth grade, that had been a good thing.

Kurt had all but jumped upon Artie that day, grabbing him by the arm and cheerfully explaining his vital statistics, including his name, his birthday, his favorite color, and why Madonna was the most amazing person ever. Artie hadn't known who Madonna was, nor what a Sagittarius was supposed to be, but had sensed their importance and nodded happily. Kurt had assigned Artie the cubby hole next to his and then led him around the room, introducing him to the other kids.

It was love at first sight for Artie. Kurt had been so kind and so nice and so smart. Artie had never before met another boy as smart as him until Kurt. Kurt used big words in their appropriate context. Kurt had already learned how to read, and he wrote in cursive. Soon they had begun discussing their favorite books, none of which were on the kindergarten reading-level.

Artie still laughed whenever he pictured Mrs. Graham's face as she listened to he and Kurt debate the merits of *A Wrinkle in Time*.

"I was searching for that something, trying to find it on the run."

He could still remember what it felt like to run, when he had chased a laughing Kurt around the playground after Kurt had stolen his pocket calculator. He had never minded when Kurt had called him a nerd, because Kurt had always meant it in the best possible sense. Kurt had told him that, until they met, he had always been so lonely because no one ever understood his words or why books were so much better than television. Kurt had never felt connected to other children until Artie, and Artie had felt exactly the same way.

He remembered what it felt to run and ride bikes and dance. He remembered what it was to be free and, for it all, Kurt had been right there with him.

And then he hadn't been able to do those things.

Three years after they had met, after sharing clothes and books and sleepovers and houses and parents and lives, Artie couldn't walk anymore.

When he had woken up in the hospital, he had sensed his parents, but Kurt's was the first face he had seen.

In those long, grueling, pain-filled months after, Kurt had saved him, more than once.
Those first few weeks had seen Artie introduced to an entirely different Kurt, one who was stubborn, obstinate, vicious, and cruel, and he had never been as grateful as he was for the many faces of Kurt Hummel.

As far as Kurt was concerned, Artie was no different, so he felt no need to treat him as such. Kurt didn't tolerate whining, so he had been unmoved by Artie's frequent plaintive wailing. Kurt didn't believe in surrender, so he had not been about to let Artie give in to the darkness. Kurt had no problem with expressing himself, so when Artie had screamed his rage and struck out at Kurt, Kurt had screamed and hit right back.

The first time Sheila Abrams had tried to break up one of their fights, she too became well acquainted with just how obnoxious and utterly intractable Kurt Hummel could be. She never interfered again.

Kurt provided the normalcy that Artie had desperately craved. Kurt hadn't taken any of his shit, nor had he offered any pity. Instead, he had demanded that Artie pull himself together and learn to use the chair. Kurt had accompanied him to physical therapy and had learned how to perform the exercises and massages so he could help Artie at home. Kurt had collected all of his homework and brought it to him every day so that he wouldn't fall behind, because Kurt was not about to let him repeat third grade.

And at Artie's first day back at school, when Dave Karofsky had been a snide comment about cripples, Kurt had punched him in the temple and knocked him the fuck out.

Artie closed his eyes, lost in the memories, a smile on his face. "Oh, and just when I stopped looking, I saw just how far I'd come."

So with Kurt as his own personal Annie Sullivan, he had adapted to the wheelchair. He had kept up with the physical therapy to make himself as strong as possible. He had begun pushing himself harder in school, doing extra credit and demanding more challenging work, with Kurt right on his heels as they battled for first in their class. They had tutored each other in those subjects in which one had a better understanding than the other. Artie's dance lessons with Kurt had switched to guitar lessons, while Kurt had continued with piano and dance, and picked up voice.

But nothing else in their friendship had changed.

Slowly, Artie had learned to accept what had happened to him. He hadn't liked it. He hadn't been able to quell completely the self-pity and feelings of worthlessness, but Kurt had always been at the ready to combat them. He had put his life back together, in part, because Kurt had demanded it and wouldn't settle for any less.

"In this life."

When he would try to thank Kurt, the other boy would just brush him off. *Haven't you determined the truth yet, Arthur? However much you think you need me, I need you so much more.*

And then Suzanne Hummel had died.

"In this life!" Artie then wailed, his voice now full and rich, with a warmth that made Brittany swoon with happiness and Kurt with envy and appreciation.

He shifted slightly in his chair and looked at Kurt, trying to channel all of the love and gratitude he felt for him through his voice.

"You give me love, you give me light. Show me everything that's been happening, I've opened up my
Artie was suddenly struck by the realization of how much he had followed Kurt. At first it had been dance and academic lessons, and then it was Glee and relationships with Tina and Brittany. Though both girls had been Kurt's first, in a strictly platonic sense, he couldn't deny that he had pursued them in part because they too loved Kurt, because they understood how amazing he was, and because they could accept how much he loved Kurt without thinking it was weird.

He wasn't gay. He had never even thought he might be, but there had been a time when he had believed Kurt might have been his exception. He felt so much for Kurt, depended on him so greatly, loved him so deeply and without reservation, that he had realized if he had fallen in love with Kurt, it might have been the best thing possible. He hadn't, and he was mainly thankful for that. If they had tried and then broken up, Artie doubted he would have survived.

Sometimes it made him laugh how little Kurt thought of himself; that is, when it didn't drive him insane. Kurt truly was one of the kindest, most gentle people Artie had ever known, as well as being intensely loyal and protective and talented and smart. But Kurt never realized those things about himself. He had only ever dwelt on the character weaknesses he had perceived in himself, which he had then covered with a veneer of insincere arrogance. He had always felt set apart, even before he understood that he was gay or what that meant. And when he had finally worked it out for himself, he had tried to pull away, but then Artie's own obstinacy had reared its very ugly head and Kurt had ungraciously conceded defeat.

Last year had been horrible. The harassment of Kurt had reached a crescendo that was actually terrifying in its brutality, but Kurt had been more concerned with how his friends had been targeted. He had truly believed that the only reason the jocks had gone after Artie and Tina was because they were friends with him. They both scoffed and dismissed his fears as groundless, but Kurt had never really accepted it. It had been incredibly frustrating watching Kurt fight for everyone but himself. He would merely stand there and accept the abuse as his due, as if he deserved to carry that cross, but the moment one of the jocks turned on Tina or Artie, Kurt's fangs would drop and all bets were off.

The worst, however, had been that debacle with Finn. One of the few things upon which Artie and Tina agreed wholeheartedly was that Finn absolutely did not deserve Kurt. They had watched as Finn had strung Kurt along, throwing out crumbs of hope, only then to snatch them back and whine about how Kurt was stalking him. Artie and Tina had known from the beginning that Finn would never return Kurt's feelings, which was the only reason they hadn't interfered; that, and Kurt needed to learn that particular lesson for himself. If they had thought, even for a moment, that Finn felt the same as Kurt, they would have killed him and fed his body to pigs. It took one to know one, after all.

Artie didn't know what the hell had happened to Kurt over the summer, other than what Kurt had furtively whispered to him during lunch – which, whoa – but he liked the changes. He just hoped Kurt would be able to sustain them.

"Three steps, fight an honest fight. Two hearts that can start a fire. One love is all I need in this life."

As he thought about it, he realized how true that lyric was. Most people were regarded as extremely fortunate if they had one true love in their lives. He knew that his was Kurt. It wasn't romantic and never would be, but it was the purest and most honest relationship he had ever known. He'd get over Tina, and even if things with Brittany didn't work out – and he was pretty sure they probably wouldn't – he knew he could always count on Kurt, just as the other boy could always depend on him.

From the corner of his eye, Artie noticed Finn scowling slightly at him.
Oh, really.

Well, he'd see about that. Finn didn't scare him, and there was nothing he could scream in Artie's basement to deter him. He figured even Tina would be up for some of that action if Finn started acting a fool. Not that he had ever acted otherwise.

He beamed at Kurt, who regarded him with such love and warmth that Artie was taken aback. It was rare that Kurt let his true emotions shine through so blatantly in public.

He was just glad Kurt wasn't crying. He had seriously considered not performing this song because of the chance Kurt might cry. He hated when Kurt cried. As much as people believed otherwise, Kurt rarely cried, and when he did, it was usually because he was angry, not sad. Kurt suppressed his emotions so often that they would build up and come out as tears of rage. Artie had never called him on it because he was guilty of the same thing, only he yelled and belittled.

Plus, Kurt was an ugly crier. When he was sad, a few perfect tears might slip from his eyes, but when he really got going, his face would screw up and become mottled, his eyes would squint, his mouth turned into an ugly scowl, and he would make these gasping noises like he had just been shot by an arrow. It was a heart-wrenching sound, and though Artie could count on one hand the number of times he had heard it, he never wanted to hear it again.

"I have faltered. I have stumbled. I have found my feet again," he sang, smiling sardonically down at his legs. Still, thanks in large part to Kurt, he had found his feet again, though they were metaphorical ones. But that was okay. Well, he was reaching that point. Kind of. "I've been angry and I've been shaken, but found a new place to begin."

He wondered how many more beginnings he would be afforded.

He was lucky to have survived the car accident. Yes, he had lost the use of his legs, but it could've been so much worse. He could've missed these last eight years. He could've missed having the best friend in the world, or the kindest and most beautiful girl as his first love.

He knew he had screwed up with Tina; he hadn't needed anyone to tell him. He should have treated her better, absolutely, and he had been ridiculous about her faked stutter. After he had truly thought about why she had done it, it had made sense to him. She had wanted to keep people away, to keep them from noticing her, because she had come to understand that being noticed often led to ridicule. Hell, that's why Artie tried to make himself look as inconspicuous as possible and often let Kurt fight his battles for him.

It was why he rarely brought up how ill-equipped Lima was to handle handicapped people, and when it became an issue, he would usually apologize for being disabled rather than rail against the thoughtless idiots who didn't care about people like him or about breaking the law.

It was why Kurt had become so cold and aloof, and he figured Quinn's Ice Queen persona was a similar defense mechanism.

He and Tina would probably never have worked. In some ways, they were so similar it was scary, including how they kept their fears and emotions to themselves. They had a lot in common, but most of their conversation had been superficial or about other people; rarely had they communicated anything of depth. He regretted how he had treated her and he was furious with how she had ended it, but it took nothing away from how much he loved and would continue to love her. He hoped they could salvage their friendship. And though he resented Mike terribly, there was no question that he was the best choice for Tina. At least he could take comfort in the fact that Mike would keep her safe and treat her like she deserved.
And Brittany. Well, she was a gift. He knew it was only a matter of time before she and Santana got back together, but when that happened, he would support them. He knew how much they loved each other. But Brittany had returned to him some of his masculinity. She had made him feel appreciated and desired, and it had been a new experience for him. He loved her. He wasn't in love with her, but he loved her. And he, like Kurt and Santana, would kill anyone who hurt her.

It was odd. Kurt and Santana were so much alike; he and Quinn perhaps even more so. But Kurt and Brittany were remarkably similar in the way they managed to attract fierce devotees, as if they were royalty or pagan gods. Perhaps this explained Kurt's tiara collection.

"And my persistence to make a difference has led me safe into your hands. In this life."

Embarrassed, Kurt blushed and looked down at his lap, slightly startled when Sam wrapped an arm around his shoulders, though he didn't pull away. Instead, he cuddled up against him.

Artie looked back up at his best friend. Kurt really was pretty, he decided. He knew Kurt hated being described that way, but it didn't make it any less true. Kurt mistakenly believed that pretty automatically translated to feminine, which was patently absurd. No one who looked at Kurt, no matter how much they found his sexuality distasteful, could claim that he looked like anything other than a guy.

But no matter how much they physically matured, Kurt would always be a pretty boy. He would never be rugged or square-jawed enough to be considered handsome, and somehow the word just didn't adequately capture Kurt's looks. The high cheekbones, strong chin, and regal bearing could be passed off as patrician, but the adorable nose and the overly plump lips would never allow that comparison to stand. Kurt looked too unique to be called average, and he would certainly never be plain or ugly. So Kurt would just have to settle for pretty. Oh, well. Everyone had problems.

From the way Sam was gazing at Kurt, apparently romantic possibilities would not be one of them. Artie wasn't sure how he felt about that. On paper, Sam was a good guy, but he didn't know the dude well enough to feel comfortable trusting him with Kurt. Sam was certainly a more appealing option than Finn, though.

The whole bromance thing was Puck was mildly troubling, as well, but Artie chalked that up to petty jealousy on his part. He'd never had to share Kurt with another boy before, and wasn't relishing the possibility. Still, he figured if Puck got out of hand, Santana would handle it. She was good at things like that. The only thing that surprised him about Kurt and Santana's friendship was that it happened sooner. Of course if it had, they'd all be living in a hell dimension with Kurt and Santana as their overlords.

"In this life. In this life!"

As the chorus once again approached, Artie suddenly felt reinvigorated and refocused on what he was doing rather than letting himself drown in memories or what-ifs. He turned his head and found himself staring at Kurt, who was blushing severely. Artie could sense the tears coming and needed to ward them off. He raised his hands, and suddenly Santana and Quinn – which, the hell? – were scrambling to his side.

"You give me love, you give me light," they sang, in a beautiful and seamless three-part harmony. "Show me everything that's been happening, I've opened up my eyes. I'm following."

Quinn was really going for the high notes, and while they were at the upper limit of her voice, she reached them regardless and looked quite pleased with herself for doing so. Artie smiled up at her, eyes dancing with merriment, to convey his pleasure. Santana matched him tone-for-tone, and
though he would probably never admit it to her, he was a little bit in awe of her talent. She, like Kurt, had the ability to manipulate her range to sing a variety of parts; and though Kurt's range was vastly superior, Santana had full access to her own. She didn't quite manage to project as well as Mercedes or Rachel, but in some ways that was better, because she could sing as part of an ensemble and make her presence known without drowning out everyone else.

"Three steps, fight an honest fight," the girls sang.

"Oh, oh," Artie sang over them.

"Two hearts that can start a fire," the girls continued.

"Yeah, yeah," Artie wailed.

"One love is all I need," Quinn and Santana, smirking lightly at Kurt and Sam, who were utterly oblivious. Santana looked at Quinn and they both rolled their eyes. Boys.

"In this life!" Artie practically roared, his voice soaring as he rapidly ascended the keys shifts.

The arrangement then entered the bridge and the pacing of the accompaniment slowed and lowered in tone.

Artie looked at Kurt, who shyly held his gaze. "I was put here for a reason, I was born into this land." He smiled. "And I'm living and I'm believing that I was meant to be your friend."

Kurt bit his lip and shyly ducked his head.

"In this life," Artie sang slowly, his voice light and a half-octave above where he usually sang. "In this life!"

It was time for the final reprise of the chorus, and Artie was determined to make it count and, yeah, to show off just a little. He knew he had a pretty good voice. Outside of Kurt, he probably had the best male voice in the group, but in a way Kurt's voice didn't count, because he could hit notes none of them – boys or girls – could hit. Artie could admit that Finn had something, some quality to his voice that was well suited to certain genres, like classic rock and maybe some rock-pop, but he had done no real work to train his voice and it showed.

Puck was a countertenor just like Kurt, though with a lower center, but he didn't have much range and actually sounded better when he was singing with someone. He could carry a tune on his own, but when he had a partner, he seemed to invest much more in his performance, as if being forced to keep up gave him something to prove. The few lines he had sung with Santana at Regionals last year were the best Artie thought he had heard Puck sound since he had joined the club.

Mike had a pleasant voice, but it wasn't anything spectacular. Artie wasn't being rude or condescending; he knew Mike would be the first to admit he had one of the weaker voices of the club, but Mike was pretty damn good at filling up and buffering the supporting vocals for the powerhouses. Singers who could do that were absolutely necessary, though it wasn't a well-appreciated or even an acknowledged gift.

Sam was still somewhat of a mystery, but he definitely had leading man potential.

"You give me," Quinn and Santana sang.

"Love!" Artie finished.
"You give me…"

"Light!"

"Show me everything that's been happening…"

"I've opened up my eyes. I'm following," Artie continued, his voice ringing with dichotomous solemnity and joy.

"Three steps, fight an honest fight," the girls sang.

"Oh, oh!"

"Two hearts that can start a fire."

"Yeah, yeah."

"One love is all I need," Quinn and Santana finished, before falling silent as the music cut off.

"In this life!" Artie sang, grinning.

The applause was immediate, for which Artie was grateful, as he wasn't in the mood to see a sea of faces staring blankly at him. He had performed to the best of his ability, but his presentation wasn't as shocking as Brittany's or, in his opinion, as poignant as Quinn's. He accepted his accolades with a nod of his head, thanked Quinn and Santana, and wheeled himself back over to where he usually parked, exchanging smiles with Kurt.

Kurt didn't say anything and Artie hadn't expected him to. It would have been awkward if he had. As close as they were, they didn't talk very much about their emotions for each other, preferring simply to recognize their existence and leaving them alone. It worked for them. They would speak later, in private, and with perhaps a few tears from both of them. But that was okay. Kurt was one of the few people from whom Artie didn't fear showing emotion.

Will promptly decided then and there that Artie had to be featured more often. His tenor was beautiful and sounded so much more mature than Finn's own. He wondered how Artie would sound if paired with Rachel or Mercedes. He felt rather dim for never before considering it.

"A wonderful job, Artie," he said enthusiastically, "and your point is not lost. Singing songs about romantic love can be limiting, and songs can be adapted for a particular audience. Truly well done."

Artie smiled, though it felt somewhat forced. Schuester had never really before given him feedback, and while the praise was nice, he would've preferred some constructive criticism. He knew his performance, while emotionally intense, had not approached anywhere near the technical level of Mercedes or even Quinn. He considered, not for the first time, about getting professional lessons. Schuester, while a good choir leader, didn't work with them one on one to develop their voices. Kurt and Rachel received private lessons, and he knew that the leader of Mercedes' church choir also offered private lessons. He wondered how much better he and some of the others, like Brittany and Santana, could be if they took some initiative.

Will clapped his hands once. "Okay! We have time for two more performances and there are four of
you left, so two of you will open tomorrow morning's meeting. Volunteers?"

Tina exchanged a glance with Kurt, who then turned to regard Puck, who raised a brow. Finn was left out of this cabal and resented it, but neither did he want to perform just yet. Of course, he also didn't want to go last.

"I'll go," Tina offered.

"And I'll close us out," Kurt added, "if that's acceptable to Noah and Finn."

The two boys nodded, pleased they would get to listen to Kurt perform.

Will shrugged. "Sounds great to me. Tina, go for it!"

Quinn and Santana glanced at each other. Schue's peppy tone was a little too reminiscent of the Cheerios. They didn't want to contemplate why.

Tina hopped to her feet and raised her arms above her head. "I call upon the Power of Three!" she dramatically bellowed.

Brittany cheered and bounced toward her. Kurt rolled his eyes fondly and followed more sedately.

Santana blinked dumbly. "Huh?"

Tina smirked. "You didn't think Single Ladies was the culmination of our little group, did you?"

Santana stared. Yes, she had. She wondered why Brittany hadn't told her they had continued to perform together, although it did explain several months of nights during which Brittany had been unavailable.

"You named your group after Charmed?" Mike asked, snickering softly.

"Charmed was boss," Puck declared. "Hot chicks kicking ass? Awesome."

Mike tilted his head and considered the point, finally nodding.

Santana looked at Kurt and raised an eyebrow. "I imagine you're Prue?"

He gave her a withering glare. "If you even have to ask the question, you're not ready for the answer."

She nodded ruefully. "I deserved that."

"You did," he agreed. "I'll pencil you in for a spanking later."

"Outstanding," she purred.

"What's Charmed?" Quinn asked. "Who's Prue?"

Several people gasped.

"It's a television show about witches," Kurt patiently explained. "I can understand why that wouldn't be included in your household programming, but it was very well done. His brows gathered. "At least in the first few seasons." He smiled. "As for Prue, well, she was played by Shannen Doherty, so basically, Brenda Walsh with magical powers."
Quinn shivered with pleasure. "Amazing."

Kurt nodded and turned to Tina. "What are we singing?"

"Number twenty-six."

Kurt and Brittany nodded and took their places as Tina docked her iPod and cued up the music.

"How many songs do you have prepared?" Rachel asked.

The three exchanged a look and shrugged. "Several dozen," Kurt replied. The girls nodded.

Rachel blinked owlishly and fell silent.

"Okay," Tina brightly began, "one theme I've noticed from most of the performances is personal transformation, and that's what my song is about too. Change is hard and, like Quinn said, it's meant to be, but that doesn't mean that you can't have fun along the way. Not all lessons are painful, and sometimes you have to stop to smell the roses before they die."

"Morbid," Kurt muttered under his breath.

"Shut up and concentrate so you won't go off-key," was her pleasant rejoinder.

Extremely offended, Kurt gave her a thunderous glare.

She smiled that much harder at him.

"He's ticklish!" Puck called out.

Kurt's eyes widened. "Noah!"

Tina, furious that Kurt had somehow managed to keep this essential information from her, cocked her head, reached out, and ran her fingers across his ribs. Predictably, he broke out in hysterical laughter.

"I'm taking notes," Santana said lightly, smirking.

Quinn and Mercedes nodded.

"I already knew," Brittany said smugly. Artie nodded.

Kurt looked at Puck and slowly drew his finger across his throat. Puck swallowed heavily. Finn looked furious.

"Uh, yeah," Tina said, blinking. "Anyway, the point is that sometimes the greatest gift you can give yourself is time. Only you can set the pace for your own life." She looked at Kurt. "Was that eloquent enough for you?"

He raised a brow. "I wouldn't chisel it on a stone tablet, but it's serviceable at the moment."

She glowered. "I'ma get you."

"Can Mike help?" he chirped.

She grinned. "I knew you wanted some of that Asian fusion."

He smirked and rattled off something in Korean, which soon had Tina punching his arm and
blushing fiercely. Mike had no idea what Kurt had just said, but he laughed anyway.

"Can we get on with this?" Puck barked.

"Words grunted to him on every date," Kurt said.

"That's what I said!" Santana cackled.

Puck pouted, but sniggered when Kurt blew him a kiss. He and Brittany then nodded at Tina, who started the music. Kurt began walking in a circle, his boots clacking loudly on the linoleum. Mercedes immediately perked up, recognizing the song.

"Da da da…" Brittany began.

Just as Kurt resumed his place, Tina started to sing.

"Hurry up and wait; so close, but so far away," she began, her voice soft, a shy smile on her face. "Everything that you've always dreamed of: close enough for you to taste." She shook her head, somewhat ruefully. "But you just can't touch."

At the end of the last school year, Tina had felt stalled, if not downright stifled. Other than the random acts of bullying, which only seemed to occur when she was seen in the company of Kurt or Rachel, her life had been perfectly adequate. She had better than average grades, a handful of relatively good friends, had eked out a place for herself in Glee – barely – and was dating Artie.

She had been miserable.

She had told herself that she had no right to be, that she had been expecting too much out of life, and people like Kurt and Rachel, who were always so dissatisfied by the lot they had been dealt, usually irked her. She had excused their posturing because they were legitimately talented; she'd always believed that at their twentieth reunion, Kurt and Rachel would absolutely be the most successful people in their class. They would do well because they demanded it, but that way wasn't for her.

Or so she thought.

She had taken a good, hard look at herself during her first week at camp, before she had even realized Mike was in residence. She didn't have it so bad, she had justified. Sure, racism and sexism ran rampant through the halls of McKinley, though at a much smaller volume than the homophobia Kurt had to battle every day of his life. She knew she would get through it and come out stronger for the experience.

She had friends. Well, she had Kurt. That was the crux of the problem. She initially had joined Glee not to become popular, because that was just a pipe dream, but she had thought she'd gain more friends and, she supposed, she in a sense had. Or more people knew her name, at least.

"You wanna show the world, but no one knows your name yet. You wonder when and where and how you're gonna make it," she sang, with Kurt and Brittany joining in, their harmonies tighter than anything the club, as a whole, had ever managed to accomplish.

Her eyes darted in Will's direction, pleased when she saw his mouth hanging open.

But outside of Kurt, and then Artie, she really wasn't close to anyone. Mercedes was there, but she was more Kurt's friend than her own. Actually, she was okay with that. Mercedes was fine in small doses, but Tina really couldn't be around her for long stretches of time. She was just so domineering and ran roughshod over everyone else. If they weren't going to the store she wanted to visit or seeing
the movie she wanted to see or watching the show she wanted to watch, she complained constantly.

Mercedes was extremely exhausting.

It wasn't that she didn't like Mercedes, nor did she resent that the girl encroached upon so much of Kurt's time – she and Kurt didn't need to hang twenty-four-seven to validate their relationship – but Mercedes was very immature. And Mercedes was only interested in spending time with her when Kurt wasn't available.

Not that Tina herself wasn't immature about certain things. Kurt was the same way. Artie was immature about a lot of stuff.

She had figured out that the biggest problem she had with Mercedes was that the girl had an unrighteous sense of entitlement, and Tina couldn't figure out why. Mercedes just assumed that everyone felt the way she did about things, be it music or fashion or books, and not only refused to consider anyone else's opinion, but couldn't even conceive why they would have them.

It was disappointing. Tina had never really had a close girlfriend before – she was like Rachel in that regard – and had been hoping that Mercedes just might be that for her, but it wasn't to be. Mercedes was really only interested in Kurt, and Tina suspected it was far more than in just a friendly way. Mercedes may have understood that Kurt was gay, but she hadn't necessarily accepted it.

In the days when Ryerson had run the choir, the meetings mostly consisted of her, Artie, and Kurt sitting around and watching as Mercedes and Rachel shouted over each other about solos. Neither of them, nor Ryerson, had ever even considered that she, Artie, or Kurt might want their own solos.

Kurt had usually stayed out of the battles, despite Rachel's constant goading, but he would step in if Rachel said something hurtful to Mercedes, not because he and Mercedes were great friends at the time, but mostly because Rachel didn't know when to stop.

But Tina had also noted the sick pleasure Rachel got when Kurt paid her any attention whatsoever, and she realized that, as far as Rachel was concerned, Kurt was her only real competition. Mercedes had heard her and Artie debating the point one day and instantly dismissed it. She might have been a great proponent of Kurt's ability, but she didn't consider him in her league. Later, Tina and Artie had laughed over it. Sure, Mercedes could sing, but she really knew nothing about music. She hadn't trained in theory; she couldn't even sight read. She only wanted to sing what she called black music and bitched when they didn't.

That was one mistake Rachel had never made: she never underestimated Kurt. She might have discouraged his desires or ideas, or downplayed his talent to undercut him and exacerbate his insecurities, but she had never dismissed him. Tina believed that Rachel, if pressed, would concede that Kurt was the only one on her level.

Kurt then had picked up on something between her and Artie, even before they themselves had, and distanced himself so they could explore it. Neither she nor Artie had cared for that, so used to Kurt's presence that when it was taken away, they had floundered. Eventually they had rallied, but by then Mercedes had sunken her claws into Kurt. Yet Kurt, for some reason, allowed it. Tina refused to consider even for a moment that he wasn't wise to Mercedes' games; she guessed Kurt just felt sorry for the girl.

So she had figured out that while she liked Mercedes well enough, she didn't consider her a good friend. It had been a shocking and disheartening realization.

She liked Brittany a lot, but she didn't really know the other girl, and it was a similar situation to that with Artie: they had only gotten to know each other because of Kurt.
Unlike Mercedes – and even Artie, to an extent – she had understood that Kurt couldn't be everything for her, nor did she want him to be; it certainly wasn't an enviable position. The trouble was that Kurt had been her best friend for so long, she didn't know who she was without him. That was also part of the problem in her relationship with Artie: they had gotten together, in part, so as not to risk alienating Kurt. She was sure Kurt had had no idea about that, and he would've been mortified if he had ever discovered it.

So camp had given her the chance to get away from Glee, from school, from Artie, and from Kurt, and to find out just who the hell she was.

"You know you can, if you get the chance," Tina continued, her voice now imbued with a slight hope even as she shook her head in resignation. "In your face, as the door keeps slamming."

She hadn't had Quinn's experience; it wasn't that she didn't like herself, but that she didn't know herself. She had defined herself through Kurt, and then Artie, for so long, that she had let Tina the person linger in the background. It was no one's fault but her own, she knew. Kurt had never taken advantage of her indecision and confusion, but Artie had. How could she fault him, though, when her silence had encouraged him? That was always one of the things that had divided the two boys: Artie had a constant need to prove himself to others, whereas Kurt was more consumed with proving himself to himself.

She had spent a long time asking herself who the real Tina was, when she wasn't shepherding around a pack of Asian kids. The real Tina, she finally decided, was proud of her intelligence, but needed to pick up the slack. She had shunted her intellect to the side a long time ago so as not to lend credence to the stereotype that all Asians were nerds. But she was smart, and she shouldn't hide that to make other people feel better about themselves. And with college looming ever closer on the horizon, downplaying herself was only hurting her in the end.

Real Tina was friendly with Mercedes, but wasn't her friend. She had always been hesitant to engage in confrontation or to make her opinions known. The stutter had been excellent subterfuge, purposefully designed to attract attention so that she could later avoid it. It had worked a little too well: she now regretted keeping silent about so very many things, but by the time she had realized that, there were few people interested in listening to her.

Real Tina loved Artie, but wasn't in love with him. She loved Artie in part because of how much Kurt did, but recognizing that did little to ameliorate the circumstances. She could never just deny or denounce Artie simply because she found facets of his personality objectionable; and unlike a lot of people, Artie had legitimate reasons for being so disgruntled. But that didn't mean she had to continue to accept his verbal abuse or rampant misogyny, and she had the feeling that if she had clued Kurt in on what was happening between them, he would have immediately urged her to break up with Artie.

She was again reminded of her earlier comparison of Kurt to Harry Potter. Like Harry, Kurt always put doing the right thing over the easy thing. Tina didn't know if she had the guts to do that, but she was sure going to try.

She did love Artie and she always would, but as something akin to a sibling, not as a boyfriend or even necessarily as a friend. So she had broken up with him, which was the right thing to do, but she had done it in an impersonal and unnecessarily vengeful email, which was the easy thing to do.

Growing up really was a process. And it sucked.

"Now you're feeling more and more frustrated, and you're getting all kind of impatient, waiting."
Mercedes was nodding her head and mouthing the lyrics, overcome by a curious feeling. Watching Kurt with Tina, their easy interaction; the way they sang so effortlessly together; the way they danced, as though they were anticipating the other's movements rather than actually rehearsing them; their long, shared history; all of it sparked that petty and useless jealousy she had for anyone in Kurt's life who wasn't her.

Tina, Artie, Quinn. Now Santana, Puck, Matt, and Sam.

It was just too much. The only one she didn't resent was Brittany, because Brittany was just too sweet and innocent to arouse any ire. She had never really resented Finn, either, basically viewing him as a nonentity. She had known Finn never could feel for Kurt as Kurt had for him, and though she had told Kurt all the right things – how he needed to get over it; how Finn would only hurt him; how Kurt was just hurting himself – she had nevertheless been secretly thrilled with Kurt's obsession, because as long as Kurt was chasing Finn, he'd be oblivious to any boy who might've expressed an interest in him. That, and she had also been impressed by Kurt's dogged determination.

She knew she had been wrong, that she was an awful person and the entire situation was hopeless – Kurt would never love her back in that way – but those thoughts and behaviors were now so ingrained in her, she didn't know how to shut them off.

Kurt's fledgling friendship with Matt didn't help matters. Even though she had strong unrequited feelings for Kurt, she had also nursed a slight crush on Matt. She didn't know if it was because Matt was black and straight, and thus a more socially acceptable, and realistic, choice for her, but she had liked him. They hadn't held very many conversations, but she had found Matt to be a sweet and kind boy; like Kurt, but straight.

She had never said or done anything about it, however, and now Matt was gone and it was too late.

Of course, she could talk with Matt on the phone or chat with him over Facebook, as Kurt did, but it seemed desperate somehow.

Figured that even straight boys were more interested in Kurt than in her.

She blinked, startled.

Was she jealous of Kurt?

Had that been the problem all along?

Kurt who was white and so damn beautiful it was obscene. Kurt, who was thin and talented and whose pride rarely came across as arrogance. Kurt, who didn't take shit from anyone, and even when he was being threatened or physically assaulted, never backed down. Kurt, who had Rachel's respect. Kurt, who was so smart that he could do anything he wanted, and had the money to back up his goals.

She felt nauseous.

Was that why she tried to keep people away from Kurt? Was that why she tried to limit his contact with others? Was that why she was always so afraid that people would try to steal his light? Because she wanted it for herself?

"We live and we learn..."

Sweet Jesus.
Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Finn glaring at the front of the room, specifically at Tina and Brittany. The jealousy was pouring off of him in waves.

Holy shit! Was that how she looked where Kurt was concerned? Was that what other people saw when they looked at her?

She cringed.

Finn noticed and nodded at her knowingly. He leaned over toward her. She frowned, but made no move to stop him.

"Kurt had sex this summer," he whispered.

She stilled, her eyes widening to the size of saucers.

No.

She refused to believe that. Kurt would have told her. He certainly would have told her before telling Finn. And why the hell would he have told Finn that anyway?

Her eyes narrowed and she turned toward him, also registering Rachel's nervous and fearful eyes.

*What?* How the hell did they both know about this and she didn't?

Wait. Was that what Kurt had whispered to Artie during lunch?

She couldn't believe it. Except that she did.

She flushed with anger and sat on her hands to keep from throttling something.

Kurt had had *sex*. But not with her.

No, it would never be with her.

She hated everything and everyone.

"...to take one step at a time. There's no need to rush. It's like learning to fly, or falling in love."

Artie also was nodding along with the music. He loved listening to Tina sing. As far as he was concerned, she had one of the best voices in the club, male or female. She might not have the power of Rachel or Mercedes, but there was just a quality to Tina's voice, some unnameable characteristic, that recalled both Kurt and Santana.

They could all sing and sing well, but they didn't make their performances odes to their talent. Their ability to interpret the lyrics and present them to the audience was always paramount in their thoughts. They wanted the audience to consider what was being sung; they sought to make the lyrics universally relatable yet personally relevant, even if that meant underplaying their voices. That's why, in his opinion, Rachel and Mercedes were singers, but Kurt, Tina, and Santana were *artists*.

Artie knew he was good, and he could perhaps perform like Tina or Kurt or Santana depending on the song choice, but he also knew he had a while to go before catching up to them. He understood he had a tendency to drop the ball or phone in a performance when the song was unfamiliar or unpalatable to him. Even Rachel beat him on that score; regardless of what he thought about her personally, when she opened her mouth to sing, she was a professional. He admired that about her, and he rather thought Kurt did as well.
"It's gonna happen when it's supposed to happen, and we find the reasons why one step at a time."

This song wasn't really Puck's style of music, but there was no doubt that Gothica was totally nailing it. He wondered why she didn't sing more, but then remembered when Berry had balked at Tina getting some song over her, which had just been all kinds of lame. Tina had stuck with it, though, and for once Schue had followed through and not kowtowed to Rachel's absurd demands.

He still couldn't believe the way the Princess had told Berry all about herself. Fuck, that had been hot. The fact that Kurt had kept himself calm and spoken to her in a considerate manner just made it that much hotter. Puck knew he couldn't have done it himself; hell, he didn't know anyone who could have done it. Rachel's crazy just inspired rage.

He wondered if he was gay.

He didn't think he was gay, nor did he feel like he was gay – not that he knew what being gay felt like – but he didn't know if he was necessarily straight anymore, either. He was surprised that he didn't blame Princess for making him question himself, but he didn't, which only made his disgust at ever thinking or saying that Kurt was out to convert people more pronounced. Seriously, what had that been about?

Most of his homophobia had been a mask, a calculated feint to ensure that Karofsky and his gang wouldn't catch on to the fact that Kurt made him feel very insecure. It wasn't really anything Kurt had done; Kurt couldn't help being so damn smart or having money. And most of Kurt's comebacks about Puck working for him one day had stung, because Puck had known they were probably true. In the world of high school, Noah Puckerman might have been top dog, but in the real world, it was guys like Kurt who ruled. Everyone knew that, even if they didn't want to admit it.

But what about the gay thing?

Well, he still liked banging chicks; he didn't regret having boffed as many as he had. So, not completely gay. Maybe bi like Sam and Tina?

Tina had been a surprise, but not totally. He probably had just been taken aback because he didn't really know her. He'd like to get to know her; not to sleep with her, but because she seemed like a really cool chick. He'd probably be hanging out with her more, now that she was dating Mike, and he found he was looking forward to it. She had been awesome when he had told her he might be bi, that he was trying to figure it out. She hadn't preached at him or pressed him for answers to explain himself; she had just offered quiet support and a friendly ear. He had appreciated that.

He also wondered if she'd had any hot lesbian sex.

She probably hadn't, but it was fun thinking about it.

So, bi?

Maybe. He sure liked touching the Princess – hugging him and tickling him and making him laugh. Kurt was like some adorable fluffy bunny you just wanted to hold, but he was also dead sexy. The growth spurt and the tan and the awesome new hair…yeah. Kurt looked mighty fine. He appreciated Kurt's beauty, and he wouldn't mind making out with him, but he wasn't sure about going further than that. And like Sam had said, he could hang and be all stupid and goofy and shit – be Noah – with Kurt, just as friends. Friends who maybe sometimes made out.

Sam.

Sam was a major stud; totally fucking hot in a way that was different from the Princess, but still
compelling. And how cool was it that Sam wanted to be his friend? No agenda, no second-guessing or undercutting. Sam was, like, a genuine person. No wonder he was into Kurt. Kurt was the most honest person Puck had ever known. He liked what he liked and said what he didn't like. Very cool. Still, it was a little embarrassing that Kurt had figured out a while ago just who the hell he was, while Puck himself was still trying to piece it together.

He looked at Mercedes, Finn, and Rachel with a wary eye. He couldn't imagine what the fuck those three had to talk about, but he doubted it meant anything good.

He should probably talk to Kurt about the bi thing. He was betting Kurt had some good advice or a website, or something.

He was also betting that Sam and the Princess would look all kinds of right together. And that thought in no way turned him off, if his rapidly hardening dick was any indication. He didn't feel jealous, either, like he thought he would have. He'd be happy if the Princess and Sam got together, because if anyone was owed some hardcore fucking, it was Kurt. Plus, Sam would be real good to Kurt, and that mattered. And they would still be his friends, because Kurt wasn't the type of person who would start dating someone and then just forget about his friends.

Kurt had loyalty and, like, honor, and other ThunderCat shit.

Wow. Kurt – Kurt Hummel – really was his friend. Sam Evans was his friend. Tina might even be a friend one day.

Fucking awesome.

He nodded to himself and went back to imagining Kurt and Sam going down on each other.

Yep. Definitely bi.

"You believe..." Kurt, Tina, and Brittany sang.

"And you doubt," Tina finished. "You're confused..."

"...and got it all figured out," they all sang, smiling at each other. "Everything that you've always wished for could be yours..."

"...should be yours..." Kurt sang.

"...would be yours..." Brittany added.

"...if they only knew," they all sang, splitting apart so that their voices were each separated by a half-octave.

Will was surprised that there was no static in the performance. Kurt and the girls danced, but it was obvious it wasn't choreographed; instead, they moved around each other naturally, which only made sense, given how often they performed together.

That in itself was somewhat astonishing to him, though he didn't really know why. Kurt was constantly singing; he, like Rachel, was one of the few students who received private lessons, and had from a young age. Tina was a talented singer, and he had known for longer than he cared to
admit that he wasn’t showcasing her to the best of both of their abilities in order to placate Rachel. Tina, like Santana, had an amazing voice, but because they weren't as strident and single-minded as Rachel and Mercedes, he had willfully ignored them, to everyone’s detriment.

Brittany was a surprise because he supposed there was still a part of him that believed she only showed up for practices to be with Santana or Kurt, but he knew he had to throw that thought out of the window. With her performance that afternoon, Brittany had declared herself a dedicated, if previously undervalued, member of this group.

Again, his guilt was compounded as he added her name to the ever-growing pile of those he had overlooked to get the club to number one. Of course, he hadn't gotten them to number one, and in the process of headlining Rachel, he'd sacrificed way too much. He was going to change things, and this time he really meant it. He knew Kurt's words to Rachel would only help, but even if she didn't heed them, he would have to put his foot down with her once and for all. Kurt had been right: they did need Rachel, but she was no more or less important than any other member.

Will was somewhat embarrassed to realize that he had been treating Rachel as his old glee coach had once treated him, and he had no doubt that were he to ask Terri or Bryan Ryan, they would bitterly tell him that they had felt as neglected and worthless as he had undoubtedly made Kurt and everyone but Finn and Rachel feel.

He had been the star of his own glee club and had sought to replicate those circumstances within New Directions. It hadn't worked very well. His club might have won Nationals and he might have been the teacher's pet, but he hadn't won it singlehandedly, nor had the onus of the fate of the entire club ever been put on his shoulders.

Regardless, he had really been sucking at this choir leader thing. He suppressed a sigh.

"You wanna show the world, but no one knows your name yet. You wonder when and where and how you're gonna make it. You know you can, if you get the chance. In your face, as the door keeps slamming," the three sang with a mounting and palpable sense of urgency.

Rachel had to admit, grudgingly and only to herself, that Tina was good; very good. With Kurt and Brittany backing her up, their showmanship was incalculable. Kurt's words came back to haunt her and she wondered what would happen were Tina to quit Glee. She was surprised Kurt hadn't already tried to recruit Tina for Cheerios. She herself had almost driven the girl away during that True Colors debacle. She was ashamed of her behavior now. In the end, what had it really mattered? It hadn't been a competition piece, and Tina had performed the song beautifully.

She had never consciously considered the support Tina's backing vocals provided. If she left, that would leave Quinn and Brittany scrambling to fill the void. As pretty as their voices were, they couldn't match Tina for power or delivery. She discounted Santana because she was sure that, after her victory that morning, the time would soon come where Santana would be fighting her and Mercedes for her share of solos.

And wasn't that her right? Santana had proven today that, given the right material, she was a compelling stage presence. It was no less than what Rachel would do herself, so how could she hold that against Santana?
"Now you're feeling more and more frustrated, and you're getting all kind of impatient, waiting."

"We live and we learn to take one step at a time," Tina then wailed, her voice rising above those of Kurt and Brittany, who beamed hugely at her.

Finn sucked in a breath. Damn, Tina could really sing.

Mike was all but vibrating with pleasure and pride. How in the name of anything holy had he managed to score such an amazing girl? He had always known that Tina was pretty and smart and nice, and he had learned last year that she could sing, but now she was really letting herself go and showing everyone just what she could do. He was utterly in awe of her talent. And to think, she was with him. Wow.

He was no less impressed with Kurt, though for different reasons. Kurt had the unparalleled ability to slip in and out of group and perform perfectly. He knew just what he needed to do without being told, what notes he needed to provide, and he always delivered.

Brittany was proving to be similarly awesome. Why hadn't he figured out how awesome she was before, or even after, they had slept together? Sure, they had always been friends, having dance in common, but there had always been a distance between them; it wasn't necessarily self-imposed, but they were both insular people. He had always tended to be a loner outside of Matt's company, and Brittany had never really been interested in anyone other than Santana and, later, Kurt.

"There's no need to rush," Kurt and Brittany sang.

"No need to rush!" Tina crooned.

"It's like learning to fly..." Kurt and Brittany continued.

"...or falling in love," the three sang together, though Tina took lead with an impressive melisma of the last word. "It's gonna happen when it's supposed to happen, and we find the reasons why one step at a time."

As they entered the bridge, Kurt and Brittany's backing vocals switched to a series of harmonious vowel sounds which had them sounding like a girl group from classic Motown. It was an awesome effect, which only served to reiterate how closely they could blend their voices.

"When you can't wait any longer," Tina sang, reaching her stride.

"You can't wait," the other two added.

"But there's no end in sight," Tina continued.

"When you need to understand..." Kurt sang in a lower key.

"...it's your faith that makes you stronger!" Tina and Brittany belted.
"The only way we get there..." Kurt and Brittany sang, at slightly different beats, thus highlighting their harmony.

"...is one step at a time," Tina finished, ending on a gentle high note many were surprised she could hit, before throwing her head back and laughing as Kurt grabbed her hand and spun them around.

"Da da da da da..." Brittany began.

Kurt was then dumbstruck when Tina pushed him away and toward the center of the group, indicating that he should take the lead on the next reprise of the chorus. He looked at her with wide-eyed hesitance, but grudgingly relented when she happily nodded.

"Oh, take one step at a time," he sang, the girls now backing him up, smiling shyly at Sam. There was no discernible shift in the dynamic, but the girls seemed re-energized and somewhat relieved, as if they were used to, and actually preferred, Kurt to be in the lead.

"There's no need to rush," Tina and Brittany continued.

"No need to rush!" Kurt added over them, his voice soaring.

"It's like learning to fly," the girls sang, "or falling in love."

Kurt gathered a deep breath, closed his eyes, and leaned slightly forward. "Falling in love!" his tone rich and pure and utterly and completely full. He was powerful.

Tina was so surprised she blinked and lost her pacing, leaving Brittany to pull up the slack. She shook her head slightly to clear it and quickly joined back in, staring at Kurt with joyous eyes.

Rachel inhaled sharply. Never before had she heard him sing in that key with that much volume and projection. Kurt's high notes, which he could apparently hit quite easily, had always been pretty, but somewhat thin. He simply didn't have the projection required to make them heard in an auditorium or theater without a microphone. But he did now, and he sounded absolutely phenomenal. If this was a preview of things to come, Rachel knew she was either in for a world of trouble or the time of her life. Perhaps both.

She looked at Mercedes, who appeared similarly stunned, as did Finn.

Artie and Santana looked smug, Quinn pleased and thoughtful, Mike happy, and Sam and Puck's eyes had glazed.

"It's gonna happen when it's supposed to happen, and we find the reasons why one step at a time," Kurt finished, rolling his eyes and dragging a sniggering Tina back over so they could again switch places.

"One step at a time," they continued seamlessly, with Tina now in the lead.

"There's no need to rush," Kurt and Brittany added, Brittany hanging off Kurt, to his unceasing amusement.

"No need to rush!" Tina trilled, obviously inspired by the way Kurt had released himself. She looked surprised it had worked for her, even though Kurt and Brittany were now dancing right beside her, clapping along with the music and bumping their hips with theirs.

"It's like learning to fly, or falling in love," Kurt and Brittany continued, looking at Tina expectantly.
"Falling in love!" she roared.

Then she and Kurt separated from Brittany and turned to face her.

"It's gonna happen when it's supposed to happen," Kurt and Tina sang, pointing at Brittany, who beamed.

"It's gonna happen!" she belted.

Kurt and Tina paused to whoop and then surrounded her, smothering her in a simultaneous hug.

Artie, Sam, and Santana were already clapping, the latter two on their feet.

"And we find the reasons why, one step at a time!" they finished in full voice, their three-part harmony bouncing off the walls and echoing around the room as the instrumental abruptly cut off.

Kurt again began walking in a circle to close the song, stomping his boots on the floor, this time leading the girls in an impromptu conga line. As they completed the circle, the three bowed grandly.

Artie, Sam, and Santana's thunderous applause was soon enthusiastically picked up by the others, causing Brittany to giggle and duck her head and Tina to bounce around like she had ants in her pants. Kurt merely stood there, a small, pleased smile on his face. The others knew he wasn't being overly modest or in search of flattery. He knew they had just killed it, but was content to bask silently.

Will just shook his head, wondering what the hell he was even doing there. It was fairly obvious he didn't need to be, not if the kids could put together performances like these. But as he looked at the forced smiles of Rachel, Finn, and Mercedes, he knew he would have to step in eventually to avoid a coup.

As it was, Kurt had unwittingly – perhaps – sparked a mutiny. In this case, however, Kurt was using his powers for Good, so who was Will to stop him? He pasted a huge smiled on his face, which really wasn't that difficult as he replayed in his head the trio's glorious cover of Jordin Sparks' hit song, and joined in on the accolades.

"Not counting Brittany's earlier performance," Will said quietly, "I've never heard the three of you sound so spectacular. Your vocals were flawless, your diction perfect, your phrasing emotional yet elegant, and your movement natural yet synchronized. Your harmonies are among some of the best I've ever had the privilege to hear. There's absolutely nothing I could suggest for improvement."

Kurt's eyes widened, Tina's mouth fell open, and Brittany stared.

Will turned to Tina. "You've been critically overlooked, and I'm owning that. And though you have no reason, I ask that you trust me when I tell you it will be rectified."

Tina closed her mouth with an audible clack as her face began turning a dark red. "Um…thanks?" she said lamely.

He smiled at her and nodded for the girls to return to their seats. He then checked his watch. "I'm afraid we only have five minutes to spare, Kurt."

He shrugged diffidently. "I only need four."

Will smiled and nodded again and indicated that Kurt should set up his number. Kurt strode over to his bag, withdrew his iPod, squeezed Sam's shoulder, smiled at Santana, and walked back toward the
"Get it, Rainbow!" Santana bellowed.

"I intend to, I assure you," he solemnly answered.

"Good!" she shot back.

He dropped his iPod into the docking station and cued up the appropriate track before turning back to the audience. "As many of you who know me have doubtlessly gathered, I had an eventful summer. A lot happened, most of it good, and I believe I'm a better person for all that I experienced. I've been accused of changing, as though that were a bad thing, but when people say that, what they really mean is that you've stopped living your life according to their rules."

He didn't look at Mercedes, or even in her vicinity, but the message was received by her and by Finn.

Kurt shrugged. "Perhaps I have. I don't think I've changed very much. I do believe I've become more thoughtful and more deliberate. I'm trying harder to think before I speak, and I try not to worry what other people think of me. I'm just trying to be the best person I can be; the best Kurt I can be. As Quinn and Tina said, it's not easy; it takes work. But I'm here to tell you it's worth it. If you don't like who you are, if you can't stand your own company, why would you expect anyone else to do those things? My grandmother reminded me this summer that we only have one life to live, so you better make it into something you want. No one else can do it for you."

As the others ruminated over his words, Kurt closed his eyes, took a deep breath, centered himself, and then reached over to start the accompaniment.

This was it, he had decided. This would be his moment in the sun. He had earned this, had waited patiently for it, and he didn't care if they liked or were impressed by his performance. He didn't care if Rachel was bothered. He didn't care about anything except finally proving that he could do everything he had always claimed; this performance was not intended to be boastful, but affirming. He might never get another shot at this, he might never get the solo he had been hoping for, but that was okay; he no longer cared. He was going to do the best he could, be the best he could, and that would be enough for him.

At the end of the day, while he loved being a member of New Directions, it was a glee club at a high school in Lima, Ohio. It didn't determine anything except where he spent some time during and after school. He didn't need to win competitions to prove that he could sing. He didn't need the club to validate or approve of him. It was a hard lesson won.

And now it was time to kick ass, so everything he had just told himself would be true. Okay, so maybe he was doubting himself a little. He was entitled. He just couldn't let those doubts get the best of him. Right!

As the guitar riffs poured out of the speakers, Sam decided to heed Santana and Tina's advice and watch the others watch Kurt, though he found it exceedingly difficult to tear his eyes away from the boy. He saw as Rachel sat up straight, folded her hands primly in her lap, and tucked her legs neatly under the chair. Finn finally appeared to focus on something, regarding Kurt avidly with a look on his face akin to wonder. Mercedes looked furious about something, but she schooled her face into a blank mask. Artie, Tina, and Brittany were smiling as if they were in possession of some secret knowledge. Puck, Quinn, and Santana looked nonchalant, but a glimmer of excitement lighted their faces. Mike looked interested but reserved.
Percussion was added and Sam noticed Finn instantly begin to move his hands in perfect rhythm; he figured the dude played the drums.

"It's Independence Day, I'm free," Kurt quietly began, his voice firmly ensconced in his typical countertenor, though at the lower end of that particular range. A wry smile overtook his face. "And it's a strange place to be."

Rachel again noted how much more full Kurt's voice was. It was rich and warm, reminiscent of Artie's tenor, and there was no doubt in her mind that he had been training religiously over the summer. There was some fear and bitterness, but mostly she was impressed. Kurt really was the only other club member who took his gift seriously and exercised it with abandon. He was also absolutely mesmerizing when he sang. He created a sense of intimacy, as though he were singing only to you, as if you and he were the only two people in the room, on the planet. She envied him that ability, but it took nothing away from her enjoyment of his performances.

The smile on his face became smaller and somewhat secretive, his eyes shining. "I'm gonna break these chains, unleash the changes in me."

He really didn't think he had changed in any dramatic way, but his view of the world and of himself had, so he supposed it was only logical that those changes would be reflected in his behavior. He thought these alleged changes were, in any case, positive ones. He was much calmer, he no longer indulged in gossip for the sake of it, and was more careful with his thoughts and words. He was a more generous person, more patient and, hopefully, kinder.

As far as he was concerned, these weren't so much changes as they were refinements. He was happy with them, and if other people didn't like them, that wasn't his problem. He no longer felt the need to live his life for other people. Of course he still wanted to be liked, but more important now was being respected, and for that to happen, he had to be someone worthy of respect.

He saw no disparity between these refinements and the way he was blackmailing Karofsky and the others. He had tried to go through the proper channels, but to no avail; he had tried living with it, but it had been slowly consuming him until he was nothing but a shaking and shrill shell of himself. Might wasn't necessarily right, but in this instance, it was. He smirked. And if they thought they would be able to get the better of him, they were in for a very rude awakening.

There was an explosion of strings and Kurt began moving his hips in time with the rhythm. He used sharp, punctuated movements that were still somehow fluid and the effect was hypnotic. The eyes of Puck, Brittany, Santana, Sam, and Finn were all glued on Kurt's hips, which in no way lied.

"I see an endless road, I feel the restless wind," he continued, his voice ascending at the end in a
gentle note that was warm and embracing. His face then turned serious and he shook his head. "I've lost the fear inside, 'cause I've got no choice but to live or die."

That was really the only choice that mattered, Kurt had finally decided: either he could live his life and be the best person he possibly could, or he could shrivel up in a hollow log and die. Yes, he had problems; yes, he was abused by people for being who he was. But everyone had problems; everyone had been abused in some manner. What mattered was how you dealt with it.

Last year, he hadn't dealt very well. He had been petty and mean, gossiping about everyone just so he could hear rumors about people other than himself. He'd developed that ridiculous and embarrassing crush on Finn simply because the boy had once scolded Noah for treating him like trash. He had tried to engineer a relationship between their parents for selfish reasons; he only hoped that his now very real happiness for his father and Carole made up for it. He had allowed Rachel to goad him at every opportunity, and when he responded, he always went straight for her jugular. That makeover had been all his doing, regardless of Quinn's instigation; he had known what she was after, and he had complied.

He was a bitch and owned that with pride, but he had very little reason to be proud of his behavior last year. He had slowly realized that said behavior was merely a defense mechanism designed to keep people away from him, to regard him as nonthreatening and unworthy of any attention, because most of the attention he had received had been cruel and violent.

He didn't believe in any dogma, but he was on the fence about karma. Logically, it made sense to him, that whatever energy you put out would be returned to you. If karma was real, then he must have been a complete jerk, because he had been put through hell. What had been discouraging was that he had never been able to figure out if his previous behavior was proactive or reactive. He rather thought it was the latter, so he had determined to be more proactive. He decided to stop blaming others for their own bad behavior and poor judgments, because ultimately, they didn't concern him.

All he could do was be accountable for his thoughts and actions, and once he had dedicated himself to that path, he found he no longer had the energy or inclination to worry needlessly about how other people viewed him.

"Suddenly you're in this fight alone, steppin' out into the great unknown."

He was alone. He had an amazing father and had been gifted with a wonderful, loving mother. He had some truly awesome friends. But in the end, finally, he was alone. Everyone was. The trick was finding peace with that. He wasn't sure he had accomplished that completely, but he was on his way.

"And the night's the hardest time, when the doubts run through your mind. 'Cause suddenly you find yourself alone."

Not that he didn't have his doubts. Sometimes he had difficulty sleeping at night because his mind wouldn't shut the hell up. After living so much of his life trying to please other people, trying to make his father proud of him so that his being gay would be less objectionable, trying not to draw attention to himself while simultaneously seeking the spotlight whenever possible, he had been hard-pressed to give voice to who he really was, because didn't know that person anymore.

"Suddenly you find yourself..."
Sam had abandoned watching the others in favor of watching Kurt; a far more worthwhile endeavor, he had determined. It wasn't just that Kurt could sing – and he could; really sing – it was that he came even more impossibly alive when he was performing. He was mesmerizing.

Sam had never really encountered someone like that before. He had met many charismatic people, sure, those who just seemed to draw others into orbit by some intangible quality, or even just on the basis of their force of will. But none of them were like Kurt. He knew he would have been staring even he hadn't been enamored of Kurt. He was just that compelling.

He didn't know what he could offer someone like that. Yeah, he and Kurt were getting along great – fantastically, even – but he couldn't help but wonder how long they could sustain it. People always seemed to be clamoring for Kurt's attention, even if it was negative attention, like with Finn and Rachel. He hadn't seen any bullying, but Kurt had said he had been bullied in the past. Sam could only assume that those who had done so had been as drawn to Kurt as everyone else.

But Kurt seemed to like him; really like him, as a person. Granted, they had known each other only a day, but Sam wanted to nourish that relationship and let it grow to see what might develop. He had been truthful when he had told Puck and Tina during Spanish that he wasn't ready for a romantic relationship, and he wasn't, not after what had happened at Lincoln, but when he was ready, he hoped that Kurt might give him a shot. At the very least, he believed they'd be awesomely good friends.

In the meanwhile, he would jack off to thoughts of Kurt and try not to feel too guilty about it.

He closed his eyes and Kurt's song carry him away.

"...in an empty room, with a suitcase on the floor," Kurt continued to sing, his voice again growing quiet and contemplative, dropping his eyes to the ground. He turned and looked over his shoulder, out of one of the exit doors. "It'll be daylight soon. I'm gonna wage my private war."

He did feel as though he were waging a war with himself, constantly on the defensive to safeguard against that part of him that wanted to return to his old ways, in which he had been an obnoxious bitch for the sake of it. Oh, he hadn't managed as well as Quinn had, not because he had any more or less of a conscience than she, but because he actually listened to it. Quinn had been able to switch off that part of her which questioned her motives when she ruled the school. Santana, for all her bluster and cruelty, actually had very high and rigorous standards for herself and everyone else, and when people failed to meet them, she lashed out.

He had been a mix of the two, he supposed. He had said and done bad things because he could, but he always regretted them later, even when he had been in the right – or what he had perceived as right, but was more likely his self-imposed royal prerogative. He had judged others, holding them against his own standards, and had often found them lacking; but looking back, he had realized that even he would never have been able to live up to such grueling scrutiny.

The temptation to become that person again – that dreadfully unhappy person who had been so mired in misery partly of his own making – was strong, simply because it was what he knew; he had reached a level of comfort while being that person. He had never felt comforted, but routine often lent itself to the illusion of acceptance.
Being happy was a choice, just as his grandmother had told him, but it was difficult and painful, and you couldn't depend on others for your happiness.

"Who's watchin' over me? Must be a guardian angel."

He didn't necessarily believe his mother was watching over him, but on the off-chance that she was, he hoped he was making her proud.

"I just need time to breathe and give my life the best of me."

He figured it was the very least he owed himself. He wasn't Voldemort. He wasn't interested in living a half-life in which he blamed everyone else for all of his problems and torments.

He had pulled away from everyone and everything he knew over the summer, trying to discover what he wanted from life. The list was fairly common, but he also realized that the simplest pleasures were also the most elusive and difficult to attain. Still, he would try.

He wanted to be happy. He wanted to fall in love. He wanted to go to college and study things he had never heard about or conceived. He wanted a career which would allow him to support himself and his family.

He really wanted a family.

He desperately wanted children.

Last year he had believed that wasn't the case. Watching the drama unfurl among Quinn, Puck, and Finn had soured him on the idea of children, or so he thought. But as his grandmother whisked him all over Europe, proudly introducing him to her friends and colleagues, he realized he wanted to do that with his own children one day. He wanted to take them traveling. He wanted to open doors for them and delight them with new experiences. He wanted to be there for them and love them and watch them grow.

He wanted to be his dad.

"Suddenly you're in this fight alone, steppin' out into the great unknown. And the night's the hardest time, when the doubts run through your mind. 'Cause suddenly you find yourself alone."

Mercedes was reeling.

Kurt had met someone while in Europe. She didn't know if he had fallen in love, but he had had sex. He had given himself away. And he hadn't told her.

Granted, she hadn't been very available these past months, but she would have made time. Kurt should have called her. Kurt should have informed her of what he was thinking and planning and asked for her advice. Kurt should have called her to tell her how it had gone and the inevitable consolation he had surely required.

And who was this mysterious guy? He couldn't have been good enough for Kurt. No one was good enough for Kurt. Except her.

She flushed and scowled, trying and failing to shut out that voice which insisted Kurt was her
boyfriend.

He had left her behind. He had left her in the dark. And fucking Finn Hudson of all people had shined the light on her.

She hated him for that, but not as much as she hated Kurt at that moment.

"You find yourself alone," Kurt sang.

"You find yourself alone," two distinct voices repeated, flowing out of the speakers. The others promptly realized that Kurt had prerecorded his own backing vocals.

He entered the bridge and his voice became lighter, almost feathery, or perhaps wistful.

"Suddenly, you're in this fight. Stepping out..."

The background vocals overlaid harmonious vowel sounds.

Kurt then kicked up his leg – over his head, many paused to notice – and began wailing.

"And then, suddenly, you're in this fight alone. Steppin' out into the great unknown!"

He poured power and emotion into his voice, projecting it more than anyone could ever recall. His breathing was regular, his eyes shined with happiness, and he was delivering the performance of his life, one which many had waited to see, either to praise or condemn.

"And the night's the hardest time, when the doubts run through your mind, and suddenly you find yourself alone."

The vocal gymnastics he was offering were more impressive than anything they had ever heard from him; indeed, they were far beyond what even his greatest supporters had ever believed he could achieve.

"You find yourself alone," the backing vocals repeated. "Suddenly you find yourself..."

Kurt gathered his breath and Rachel knew the glory note was on the horizon. She folded her arms across her chest and waited for it. She knew it would be impressive. Kurt always was.

"Alone!"

Will's mouth fell open and he turned to find Finn, Puck, Santana, and even Quinn, Mercedes, and Tina in a similar state. Rachel remained passive, but looked vaguely unnerved.

Kurt was belting.

Kurt didn't belt.

The one-off during Tina's performance had been one thing, but this was something altogether different. Throughout his entire performance, Kurt's skill had displayed itself marvelously; the dedication and training he had spent the summer undertaking was obvious. His tone had changed, maturing quite nicely, and rivaling those of Artie, Mercedes, and Santana for warmth and richness.
But the fullness of his voice, his actualization of his potential, was astounding to behold. And, frankly, humbling.

Kurt had not only belted a high E5, but had sustained it in full voice.

In fact, he still was.

Will blinked dumbly, wondering just how the hell Kurt was holding that note, as well as how much longer he could maintain it.

Kurt ended the fermata with a quick, staccato melisma, downshifting a number of keys.

Will found himself applauding without conscious thought and noted that Brittany and Sam were already on their feet, soon joined by Quinn.

"Steppin' out into the great unknown," Kurt continued to belt, his intonation fun and fresh, a huge smile on his face. "And the night's the hardest time, when the doubts run through your mind, 'cause suddenly you find yourself alone. You find yourself alone."

As the accompaniment began winding down, Kurt looked out into the audience and smiled warmly at no one in particular. Many wondered just who he was looking at or what he was recalling.

"Suddenly, I found myself."

And he had.

The entire company, excepting Artie, of course, leapt to their feet, even Rachel, because the power of Kurt's performance just couldn't be denied.

Santana was screaming her head off in Spanish, Brittany enthusiastically performed a Cheerios routine, and Quinn was crying, so proud of Kurt that she couldn't even form words. She had been waiting almost a year to see him like this, and she found it ironic yet appropriate that the boy who had helped her and others find their voices had finally found his own.

Artie was dumbfounded and absently wondered when Kurt would stop surprising him. Hell, when would he stop underestimating his friend? Just when he thought he had finally figured Kurt out, a new facet would present itself and Artie was left a dribbling idiot. Tina was having similar thoughts.

Mercedes just shook her head as she applauded and wiped away a few stray tears. There was nothing she could say, and despite her anger toward Kurt, that performance had just shut everything down, as well as shutting everyone up. Never again could Rachel question Kurt's talent. Never again could Schue excuse not giving Kurt a solo. He had shown everyone; he had earned this.

Mike was stunned, absolutely stunned. Where had Kurt been hiding that voice? Sure, he had always known Kurt could sing, but this was beyond any expectation. It was practically a Susan Boyle moment. He was so happy for Kurt. He was so happy he had joined New Directions last year. He knew he could never hope even to approach that level of skill, but he wasn't jealous. He was proud.

Puck was alternately clapping and cheering his head off. "Jesus fuck. Thank Christ I don't have to follow that," he muttered under his breath.
A dazed Finn overheard and nodded. For the first time, he began to understand why Rachel feared Kurt. No one, certainly not any of the other guys, could ever hope to match that performance. And somehow he knew it wasn't just a case of capturing lightning in a bottle; Kurt could repeat that performance if necessary. Hell, Kurt could probably improve upon it. He didn't know if that was even possible, but he had no doubt Kurt could find a way. His face clouded as Quinn, Puck, Sam, and Santana swarmed around Kurt; they were soon joined by Artie and Tina. He looked to his right and saw Mercedes frown. Well, good. At least he wasn't alone.

Kurt graciously accepted the applause and voiced his gratitude, but he didn't milk the spotlight he had finally earned. He was happy enough that he had delivered a stellar performance. If the experience was never to be repeated, he would always have this moment.

Overcome, Will could say nothing, so he grasped Kurt's shoulder tightly and hoped the gesture would sufficiently convey his appreciation. From the way Kurt smiled shyly at him, he supposed it had.

"Dismissed," Will finally said in a choked voice. "I'll see you all tomorrow, where Finn and Puck will open the meeting with their performances." He paused. "Kurt…there are no words. Just…well done."

"Thank you, Mr. Schuester," the boy softly answered.

Sam could do nothing but stare at Kurt in awe, though he took no small amount of pleasure in the fact that Kurt had ensconced himself firmly at his side and appeared in no rush to move away.

Finn, Mercedes, and Rachel drew together and began whispering furtively. Once again Puck noticed and frowned. He sighed, shook his head, and made his way over to the Little Dude.

"Here's the number to my landline, as promised," Kurt said to Sam, who accepted the slip of paper. "Ask your parents about the sleepover and let me know tomorrow. As I said, they're welcome to call my father with any questions."

Sam nodded, smiling shyly.

"I wish Matt could have heard that," Mike lamented.

"I recorded it," Brittany said, brandishing her cell phone. Immediately, everyone demanded she send them the file, so she sent out a mass email to the entire club.

"Dude," Puck said to Sam, "let me get your digits." They swapped phones and returned them when done.

Tina, Artie, and Mike also exchanged phones with Sam, and Puck then quietly exchanged numbers with Tina.

"I have to take my leave," Kurt said. "I need to go to the grocery store so I can make dinner tonight." He looked over his shoulder. "See you later, Finn!" he called out to the boy.

Finn just stared at him and slowly nodded.
Kurt threw another smile at Will and then exited the room. Sam, Puck, Santana, Quinn, Artie, Tina, Mike, and Brittany followed him like goslings.

"Hummel."

Kurt turned to his left and saw Azimio hanging outside the door of the men's room. He raised a brow. "Yes?"

"A word."

Kurt nodded and began making his way over before noticing he had an entourage. "Back off," he said lightly to them. At their protests, he rolled his eyes. "Noah, if you would?"

Puck's chest puffed out and he sauntered after Kurt.

Azimio was careful not to meet Kurt's eyes as the other boy approached. He had arrived outside of the choir room just in time to catch Kurt's performance and, though he would never admit it, the kid had a right to be as arrogant he was. He'd never heard anyone sing like that live, not even Berry.

He still thought Glee was super gay and stupid, but he appreciated genuine talent, and Hummel had that in spades.

"Is there a problem?" Kurt carefully asked him.

Azimio finally raised his eyes and looked at Kurt, before turning to look at Puck.

"I trust Noah."

Azimio sighed and shook his head. "Whatever. Look, what we talked about this morning? It's happening."

Kurt nodded tightly. "Who?"

"Peterson," Azimio grunted.

Kurt's brows gathered. "Because of homeroom? When Brittany kissed me?"

Azimio nodded.

"He's targeting me?"

Azimio shook his head. "No. He's scared of you, like all of us are, but he felt humiliated and wants to get you back, so he's going after one of your weak points."

Kurt's eyes hooded. "Brittany."

Azimio curled a lip and nodded as Puck growled. "He knows how tight you two are. Hell, everyone does. He's been talking about her all day. I heard he called her retarded." He blew out a breath. "Look, I don't give two shits about Fabray, and I fucking hate Lopez, but Brittany…"

Kurt nodded and shrugged. "She's Brittany."

Azimio nodded, relieved he didn't have to explain it, because he really didn't have the words. "What do you have on him?"

Kurt smirked, and Azimio suddenly knew fear. He watched with bated breath as Kurt withdrew his
phone and placed a call.

"It's me," Kurt said in a low voice. "Number twenty-eight."

Azimio blinked, recognizing Peterson's jersey number.

"How soon can you make it happen?" Kurt asked. Whatever the response, he seemed pleased.
"Thank you."

He dropped his phone back into his bag and regarded Azimio calmly. "If you're interested in seeing how this ends, I advise you to be outside Mr. Peterson's home at around seven o'clock this evening. It should be quite a show, complete with flashing lights. Red and blue ones."

Azimio paled. "What the hell did he do?"

Kurt's face fell into a moue of disgust. "I had always planned to turn him in. I just had to wait until I had incontrovertible proof, which I now possess." He stared into Azimio's eyes. "I take no pleasure in this, but what he's done – what he's likely to do – I couldn't live with myself if I didn't turn him in."

"It's that bad?" asked a surprised Puck. He had always thought Peterson was a decent dude; kind of a dick, but he wasn't violent or anything.

Kurt nodded. "It is." He turned back to Azimio. "It should make Jacob's blog later this evening. Of course, I'll deny any involvement."

Azimio nodded slowly. "I'll spread the word anyway."

Kurt nodded and then cocked his head. "Why are you doing this?"

Azimio was silent for a long moment. "Because despite how fucked up all of this is, you still have morals. You're going after Peterson because he threatened Brittany and, like you said, she's Brittany. Whatever you have on Dave must be something pretty major, or else I'd know about it. And you're not going to tell on him unless he hurts you. I respect that. You don't like him, you don't owe him anything, but you're showing him the respect he's never shown you. So I can respect you."

It was a better, and more honest, answer than Kurt had expected. He didn't exactly understand the reasoning, but he supposed it was some jock sense of honor into which he'd never be initiated.

"Later," Azimio said shortly, before darting away.

Puck stared at Kurt, who ignored him.

"What the hell was that about?" Santana demanded.

Kurt gave her a bland look. "Check out the blog tonight." He again made his excuses, said his goodbyes, and rushed out to his car.

When she was sure no one was looking, Brittany smirked.

Ninety minutes later, flush with his grocery store triumph, Kurt pulled into his driveway, hopped out
of his car with his bag slung over one shoulder, and promptly began unloading his purchases. He smiled broadly as Carole pulled up next to him, honking the horn, beaming and waving ecstatically.

"You look wonderful!" she gushed, as she threw open her car door and rushed him.

He laughed and enthusiastically returned her embrace. "So do you! I told you the highlights would look fabulous."

"Like your own?" she asked, smirking slightly.

He sneered haughtily and tossed his hair. "This is all natural."

She giggled and relieved him of several bags. They began chattering excitedly as they made their way up the front walk, Carole demanding he tell her everything about Europe, because the pictures simply weren't enough. She wanted to hear about his grandmother, every place he visited, what he had learned from his tutors, and everything he had bought. She also managed to compliment his outfit, his tan, the new Jeep, and expressed how much she had missed his cooking.

Kurt smiled happily, so pleased to find himself once again in this woman's company. He truly liked her, and hadn't that been a surprise? She could never replace his mother, of course, because no one ever could, but he wouldn't mind at all were she to become his stepmother. He was already proud to call her a friend.

He began answering her prompts as he juggled his myriad bags and unlocked the door, their mutual laughter echoing down the hall.

"Kurt."

He turned, still smiling, toward the living room whence his father's voice had come. His smile died and his mouth turned down in a confused frown as he saw his father glaring at him. Mercedes, Rachel, and Finn were sitting on the coach.

"You didn't tell me you were dropping by," he said to Mercedes.

Her answer was a blank face and stony silence.

A bad feeling began to course through his veins, but he refused to acknowledge it. He turned to Rachel. "Finn didn't mention you were joining us, but I'm sure between the two of us, we can whip up something in the kitchen that's vegan-friendly."

She regarded him nervously, flushing fiercely.

He saw the scowl on Finn's face and decided to bypass him altogether. Finally, he looked at his father, and startled when a confused and concerned Carole laid a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"Is something wrong?" he asked, now extremely anxious.

Burt's eyes were lighted with fury. "Did you have sex this summer?" he demanded.

Chapter End Notes

Quinn performed "Fallen," by Sarah McLachlan. The original version is available on
McLachlan's album "Afterglow."

Artie performed "In This Life," by Delta Goodrem. The original version is available on Goodrem's U.S. debut album "Delta."

Tina (featuring Kurt and Brittany) performed "One Step at a Time," by Jordin Sparks. The original version is available on debut Sparks' album "Jordin Sparks."

Kurt performed "Suddenly," by LeAnn Rimes. The original version is available on Rimes' album "Twisted Angel."
Kurt had heard of moments like this – well, read about them was more accurate – moments of complete and utter stillness.

All sound had died away, leaving him with the disconcerting realization that he had gone suddenly deaf. His balance and equilibrium were likewise shattered, and he had to call on all of his inner reserves to avoid stumbling and accidentally pitching himself forward onto the ground. That was the not the statement he wished to make.

He inhaled deeply and identified none of the recognizable or comforting smells which identified this as his home – years of Old English furniture polish rubbed thoughtfully and lovingly into wood; Gain laundry detergent and the April-fresh scent of Downy fabric softener; the lemongrass candles he had burning whenever he was home; the lingering remnants of his father's singular coffee recipe; the powerful yet imagined heady spiciness of his mother's Opium perfume. There was just...nothing, as though his home had abandoned him.

The angry scene before him receded from his mind and was replaced with pictures of his youth: Christmas mornings, when he still believed in God and Santa Claus, unsure if the two were actually separate entities; cooking in the kitchen with his mother, her fingers twining through his hair – the first and last person he had ever allowed to do so, until Quinn this morning – as they waited for the timer to announce the readiness of a fresh batch of cranberry-orange scones; those rare instances of perfect, silent companionship between he and his father as they worked on some car in the garage. All of these rioted through his mind in all of their sepia-toned glory – recollected, though doing so became harder with each passing year, and untouchable, until they, too, dimmed.

His field of vision had been reduced to two solid pinpricks of white light and he absently wondered, as his heart attempted to burst forth from his chest, if he was about to faint. He had never fainted before and had no desire to start. His brain must have agreed with him, for he felt his knees lock together in a successful attempt to keep him upright.

He then felt as though a bucket of ice water had been poured over his head, an unwelcome gift with purchase which extinguished any joy, happiness, sorrow or rage he had experienced since returning home as his father's furious question ricocheted inside his skull. The feeling soon passed and was replaced with cold, calculated clarity.

Buoyed by this sense of calm, feigned or not, his eyes slowly panned around the room as he considered his options. He could lie, but to what end? He wasn't ashamed of anything he had done. He could deflect the question, but knew his father would not be put off for long. He could roll over and bare his belly in submission, but that was not his way, his new outlook on life notwithstanding. Besides, his grandmother had told him that while it was all well and good to choose happiness for yourself and to pick your battles wisely, you should never allow yourself to be anyone's doormat.

He also realized several things.

First, his father had indeed just asked that question, and Kurt himself had hesitated too long to deny it. That was fine; he felt no need to deny anything or anyone.

Second, there was no doubt in his mind that Finn Hudson had placed this particular bee in Burt Hummel's trucker cap and instigated this interrogation. One look at the other boy confirmed this, for Finn's eyes were lighted with guilt, hurt, envy, anger, and, above all, smug triumph. Kurt would never forget that look, and he would ensure Finn did not leave this house without some measure of
recompense.

Third, Mercedes must have come by this information from Finn and had thus partially engineered this machination. Kurt recognized this as an unassailable truth, for his father would never have had the temerity to confront him over Finn's accusation unless it had been validated by Kurt's own best friend. The sharp spike of betrayal shot through his heart before he mercilessly batted it away. This was her revenge for his standing up to her this morning, he realized. He was content to allow her her Pyrrhic victory, for he knew she would never enjoy it. Once the adrenaline wore off and she realized what she had done, her guilt would judge her more harshly than he ever could.

There was no coming back from this for them, he knew. He would never forgive her; his pride and vanity, the two sins to which he had always been prey, simply wouldn't allow it. Even if could move past her betrayal, he could never again trust her. Their friendship was over. He was somewhat startled by the sense of relief he experienced, one which outpaced his sense of loss. He believed they both had probably seen this coming for some time. Their relationship had been waning ever since he had remained with the Cheerios. They had both acted poorly toward each other during that time, but he knew Mercedes still nursed hurt and harbored resentment for his decision, interpreting it as him choosing others over her. He wasn't sure she had been wrong to think so.

Truthfully, they had never recovered from when she had busted his windshield. His grand reveal about his sexuality had in essence only sown more secrecy between them. Her crush on him had continued; he had ignored it and hoped it would go away, not wanting to deal with it. That had been a mistake, for it had only encouraged her to regard him in a certain way, one which was inappropriate for a girl and her gay best friend. His crush on Finn had distanced them further, and he had always been curious as to why she never had more to say about it, though he'd never had the courage to ask her. Her messages had been so mixed, alternately chastising him and then cheering him on, he never got a clear read on her feelings about the whole thing. Perhaps he hadn't wanted to know.

Then he had led the Cheerios to a national victory and, while she had congratulated him, he had seen the scorn in her eyes. They hadn't even discussed Glee's devastating loss at Regionals. His new friendships with Santana and Puck had taken her by surprise, as he knew they would, but her anger over them confused and hurt him. He had defended her reaction that morning, but Brittany's words had struck a chord. Why wasn't he allowed to have friends other than Mercedes? He had the feeling she'd only ever tolerated Tina and Artie because they had been his friends since childhood and knew that if she had forced the issue, she would have lost.

What did she want from him? If this was about her crush, if it was actually still in effect, she had to know that nothing would ever happen between them. He had made that clear. There must have been something more. He wished he had it in him to care, but he didn't.

He would always treasure what they had, but the good would be forever colored by this moment.

Fourth; for once, Rachel Berry was the unknown quantity in the equation. He glanced at her fleetingly and was surprised he was unable to read her like the open book she had always been to him. What was her motivation in this scenario? There was fear in her eyes, of course; that was to be expected. She had always known she could push him only so far and had been careful to mind that point.

But there was also disgust and betrayal and confusion, none of which were aimed at him. He blinked as realization washed over him and suppressed derisive laughter. Finn had sold her some line to ensure her presence. He was quite curious as to what it was.

Finally he looked at his father, pleased by the noticeable flinch, obviously aware that his son had
slipped into what some considered his damnable Borg mode, designed to fully unseat his opponent. He was only startled out of his ruminations by the comforting pressure Carole's hand was exerting on his lower back. At least one person was on his side. He was glad it was her. "Oh, my," he said, smiling thinly at his father. "Is this my intervention?"

Sam shepherded Stacy and Stevie through the front door and winced as he was immediately assaulted by the smell of pizza. He loved his parents, he truly did, but they were both worthless as cooks. He'd grown up on more than his share of takeout, and while his siblings saw no problem with inhaling fast food by the pound, he preferred more healthy fare. Also, pizza was a particular weakness of his, second only to Cool Ranch Doritos, which he was fairly certain were made with some kind of potion that made one addicted to them after that first bite. He figured the evil genius upon whom Severus Snape was based was responsible.

Stevie scrambled up to his room while Stacy pranced into the kitchen. "Sammy's got a boyfriend!" she sang loudly. And off-key, Sam noted. He cursed himself for stupidly babbling to them about Kurt, but it had felt wonderful to talk to about the boy. Besides, he knew as much grief as Stacy would give him over this, she'd keep her mouth closed in public and punch anyone who talked smack about her elder brother. He kind of loved that about her. Still, at home, she would be an absolute nightmare. He couldn't wait until she had her first crush. He would show no mercy.

His mother Savannah immediately emerged into the hallway, a feral grin on her face. Sam sighed.

"Tell me everything about him," she commanded.

He pouted.

"Wait! Let me get your father."

"Joy," Sam said crossly.

Savannah stuck her tongue out at him, then grinned again and cupped her hands around her mouth. "Scott! Sammy has a boyfriend!" she bellowed.

Sam gritted his teeth, unsurprised when his father suddenly materialized in the room like some kind of freaking demon.

"Why do we all have names that begin with the same letter?" Sam demanded. "What are we, the Midwest Kardashians?"

Savannah grimaced and waved him toward the kitchen. He rolled his eyes and followed. By the time he got there, Stevie was already sitting at the table next to Stacy, staring longingly at the pizza boxes. Sam decided to limit himself to only two pieces, though he could have easily consumed an entire pie and then asked for more.
"I got you a chef salad," Scott said.

Sam smiled. "Thanks, Dad."

"Yeah, yeah," Savannah impatiently said, waving a dismissive hand. "What about the boyfriend?"

"He's not my boyfriend!" Sam protested.

Her lips curved into a feline smile. "Not yet, you mean?"

Sam flushed and looked away.

Scott raised a brow. "You really like this boy," he observed.

"We're just friends," Sam insisted. "Maybe down the road there might be something more but, for right now, we're just friends."

"What's his name?"

Sam shifted uncomfortably, knowing the interrogation would not be put off, but wanting to prolong the discussion for as long as possible. He sat next to his brother and reached for his salad, taking a bite and chewing it methodically. He ignored the blatant staring of his alleged family.

"Kurt Hummel," he finally said.

Savannah silently mouthed the name, deciding she liked it. It was strong but elegant.

"Is he gay or bi?" Stevie asked.

Sam looked at his little brother and raised a brow.

"I know about this stuff!" Stevie squawked.

"Kurt's gay," Sam reluctantly admitted, "though he makes out with girls an awful lot." He frowned. "Actually, they're queuing up for him."

Scott gave his son a shrewd look. "Are you certain he's gay, son? He's not setting you up for a prank or anything?"

Sam shook his head, a soft smile on his face. "Kurt would never do something like that," he said quietly.

Savannah peered closely at him. "You really do like him."

Sam blushed and nodded.

His parents exchanged a worried glance, which Sam ignored.

"It's not like Lincoln," he whispered. "Kurt's not like that."

Savannah slowly nodded. "Alright. We know you're a good judge of character, Sammy, so if you trust this Kurt, we'll trust your judgment."

"Thanks."

"So what does he look like?" she then asked.
Sam's blush turned furious.

"That cute, huh?" she cooed, grinning.

Sam squirmed. "He's...he's beautiful."

Savannah stared at him and then glanced at her husband, some unknown discussion occurring between them.

"How did you meet him?" she finally asked.

Sam heaved a sigh of relief. This was much more neutral territory. "Through the guidance counselor, Ms. Pillsbury. Kurt was assigned to be my Peer Mentor. Basically, it means he's showing me around school and stuff." He paused. "He also knows about my dyslexia and was...really cool about it, actually. He offered me tutoring whenever I need it."

"So he's smart?" Scott asked.

Sam nodded. "He's in the top three of the junior class, and all of his courses are super advanced. He's in AP everything and he's already placed out of a bunch of stuff. He speaks six languages."

Savannah's brows all but shot off her forehead. This sounded like prime future son-in-law material.

"He was on the football team last year," Sam continued, "and he's about to be announced as head cheerleader." He took another bite of his salad and chewed it carefully. "Apparently cheerleading is a big deal at McKinley. The squad is called the Cheerios, and they've won six national championships. Kurt won it for them last year by performing a full routine while singing a fifteen-minute medley of Celine Dion songs. In French."

Scott gave a low whistle while Stacy decided Kurt Hummel was the most important person on the face of the earth.

"He sings?" Savannah asked.

Sam rolled his eyes. "Understatement. He's in the glee club and took me to their morning and afternoon practices. They're really good. They made it to Regionals last year. I auditioned, and I've got a spot if I want it, but some of those kids are really weird. One girl actually accused me of being a spy out to destroy her."

Savannah snickered. "Seriously?"

Sam nodded again. "She's really out of control, and when Kurt defended me, she threw him to the ground and ran out of the room. She came back and apologized, though, and Kurt said she'll probably give me cookies tomorrow."

"Sounds like a screwball," Stevie remarked, chomping on his pizza.

Sam shrugged, but nodded. "I wasn't impressed. She's really talented, but I think her cheese slipped off the cracker a while ago."

"But Kurt defended you?" Savannah asked, eyes sparkling.

Sam sighed and shook his head. "Yes," he hissed.

"It's so cute!"
For the first time since he was seven years old and his mother announced she was pregnant with Stacy, Sam wanted to run away from home.

Scott cleared his throat and Savannah threw up her hands and backed off.

"So," Scott said, "your Kurt is smart, athletic, and artistic. Sounds like a winner."

A soft smile appeared on Sam's face. "He is, and he's really nice, you know? I mean, you wouldn't think so at first, because he comes across as cold and aloof, but he's a genuinely nice person. He took me around the whole school and introduced me to my teachers and his friends, some of whom are really awesome, like this guy Puck. Apparently, he used to bully Kurt something awful but, at the end of last term, he went and apologized and really meant it, and Kurt forgave him, so now they're friends. Puck's very protective of Kurt."

Savannah blinked. "Well, Kurt certainly sounds very mature. What about his parents?"

Sam winced. "It's just Kurt and his dad. His mom died when he was little."

"That's sad," Stacy softly said.

Sam nodded. "It is," he quietly agreed. "I guess he was really close to his mom, but his dad sounds cool. He knows Kurt is gay and totally supports him."

"Good," Savannah staunchly declared, nodding.

"What about his other friends?" Scott asked. "The ones to whom he introduced you?"

Sam shrugged, stabbing his salad with his fork. "Most of his friends are girls, and some of them are really great. In a way, they're all kind of stereotypical. There's the sassy black girl, Mercedes, who's his best friend and is probably in love with him. There's the blond princess, Quinn, who used to rule the school with an iron fist in a velvet glove, but she fell out of grace last year when she got pregnant by Puck. They gave the baby up for adoption."

His parents exchanged another look.

Sam paused. "It was really hard on her," he finally said. "Their assignment for Glee was to sing about something they learned over the summer, and Quinn sang about how her baby changed her for the better. She gave a lot of the credit to Kurt. I guess he really helped her through some bad stuff. I don't know too much about it. I don't think many people do. Their friendship seems to have taken a lot of people by surprise, but the way they look at each other…I think they would really kill anyone who threatened the other."

He sighed. "The crazy girl is Rachel. She's the captain of the club. She has a great voice, but sounds like Streisand. I mean, her voice is awesome, but she's boring. She's also kind of obsessed with Kurt. She considers him her only competition, so she's always trying to get under his skin. I guess it used to work, but it didn't today and she kind of became unhinged. But then he gave her this big speech about how she needs to learn teamwork and that she's no more valuable than anyone else. She seemed to listen to him, but I don't know," he finished, shrugging.

"This is fairly unbelievable," Scott said.

Sam nodded. "Pretty much. It's like we moved to Mayberry or something. Rachel is dating this guy, Finn, who is way too involved with Kurt's life. Finn's mom is dating Kurt's dad, and I can't figure out if Finn is trying to do the big brother thing, or if he just wants in Kurt's pants. Their dynamic is crazy strange. Kurt had a crush on Finn last year, who had a big gay freakout over it and I guess now
regrets it. Kurt's nice enough to him, but you can tell he just wants Finn to go away."

Savannah shook her head. "It sounds to me like this whole club revolves around Kurt."

"You'd think," Sam agreed, "but not really. These people have tons of their own drama. It's just that I paid more attention to Kurt and how they reacted to him then I did to them as individuals."

He then realized how that sounded and blushed.

Savannah wanted to coo once more but restrained herself.

"Whatever," Sam said, shaking his head. "At any rate, Kurt's friends with almost everyone in the club, and they all really like each other. They protect and defend each other. It's nice. They're like a family, even the crazy ones."

"So do you plan on joining?" Scott asked.

Sam shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe? My audition was good. Kurt accompanied me on the piano and sang backup for me. It was awesome! But if I do this, I want to make sure it's because it's something I really want to do, not just because I want to hang with Kurt."

Scott nodded. "Makes sense to me. What does Kurt think?"

"He agrees," Sam replied. "He told me that he wants me to be happy, and if Glee will help with that, he'd be thrilled, but that our friendship isn't predicated on me joining. He wasn't recruiting me or anything, he just wanted to include me."

"Well, he sounds like a fine young man," said a pompous Savannah.

Sam rolled his eyes but laughed. "Um, do you want to hear him? Sing, I mean? His friend Brittany recorded it. She's sweet, but a little spacey. She can't stop kissing Kurt and calls him her dolphin."

"Dolphin?" Stevie repeated.

Sam nodded. "According to Brittany, dolphins are just gay sharks."

"Well, they are," Stacy announced, huffing when everyone stared at her. How did they not already know this essential information? It was obviously up to her to seek out this Brittany and proclaim her genius to the world.

"I want to hear!" Stevie said, tugging on Sam's shirtsleeve.

Sam smiled and withdrew his phone from his pocket, opening the file.

The rest of his family picked at their meal as the song's opening measures began flooding out of his phone. He was annoyed that they weren't paying Kurt the proper attention he deserved, then realized he was being ridiculous and fought the blush that was threatening to emerge.

Stacy was nodding along with the music as Savannah's nails tapped out a rhythmic accompaniment on the table. Scott kept his face schooled into a polite mask, though he was surprised by the high key in which Kurt was singing. Regardless, the boy certainly had a beautiful voice. Stevie now looked utterly bored.

As the song continued, Sam noticed the slight looks of awe his family began donning. His father, whose musical tastes were particularly refined, appeared enraptured. Sam knew his dad was much more impressed by good technique over flashy vocal gymnastics, and while the song was almost
tailor-made to show off Kurt's range, he didn't oversing it. His mother was staring at the phone on the table as though it was some alien technology not of this world. Stacy eyes seemed far away, probably determining which Harry Potter couple the song best suited. She was a total Harmony stan. Stevie's mouth was opening and closing as he tried to anticipate the words and softly sing along.

And then Kurt hit that note, holding it for all it was worth, and Sam smirked with pride at his family's collective gasp.

"Wow," Stevie whispered. He rolled his eyes when Stacy shushed him.

As the final notes died away, Scott blinked heavily. "That was lovely."

Savannah snorted. "Lovely? He did that live, with no autotune. His voice is strong, but not overpowering. He made me feel..."

"Like a natural woman?" Stevie innocently suggested.

Savannah glared at her younger son.

"As though you were part of the song?" Sam offered.

Savannah nodded and Sam nodded in kind.

"That's what he does," he added, shrugging. "He makes it personal; not just for him, but for the entire audience. There were twelve other people in that room, and it felt like he was singing just to me. If you asked the other twelve, they'd say they all felt the same way."

Savannah cleared her throat. "So when can we meet him."

It was a statement, not a question.

Sam dropped his head and sighed. "This family sucks," he muttered.

They all laughed at him.

Standing outside the door of the house where evil dwelt, Emma was experiencing a very real crisis of conscience.

She shouldn't have been there; she knew that. She had absolutely no business colluding with Sue Sylvester of all people, and certainly not to undermine a fellow colleague.

But there she was, and she couldn't seem to walk away. She didn't really want to, either, which scared the hell out of her.

Sam's words had been haunting her all day. No student had ever before thanked her for helping them. In fact, she was unsure as to whether she had actually helped any student.

The entire encounter had been very sobering.

She had always somewhat prided herself on her ability to do her job. She had more than the minimum educational requirements. She liked kids, particularly teenagers, and wanted to help them
make choices which would better their lives. She kept up with the latest trends and lingo in order to do just that. She felt she was a good person who was nice and approachable.

She sighed.

She also knew that, too often, she let her own personal hang-ups interfere with her job, possibly to the detriment of her students.

She frowned. She couldn't allow that to continue. She had waited too long to take an active role in the lives of the children she was supposed to guide.

But was this the right thing? Allying herself with Sue Sylvester could not, by any stretch of the imagination, be considered a good thing. Still, Sue at least went to bat for her students, which was more than Emma could say for herself; or Will, for that matter.

Also, she quite liked Sam and was more than fond of Kurt. Unlike the rest of the faculty, she had never willingly blinded herself to the abuse that boy was forced to endure at McKinley. She had always been ashamed by how she had done nothing to interfere with that, though she also knew that, had she tried, she would have been thwarted by the administration at every turn.

Resolve deepened, though she was still wary, she swiftly carried herself toward the door and knocked in what she hoped was a confident manner.

Before she had even removed her fist from the wood, the door swung open and a bemused Sue Sylvester was staring down at her.

"Evangeline," Sue greeted her. "I was wondering how long you planned on lingering on my doorstep like a rabid raccoon in search of moldering crumbs." She narrowed her eyes. "In the name of Madonna, Eurydice, what the hell are you wearing? You look like a traffic cone."

Emma swallowed her fear and distaste for the woman before her. She knew she couldn't afford to prevaricate, nor could she show any weakness. "A colleague of ours denigrated one of your Cheerios to another student this morning."

Sue's eyes widened. "Name."

"Daniel Parks."

Sue curled a lip. If there was any man she hated more than that walking feather duster Will Schuester, it was Daniel Parks. Any chance she could get to make his life as miserable as he deserved, she would take, at least until her coup against Ryan Seacrest could be fully realized. But why would Ernestine present her with such a delicious opportunity?

"Why are you telling me this and not that insufferable Gandhi wannabe who alleges himself an educator?" she demanded.

Emma fought the blush spreading across her cheeks. She had gone to Figgins, of course, but had gotten nowhere, which hadn't surprised her. Her disdain for that man had grown exponentially over the years, and she simply could no longer tolerate his blasé approach to administrating.

"He wasn't willing to interfere," she admitted. Her mouth set in a firm line. "His refusal to do his job hinders my ability to do mine." She paused. "I don't like you, and I don't trust you, but I can no longer sit back and allow his idiocy to hurt the children who have been given into our care."

Sue smirked. Well, wasn't this interesting? Who knew the doe-eyed moppet had a backbone? If
nothing else, this should be good for a few laughs. She therefore decided to entertain this nonsense and stepped back, allowing this rejected Disney princess into her domicile.

Emma hesitated only briefly before stomping her way inside.

Sue closed the door and leaned against it. "Details."

"Parks made disparaging remarks about Kurt Hummel to Sam Evans, a new student," Emma stated in a rush of words, desperate to remain in control of herself and not run screaming from the house.

Sue's eyes hooded as she felt all the blood in her body rush to her feet. "More."

Emma laid it all out for the woman: how Kurt was Sam's Peer Mentor, how Sam had come to her after his algebra class and reported Parks for his derogatory words, how Kurt was unaware of these facts and that Sam wanted him to remain in the dark, and her failed attempt to corral Figgins into action. She was quite proud of herself for reciting the facts concisely and unemotionally.

"I can't sit back anymore and do nothing," Emma whispered fiercely, staring at the carpet and deciding it needed a thorough vacuuming. "Kurt is a good boy. He's an excellent student; a real tribute to his parents and our school. His sexuality should be a nonissue. If Figgins won't do his job, then it's up to the rest of us. This cannot continue."

Sue was surprised, pleasantly so. She had believed herself to be Porcelain's only ally among the faculty. Certainly Will Schuester didn't count. If she could use the Glo-worm before her as her mouthpiece, she could help Porcelain while standing in the background, looming like a vulture and unable to be accused as possessing anything so ridiculous as feelings.

"Evans," she said. "He was hanging all over Porcelain today. The last time I saw a set of lips like that, there was a fishhook through them. What's his story?"

Emma sighed. "I can't get into specifics, but he had problems at his last school. Let's just say he understands what Kurt is being forced to endure, as well as a disinterested and even enabling faculty."

Sue gave Strawberry Shortcake points for keeping a student's confidence. Of course, she would have New Kid investigated immediately. She didn't want him getting any ideas about Porcelain. Only Sue Sylvester was qualified to make life-changing decisions for one Kurt Hummel, and until she was convinced Fishlips was worthy of sharing the atmosphere with one of her Cheerios, he was suspect.

"I happen to know Daniel Parks is quite allergic to bees," Emma said offhandedly, blushing once more.

Sue threw back her head and cackled. "Welcome to the Dark Side, Emma."

"Why don't we all sit down?" Carole hesitantly suggested.

"Thank you, but I prefer to stand," Kurt replied, though he nodded kindly at the woman. He then turned to her son. "You ambushing me in my home appears to be becoming a pattern."

Rachel and Mercedes frowned as Finn flushed under his mother's glare. Before he could even posit a
reply, however, Kurt faced his father.

Burt had been momentarily quelled by the startled and then emotionless looks his son had donned, but his anger and fear had reasserted themselves and he saw nothing but rage, only exacerbated by the fact that Kurt had yet to deny the accusation. Still, Kurt's point had not been lost on him. Kurt had once again been attacked in his own home, courtesy of Finn; this time, however, Burt himself had led the charge.

"Please explain to me how you arrived at this conclusion," Kurt demanded of his father.

Burt began bellowing as Finn and Mercedes started babbling, and while Kurt filed away their declarations, it was Rachel to whom he paid attention. Aside from her obvious nervousness, there was a building resentment on her face which was clearly leveled at Finn. Further, Kurt's charge of past ambushing had obviously not escaped her attention and she was questioning as to whether her boyfriend had another agenda for this meeting.

"Let me see if I understand this correctly," Kurt said slowly. "Finn left his class under the pretext of going to the bathroom, stalked me to the choir room to spy on me, and overheard me singing a song. Then, on the basis of absolutely nothing, deduced that I'd lost my virginity over the summer and shared this conclusion with his girlfriend and my best friend. None of them bothered to ask me directly if his belief had merit, and then the three of you went behind my back and presented this nonsense to my father."

He blinked. "Is that the gist of it, then? Have I forgotten anything?"

Finn and Mercedes studied the carpet as Rachel meekly shook her head.

"I see," Kurt said, nodding, and again looked to his father, "and you never sought to question this conclusion or wonder if there was another purpose behind it. You didn't call me to address the matter or even ask me to come home so we could discuss it, but instead waited until I arrived home to begin preparing dinner for us, your fiancée, and her son. You obviously had no qualms about embarrassing and humiliating me in front of people I once called my friends."

Rachel's eyes filled and she ducked her head. She had known this was a bad idea, but her concern for Kurt had completely trampled logic and she had just lost whatever ground she might have gained with him earlier that day.

"We are your friends!" Mercedes insisted.

Kurt chuckled darkly. "No, I don't think so. Not after this."

"Don't blame them," Burt barked.

Kurt arched a brow. "Why shouldn't I? How would you feel, Dad, if three people you trusted, whom you believed were friends, had done this to you?"

"You're not denying it," Burt said gruffly.

Kurt stared at him evenly. "I have no intention of commenting on this one way or the other as long as they're here. This is not their business, and despite what all of you think, I am entitled to some measure of privacy."

Burt flinched.

"Please leave my house," Kurt said to Finn, Rachel, and Mercedes.
"Kurt!" Mercedes screeched.

"This isn't your house!" Finn loudly objected. "It's Burt's!

"Finn!" Carole yelled. "Shut your mouth and mind your business."

"Actually, Mr. Hudson," Kurt said coldly, "this is my house. It belonged to my mother and was willed to me. My father holds it in trust until I'm of age, but the house is mine."

Burt winced but said nothing.

Finn's eyes widened, as did Carole's, for she'd had no idea. Why hadn't Burt told her this information months ago when they had first tried living together, or when they had discussed making renovations? The fact that the house actually belonged to Kurt certainly indicated that he should have been involved in any plans for it.

"Get out," Kurt hissed at Finn, his eyes narrowed to slits, "and to make it clear, I fully support the relationship between our parents and will play nice for their sake, but you and I are not friends. We never will be. Never speak to me again as though we are."

"Kurt," Burt said in warning.

Kurt's eyes flashed as he glared at his father. "Stay out of it. This is not your business."

"Wrong!" Burt screamed. "Everything you do is my business."

"Incorrect," Kurt said dismissively, "and the fact that you kept them here, lying in wait for me to come home so that you could use them as cannon fodder has not gone unnoticed."

"Now you wait just a damn minute!" Burt roared.

"No," Kurt said calmly, "you will wait a minute until the others leave. This is not a community discussion, and if you seriously believe that I would talk about something this private and personal in front of people I no longer trust, then it's obvious you have no idea at all who I am."

"I sure as hell don't," Burt spat.

Kurt ignored his father and turned to Rachel. "As interfering and controlling as you are, I don't believe this was your idea."

She frantically shook her head.

"What was it Finn told you to get you here?"

"I didn't..." Finn tried to interrupt.

"Shut up, Finn," his mother growled.

Rachel drew a shallow, shaky breath. "When he came to me before lunch, he told me what he thought your song meant," she whispered, closing her eyes. "The way he phrased it...oh, Kurt, I thought you had been raped!"

Kurt's eyes widened and Carole gasped.

"I didn't want to do this," Rachel said, her voice stronger. "I didn't want to come here. I told them not to. I wanted to ask you privately and give you this number to a crisis hotline," she continued,
withdrawing a piece of paper from her skirt pocket. She then hung her head. "Even if my worst fear was true, I would never have put you in this position, but I was worried about what they would say and how they would say it. I asked Finn if he thought...that was what happened, and he said no, but he was so uncertain and I was so scared..."

Kurt stared at her for a long moment. "I believe you," he finally said.

Rachel wisely kept her mouth shut, not wanting to push him any further.

Kurt then turned toward Mercedes. "Did you mention Rachel's fear to my father?"

Mercedes sat sullenly, not immediately answering. Finally, she grunted, glaring at Finn all the while.

"Finn!" Carole hissed.

"He could have been!" Finn insisted.

"That doesn't give you the right to go running to Burt about it! You don't even know if it's true!" she exclaimed. "Who do you think you are?"

"I'm his brother!"

"You're not," Kurt said decidedly. "Even after our parents marry, I will never think of you as such. No brother of mine would have done this. No brother of mine would have started a physical altercation with Noah in the middle of rehearsal because he's my friend. No brother of mine would have threatened Sam to stay away from me. No brother of mine would have stalked and spied on me." He gave Finn a measured look. "You are in no way my brother."

"How could you have slept with someone else?" Finn exploded.

"Someone else?" Kurt blankly repeated. "You're acting as though I've cheated on you."

A pregnant silence fell as everyone in the room considered that analogy.

"Oh, my god," Rachel whispered, shaking her head dumbly.

Mercedes closed her eyes, Carole was visibly trembling with rage, and Burt stared at Finn as the final, unwelcome piece locked in to place.

"I see," Kurt said quietly.

"I'm not gay!" Finn screamed.

"I don't belong to you, Finn," Kurt said, ignoring the oft-screamed denial. "What I do or with whom I choose to do it is none of your concern. You should also be very grateful that I haven't yet returned this favor, because you best believe I know far more about you than you do of me."

Finn raised fearful eyes to Kurt and at once understood that the other boy knew about his night with Santana. All Kurt had to do was drop a few choice words and his relationship with Rachel would be over. That didn't even take into consideration how Rachel would react to the confrontation between Kurt and himself in the basement.

"Please leave," Kurt repeated, "and take Mercedes with you."

Mercedes shot to her feet and opened her mouth, but Kurt cut her off.
"Don't," he warned. "There is no excuse for what you've done. I don't know if I'll ever manage to forgive you, but I will never again trust you."

"I was worried about you!"

"No," he said flatly, "you were jealous. Let's not pretend that we don't know each other as well as we do. We both know that, had the situation been reversed, I never would have done this to you. I would have asked you directly. That's what friends do. They don't go behind each other's back and inform on them to their parents, particularly with erroneous information gleaned by Finn Hudson. You have no real excuse. This was vengeance, not concern."

Just like that, Mercedes knew it was over. As compassionate and forgiving as Kurt could be, he could not abide betrayal. For weeks, months even, perhaps since the beginning of last year, she had been pressuring him, testing him, trying to discern his limits and what he was willing to put up with where their friendship was concerned, and he had let her get away with a lot, far more than she would have allowed him. Now, she had pushed too far.

"It never would have been me, would it?" she whispered brokenly. "Even if you were straight, it never would have been me."

"No."

She snorted and shook her head. "Santana, then? Quinn?"

"Brittany."

Mercedes nodded, sucking her teeth.

Burt stared at the girl as though he didn't even know her.

"Even I knew that," Finn said sourly.

"What you know couldn't fill the eye of a needle," Kurt said dispassionately.

"We're leaving, Finn," Carole snapped. "I'll call you tomorrow."

"Thanks, Carole," said a grateful Burt, rubbing his face with a hand. "I think that's best."

"I wasn't talking to you," Carole barked, her disgust with how he had handled this obvious, as she reached out and grabbed Kurt's hand. "I'll call you tomorrow, honey."

Kurt nodded gratefully at her and squeezed back.

Carole then ushered her son from the house, leaving the door open behind her.

"They're not your friends," Mercedes said to Kurt. "Santana, Quinn, Brittany. They will end up hurting you. They don't care about you like I do."

"For which I am very much relieved," Kurt replied. "Your kind of care has harmed far more than it has helped." He paused. "I've never led you on," he said quietly. "You were the first person I came out to, Mercedes. I was very clear that I'm gay. I never made promises to you. I never insinuated in any way that we had a future together in that way."

He shook his head and sighed. "I've been a good friend to you, Mercedes. I've defended you from others, I've taken slushies for you, I've helped you with your homework. I've supported you in Glee. Never have I tried to tell you who your friends can be. Never have I tried to limit you."
"I can honestly say that, up to this point, you were a good friend in return," he continued. "We've had our ups and downs, and I understand how difficult it can be for someone to be my friend. I've been taciturn and moody. I've been petty and judgmental. I've made some truly unkind and hurtful remarks to you, disguised as helpfulness. I am more than willing to accept my share of the blame for the demise of our friendship, and I am very sorry that it had to end this way, but I think it best we part ways now before we hurt each other anymore than we already have."

Mercedes nodded but couldn't bring herself to apologize. Even now, even though she recognized the veracity of his words, even though she appreciated his willingness to accept his portion of blame for mutual resentments which had been building for quite some time, she was still angry that he might have slept with someone else. She picked up her purse, debating trying to hug him goodbye, but finally rushed out of the house, eyes welling.

"I'm so sorry," Rachel whispered.

"I accept," Kurt said. "I know this wasn't your intention and that you were acting only out of concern for me, but you should have come to me first."

She nodded. "I know."

"I won't tell you," he said, answering her unasked question. "My past relationship with Finn is complicated. I'm sure you've deduced that I know things about him that you don't, and while I don't much like him at the moment, I won't report on him to you. Your answers will have to come from him."

"I respect that," she said, nodding. "I guess I'll see you tomorrow."

"Good night, Rachel."

She all but fled from the house, quietly shutting the door behind her.

Kurt and Burt stared at each other.

"Ask your questions," Kurt softly said.

Burt wanted to do just that, but felt overwhelmed with guilt. He had bungled this so badly, completely mishandled the entire situation, and his son had just lost three people who, for better or worse, were important to him; people who had motives of their own for coming here tonight.

"Were you raped?" he asked in a tremulous voice.

"No."

Burt heaved a tremendous sigh and closed his eyes. "Thank god. Oh, thank god." He sat down heavily in his recliner and was silent for several long moments. "Did you have sex?" he finally asked, his voice raspy.

"Yes," Kurt answered, sitting primly on the sofa and staring at his father.

"Were you going to tell me?" Burt asked, still unable to look at his son.

"No."

Indignation flared in Burt's eyes. "Why the hell not?" he hissed.

"Because I knew how you would react and, apparently, I was right. Besides, it's not any of your
"Like I said before," Burt ground out, "everything you do is my business."

"Not this," Kurt countered. "This belongs to me and only me. I don't ask about your relationship with Carole because I know it doesn't concern me."

"It's not the same thing at all!"

"It is," Kurt insisted. "I respect your boundaries, but it's obvious that you don't respect mine." He tilted his head. "However, since this can of worms has been opened, I will try to put some of your worries to rest. Yes, I had sex. No, I was not raped or in any way coerced. It was completely my decision. Yes, I was safe."

Burt set his jaw and looked away. "Who was it?"

"You don't honestly believe I'd answer that question, do you?"

Burt swiftly turned to face his son and glared.

"I'm not going to give you a name, Dad, because I know you. You would try to track him down and harass him. Maybe even fly to him and confront him for what you believe he's done to me." He sighed. "I had sex because I wanted to have sex, Dad."

Burt bit his lip as his eyes filled with tears. "You don't know what you've done," he whispered, shaking his head.

"On the contrary," Kurt snapped, "I know exactly what I've done. I also know what you're doing. It's what you've always done. I'm your son, Dad, not your daughter. I don't need you to protect me. I've been protecting myself for a long time now."

"I know you're not a girl!" Burt roared.

"Do you? I don't think so." He paused. "I'm curious, Dad. If you and Carole were married and you discovered that Finn had had sex, how would you react?"

"Finn's not my son."

"He is when it suits you," Kurt said. "He's your son when you want someone to watch football with you. He's your son when you want someone to go to a game with you. He's your son when he's out on the field and people are cheering him on."

"It's not the same," Burt whispered.

"Of course not. We both know that if the positions were reversed and I had shown up tonight with Mercedes and another friend in tow to inform Carole that her son had had sex, you would have ranted and raved at me while defending Finn. You have a complete double standard where I'm concerned.

"What I don't understand is why. I get very good grades. I've never done drugs. I've never experimented with alcohol, save that unfortunate incident last year with April, and I didn't even know what she had given me until it was too late. I don't sleep around. I help you at the shop. I'm responsible with my money. I cook for us, clean the house, do the laundry, and help you in the yard. What else do you want from me?"
"You don't understand," Burt morosely repeated.

"I'd like to understand," Kurt whispered.

Burt was quiet for a very long time. "You're my son, my baby. You're all I have left of your mother." He sighed, tears glittering on his lashes. "I've felt it the past year, you moving away from me, growing up. I don't want...I want you to stop it."

"I can't do that, Dad," Kurt said softly.

Burt bit his lip so hard it split. "I know...I know I'm not always fair to you. It's hard for me, Kurt. I look at you and I still see the day you were born. You were so small I could hold you in one hand. I look at you and see you learning how to walk, running away from me. I see you in that little suit on the day of your mom's funeral, trying so hard to be brave." He released a harsh, wet noise. "And you were. You were so brave. Braver than I ever was. You always have been."

He wiped at his eyes. "When I look at you, I see what could happen to you. I see how easily you could be hurt. I just don't want to see you hurt."

"That's not what this is about," Kurt said angrily, refusing to allow his father to skirt around the issue.

Burt narrowed his eyes dangerously. "Then tell me what it's about."

"It's about the fact that I'm gay. It's about the fact that I slept with a man."

Burt flinched before he could stop himself.

"I knew it," Kurt said bitterly.

"I don't give a damn that you're queer!" Burt thundered. "I've always known. I knew before you did!"

"But you don't accept it," Kurt volleyed. "You say you do, and you publicly support me, for which I am grateful, but you don't accept it." He threw up his hands. "How did you think this was going to play out, Dad? That I would change and suddenly become straight? That this was just a phase and soon I'd be out chasing girls while you slapped me on the shoulder and handed me a box of condoms? I'm gay, Dad. I like men. I sleep with men."

"Shut up!"

"No," Kurt said defiantly. "We're not putting off this conversation anymore just because it makes us uncomfortable. This is who I am, Dad. If you can't accept it, tell me now."

Burt turned away. "I...I..."

"You don't want to," Kurt said, nodding his head. "I see."

"I'm trying to protect you!"

"No, you're trying to shame me. I won't let you."

"I am not!"

"You are, but I'm not ashamed. I had sex with a man about whom I cared a great deal. He didn't seduce me. He didn't trick me. He didn't drug me. We met, we had a lot in common, and we spent a great deal of time together. I grew very fond of him. We both went into this with eyes wide open.
We knew our time was limited and that our relationship wouldn't survive the separation. When we made love, it was a mutual decision. We took all the necessary precautions."

Kurt was growing more and more belligerent, and it was difficult for him to rein in his temper. "And you know what? It was wonderful. It was fantastic! I don't regret it, and nothing you can say or do will make me regret it."

"Watch your mouth, boy," Burt warned.

"No," Kurt snapped. "I'm tired of watching my mouth. I'm tired of tiptoeing around my own father, afraid to speak, afraid to act, afraid to be myself completely because of what might happen. I'm tired of being terrified that I'll finally say or do the wrong thing and that all of your support will evaporate in my face. I'm tired of wondering if I'm going to end up one of those teenagers who's thrown out of their house because they're gay. I'm tired of wondering what will happen if I ever had a boyfriend, something I've wanted so badly and for so long, just for a chance to feel normal, knowing I'd probably have to date him in secret - not because of how others would react, but because of how you would react!"

Burt's eyes widened.

"You go to every single one of Finn's games," Kurt charged. "You go out of your way to do things with him, to be the father he's never had. I've heard you brag about him to all the guys down at the shop. Well, what about me? I've been working there for years! I can strip down and rebuild an engine in a day, while Finn can barely pump gas without the National Guard being called out. When's the last time you took an interest in something I do?"

"What the hell are you talking about?" Burt crossly demanded. Kurt shot him a look filled with disbelief. "Are you serious? How many piano and dance recitals did you skip out on, or the plays I did in elementary school? You were always too busy with the shop. You own the shop! You set the hours! I've been in Glee going on three years, Dad, and you've never come to a single performance. We won Sectionals last year! We went all the way to Regionals and, although we didn't place, we put on an amazing performance! "I led the Cheerios to a national championship just a few months ago and you could've cared less! Sure, you drove me to the airport, but you didn't walk me in. You didn't wish me good luck. I was on ESPN, your favorite channel, but you didn't watch. You didn't even know I had won until I told you! How do you think that made me feel?"

Burt flushed and looked down at his hands, now wringing themselves desperately in his lap.

"Oh, but as soon as I get on the football team, a game which you knew very well I couldn't stand, you couldn't wait to come and cheer me on," Kurt said snidely, "but when I do something I love, something at which I excel, something that's important to me, you could care less."

"I tried so hard to please you," he seethed, years of bitterness and resentment bubbling up and rising to the fore. "I sat up in this room for years, feigning interest in football and baseball and basketball and NASCAR, and in all of your ridiculous extreme fishing and hunting and trucking shows. You knew I hated it, that I was miserable, but you said you wanted us to spend time together." He shook his head. "You only want to spend time with me when it's convenient or it's something you want to do. You're only interested in me when I'm the one making all the effort!"

"I...I didn't know you felt that way," Burt said quietly.
"You mean you didn't know I figured it out," Kurt replied, "but I did, a long time ago. I just didn't care because I wanted to be with you. How do you think it feels to know that your only living parent can only be bothered to spend time with you when you're doing what he wants?"

Burt flinched.

"And all of the grief you gave me about going to visit my grandmother this summer!" Kurt continued, his face flushing darkly. "You actually put me on a guilt trip and tried to make me feel sorry for leaving you! I hadn't seen her since Mom's funeral! She's all I have of Mom, but you didn't care! You made me feel ashamed for wanting to see the only family I have left!"

Kurt sighed. "I love you, Dad. You're the most important person in my life, and while I know you love me, I really don't think you like me."

"That's not true!" Burt immediately denied, eyes huge and horrified.

"Yes, it is," Kurt said sadly, biting his lip and forcing himself not to cry.

Burt couldn't believe his son actually felt this way. When had this started, he wondered. Never had he believed Kurt resented him this much, but, now, listening to his list of grievances, some of which pained him to admit were justified, was heartbreaking. What had he said or done, or not said or done, to make his baby believe that he didn't like him?

And then he realized he had hesitated too long to set Kurt's mind at ease. When he looked over at his son, he saw that Kurt had already retreated from the entire situation, closing himself off from anything Burt might try and say now.

"You say you don't think of me as your daughter," Kurt said, "but neither do you think of me as a man, Dad, and that's what I am. Gay or not, I am a man."

"About this guy..." Burt said, trying to redirect the conversation, preferring righteous indignation over feeling like a failure as a parent.

"I'm not telling you anything about him," Kurt said stiffly. "It's over and done. I wouldn't take it back even if I could."

"This can't go unpunished," Burt said.

Kurt nodded. "You'll do what you feel you have to."

Burt didn't even know how to interpret that statement, but he was sure he had just been insulted. His anger renewed itself and all he could think of was hurting Kurt as badly as he himself had just been hurt. He knew it was childish, knew he was overreacting and being too defensive, and he resented that a teenage boy had made him feel this way. It was one of the things that bothered him the most about Kurt, having a child who was so much smarter than you.

"You're off Cheerios and out of Glee."

Kurt stared at him for a long moment. "If that's your decision," he finally said, nodding and standing up. "May I go to my room now?"

Burt sighed, knowing that though he had won the battle, he was ultimately losing the war. "We have to discuss your schedule at the shop."

"We don't, actually," Kurt said. "I resign."
Burt blinked owlishly. "What? You can't do that!"

"I can," Kurt insisted. "I'm not going to come down there every day and subject myself to the stares and whispers, as I know you'll be informing all of your friends that I'm being punished. The last thing I need is them wondering why."

"I need you down there, Kurt," Burt sighed.

"You'll have to train someone else or find a new mechanic," Kurt replied. "I paid for all of my training and certifications, so there's no monetary loss to you. I'm sure there are others who would like the opportunity. It's a growing job market and the economy is tight right now."

"I can't believe you're doing this to me with no notice," Burt said angrily.

"And I can't believe you decided it would be a good idea to discuss my private life, my most intimate behavior, with traitors," Kurt snapped back. "Call Finn. I'm sure he'd love to work at the shop with you. Then he can finally fulfill his deluded fantasy of having everything I do."

Burt shook his head. "I'm disappointed in you."

Kurt nodded brusquely. "Not nearly as disappointed as I am in you. If you'll excuse me, I need to revise the now gaping holes in my schedule. By the way, thank you for taking away my extracurricular activities during the most important year of my high school career. I'm sure it will look wonderful on my college applications."

He grabbed his bag, left the groceries on the couch, and quickly left the room.

Burt heard his son quietly shut the basement door behind him and clamber down the stairs before he closed his eyes and dropped his head into his hands.

Kurt paced about his bedroom, regretting everything he had just said to his father, despite its veracity.

He had bitten off more than he could chew, he realized, and wasn't sure how to go about rectifying it. He hated fighting with his father; it happened so rarely, he didn't really know how to guide himself through it, though he saw no easy resolution in sight.

He should have controlled himself better and not taken out all of his anger at Finn and Mercedes out on his father. Still, he was furious that his father had confronted him in such a manner, let alone in front of Finn, Mercedes, Rachel, and Carole. On some level, he felt badly for his father, being presented with that information by outsiders and not Kurt himself, but, as he had said, it was no one's business but his own. He still felt that way and believed he always would.

Had he been hasty in resigning his position at the shop? On the one hand, he thought he was. He didn't have to work, but he enjoyed it, and knew there were no other opportunities in Lima which would pay him nearly as much as his father did. He would, of course, be welcome at any one of their competitors, but he couldn't do that do his dad, no matter how angry he was. Most likely, he'd be stuck with some minimum wage job with other people his age and which he would never bother to put on his résumé.

On the other hand, he had grown somewhat bored with the shop and its regularity. There was never
anything new or exciting, except studying up for his recertification. True, he was in the vicinity of his father, but they had never really spent any time together at the shop. There was simply too much to do.

Still, he had derived a certain satisfaction from the routine, of knowing where he was going and what he would be doing every day. Also, he enjoyed working with his hands. It validated something within him and gave him a sense of macho pride, that he had skills which many of his male contemporaries envied.

What a mess.

He would have to do something about his entire school schedule, as well. Even though he didn't receive a grade, Glee had offered him three credits in Performing Arts; without it, he would fall under the minimum number of mandatory credit hours. Being Sam's Peer Mentor offered an additional credit, as well as some community service hours, but he already had more hours than any three people. He wouldn't abandon Sam, of course, but he would have to add an additional class to make up for the loss of Glee, which would mean a lot more work than Glee required.

He worried about how Glee would qualify for Sectionals; even if Sam joined, they would still be down two members. He didn't feel guilty, of course, as it wasn't his decision to leave, and he felt some measure of vengeance that Finn and Mercedes would be made to suffer for his absence. Still, he felt bad for the rest of his teammates, as well as Schue; they certainly didn't deserve this.

Figgins and Sylvester would probably be frothing at the mouth to abrogate the club altogether, but Kurt had a plan in mind as far as that was concerned, as well as how to negate Sylvester's resulting furor.

He would go to school early in the morning to explain the situation to Schue. He felt it best to handle that in person. Sylvester was a different matter; if he didn't call her in the next five minutes, she would annihilate him tomorrow for putting her off. He certainly wasn't looking forward to the conversation, but as he wasn't to blame, he wasn't too worried.

He debated for a moment as to whether he should offer up Finn and Mercedes as sacrificial lambs before deciding that he couldn't be that petty. Besides, he figured Santana and Quinn would see to them. There would be no point in his trying to dissuade them from such action, nor would they believe anything other than the absolute truth as to why he had resigned. They would do what they wanted; they were like people that way.

He sighed and sat down on his bed, willing away the tears which had gathered and were demanding release.

He shouldn't be crying, he thought. He should be stronger and focus on the positive, but there was little positivity he could muster, and self-pity sounded really nice at the moment.

But there would be time enough for that later, he decided. He wiped his eyes and dug through his bag for his phone. He sighed once more and called Sylvester.

The woman must have had her DNA spliced with that of a howler monkey, Kurt decided ten minutes later.
Sylvester, unsurprisingly, had been furious, but thankfully hadn't blamed him. He could tell that she had desperately wanted to, of course, but had been unable to find a way to hold him accountable. He hadn't told her about the role his former friends had played in this involuntary expulsion because he was honestly afraid of what she would have done to them. As much as he didn't like Finn and Mercedes at this moment, he didn't want to subject them to a Sue Sylvester vendetta.

He had assured her that he would still have a new routine ready for her in time for the pep rally next week, even though he was no longer on the team. He would design it around Quinn, as he obviously was no longer in contention for head of the squad.

He thought he should have been more upset about that, but he really didn't have it in him. Quinn was familiar with the responsibilities of the position and was itching to prove herself once more to Sylvester, so she was welcome to it. He had felt rather smug that he had worked his way up the Cheerio chain so quickly, but he also knew that it was easy to fall from grace depending on Sue's whims, which seemed to change like the wind. It was pressure he didn't need.

When Sue had demanded a reason why she should allow him to design anything, he'd simply said *kylie* and she dropped the entire subject.

He had also convinced her to name Brittany and Santana as assistant captains by pointing out that, unless she was given some measure of power, Santana would rebel and waste everyone's time trying to dethrone Quinn. Like Sue, he believed that competition was healthy among teammates, but that kind of infighting simply wasn't conducive to a functioning squad. Santana would manage to turn at least half the Cheerios against Quinn before next week and it would be disastrous for everyone involved.

Besides, Santana had earned her due after taking over for Quinn last term and performing admirably; to take that back now would be tantamount to sparking a mutiny. Brittany needed to be given an equal role because she had earned it, and when Brittany was happy, Santana was happy. Santana would do nothing which might humiliate the other girl.

Luckily, Sue had seen the wisdom in this. Also, restoring the Unholy Trinity to their former glory would only instill more fear in the restless masses, which always pleased her to no end.

She had named him as an Assistant Manager, a position much like the one Becky enjoyed, and would brook no argument to the contrary. It was a title with no real power - he would essentially be a figurehead - but neither would it make any demands on his time; plus it would look good on his college applications. Basically, she had put him in charge of wrangling Quinn, Brittany, and Santana.

He had told her that giving him the title went against his father's punishment, but she had told him flatly that his father should have bothered to learn loopholes.

Kurt was still expected to wear his uniform on rehearsal days, even if he wasn't attending the practices, and he was rather happy about that. The uniform was like a suit of armor for him, and made him feel powerful. He was also entitled to all of the benefits of being a Cheerio, so he had really gotten a pretty sweet deal.

Though she had never said it, and would have backhanded him across the state for even suggesting it, he knew Sue felt sorry for him. She had also tried to interrogate him about his summer fling, but he staunchly refused to tell her anything. He was not about to cede any information which might give her more power over him, but knew she was likely to try and unearth some intelligence. She wouldn't find any and would most likely be frustrated by the experience, which was a bonus, but it ultimately wasn't his problem.
He would have to meet with Pillsbury tomorrow morning and try to find another class to work in to his schedule. He'd also have to consider new extracurriculars to add. He wasn't about to go out for football again, or any other team sport for that matter. He thought about yearbook and the school newspaper, but they would probably take up more time than he was willing to sacrifice and he would also be forced to spend more time with Rachel. He might not have been angry with her, but he had no desire to become her new best friend and, being who she was, she'd try to make the most of the opportunity.

So: new class, new activities, and a new job.

He nodded. He could do this.

He snorted and shook his head.

He finally gave up the ghost and succumbed to the tears before dialing the phone once more.

Artie was carefully and methodically chewing his food, paying due attention to the number of bites he afforded to each morsel. He figured that as long as his mouth was full, he could continue to dodge his parents' gentle but insistent questioning about the demise of his relationship with Tina, as well as how and why he had started dating Brittany. Apparently he had been freer with his comments concerning the other Glee members than he had ever realized, because his parents had discreetly asked about Santana. He had given a long-winded explanation which really didn't answer their question, worried about how they would react that Brittany was bisexual. Granted, they had never had an issue with Kurt's sexuality, but he didn't want to push the limits of their acceptance.

He also had the feeling that his parents knew he and Brittany had had sex. He wasn't sure how they knew, but was certain they did. That was a can of worms he definitely didn't want to open.

It was odd, how both he and Kurt had lost their virginity during the past summer.

He frowned and slowly worked his way through his green beans. Kurt. Something was happening there, he knew, and it worried him. The feeling of general unease had been increasing during the last hour.

"Artie?" his mother said, interrupting his thoughts.

"Something's wrong with Kurt," he blurted to no one in particular.

Sheila blinked and exchanged a look with Jeffrey. It was a bothersome diversion from their interrogation, but they loved Kurt as their own and trusted their son when he said something was wrong.

Artie reached down and plucked his phone from the bag attached to his wheelchair. As soon as his fingers wrapped around the device, it rang. It was Kurt's ringtone.

Artie scrambled to accept the call. "What's wrong?" He paused. "Are you crying? You don't cry."

Jeffrey's eyes hooded.
Artie listened for a long time, his brow furrowed and mouth affixed in horror. His parents exchanged another nervous look.

"Why would they do that?" Artie hissed, his face growing more and more red the further Kurt elaborated.

"What!" he screeched.

His parents laid down their flatware and blatantly stared at him.

"I'm on my way," Artie declared. He shook his head. "Don't argue with me, Kurt. You shouldn't be alone right now." He listened further. "I don't care what Uncle Burt thinks about it. If he has a problem, he can take it up with me. I'll be there in twenty minutes. I'm spending the night."

He hung up and released a long, painful sigh.

"What's happened?" Sheila immediately asked.

Artie gave his mother a flat look, obviously struggling with what to tell her. He certainly didn't want to violate Kurt's confidence, but knew his parents wouldn't drive him to the Hummel house until he gave them a valid reason.

He prevaricated longer than was appropriate, and his parents finally had enough.

"Is Kurt in trouble?" Jeffrey asked.

Artie sighed again. "Kurt...met someone...while he was in Europe."

Sheila frowned. "Okay," she said slowly. Both she and Jeffrey knew that Kurt was gay and could've cared less. He was a good boy who had been a lifeline for their son for as long as any of them could remember. "So?"

"They slept together," Artie whispered.

Jeffrey blinked, a sudden surge of protectiveness for Kurt shooting up his spine. "And?"

Artie groaned and banged his head on the table. "Finn somehow found out, told Mercedes and Rachel, and the three of them went to Kurt's house and told Uncle Burt."

Sheila's eyes widened to the size of banjos. She could only imagine how Burt Hummel had reacted to that bit of information. And, really, what right did those children have to interfere in Kurt's life that way? It was thoroughly obnoxious!

"I knew," Artie hissed. "I knew Finn's feelings for him were more than just friendship, but I convinced myself that all of it was over." He shook his head ruefully. "I should have known better after today, after the way he overreacted to Puck and Sam." He growled and slammed his hand down on the table, rattling all of the crockery. "I can't believe Finn did this! And now Kurt's off Cheerios and out of Glee!"

Sheila huffed. "That's ridiculous!"

Jeffrey looked pained. He understood Burt's impulse, but this punishment was not well thought out and would only alienate him further from his son.

Artie suddenly began to panic. "Kurt quit the shop. This is really bad. Neither one is going to forgive the other for a very long time. You know how stubborn they both are." His eyes widened. "Kurt was
talking about going abroad for college even before he went to Europe this summer. He might really do it now."

He couldn't be separated from Kurt, he just couldn't be. It had only been a few weeks, but he had already seen the toll it was taking on Mike to be separated from Matt. Artie knew he wasn't strong enough to survive that. He knew he was probably more dependent on Kurt than what was healthy, but he truly didn't care.

Stupid Finn!

"Will one of you please drive me over there?" Artie asked his parents, closing his eyes. "He sounded...he was so...he was crying. You know Kurt doesn't cry. I'm worried about him."

Jeffrey nodded swiftly and wiped his mouth with his napkin. "Of course. If you're staying the night, you'd better go pack a bag and get your books."

"Thank you," Artie said gratefully, whirling around in his chair and shooting off toward his room.

Jeffrey and Sheila looked at each other.

"They both lost their virginity this summer," Sheila said.

Jeffrey nodded. "Remember when we thought they'd end up together?"

She smiled sadly. "I guess they have, in a way."

"I know you wanted..." he trailed off uncomfortably.

Sheila had always believed that Artie and Kurt were closer than best friends usually were and was convinced they would one day date. She hadn't been worried about it and, if it had happened, Jeffrey would have accepted it. Still, he believed that the bond between his son and Kurt had simply been firmly cemented when they were very young, due to Artie's accident and the death of Suzanne Hummel.

"I just want them to be happy," she said, "even if it's with other people." She sighed. "I'm worried about this Brittany girl, but I know Kurt is very fond of her, and if he thought she might hurt Artie in any way, he'd never allow her to get near him. That means something to me."

Jeffrey nodded again. "Do you think he's right to be worried about Kurt?"

She hesitated only briefly. "I don't think Kurt would ever do something stupid, but I'm sure he's very upset. This was a gross invasion of his privacy, and I can only imagine how he must feel. And I'm sure that Burt's overreacting. We both know Kurt, Jeff. He does what he wants, when he wants. He's been an adult since he was a child. If he slept with someone, it was because he wanted to."

"They've both waited longer than most of their peers," Jeff said, trying to find the silver lining. "They're smart boys, and they watched what the Fabray girl went through last year. I'm sure they used protection."

Sheila nodded, though her eyes were very far away. "They're growing up."

"That's what children do, honey," Jeffrey said awkwardly, patting her hand. "I'd better go warm up the van."

She nodded again and took a sip of her wine. "They're growing up," she softly repeated.
Tina and Mike were doing their calculus homework together in her room, the former still very surprised the latter had been allowed upstairs.

Tina knew her parents were worried over her sudden breakup with Artie and new relationship with Mike. She was also a little annoyed that they were so much more accepting of Mike than they had ever been of Artie, and knew the predominant reason, as far as her mother was concerned, was because Mike was Asian.

Even though Mike wasn't Korean, even though they didn't share a language, a cultural history, or a religion, he had been deemed a more suitable boyfriend than Artie. It was a little grating.

Of course her father had never objected to Artie because they were both Jewish and her father had somehow gotten it in his head that, because Artie was in a wheelchair, he wasn't capable of having sex and therefore Tina was safe with him. He hadn't wanted to allow Mike in her room, but her mother had overridden him, as she did with almost everything.

As much as Tina silently complained about how controlling Mike's mother was, it was largely because the woman reminded her so much of her own mother and she was desperate not to turn out like either one of them.

She sighed and stubbornly worked through the integral.

"You okay?" asked a distracted Mike.

Tina frowned and considered the question. She wasn't okay, really; she just didn't know what the problem was. "Something's wrong," she said.

Mike blinked and put down his pencil, looking at her nervously. Had he done something to upset her?

"I don't know what it is," Tina continued, turning to face him, "but something's wrong."

At once, both of their phones trilled.

They regarded each other with worried looks before reaching for their respective phones.

"It's Artie," Tina said, looking down at the screen.

"Matt," Mike said.

They looked at each other once more. "Kurt."

They answered their calls. "Hello?"

The next few minutes were filled with angry exclamations and exhortations, with Mike stunned and not a little turned on by the breadth of Tina's vocabulary.

Tina was furious. This would not go unavenged.
Puck parked a few blocks away from Peterson's house, giddy with excitement about whatever the Princess had planned to go down this fine night.

He was no fan of Peterson, and if the punk had done something truly heinous - which he must have, if Hummel were going after him - he was all about discovering the grizzly details.

He sauntered down the street toward Peterson's house, pausing to blink, sure that Wheels had just passed him in his van. He shrugged and dismissed it from his mind as he continued his stroll. Just as he turned the corner, he happened upon Azimio, attempting to crouch in the neighboring row of bushes. He looked beyond the hedge and his eyes widened as he saw three police cars parked in front of the Peterson house.

"What's happening?" Puck asked.

Azimio startled and released a squeak before attempting to turn it into a manly cough. "I've been here about five minutes," he growled out. "The cops were already here. I don't know what's going on."

Puck grunted and squatted down on his haunches to wait.

"Jewfro's hiding over there," Azimio added, pointing to a distant tree. The dork was hanging around when I got here, so he probably knows more."

"The Princess must have tipped him off."

Azimio raised an eyebrow. "Who?"

"Hummel."

Azimio blinked. "He lets you call him that?"

Puck shrugged. "He knows I don't mean anything by it."

Azimio thought about that for a moment. "He said before that he trusts you." He shook his head. "What I can't figure out is why. You were almost as bad to him as Dave and me."

Puck turned to face him and cocked his head. "You saying you know what you did was wrong?"

Azimio darkened slightly and ground his teeth. "I don't like...what he is."

"Why?" Puck demanded.

Faced with a pointed question, Azimio found he had no ready answer. "It's not normal," he finally said.

"Whatever, man," Puck said, rolling his eyes and shaking his head. "I just don't get why you care. It's not like he's chasing after you or anything, so what's it matter?"

Azimio pursed his lips and said nothing. There really was nothing to say to that. "You saw how he chased after Hudson," he said weakly.

Puck snorted. "Ever hear Hudson tell him to stop?"

Azimio's eyes widened. "You saying Hudson's queer?"
"I didn't fucking say that," Puck hissed. "All I'm saying is that Hummel's crush didn't come out of nowhere, okay? And Hudson had no problem running to Kurt with his every problem. He was just fine with Kurt helping him with his homework and Glee. Fuck, Hudson would've failed last year if not for Kurt. As it was, we only won one game, and that was thanks to the Princess. What's he ever done or said that deserves all the shit he gets?"

Azimio grimaced. There was truth in Puck's statements, no matter how much he wish he could've denied it. Hummel may have been blackmailing them, but he could've fucked them over a long time ago, and a lot more viciously, with all the shit they had pulled on him. Plus, the only reason Peterson was going down tonight was because he'd been talking shit about Brittany.

He could say a lot about Hummel, and he had, but he had to give the little fairy props for always having his friends' backs. It was something Azimio understood. He always sided with Dave, even when he knew Dave was wrong about stuff. And maybe, just maybe, Dave had been wrong about Hummel.

"They're coming out," Puck whispered, scrambling for a better position. "Peterson's in cuffs!"

"Shit, man," Azimio hissed, "Hummel wasn't kidding, was he? They wouldn't arrest Peterson for nothing."

Puck nodded absently. "As soon as they haul his ass away, we need to talk to Jewfro. Cut through this yard, go around the Peterson house, and come up through the other neighbor's yard. I'll cross the street and work my way down."

Azimio nodded and took off.

Puck was about to leave when his phone vibrated. He frowned, withdrew it from his pocket, and looked down at the screen. Tina.

"Huh."

He dismissed the call, shoved the phone back in his pocket, and scurried across the street as covertly as possible.

Brittany was too entranced in playing Words With Friends to interfere in the argument Quinn and Santana were currently having.

Also, she didn't care.

Santana and Quinn always argued, and it was nice, Brittany thought, because it was so normal. Besides, they were fighting about which Kardashian show to watch, and since she thought all Kardashians were shameless whores, she couldn't be bothered with which show would win. Especially since she had already hidden the remote.

She blinked and frowned down at her phone when it lit up and made a lot of noise.

Quinn and Santana paused their screaming to turn and stare at her.

"Is that the Flipper theme song?" Quinn asked, now struggling not to laugh.
"It's my dolphin!" Brittany happily screeched. She quickly accepted the call. "Kurty!"

Quinn and Santana watched her with bemusement, which quickly turned to concern as Brittany's pallor turned pasty.

"What's wrong?" Brittany asked softly. "Kurty, why are you crying?" Her own eyes had automatically welled in response.

Quinn's eyes widened as Santana began growling in Spanish.

Brittany listened for a very long time, blinking rapidly as she tried to process what Kurt was telling her.

"But why would they do that?" she shrieked, jumping to her feet.

Santana followed suit and raced to her side, quickly followed by Quinn.

"What happened?" Santana hissed.

Brittany waved her off, intently listening to Kurt's words. Her hand clutched her phone so tightly, it looked like it would crumble to dust at any moment. She angrily shook her head and began throwing everything into her bag.

"I'm on my way right now," she said. She paused. "Oh, okay." She nodded. "Are you sure, Kurty? I can be there in ten minutes."

Quinn and Santana exchanged a look.

"Don't worry, Kurt," Brittany said. "They're not going to get away with this." She sighed. "If you think so." She nodded again. "I'll tell them." She sniffl ed. "I love you, Kurt. I'm so sorry. Tell Artie I said hi and that I really like his penis, okay?" She bit her lip. "Okay," she whispered. "Bye."

Brittany ended the call and her phone slipped from her hand to the floor as she stared ahead sightlessly at the bedroom door. "Bitches," she seethed, vibrating with fury.

Quinn opened her mouth to ask the obvious, but fell silent at Santana's glare. She held up her hands, content to let the other girl handle this. After all, Santana knew Brittany best.

"Who?" Santana asked.

Brittany whirled on her heel to face them, her eyes practically spitting sparks. "Finn." She curled a lip. "And Aretha," she hissed venomously.

Quinn's eyes hooded, all of her misgivings about Mercedes suddenly given much greater weight.

"What did they do?" Santana carefully asked.

Brittany glowered. "Remember this morning when you asked Kurt if he'd met anyone this summer?"

Santana blinked. "And he did?"

Brittany nodded.

Santana hooted and pumped a fist in victory. "Woo! Tink got some!"

Quinn remained silent, desperately curious as to where all of this was going.
"Somehow, Finn found out," Brittany continued, "and he told Rachel and Mercedes."

"Wait!" Santana barked. "Berry's involved in this?"

Brittany shrugged. "Not really. She was as much a victim as Kurty."

"How?" Quinn wondered.

"What exactly went down, Brit?" Santana demanded.

Brittany released a slow, controlled breath. "Finn, Rachel, and Mercedes went to Kurt's house and told his father that Kurt had sex."

The other girls blinked.

"What the fuck?" Santana finally screamed.

Quinn's mind immediately started creating and discarding scenarios. She could well believe that Finn had done something so colossally stupid, and it was no surprise Mercedes had gone along with him, given the matter involved. "Where does Rachel fit in to this?"

Brittany's mouth pursed into a moue of disgust. "That's what's so gross. Finn let Rachel think that Kurt had been r-aped."

Santana's mouth fell open in shock.

"That's sick," Quinn whispered, shaking her head, voice filled with disbelief. "Are you saying Finn let her think that just so she would go with them and lend weight to their story?"

Brittany nodded.

"But he...Kurt wasn't...that didn't happen, right?" Santana said in a strangled voice.

"No," Brittany quickly said. "He met someone in Spain and they did it." She burst into tears. "Kurty was so happy! He said it was really good and he didn't have any regrets or anything. The only person he told was Artie."

"Artie's over there?" Quinn asked.

Brittany nodded. "He's on his way. Kurt was so upset, Quinn. He was crying, and it was awful. I could barely understand him, he was crying so hard." She collapsed in the chair and stared down at the floor. She then snorted, shaking her head. "Finn overheard him singing a fucking song and then just decided he knew everything and couldn't wait to run and tell."

"What a complete asshole!" Santana thundered.

Brittany sniffled. "Kurt said that Finn made it sound like Kurt had cheated on him or something."

Quinn and Santana stared at her.

"That...makes sense," Quinn said slowly.

"That little fucker," Santana hissed.

Brittany chuckled mirthlessly. "That's not even the worst part."
Quinn's eyes bulged. "How much worse could it get?"

Brittany heaved a tremendous sigh. "As punishment, Kurt has to quit Cheerios and Glee."

Santana shook her head. "No."

"He already called Coach."

Quinn shut her eyes. She could only imagine how that conversation had gone.

"She accepted his resignation," Brittany continued, "and made him Assistant Coach. Quinn, you're captain again, and Santana and me are assistant captains."

"But Kurt was going to be captain!" Santana exploded. "He deserved it! He earned it!"

Quinn nodded. She could take no pleasure in this. She knew the best she could have hoped for was to have been named co-captain with Kurt, and she had been okay with that. She didn't want the headship like this.

Brittany shook her head sadly. "Glee's over. We can't compete at Sectionals with ten members, and there's no way Sammy will join now."

"Goddamn it!" Santana screamed, picking up her old Holly Hobbie and throwing it across the room.

Quinn sat down on the bed, staring off into space. There had to be a way to fix this.

"We're going to make them pay," Brittany vowed. "No one hurts my Kurty."

Santana was already plotting.

"He didn't ask me to do anything," Brittany said, smirking, "but he didn't tell me not to, either."

Santana's raucous laughter filled the room.

"We leave Rachel out of it," Quinn announced.

Brittany nodded. "Kurt said she felt terrible. She was crying. Finn totally played her."

Santana sighed and ground her teeth. "She was just trying to help," she spat, almost against her will, "but she should've asked Tink directly instead of going behind his back."

Quinn nodded. "She probably hasn't even realized what this means for Glee, which just goes to show how upset she is."

Santana shrugged. "Whatever. I don't give a crap about Berry. We won't hurt her, but she's not a part of this, either. She'll second-guess everything and blab about whatever she doesn't like."

"That's fair," Brittany chirped.

Santana set her jaw and shook her head. "Hudson is a piece of shit. Why the fuck should he care who Kurt sleeps with? He hasn't even told Berry that we fucked." She smirked. "I wonder what would happen if she found out?"

Quinn gawped. "You slept with Finn?"

Santana rolled her eyes.
Quinn saw red. She wasn't jealous; far from it. She was angry. Finn was truly an idiot whose double standards ended up hurting everyone but him. "This isn't the first time Finn has pulled something like this in Kurt's house."

Santana's head swiveled so fast, it almost snapped off and rolled under the bed. "Excuse me?"

"What do you know?" Brittany demanded.

Quinn related, with only mild reluctance, the incident that had occurred between the boys in Kurt's basement.

"I'm going to make him suffer," Brittany swore.

Santana's phone began ringing and she sullenly went to retrieve it. "Now who the hell is this?" she asked of no one before accepting the call. "Lopez, here. Start talking."

She winced and held the phone far from her ear as the room was filled with screeching in a language none of them immediately recognized.

"Wow," said a startled Quinn.

"That's Tina!" Brittany happily exclaimed. "Artie must have called her."

"Jesus fuck, Goth Girl," Santana shouted. "I don't even need to know what the hell you're saying to get your drift. I'm impressed." She listened and nodded. "Yeah, he just called Brit." Her eyes widened. "I don't think it's physically possible for Hudson to do that, but I'd sure as hell like to watch while you forced him to try."

She shrugged. "Yeah, come on over. Is Asian Abs with you?" She nodded. "Yeah, okay, I'll order some pizzas. You got the address? Okay. Quinn and Brit are already here. I'll call the Puckhole."

She blinked. "What? Oh, yeah, he's probably scoping out the Peterson thing, whatever the hell that's about. Okay, try him again, and tell him to call Evans. I saw them exchange numbers earlier. Later."

She turned to the others. "They're on their way," she said unnecessarily. "I'm sure we'll think of something."

Quinn smirked. "I already have. We'll consider it Phase One. There's nothing Finn loves more than his popularity, so that has to go."

Santana's grin was positively wolfish. "Spill it."

"Activate the Cheerio Phone Tree. We're going to need some help."

Burt looked away from the muted television and listened carefully as he heard someone pull up in the driveway. He doubted it was Carole; not after the way she had looked at him earlier.

He was having second, third, and fourth thoughts about how he had handled the evening's events. He should have waited to confront Kurt until after dinner, when everyone had gone. He knew his son was intensely private.

He sighed. He had drawn a line in the sand and Kurt had walked away. As angry as he was, he
understood that, and he had to give Kurt credit for not blowing his top and becoming hysterical. Of course, whenever Kurt was cornered, he either tended not to react at all or to make statements guaranteed to inflict maximum emotional damage.

Burt shouldn't have been surprised when Kurt had gone with the latter, and as much as he wanted to believe Kurt's words had been said to manipulate him and instill a guilt trip, he knew his son had meant every word, and it was killing him.

He then heard the familiar beeping which always heralded Artie's arrival in the van. The floodlights snapped on and he heard Artie saying goodnight to Jeffrey.

Burt got up and crossed to the front door, looking out the window, shuddering when Artie paused in his trek to level a glare his way which would have melted scaffolding.

The boy then calmly rolled around the side of the house and disappeared from sight.

Burt sat back down in his chair.

Puck and Azimio pounced on Jacob as soon as the cops hauled Peterson away.

"What do you know, geek?" Puck barked, grabbing the boy by his shirt collar.

"W-What's it to you?" Jacob whimpered, trying and failing to inject some bravado into his words.

"Talk or die," Azimio growled.

Jacob quivered and finally capitulated. "Over fifty counts of possession of child pornography."

Puck released Jacob as if burned by the words. "Peterson's a fucking pedo?" he angrily spat, shaking with rage.

Jacob nodded fearfully before taking the opportunity to escape.

"Fucking perv!" Puck roared, automatically thinking of Beth. "Sick bastard!" He shook his head dumbly as he wondered how he could've missed this, if there were signs he had ignored. But Peterson had a girlfriend! Julie Something-or-Other. Peterson was always bragging about the head she gave. He blinked and looked at Azimio, who was pale and sweaty. "Dude, you okay?"

Azimio opened his mouth but struggled to form words. "He's been in my house," he finally rasped, eyes filled with pain. "I've got a little sister, man."

Puck's own eyes widened. Thank Christ he'd never had Peterson in his own home, because if that miserable piece of shit had laid hands on Grace, Puck would've kill him before the arraignment.

"Jesus! Go home," he advised. "Talk to your parents. You've got to find out if he ever...you need to know, okay? Get her help if she needs it."

Azimio shook his head. "I never thought...it would be this. I thought drugs or something."

Puck stilled and glared. "You know Kurt wouldn't have done this unless he was sure."
Azimio nodded. "I do know." He grimaced. "Fuck, man, we've known Peterson how long?"

"I know," Puck muttered, shaking his head.

"He's been in most of our houses. A lot of us have little brothers and sisters," Azimio continued, sounding as though he were about to burst into tears or vomit up everything he had ever eaten.

"The school will...

Azimio snorted. "Yeah, right. With Figgins in charge?"

Puck winced and then brightened. "Sylvester."

Azimio blinked. "That could work."

Puck nodded. "I'll ask the Princess. He's tight with her." He cocked his head. "Well, as tight as anyone can be with a demon."

"You think he would?"

"I think Peterson ought to be damn glad the Princess went to the cops and not his old man. Burt Hummel is fucking terrifying and owns a shitload of guns."

Azimio stared. "Then why didn't he..."

"Because that's not how the Princess operates. He deals with his own stuff."

The more Azimio found out about Hummel, the more he respected the homo. It was an unsettling and unwelcome feeling, making him rethink a lot of things, as well as wondering what the hell Hummel had on Dave. Was it this bad? Did he not know Dave at all?

He exhaled. "Will you...will you thank him for me?"

Puck shrugged. "Yeah, whatever." He rolled his eyes when his phone went off again. "What the hell does she want?"

"Who?"

"Tina."

"The Goth chick? I thought she was with Chang. You hitting that?"

Puck flushed. "I wouldn't do that to Mike, and Kurt would kick my ass. Tina's one of his best friends. He doesn't put up with that kind of shit. If he'd been friends with Finn before that mess with Quinn, I'd be in a grave."

Azimio nodded, remembering when Hummel had confronted him and Dave over pushing the Goth girl.

"Sup, Gothica?" Puck asked, finally answering the call.

Azimio tilted his head and studied Puck in confusion as the other boy's face went through a rapid cycle of different looks, most of which were pretty damn scary.

Puck finally sighed and closed his eyes. "Yeah, I'll grab Evans and meet you there." He ground his teeth. "Hey, Tina? Thanks for calling me." He dropped his phone back into his pants and curled and

"Who?" Azimio couldn't help but ask.

Puck peered at him speculatively. "Hudson just pulled some major shade on the Princess. And I mean major."

"That was...pretty dumb," Azimio allowed. "Shouldn't he know better?"

Puck snorted. "You'd think, but it'll be okay; he'll get his. He pissed off the wrong person."

"Tina?"

Puck smirked. "Brittany. And where Brittany goes, Satan follows."

Azimio's eyes widened.

"Gotta go. Let me know tomorrow if...Christ, I hope your sis is okay, man. If it were my sister, I'd fucking kill him, and if he touched yours, I'll help you kill him."

Azimio shook his head to clear it. "Thanks, dude." He hesitantly held up a fist.

Puck bumped it and then ran back to his truck.

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Sam was surprised when Puck called him and demanded his address. Despite persistent questioning, Puck refused to tell him the reason he needed the information, only that he should pack an overnight bag and his homework.

Ten minutes later, Puck was on his doorstep and pushing his way inside.

Sam watched in awe as the Puckerman charm was laid on so thick it could be filleted.

Within three minutes, Puck had Sam's parents wrapped around his finger, announcing he had come to kidnap Sam and bring him to a sleepover party the glee club was throwing to welcome him to McKinley. Puck waved away their concerns that Sam might not actually join, claiming that they had already decided Sam belonged to them regardless of whether he signed up.

Worried that this was a feint for Sam to be alone with Kurt, Scott asked if the other boy would be in attendance.

"The Princess has plans with Wheels," Puck said, much to Sam's disappointment. "Some nerd thing, I guess. They're probably going to do their homework for the next month."

Savannah laughed and Scott calmed down. Puck then flirted harmlessly with Stacy and soon had her giggling and blushing before proceeding to throw Stevie around like a football, to the shrieking boy's delight.

"Here's Santana's number," Puck added, pressing a piece of paper into Savannah's hand. "I'll take Sam to school tomorrow."

The Evans parents, who now believed their fears to be groundless, pushed a confused Sam out of the
After they climbed in to Puck's truck, Sam demanded an explanation.

"Hudson totally fucked up Kurt's life tonight. Santana's taking him down tomorrow. Are you in?"

"All the way."

Puck strolled into Santana's mansion like he owned it, calling greetings to her parents, who replied with salutations of their own, though her father's were more akin to grumbling.

He led Sam up the massive stairway and stormed down the wing which housed Santana's suite.

Sam couldn't help but stare at, well, everything.

"Pizzas are on the way," Santana announced, throwing open her door and ushering them inside. She looked at Sam. "Did the Puckhole fill you in, Hot Lips?" she asked carefully.

Sam nodded, flushing. "Just the basics."

He was jealous that Kurt had slept with someone and knew he was being ridiculous. He didn't own Kurt, had no claim on him, and the whole thing sounded like a fling which was definitely over. He didn't want to believe Finn could have done something so unbelievably douchetastic, especially to his future stepbrother, but he did believe it.

"Status?" he asked.

Santana smirked. "Glad to have you onboard. Brit and Q are marshalling forces. Tina's devising strategy. The rest of us are finishing up our homework. Have you done yours?"

"Most of it," Sam said, noticeably uncomfortable.

"I'll help you with the rest," Puck said.

Santana blinked in surprise. "You will?" She then shrugged. "Oh, yeah. You're friends or something. Whatever. You're smart."

Puck wanted to thank her, but he didn't, because she would have slapped him.

"Put your stuff over there," Santana directed Sam. "I have sleeping bags and air mattresses. Mike will fill you in on everything that went down."

Sam nodded and followed orders.

"You really think the Cheerios can take care of Hudson?" Puck muttered to her.

She smirked. "Oh, you better believe it. It's not just the girls this time. See, the Cheerio boys all like Kurt. That hot ass won us a national victory, not to mention he helps them all with their homework and pathetic love lives. They didn't know half the shit he's had to put up with, but they do now, and they're itching for some payback. You don't fuck with Cheerios."
Puck grinned. This could actually work.

"And then there's the additional ammunition we have on Hudson," she purred.

He quirked a brow.

"I screwed him last term and he lied to Berry about it."

Puck burst out laughing, feeling the urge to rub his hands together like some cartoon villain.

"And this isn't the first time Hudson has ambushed Tink," she added, her face closed off.

He frowned as she told him about the argument in the basement. He wished he could have been more surprised.

"And Hummel Senior knew about that and pulled this shit anyway?" an outraged Puck demanded.

Santana nodded solemnly.

Puck shook his head and blew out a breath. "What are we going to do about Glee?"

"I really don't know," she whispered. "We might not be able to save it."

"Fuck," he growled, scrubbing his face with a hand.

"What happened with Peterson?" Tina suddenly called out. "I've been obsessively checking Jewfro's blog, but he hasn't posted anything yet."

At once, everyone quieted down and waited for an answer.

Puck curled his lip. "He's a goddamn pedophile," he hissed.

Several small explosions then took place, Santana's being the loudest.

Puck locked eyes with Quinn and knew she too was thinking of Beth and wondering how the hell anyone could look at a kid and think about...that. They both shuddered.

"Azimio was there, too," he quietly added. "He's got a little sister. Peterson's been to his house. A lot."

"Damn," Mike whispered, shaking his head.

Santana stared at Brittany, who was sitting in a corner and smirking. "You set this up."

Everyone's eyes were suddenly on the girl in question.

"Why would you think that?" Brittany asked sweetly.

Santana snorted. "Because you were smirking like that during lunch, and then again after Glee, when Azimio talked to Tink. You're responsible for this." She threw back her head and cackled.

Brittany smiled. "I may have heard Peterson trash-talking me and Kurt because I kissed him in homeroom. Then I might have started a rumor that Peterson called me retarded, knowing that it would eventually get back to Kurty. I might have known how he would react to said rumor and how he would respond." She buffed her nails on her skirt. "But I didn't know what Peterson had actually done."
"You're brilliant," Tina whispered, awe plain in her voice.

Brittany nodded. "I know."
Kurt awoke early the next morning, momentarily confused when he realized someone was holding him very tightly. He frowned. What was poking at his hip? Was that a...

"Artie," he hissed.

"Expecto Patronum," Artie sleepily gurgled.

Kurt couldn't help it; he burst out laughing.

Artie immediately startled awake. "Is it Dementors?"

"Happy memory, Arthur?" Kurt purred.

Artie rolled his eyes and shoved Kurt away. Unfortunately, Kurt fell to the floor, dragging the comforter and most of the top sheet with him.

"Watch what you're doing with that wand, Artie," Kurt said, still laughing.

"Oh, god, Kurt, I'm so sorry!" Artie trilled, fumbling for his glasses, which were just out of reach on the end table.

"It's okay, Artie," Kurt snickered. "Really." He shot to his feet and darted around the bed, handing the other boy his glasses.

"Um, good morning?" Artie said bashfully. "Sorry about, uh, you know."

Kurt waved a hand toward his left hip and glared. "I think you dented it."

Artie colored darkly but rallied. "Well, you know what they say: with great power comes great responsibility."

Kurt shook his head, his laughter renewing itself. "That doesn't even make sense! And you were dangerously close to coming with great irresponsibility."

Artie groaned and covered his face with his hands.

"I suppose it's a good thing I won't be holding that sleepover," Kurt said, vastly amused. "Imagine if it had been Santana you had awakened."

Huge, horrified eyes peeked out between Artie's fingers.

Kurt plopped down on the bed and ran his fingers through Artie's hair, smiling when the other boy leaned up into the touch. "Tina or Brittany?" he asked quietly, no judgment in his voice.

"Tina," Artie softly admitted. "I know I shouldn't..."

"You can't help what you feel, Artie," said a gentle Kurt. "I'm sure Brittany finds herself in a similar predicament with Santana. Just make sure you treat her well. You're my best friend; I'd really hate to have to kill you."
"You'd put Brittany before me?" Artie squawked indignantly, mock-glaring.

Kurt patted his shoulder. "I'd pick out a really nice headstone for you."

Artie laughed and pushed him away. "How are you doing?" he asked carefully.

Kurt shrugged. "I don't even know how to answer that question. I probably won't for a very long time."

Artie nodded.

"Do you have to go to the bathroom?" Kurt asked.

Artie nodded again, averting his eyes and blushing.

"Hey," Kurt said, placing a finger underneat Artie's chin and forcing the other boy to look at him. "What's that about? This is us. There's no shame or embarrassment here. Do you not remember how I sobbed like a little girl into your shoulder for most of the night?"

"You had every right," Artie hissed. "What they did..." he trailed off, angrily shaking his head.

"Is not even worth mentioning," Kurt finished. "I refuse to let them have that much power over me." He rose to his feet, and then bent and scooped Artie up into his arms.

Artie placed the back of his hand on his forehead. "Oh, you big, strong man!" he exclaimed in a swooning voice.

Kurt leered down at him and began walking toward the bathroom.

"You can put me in the chair, you know," Artie mumbled.

"I could," Kurt said, "but I don't want to. Last night I realized how much I missed you this summer, and since I can't fawn all over you at school, I choose to do so now."

Artie rolled his eyes once more, but smiled and clung to Kurt just a little more tightly than was necessary.

Their morning ablutions took a while to coordinate and complete, as Kurt had to help Artie bathe. To save time, they shared the shower, although Artie had insisted on wearing his boxer shorts; he'd always been a little insecure by how large Kurt was down there.

Kurt had shrugged, made sure Artie was secure on the toilet, and then went to the cabinet to remove the shower chair he kept stowed away for when Artie slept over. He set it up in the stall before settling the boy into it.

Then, without any compunction whatsoever, Kurt stepped out of his sleep clothes and joined Artie in the shower.

Artie was struck by how normal it was for them. There was no awkwardness or wandering eyes; indeed, there was almost a clinical detachment about the entire matter. Artie wondered why the jocks
would get so flustered whenever Kurt was in the locker room. Kurt certainly wasn't a pervert, nor was he embarrassed by his own body. The jocks showered together all the time, but because Kurt was gay, they feared for their virtue. Idiots.

Artie snorted and shook his head, before groaning and going boneless when Kurt began shampooing his hair. "You could do this for a living."

Kurt laughed. "I'm not that much of a stereotype, am I?"

He really wasn't, in Artie's opinion. Sure, Kurt was fabulous and everything, but he wasn't a caricature. It depressed him that more people didn't realize that, that they were so willing to dismiss Kurt as nothing more than clothes and a sharp wit, just as people only saw the chair when they looked at him.

"Tell me what's going on with you and Brittany," Kurt said.

Artie grimaced and didn't immediately answer, tilting his head as Kurt rinsed his hair and applied the conditioner. "I don't really know," he finally said. "You know we slept together, but I don't think it meant as much to her as it did to me."

"Stereotyping," Kurt said in a warning voice. "Don't assume that just because Brittany isn't a virgin that she's wanton."

Chastened, Artie dropped his head.

"Have you actually discussed it with her?" Kurt asked, already knowing the answer.

"No," Artie quietly admitted.

Kurt curled his fingers around Artie's shoulder. "Don't make the same mistakes you made with Tina, Artie," he said. "Don't do her thinking for her."

Artie sighed and nodded.

"Talk to her," Kurt advised. "Brittany's a smart girl, but that doesn't mean she's not insecure. She could be feeling just as unsure as you. Maybe she thinks she's nothing more to you than a Tina substitute."

"That's not true," Artie hotly denied.

"I know," Kurt said gently, "but she might not."

Artie accepted the loofah and bodywash from Kurt and began soaping himself up. "She loves Santana."

Kurt nodded. "And you love Tina, but that's not the issue at hand. As it stands, you two are in a relationship of sorts, and it's up to the both of you as to how you want to define it. Promise me you'll talk to her."

Artie nodded. "I will, I promise."

Kurt nodded happily and began rinsing himself off.

"What about you?" Artie suddenly asked.

"What about me?" Kurt blankly repeated.
"Well," Artie began, shuffling restlessly, "how was it?"

The corners of Kurt's mouth turned upward. "It was wonderful," he murmured.

"So no regrets?"

"None whatsoever."

Artie fidgeted. "Did it, um, did it hurt?" His eyes widened. "I mean, are you okay?"

Kurt snickered. "Arthur, is this your indelicate way of asking if I was the bottom?"

Artie blinked. "Weren't you?"

"Stereotyping!" Kurt snapped, slapping Artie upside his head.

"Watch it, Gibbs," Artie grumbled, though he blushed. "Yeah, okay, I'm sorry. That was pretty obnoxious."

Kurt nodded. "Indeed. However, since you're the one asking, I don't mind telling you. Yes, I bottomed, but so did he."

"Woo! Go, Kurt!"

"Artie!"

"Aw, come on!" Artie whined. "That means you were hitting it on the regular, at least for a little while! I want to know!"

Kurt's lips twitched. "That's somewhat gay of you."

Artie waved a dismissive hand. "Oh, whatever. If you were straight and had lost it to a girl, I'd still want details. Of course, I probably wouldn't threaten to kill her if she hurt you, and I'm kind of annoyed I won't be able to threaten your Big Summer Lover."

Kurt smirked. "And he was quite big."

Artie choked.

"Still want to know everything?" Kurt cooed. "Gay TMI?"

Artie soured and rolled his eyes. "Look, I'll admit it's a little...weird, but only because I was taken by surprise. We're no longer virgins, and, okay, maybe it seems kind of out there, but I just assumed we'd be there for each other when something that major happened. I mean, I guess I always thought that, when we finally had significant others, we'd go on double dates and stuff. I'd be able to check out your boyfriend and make sure he was good enough for you and growl at him to remind him how lucky he was."

Kurt flushed, touched, and shut off the water and stepped out of the shower and into his robe. He grabbed a pile of freshly-laundered towels, laid them on the sink, and then picked up Artie in the chair and brought it out into the bathroom proper, handing the other boy a couple of the towels.

"He was, you know," Kurt said quietly. "Good enough for me, I mean. He's a good man, Artie. He was very kind to me."

Artie swallowed nervously. "He didn't hurt you or anything? He was gentle?"
Kurt nodded. "We both were. He'd never slept with a man before, either."

"You mean you converted one? Well, if anyone could, it would be you."

Kurt snapped a towel at Artie's head. "Bitch, please."

Artie laughed and rubbed his head roughly with the towel, causing his hair to stand on end. He quickly sobered. "He was older than you, wasn't he?"

Kurt stilled and turned to face him. "How did you know?"

Artie shrugged. "Honestly? It just makes sense. I mean, come on, Kurt, you're more mature than most adults we know. You were an adult when we were kids!" He shook his head. "I never understood your fascination with Finn, because he's pretty much a little girl in an overgrown man's body. I guess I always saw you with someone older, more settled and sure of himself."

"He was a few years older than me, yes," Kurt allowed, before sighing. "Artie, I know we tell each other everything, and I'm not averse to sharing a few details, but this is something I'd prefer to keep as private as possible."

He cocked his head. "It all happened so quickly, but it was so far removed from anything I've ever experienced. It was like he and I were in our own world, safe from everyone who might wish to judge or condemn us." He smiled softly. "And it was perfect. He was perfect. Then it was over and we went our separate ways, but we were better people for having loved each other."

Artie regarded him with wide eyes, feeling vaguely jealous. Kurt had lost his virginity to someone he actually loved. His own encounter with Brittany, of whom he was very fond, had been awkward and nerve-wracking, at least for him. He had been nervous and confused and unsure, and had had to rely on her for almost everything. What Kurt was describing was practically a fantasy, something out of a romance novel, which was a little obnoxious. He stifled a sigh. He didn't begrudge Kurt his happiness, but he wished his own experience had been similar.

"And they tried to take that from me," Kurt then whispered, his voice sad. He looked up at Artie with large, hurt eyes. "Why doesn't my happiness ever matter, Artie? Why can't I have something of my own?"

Artie's fury reignited and his jaws flexed.

In the next instant, Kurt shook off his maudlin mood and smiled brightly. "Breakfast!"

Thankfully, Burt had already left for the shop by the time the boys made it upstairs. Kurt whipped himself into a frenzy and soon had breakfast on the table.

"I don't know why we have to get to school so early," Artie groused, devouring the whole wheat pancakes even while he frowned. They shouldn't have tasted so good, he was sure. Curse Kurt and his wicked chef skills. Sneaky evil gays and their healthy food fetishes.

"I need to meet with Ms. Pillsbury," Kurt explained. "I'm going to have to choose another class or I'll fall beneath the required credit level."

Artie glared. Now Finn was fucking with Kurt's grades! He cleared his throat. "Please don't get angry, but I sort of told Tina about what happened."

"I'm not angry," Kurt said, amused by Artie's sigh of relief. "Oh, honestly, Artie! What did you think I would do to you?" He shook his head. "After we got off the phone, I called and spoke with Matt. It was nice, talking to someone who knew the players but wasn't involved in the situation. He just let me vent. He's a good guy." He shrugged. "Besides, I figured he would most likely tell Mike, who would tell Tina."

He swallowed a slug of coffee. "I'm not keeping secrets, Artie. I couldn't even if I tried. We both know that, sooner or later, either Finn, Mercedes, or both of them will spill the beans in order to try and justify their behavior. People are going to notice that I'm off Cheerios and out of Glee. The best I can hope for is to try and limit the damage."

"You know you have no reason to be ashamed," Artie said sharply.

Kurt smiled and nodded. "I do know, but I appreciate you saying it."

"Any idea what class you're going to take?"

"I was thinking about the Shakespeare seminar."

Artie gave him a sly look. "That wouldn't be because Sam is in the class, would it?"

Kurt blushed lightly. "It's not the only reason, but it is one I considered."

"Do you like him?"

"I like him very much, but not in a romantic sense. Aside from you, and now Noah, I don't have any male friends." He hummed. "There's Matt, I suppose, but he's no longer here."

"What about Mike?" asked a hesitant Artie.

Kurt nodded. "I'm glad you brought him up. I would like to be friends with Mike, but I don't know if that will happen. If it does, you know he could never replace you."

Artie ducked his head shyly. "I know, but I appreciate you saying it."

Kurt laughed but soon turned quiet. "I'd forgotten what this was like," he said, "being able to choose my own friends and not worrying about how...other people would react."

Artie soured. "I never liked her."

Kurt sighed, knowing the words were true; though Artie had never said anything against Mercedes, to those who knew him well, his disdain was apparent. "She has her good qualities, Artie. This is as much my fault as it hers. I knew she had a crush on me, but I'd fooled myself into thinking it had been resolved. I should have been more clear. I now better understand why Finn was so frustrated with me last year."

Artie snorted. "I don't know how much more clear I'm gay could be, and do not even get me started on Finn."

Kurt waved away that particular topic, not wishing to dwell on it more than necessary. He'd have to face the results of last night soon enough. "I don't want you to tell anyone, but I might have a plan to save Glee."
Artie blinked in confusion before realization set in. "I can't believe that didn't even occur to me. Without you, we're down to ten members, and I really doubt Sam will want to join now."

"I'll talk to him," Kurt promised, "but I can't make any guarantees. After Rachel, the fight between Noah and Finn, and now this, I don't blame him for not wanting to walk through a minefield."

Artie nodded ruefully. "So what are you planning?"

"I'm not willing to say at the moment," Kurt replied. "I don't even know if it will work, and I don't want to get anyone's hopes up. I will try, though."

"It's more than most of them deserve."

Kurt clicked his tongue. "This is between Finn, Mercedes, and myself. I won't let the rest of the club suffer if I can avoid it."

Artie scoffed. "You're a better person than me. You don't owe us anything, Kurt."

"There's nothing I wouldn't do for you, Artie, or for Tina and Brittany."

"And Quinn and Santana?" Artie asked, smiling.

Kurt nodded. "Them, as well. None of them asked for this, and they're in no way responsible."

Artie fidgeted. "I'm a little surprised," he admitted. "A few months ago, you would have been itching for revenge."

"I probably would have been," Kurt agreed, "but revenge is ultimately hollow. It won't change what's happened, so what's the point?"

Artie curled a lip. "You're all grown and shit. It's kind of gross."

Kurt laughed.

Sam awoke on the floor of Santana's bedroom floor with Puck's face buried in his neck.

Okay, yeah, Puck was totally hot, and Sam liked him as a friend and everything, but there was such a thing as too much togetherness.

"Dude."

Puck whimpered in his sleep and said something which suspiciously sounded like Kurt's name.

"Puck!"

"Unicorns!" Puck exclaimed, sitting straight up.

Sam's eyes widened. He then startled when hysterical laughter erupted to his right. He hesitantly looked in that direction and blushed as Quinn and Brittany cooed at him.

"They're so adorable," Quinn bleated, hearts in her eyes.
Brittany frowned. "No, they're hot, not adorable. Adorable is Sammy and Kurty."

"Word," Santana said absently, as she pouted her lips at her mirror before deciding she didn't particularly care for that shade of lipstick after all.

"Leave Sam alone," said a cranky Tina.

Mike snickered. "Come on, T. They were both saying Kurt's name in their sleep."

Puck and Sam's mouths simultaneously fell open in horror. They then involuntarily looked at each other, blushed, and quickly looked away.

"Hevans!" Brittany exclaimed.

"Puckurt!" a laughing Quinn insisted, just to be contrary.

"What about Kartie?" asked a sly Santana.

"That would be hot and adorable," Brittany declared. "Then I could finally get my threesome." She then rose and skipped off toward the bathroom.

"I guess the cat's out of the bag," Puck angrily muttered.

"Hey!" Santana barked. "No one here cares, Puckerman. If you like Tink, you like Tink. We're like honey badgers; we don't give a shit." Her eyes turned flinty. "But if you hurt him, there won't be a rock I won't overturn to find your ass and kick it."

Sam grimaced at her almost tacit permission for Puck to pursue Kurt.

"I don't even know if I like him," Puck mumbled, somewhat belligerently. "I mean, sure, I like him. He's the Princess, you know? He's awesome." He sighed and shook his head. "This is so weird. I don't understand what's happening."

Sam felt a modicum of pity work its way into his heart. "Puck only realized yesterday that he can be friends with Kurt without actually having to date him."

The others stared at him, and then at Puck, completely bewildered.

"Puck," Mike said slowly, "you do know that we're your friends." He blinked. "Don't you?"

Puck shrugged. "Don't know why you'd want to be. I'm not exactly friend material."

Santana looked away. His low self-esteem was reflecting her own, and she didn't need that particular mirror.

"That was true last year," Quinn agreed, "and the years before, but it's not so now. You're a different person, Puck. It took a lot of character to go and apologize to Kurt the way you did. I don't know if I could do that with Rachel. Maybe you're just confusing gratitude and appreciation with liking him that way."

Puck frowned and slowly nodded. "That makes sense. I've never really had a friend like him before. I mean, Finn..."

They all growled at the mention of that name.

"Forget Finn," Mike snapped.
"I'd like to," Puck said, sighing, "but it's not that easy. I wasn't a good friend to him. I mean, is this what I've turned him into? Is it my fault he's become such a douche? The Finn I knew would never have done this to the Princess."

"Maybe you never knew him at all," Tina gently suggested, coming to sit beside him.

"That's what scares me, you know?" Puck asked, shaking his head, eyes wide. "We've been best friends since we were in fucking Pull-Ups, but I never saw this coming. I mean, sure, I knew he could get angry like a boss, but this just isn't him."

"Or maybe he just hid it really well," Sam said. "I know he was friends with all of you, but I don't share your history with him. I met him just yesterday and I pretty much thought he was a jackass right off."

"It would be fun to blame Berry," Santana sniped, "but I don't think she's responsible either. And you got it wrong, Hot Lips. I never liked Hudson. He's always reeked of weakness and banality."

"Yet you slept with him?" Quinn asked.

Santana shrugged. "His virginity was offensive."

"I wonder how Carole reacted to all of this," Quinn said.

"She was furious, according to Kurt," Brittany announced as she sashayed back in to the room. "I guess she really likes him."

Quinn nodded. "That makes sense. They're very much alike, just as Finn and Kurt's father are."

"You know," Puck began, "Hudson thought the Princess engineered that match just to get closer to him."

"He did," Tina said, "but he didn't plan on it actually working. Even Kurt's not that good. Also, he genuinely likes Mrs. Hudson. He'd tell me if he didn't, and I've never heard him say a bad word about her."

"So what's the story, Hot Lips?" Santana demanded. "You want to hit that?"

"Back off," Tina warned her. "No pushing."

Santana frowned, unused to being challenged by the girl.

"It's okay, Tina," Sam said softly.

"You don't have to explain yourself or your feelings to anyone," said a suddenly defensive Puck.

Sam shrugged. "There's not much point in hiding. You all could just Google it to find out."

"Find out what?" asked a frowning Brittany.

Sam sighed and looked at Tina and Puck. "Remember when I told you yesterday that I wasn't ready to be in a relationship?"

They nodded.

"Bad breakup?" Quinn asked.
"Not exactly," Sam said, flushing. "I had problems at my last school."

"Just so we're clear," Santana interrupted, "what's your rainbow status? If you even have one."

Sam rolled his eyes. "Bisexual. Yes, Kurt knows, and so do Puck and Tina."

Santana nodded. "Okay."

Sam blinked. "That's it?"

The others nodded.

"Well, sure," said a perplexed Quinn. "We don't care. I mean, we care, but about you, not that you're bisexual."

"You...care...about me," Sam slowly repeated.

Brittany nodded. "Because Kurty does. You're important to him, so you're important to us. Once we get to know you better, we'll care about you all on your own."

Sam colored darkly. "I'm not...used to that. I mean, I had a lot of friends at Lincoln, but we were never really close, you know what I mean?"

"Sure," Mike said. "We all have friends like that, but Glee is different."

"I'm not in Glee."

"That doesn't matter," Tina said. "You're our friend, Sam."

Sam hastily blinked back the tears forming in his eyes.

"Dude," Puck said gently, "what happened?"

Sam fidgeted and released a slow breath. "Last year, I was dating this guy, Caleb. We were together for most of sophomore year."

Quinn and Brittany immediately flocked to his side.

"I...before that, I dated a girl, Miranda, in freshman year. She was cool. With the whole bi thing, I mean. When we broke up, it wasn't because I liked boys or that anything bad happened. We had just...run our course."

They all nodded.

Sam cleared his throat. "Anyway, I started going out with Caleb that summer and it was great. We had a lot in common and really liked each other." He stared off into space. "There was this guy at school. I never knew him, didn't even know his name. There were a thousand kids just in my grade alone, so that wasn't unusual. Lots of us didn't share classes or clubs or anything."

Quinn nodded and took his hand.

"Around Christmastime," Sam continued, "I started getting these weird notes in my locker. I thought they were a joke at first, but then the notes turned became presents. Little things, mostly, but stuff that was obviously picked out for me, like whoever it was knew what I liked."

Santana pursed her lips, getting a bad feeling about where this was going.
"I thought my friends were playing a prank on me," Sam said, shaking his head, "but they weren't." He bit his lip and sighed again. "The gifts got weirder the longer it went on. Dead flowers and bugs, pictures of me with my eyes gouged out, and a rubbing from my grandpa's headstone."

"That's fucking sick," Puck hissed.

"Caleb really tried to help, but it was freaking him out, too, especially because he started getting notes."

"To stay away from you?" Mike guessed.

Sam nodded. "It all stopped right after Valentine's Day. Caleb and I went to the dance together and it was awesome. Then there were no more notes or gifts and everything was fine for a few weeks." He hesitated and looked down at his hands. "Right before Spring Break, I was in the locker room after a game. I was the only one there, because I had messed up my shoulder during a basketball play and wanted to soak in the hot tub. Everyone else had already gone."

His eyes took on a faraway and fearful look.

"He just appeared in front of me," he whispered. "I didn't know who he was or where he had come from. I didn't even know if he was a student at the school. I'm sitting there in my fucking jock wondering what's going on, and he just kept staring at me." He shuddered.

"Jesus," Santana murmured.

"I...I didn't understand," Sam said. "I didn't know what he wanted. Then he asked me if I had enjoyed his gifts and I started to freak out." His eyes found the floor. "That's when he pulled out the gun."

"Holy fuck," breathed a wide-eyed Puck.

"Oh, god, Sam," Quinn warbled, tears rolling down her face.

"He just...started talking. Raving, I guess you'd call it," Sam said, his voice devoid of any emotion. "He kept telling me how much he loved me and how he'd been watching me since seventh grade. He knew my car, where I lived, my brother and sister's names, where my parents worked." He shook his head. "I didn't know what to say. I didn't know what to do. I just sat there like a tool."

"Sam, what could you have done?" Mike quietly asked. "The guy had a gun."

Sam didn't hear him, nor did he register Brittany clinging to him. "He told me that it had been okay when I was with Miranda, because she was a girl and that meant he couldn't have me, but when I started going out with Caleb..."

"He thought you should be his," Santana said.

Sam gave a jerky nod. "He was so angry. I've never seen anyone that angry. He turned so red, and spittle was flying with every word. All I could think of was that, as much as he said he loved me, he really hated me. And I didn't even know his name."

He shifted uncomfortably. "He...he leaned over and he..." Sam swallowed painfully. "He put the gun to my head."

Tina gasped and her hands flew to cover her mouth.
"He dragged it down in my face," Sam recalled, mimicking the action with a finger. "He called me all sorts of names, stuff I'd never even heard the really bad kids say, and he told me...everything he wanted to do to me, how he had followed me on Caleb on dates and imagined I was with him, how he wrote stories about the two of us together, how he...touched himself when he thought of me. How he had planned it, bought supplies, how he thought he could make me love him."

"Sick," Mike muttered, shaking his head.

"I told him that I loved Caleb, because I thought I did. I mean, I did love him, as much as I knew what that was." He bit his lip. "It was a stupid thing to say."

"What did he do to you?" Brittany whispered.

Sam shook his head. "Not that. He told me I wasn't worth that. How I was soiled and dirty and wasn't worthy of his love anymore because I'd given myself away." He blushed. "That, uh, wasn't true. I mean, I've never..."

"Understood," Santana said softly.

Sam cleared his throat. "He told me that I wasn't worth anything and that my mom should've grabbed a knitting needle when she found out she was having me."

Quinn choked out a sob.

"He said the best thing he could do was to let me live, so that I would always remember that moment. How much I had hurt him when he loved me so much, how no one would ever love me as much as he did. How he knew that I would break up with Caleb. How he would always haunt me. That was his final revenge, he said. I'd never be able to be with another guy without thinking of him." Sam closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Then he put the gun in his mouth and pulled the trigger."

At that point, Mike and even Santana had come to sit with him on the floor.

"I didn't even know his name," Sam dully repeated.

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Rachel was nervous and depressed at the breakfast table and her fathers were well aware of it. They knew when their daughter was in fight-or-flight mode, however, and decided not to press her on whatever might be bothering her, acknowledging it would be better if she told them herself. So they watched as she fussed about and opened and closed her mouth several times, punctuating the action with sighs of exasperation.

Leroy had had just about enough and opened his mouth to demand answers, despite the warning glances from Hiram.

"I think Finn's in love with Kurt," Rachel suddenly blurted.

Leroy abruptly closed his mouth with an audible lack of teeth while Hiram settled for simply staring at their daughter.

Rachel then launched into an encapsulated summary of last night's events, which only served to
Hiram slowly shook his head, trying to clear the cobwebs from his mind, eyes filled with disbelief that his daughter had taken part in such a farce. Regardless of her intentions, she had crossed a line.

"Honey," he said carefully, "what the hell were you thinking?"

She flinched and looked down at her plate. "I really don't know."

Leroy, meanwhile, was focused on Finn's role in this drama. "I don't know if I believe that Finn is in love with Kurt," he said slowly, "but he certainly seems to be possessive of the boy."

Rachel nodded. "He gets like that, jealous and demanding of the people around him."

"You do realize that's not a good thing?"

She nodded. "I know," she said softly. "There's a lot I've willingly overlooked about him, just as he's overlooked things about me, but I don't know how we're going to come back from this."

"With good reason," Hiram said, nodding. "From everything you've told us about him, he's a very private person, and this was a gross invasion of that privacy. I understand your intentions, sweetheart, and I know you just wanted to make sure he was safe, but you really jumped the gun on this and I can't comprehend why. It certainly sounds like Finn manipulated you into this confrontation, but I have difficulty understanding how you allowed that to happen."

"I don't know, either," she said in a dull voice. She paused. "I think...I think maybe part of me wanted to see Kurt hurt."

Leroy sucked in a sharp breath. "That still doesn't explain your behavior. Wanting and doing are two very different things. I know you and Kurt have always had a rivalry between you, one that perhaps is sometimes unhealthy, but you've carried it too far." He raised a brow. "Do you really think he would have done the same to you?"

"No," she murmured, eyes welling. "Kurt can be mean, and we've never really gotten along, but, no, if the situation had been reversed, he wouldn't have done to me what I did to him."

"Then you must apologize," Hiram insisted. "I know you did so last night, but that was in the heat of the moment. You need to tell him again, after a night's contemplation, that you truly are sorry for your part in this."

She nodded. "I will. I just hope he'll talk to me. He said last night that he accepted my apology, but maybe that won't still be true today."

"That's a chance you have to take," Leroy said dispassionately. "There's no absolution without restitution."

She sighed and nodded again.

"And what about Finn?" Hiram asked. In truth, he had never really been comfortable around the boy, who always appeared to be walking on eggshells whenever he was in their home. Perhaps now there was an explanation for his behavior.
Rachel restlessly drummed her nails on the table. "I honestly don't know," she finally said. "Kurt's one of those topics both of us tend to avoid." She pursed her lips. "I'm pretty sure something happened between them last term." Her eyes widened. "Not like that!" she rushed to add. "Something bad. A fight or something. I'm not sure."

She dropped her chin in her hands. "Last night Kurt told me that there were things about Finn I didn't know," she said, voice hushed. "I think he felt that I should know, but he wouldn't tell me because he said it wasn't his place to do so, that I'd have to ask Finn."

"I think that's commendable of him," Hiram said.

She nodded. "Kurt really does have a lot of integrity. He has slips on occasion, but, in general, he's a lot kinder than most people I know, despite how horribly he's treated." She blinked. "Did I tell you how he's blackmailing all of the jocks?"

Her fathers' brows almost shot off their foreheads.

She quickly explained the situation.

Hiram and Leroy were reluctantly impressed. They didn't condone extortion, but they understood all too well the trials and tribulations Kurt Hummel had been forced to endure. He had found a nonviolent yet surefire method to control his tormentors, one that had cost him a lot of time and money, and he had extended the peace he had been afforded to the rest of the glee club.

They wondered, however, if that peace would last past this morning. They were sure that Kurt must have been debating revoking certain people from the protected class.

Leroy frowned. "I still can't believe Mercedes did this," he said, thunderstruck. He had always appreciated the girl's talent and felt somewhat of a kinship with her because of their shared race.

"She's in love with him," Rachel said quietly, shrugging.

Hiram grimaced. He'd been through a similar situation in college and didn't look back on it with any fondness. He'd lost a very good friend, and he sincerely hoped that Kurt and Mercedes would find some way to reconcile.

"Are you sure?" Leroy pressed his daughter. "Or is she just possessive of him, like Finn?"

Rachel considered the question for a very long time. "I guess I don't really know," she finally said. "All of us are somewhat possessive of Kurt." She rolled her shoulders. "Even though he and I are not friends, we've had our moments. We look out for each other when it really matters. The most he and I have ever shared is a rivalry, and while it hasn't always been friendly, we have a relationship of sorts."

"You make him sound as though he's a mascot," Hiram said evenly.

She flushed. "I guess, in some ways, he is. Even when he's driving you crazy, you still feel a need to protect him. Even when you're not his friend, you still want to be around him. When you see how devoted he is to his friends, you want to be one of them. He's very...charismatic. Love him or hate him, you can't help but be drawn towards him."

Leroy raised a brow. "And how do you think the rest of the glee club is going to react to this?"

Rachel blanched. "I didn't even think about that. I'm sure he's told some of them." Her mind raced. "Artie and Tina, definitely. He's been best friends with them for as long as anyone can remember.
Brittany adores him and can be really, really scary where he's concerned. She usually gets along with everyone, she doesn't let much bother her, but Kurt is one of her few weak spots." She shook her head. "I can't even imagine what Quinn or, even worse, Santana will do."

Leroy and Hiram exchanged a look. The exploits of Santana Lopez were well known to the entire town.

"Then you should prepare yourself," Hiram advised. "You could very well be walking into a warzone this morning."

"I didn't start anything last night," Carole said, "because I wanted cooler heads to prevail and to allow myself the opportunity to sleep on everything that happened." She paused. "That said, what in the hell was that about?"

Finn stared at his plate of waffles and said nothing.

"Are you in love with him?" she demanded. "No lying or dancing around the subject, either, Finn. This is something we need to discuss. If you have romantic feelings for Kurt, I need to know, and I need to know now."

"I don't know," he whispered.

She gathered a breath and slowly released it. It was a better answer than she had thought she might receive. "Figure it out. Burt and I are engaged, Finn. If you're in love with the boy who will end up being your stepbrother, it's something we need to take into consideration."

"I don't know!" he bellowed.

She slammed her hands down on the table. "Don't take that tone of voice with me, young man! Now, you listen to me: I've excused a lot of your behavior this past year. I know that everything that happened with Quinn and Noah and the baby hit you hard, and I'm sorry for that. I truly am. However, that does not give you the right to decimate Kurt's life whenever you're dissatisfied with your own."

"I didn't mean to!" he wailed.

"Oh, yes, you did," she snapped. "Don't even try to play the victim here, Finn. You knew exactly what you were doing last night. You were only shocked that Kurt didn't rise to your baiting." She shook her head. "Frankly, I'm surprised, as well. Obviously, he's grown up."

"And I haven't," Finn muttered.

"Apparently not!" she exclaimed. "Are you really going to sit there and try to blame Kurt for what you did?"

He opened his mouth and then closed it.

"Smart," she said, nodding. "If you think for one moment that you're getting out of this, think again. What you did last night was inexcusable. You had absolutely no right to run tattling to Burt, especially considering that you don't know even if anything happened!"
"I do know," he insisted. "I know Kurt. He slept with someone. He would have just denied it if he hadn't."

"But how is it any of your business?" she demanded. "After all of the nonsense you pulled last term, how dare you sit there and act like the injured party? This is the second time you've attacked him in his own home! So what if Kurt slept with someone? It's not your concern!"

"I need to protect him!"

"From what?"

"I...I..." He shook his head frantically, unable to communicate what he was feeling.

She sighed and rubbed her temples. "You have to deal with this, Finn. You should know that if you're gay or bisexual or whatever, I could care less, I will support you, but you simply cannot treat people this way because you're confused."

"I'm not..."

"You very well could have destroyed Kurt's relationship with his father. I want you to think about that. I want you to think about how you would feel if Kurt had come into this house and spilled all of your secrets to me, things you believe that I don't know about. What if Kurt had waltzed in here last night with two of his friends and announced to Rachel and myself that you slept with Santana last term?"

Finn's eyes widened to unfathomable proportions and he began hyperventilating.

She raised a brow. "Didn't think I knew about that, did you? I can only assume Rachel doesn't. You do realize that you're a complete hypocrite, don't you? You're very lucky Kurt didn't call you on the carpet for it. Who are you to judge the actions of others when they're no different from your own? In fact, yours are worse. Kurt didn't do anything but mind his own business; you're lying to your girlfriend about your sexual history. You have these ridiculous double standards for people and then lash out when they fail to live up to expectations which you can't even meet yourself."

She shook her head. "Burt is all Kurt has, Finn. Despite the united front they present to the world, they have their problems, which you well knew, and you blew a huge hole in whatever peace they've managed to make between themselves. That you did it so deliberately and so maliciously just makes it that much worse."

"I don't want to hurt Kurt," he said softly.

"Then why are you always hurting him?" she asked. She blew out a breath. "I love you more than anything, Finn, more than my own life, but I truly don't understand you sometimes, no matter how hard I try. I can't allow this behavior to continue. I can't let you use Kurt as a punching bag because you've convinced yourself that he's to blame for all your problems."

"I've never hit him!"

She snorted. "It would have been easier if you had. You've systematically attacked everything he is, who he is. It was only months ago that you stood in his bedroom and called him...that...that word."

"I didn't call him that! It was all that...stuff!"

She eyed him. "Oh, please. Who do you think you're fooling, Finn? We all know what that confrontation was really about. If his crush on you made you that uncomfortable, there were other
ways you could've addressed it." She glared. "We both know how he felt about you, and we both know you didn't do anything about it until it was too late. Kurt is a reasonable person, Finn. If you had bothered to tell him that he was upsetting you, he would've backed off immediately. And those same feelings weren't so bothersome that they stopped you from running to Kurt with all of your problems and for homework help. You were perfectly content to use him when it suited. You knew his feelings and you took advantage of them."

She shook her head and clucked her tongue. "I can't believe I missed it. I thought you were homophobic, but now I realize that Kurt's infatuation with you obviously affected you more deeply than I thought. Rather than dealing with your feelings, you turned them around and took everything out on him."

"I am not gay!" he exploded, shooting to his feet.

"Sit your ass down!" she barked.

He hesitated.

"I said sit!"

He did.

"I never said you were gay, Finn," she said more sedately. "What I don't understand is why you're so defensive about it, why you take it as though it were an accusation." Her eyes bored into him. "There is nothing wrong with being gay, Finn, and what I can't figure out is why you would ever think there was. I'm not homophobic. I have gay friends. I've never given you the impression that being gay is objectionable or something about which a person should be ashamed, so where is this coming from?"

He said nothing.

She sighed. "This can't go on. There's nothing I can do or say to force you to change your thinking, but I cannot and will not allow Kurt to be subjected to you any further. I think it's best if Burt and I don't see each other for a while."

"No!" Finn said, panicking. "Mom, don't do that! Don't hurt yourself because of what I've done!"

"I've already decided, Finn," she insisted, "and it's not just because of you. I was very disappointed by how Burt reacted last night. He had already made his decision before Kurt even walked through the door. He didn't ask Kurt to explain anything, but instead demanded that he defend himself. He took the word of three teenagers, including Rachel, whom he doesn't even know, over his own son."

She shook her head. "I can't accept that. No matter what you've said or done, I would never throw you under the bus the way Burt did to Kurt last night. You're my son; you always come first, even when I don't agree with your actions."

Finn flushed and looked away.

"So this is how things are going to go," she continued. "First, you will leave Kurt alone. I don't want you talking to him unless it's absolutely necessary, not that I imagine he's much interested in speaking with you at the moment. I know he usually helps you with your schoolwork, but not anymore. The school offers tutoring services and you will avail yourself of them. You will avoid him in Glee."

Finn nodded in defeat.

"Second, you will take the time and sort out your feelings for him, because things can't go on this way. Kurt has every right to date, and if he wants to have sex, it's not your business. You're not his
boyfriend and, as he pointed out last night, you are not his brother. Even if Burt and I were married, Kurt's private life is his own and is of no concern of yours."

Finn flushed angrily.

"Knock it off," she snapped. "Third, you will learn to get your temper under control. It's obvious that I've completely failed to help you with this, but your behavior is unacceptable. If you can't do it yourself, then we'll schedule appointments with your guidance counselor or a therapist. Regardless, you need to learn how to deal with things that you don't like. Am I making myself clear?"

Finn's mouth was drawn in a tight line, but he finally sighed and nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

She was unimpressed with his token submission. She knew her son far too well. "Don't think this is over. These were just the ground rules. We'll discuss your punishment later. Go to school."

"That took guts, dude," Puck said to Sam, who had been relatively mute since his admission in Santana's bedroom, more so than Rutherford had ever been. It was disconcerting.

Sam shifted and remained quiet, preferring the mundane scenery speeding past them as he looked out from Puck's passenger window.

"I'm serious," Puck added, for some reason desperate to fill the silence. "I don't know if I could've talked about it if something like that had happened to me." He gave Sam what he hoped was a reassuring smile. "And you don't have to worry. None of us are going to run our yaps about it."

"I know," Sam whispered. "Thanks, man."

Puck nodded. "You plan on telling the Princess?"

"Yeah, I think so," Sam said. "It's just...for some reason, it'll be harder with him. Not that he would judge me or anything, but I just get the feeling that we would understand a little too well, and then it would be, like, this big thing between us. I don't want him to look and me and just see...that." He sighed. "You know how they say that the more you talk about something, the easier it gets?" He shook his head. "Total lie."

Puck snorted. "No shit. That's why I don't talk about Beth."

Sam nodded and then blinked. "Not even with Quinn, though?"

"Especially not with her," Puck said. "As much as I love Beth and wish we could've kept her, I know we did right by giving her up, but for Quinn...that whole scene was a lot harder on her. She carried Beth for nine months. She totally got shit on by most of the school, got kicked off the squad, kicked out by her parents." He shook his head. "I wasn't much help to her. I kept silent when I shouldn't have."

Sam exhaled. "From what I've been able to figure out, that wasn't exactly your choice."

Puck shrugged. "True enough, but I went along with it for the wrong reasons." He glanced at Sam. "The Princess tell you about that?"

"No," Sam replied. "He refused to discuss it at all. Said it wasn't his business to say anything."
Puck felt a deep swell of appreciation rise in his chest. "That's why he's awesome. Too bad Hudson didn't follow his example."

Sam grunted.

Puck was quiet for a long time, believing he had some idea of what Sam was thinking. "You jealous?"

Sam shrugged. "A little, yeah, but I know it's ridiculous. I'm not dating him. It's not like he cheated on me or something." He paused. "I just...I hope it was everything he wanted."

"Jesus, dude, are you a Pollyanna or what?" Puck exploded. "Look, let's cut the shit. You want him; I can tell. Are you going to do something about it?"

"Too soon," Sam said quietly, "for both of us, I think. You know him better than you believe, Puck. Do you really think Kurt would have slept with someone he didn't love? Because, even after knowing him a day, I don't."

Puck thought about that and reluctantly nodded. Casual sex just wasn't the Princess's thing.

"He came home because he had to, Puck," Sam whispered, "not because he wanted to. Just because he's here now doesn't mean he doesn't want to be back with this other dude."

Puck blinked. He totally hadn't even considered that, that the Princess might be nursing a broken heart or some shit, and of course he wouldn't tell anyone, because he never told anyone when he was hurting. Great, now he felt guilty for pushing Sam at Kurt.

"There's still a lot of mess I need to work through," Sam continued, "and Kurt's got his own deal going on. And now this shit with Finn on top of it? Not to mention he's just lost his best friend, and I'm sure there's going to be drama with his dad and Finn's mom, since the mom took Kurt's side."

Puck nodded. "Truth. Okay, I'm backing off. I just...I thought you would be good for each other. Still do."

"You don't even know me, Puck," Sam said softly.

"I know what I need to know," Puck insisted. "You've been through shit, the Princess has been through shit, and you're both standup dudes. Hot ones, too."

Sam laughed before smirking deviously. "And what if I wanted to date you, Puck?"

Puck blinked owlishly. "Dude, are you joking me right now?"

Sam gave an indifferent shrug. "You know how hot you are. You're pretty cool, too. What would you do if I asked you out?"

Puck said nothing immediately, his jaws flexing. "I think I might say yes," he finally said.

Sam turned toward him, eyes wide and jaw unhinged. "Seriously?"

"Why not?" Puck asked, shrugging. "It'd be different, but it might work. Hey, at least we'd have some fun."

Sam raised a brow.

"Not that," Puck rushed to add, blushing slightly. He then smirked. "Well, not right away."
Sam leered. "And if we asked Kurt out together?"

Puck cocked his head and finally nodded. "That could work, too."

Sam burst out in hysterical laughter, before it abruptly died away. "Wait, what?" he trilled.

Puck smirked again. "I've never said no to a threesome."

"What about Jones?" Santana demanded, as she almost ran over a pedestrian, who she subsequently flipped off.

Quinn swallowed her panic. "It's really quite simple," she said evenly. "Remember when she dated Puck to try and boost her popularity? That, combined with her going out for Cheerios, shows that, though she might gossip about and resent the popular kids, she wants to be one of us. She wants to belong. So we deny her that."

"Sounds good," Santana allowed. "How?"

Quinn smiled. "Mercedes thrives on talking about other people. What would happen if she had no one to talk about or anyone to listen?"

Santana smirked. "You're talking about a shunning."

Quinn nodded. "Absolutely. Really, she's only ever had Kurt, and that's over. Artie and Tina were friends by proxy and it's apparent they've sided with Kurt, as they should. She's never gotten along with Rachel, and I don't see that changing. Mike will do whatever Tina wants, Puck could care less, and Sam will do anything for Kurt. Stick a fork in the girl; she's done."

Santana cackled and then sobered. "What happened between you two? You were pretty tight before the summer."

Quinn grimaced. "You know I went to visit her a few times at her bible camp?"

Santana nodded.

"Every time I asked her about Kurt and how he was doing in Europe, she changed the subject. Whenever I brought him up, even if it was just a mention, she shifted the conversation to point out that she was his best friend and how much he loved her. It was pretty obvious that, though she was fine with she and I being friends, she didn't want me near Kurt."

Santana rolled her eyes. "Jesus, insecure much?"

Quinn nodded. "It reminded me a lot of how I used to talk about Finn to other people, so it really put me off." She sighed. "Mercedes can be a great person, and she truly did save me last term, for which I'll always be grateful. That said, she's also incredibly possessive and can be very selfish." She shrugged. "I was the same and, in many respects, still am, so I don't feel guilty for calling her out. I hope she gets it together and gets over this, because it's only going to make her miserable."

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Santana asked in a measured voice. "It will end up hurting her."

Quinn's face was pained. "Honestly? I'm torn. She deserves this, absolutely, but I remember how
lonely I was last year. I don't want her to go through that. I don't want to be the cause of it." She exhaled. "But it's for Kurt. I know he's taking the high road and that's fine; good for him. At the same time, though, I don't really care. Plus, Mercedes has a great family and has a lot of friends in her church youth group. She can get through it if she allows herself.

"So, no, I don't want to do this, but I will, because she really needs to wake the fuck up."

Santana grinned. "I like this new, improved version of you."

Quinn smiled. "I'm starting to like me, too, even if I am still a bitch."

"Hi, this is Brittany. I can't take your call right now, so please leave a message after the beep and I'll get back to you. Beep!"

Mike and Tina snickered.

"Oh, hi, Quinn!" Brittany chirped. "Has Santana run over anyone yet? She drives like Mr. Magoo."

Tina howled.

"Okay," Brittany said, frowning. "It's kind of mean, but she deserves it. Send a text to Angela Gardner and she'll coordinate with the Secondary and Tertiary Councils." She nodded. "We'll see you soon." She blinked. "Why would I say hi to Mike's abs? I already did that, but Tina wouldn't let me lick them. I licked them last year, though, and they're really delicious!"

Tina began hiccupping and pointing at a blushing Mike, who was studiously concentrating on his driving.

"So what's going on, Brittany?" Mike asked, after the girl in question signed off the phone with what he thought was a Klingon epithet.

"We're shunning Mercedes."

Tina turned around in her seat and stared. "Wow, really?"

"Are you okay with that?" Brittany asked kindly.

Tina snorted. "More than. She didn't just go over the line, she completely obliterated it." She shook her head. "Don't let the PR confuse you, Brit. Mercedes and I are really not that close. I like her well enough, but even if this hadn't happened, we were never best friends, nor were we ever going to be."

Brittany nodded and then bit her lip. "Have you heard from Artie?" she whispered.

Tina shook her head. "We're not really talking to each other, honey, but if I know Artie and Kurt like I know I do, they were up all night talking."

"I don't think Artie likes me very much," Brittany said, eyes sad.

"That's just not true," Tina staunchly insisted. "Believe me, sweetie, if Artie didn't like you, I'd be able to tell. He likes you a lot."
"But he still loves you."

Mike tightened his hands on the steering wheel.

"I love him, too," Tina said quietly, "and I probably always will, but we just weren't good together, Brit. I didn't like who I was when I was with him, and I don't think he was happy either." She sighed. "I handled it all wrong, but it was coming sooner or later. I'm really happy with Mike."

Mike smiled at her.

Brittany nodded. "Mike's awesome in bed. He can do amazing things with his tongue, and he likes it when you pull on his hair when he's...down there."

Mike blanched.

Tina cackled. "Good to know."

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Kurt deposited a grumbling Artie in the school library before he began his mad dash around the school to get as much accomplished before homeroom.

He still didn't know how he was going to deal with Finn and Mercedes when they showed up. Rachel was also an iffy matter; she always wanted to talk. Kurt idly wondered if the girl had ever had a moment of silence her head. He sincerely doubted it, as she never seemed capable of shutting up. It gave him a headache just thinking about it.

Just as he rounded the corner toward the principal's office, he, of course, stumbled across one Sue Sylvester.

"Porcelain," she said in a curiously blank voice.

He nodded cautiously. "Overlord."

She preened. "Why are you here so early?"

He debated only for a moment before deciding to go with the unvarnished truth. "I'm about to ruin Principal Figgins' day."

Her eyes brightened and Kurt knew fear. "Do tell," she purred.

"Would you care to accompany me?" he asked. "I don't relish being alone with him. He makes me uncomfortable and his office smells like alcoholism."

She smirked. "After you."

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Fifteen minutes later, an angry yet impressed Sue Sylvester stormed from the administrative office. She looked at a satisfied, smug Kurt and glared.
"Not that watching you work over that Kashmirian marionette wasn't enjoyable, and it pleases me that my rightful budget has been fully restored, but why did you do that?" she seethed.

He raised a brow. "Well, do you want the sanitized reason or the real one?"

She soured, the answer obvious.

He smirked. "I saved Glee because it will result in one of two outcomes. If they fail, it's because they couldn't survive without me, but will know I did everything possible to give them a chance. Therefore, I can't be blamed for what some might term my abandonment of them."

She nodded warily. "Acknowledged."

"But if they succeed," he continued, "they'll owe it all to me." He shrugged with indifference. "Either way, I win."

She covered her shock well and grunted her satisfaction, somewhat furious that she'd never thought of so elegant a solution. While she didn't like his action, she couldn't deny its brilliance.

"Masterful," she allowed, "and the so-called sanitized reason?"

He gave her doe eyes and clasped his hands together under his chin. "It was the right thing to do," he said in a breathy voice.

She snorted before her eyes narrowed. "You're responsible for that scumbag child-toucher Peterson being sent up without a paddle."

He merely studied his nails.

She balked, then sneered, and finally chuckled. "You're something special, K." She blinked. "From this day forward, you shall be known as Special K."

He tilted his head, considered it, and then nodded. "Acceptable."

He'd never really cared for Porcelain, after all. He was many things, but delicate wasn't one of them.

Kurt had decided that spinning a grand web of lies to placate Ms. Pillsbury wasn't worth his time. Despite her placid demeanor, the woman had a phenomenal bullshit detector when she chose to employ it. Besides, it wasn't like he had done anything of which to be ashamed.

So after she had adjusted his schedule, he told her the truth of what had happened. He was somewhat warmed that she appeared so outraged on his behalf.

"May I ask you something?" she questioned.

Pleased by her appropriate grammar and rather lovely outfit, he nodded.

"Just for my own peace of mind," she elaborated, "you told your father the truth? You weren't...it was your decision?"

He nodded more slowly. "Yes, of course."
He peered at her more closely, noticing the sudden shadows in her eyes and recognized them for what they were. His heart seized up in his chest and it took all of his inner strength not to get out of his chair and give her a hug. Thankfully, he was able to restrain himself. Neither of them were very keen on being touched, though he was slowly learning to accept physical comfort.

Unfortunately, she had noticed the understanding dawning in his eyes, reminding him once again that she was far more observant than most people gave her credit for being. She gave him a weak smile. "An unsuccessful attempt."

He nodded and they spoke no more of it, engaging in a few minutes of silence which neither found uncomfortable, a fact which was mildly shocking to them both.

Kurt finally cleared his throat. "I just wanted to thank you, Ms. Pillsbury. Sam told me yesterday that Mr. Parks made some unkind remarks about his dyslexia and that you subsequently moved him to another class. Sam was very much relieved and was singing your praises."

She blushed lightly. "Sam is a nice boy. I was happy to help." She gave a diffident shrug. "After all, it's my job."

He scoffed. "Helping children is a lot more than just a job, and we both know it. You care about us, Ms. Pillsbury. You're one of the few who does. I want you to understand that it's noticed and appreciated." He paused. "I'm not asking to you to break any confidences, but would it be possible for you to confirm that Sam had some trouble at his last school?" He held up a hand. "I don't need to know what it is. If he wants me to know, he'll tell me." He bit his lip. "I find myself feeling very protective of him, and I would just like to know that my intuition is not misfiring."

The question put Emma in a quagmire. She frankly wanted to tell Kurt everything but understood it wasn't her place. Still, she wanted a network of support in place for Sam should he need it, and she knew Kurt would be invaluable in said network. She pursed her lips.

He half-smiled. "That's all I needed to know."

Her eyes widened far more than normal. It was rather discomfiting that he could read her so well, and she absently wondered if that was why, though she admired him, she had always kept a bit of distance between them.

"Are you going to speak with Mr. Schuester about Glee?" she asked.

He nodded. "He deserves to know why I've been removed." His eyes drifted toward the door. "I should probably find him. I don't want the Overlord telling him before I can. He'll just get angry and confused, which is, of course, always her goal."

Emma smirked, surprised by how natural it felt.

"Thank you again, Ms. Pillsbury, for helping Sam," he reiterated.

"I'm always happy to be of assistance to the students," she primly responded.

He nodded and smirked in kind. "By the way, while I was in the principal's office, I overheard that Mr. Parks is in the hospital." He raised a brow. "Something about him finding a hornet nest in his car?"

"It was very unfortunate," she demurred.

His eyes sparkled. "Indeed."
"And that's what happened," Kurt quietly finished.

Will's head was in his hands and he was moaning softly. Kurt patiently waited for the man to conclude his wallowing.

"This is all my fault," Will groaned.

Kurt's eyes widened. "It absolutely is not!"

Will raised his head, soft eyes caught in Kurt's searing gaze. "Kurt..."

Kurt shook his head. "Will, you're being ridiculous. This is not your fault."

"If I hadn't..."

Kurt ducked his head, eyes welling. "So you do regret it."

"No!" Will insisted, straightening into a rigid position. "No," he repeated, voice more quiet. "I'll never regret Madrid."

Kurt looked at him again, his eyes dubious and confused. Will had never seen him appear so vulnerable.

"I could never regret us," Will whispered.

Kurt bit his lip.

Will sighed. "If circumstances..."

Kurt nodded miserably. "But you still feel guilty," he surmised.

"I took advantage of you," Will lamented, as he had many times.

Kurt rolled his eyes and snorted. "Not this again. You are so Catholic." He shook his head. "Will, if you really want to debate the merits of who took advantage of whom, you would do well to remember that I made the first move. In fact, I recall being rather...persistent."

Will swallowed heavily and felt the blush creeping up his neck. Once again their eyes met, and this time, neither could tear themselves away, lost in the memories.

They had run across each other accidentally while touring El Real Jardín Botánico de Madrid.

Will had been on his lunch break, in town attending an international educational conference, his way paid as he was to present a paper he had written which would soon be published in an American journal. Kurt was merely touring the royal gardens while his grandmother enjoyed a long, leisurely lunch with several friends, including one who had traveled from Barcelona to join her.

It had been bizarre for them, how happy both were to see each other, as they'd never had much to do with each other. Kurt had already been fluent in Spanish by the time he had matriculated McKinley, so he'd never had Will as a teacher. Their interactions had only begun during his sophomore year due to Glee, and their relationship had always been rather strained, given Will's predilection of allowing
Rachel to run roughshod over the other students.

Regardless, they had exchanged warm greetings and a tentative hug, buoyed by this chance meeting of two lonely tourists in a strange, foreign city. Despite their mutual wariness, it had been nice to find such a tether. They had quickly caught each other up on their respective summer plans and agreed to have lunch together in the Classical Romantic Garden.

Unwittingly, it had set the tone for the remainder of their time in Madrid.

The more they chatted, mostly about inconsequential things, the more Will had been struck by how mature Kurt truly was; that the sullen, petulant boy he had believed Kurt to be was merely a pretense crafted to protect himself. Free of the confines of the school, and of Ohio, however, Kurt was bubbly and witty and incredibly charming. The dichotomy had been so shocking that Will stumbled over most of his part of the conversation, silently reprimanding himself for dismissing Kurt so easily without ever having bothered to discover what lied beneath.

They had been so far removed from everything: people in common, circumstances, McKinley, Lima itself, and all of the barriers which had existed to keep them from viewing each other as equals.

There, in that garden, surrounded by scents and colors and sunlight and life, they were like two gods at the dawning of the world, known only to each other.

During the middle of lunch, Kurt's grandmother Katrine had rung and advised him that she had been invited to a party that night, wondering if he would mind being left to his own devices. Will had noted that Kurt, while still effervescent, appeared somewhat distressed that he would be spending the rest of the day alone, despite his insistence that his grandmother attend the soiree. After Kurt had hung up, Will hadn't hesitated in asking him to return to the conference with him and then have dinner.

Kurt had been startled but quickly agreed. Will had tried to ignore the slight blush on Kurt's face, as well as the one he felt on his own. After all, it was just dinner.

But then Kurt had let his intellectual side out to play at the afternoon session, putting forth several provocative and insightful comments to the panel of which Will was part. Will had responded to the challenge and the entire meeting had devolved into a debate between the two, the other participants impressed and thoughtful.

Several of Will's colleagues had assumed Kurt to be a student teacher whom Will was mentoring, a young man in the process of earning his own degree in education. Neither Will nor Kurt had disabused them of those notions. Those who knew of Will professionally and were aware of his divorce inferred that Kurt was his new partner. Will hadn't dissuaded that idea, either, though he had refused to consider why he hadn't.

The whole day had been completely surreal and that feeling of phantasmagoria carried over through dinner, as they kept chatting and finding they shared more in common than either imagined.

Dinner had then led to dancing at a neighboring club.

Will now couldn't remember whose suggestion it had been, but believed it was his.

By this time, neither one had bothered to deny they weren't on a date. They never spoke of it, but knew it for what it was.

The swell of young, steamy bodies on the dance floor had pushed them much closer than either intended, but neither Will nor Kurt had pulled away.
Will had been chagrined to discover that Kurt was a much better dance than he himself. He could move well enough, but he'd had no formal education. Kurt always seemed at a loss when told to freestyle, but when strict choreography was the name of the game, he truly excelled, due to his years of training.

Will hadn't been sure how to act when a masterful and dominant Kurt led them through a passionate *paso doble* while an enthusiastic and appreciative crowd cheered them on. In the end, he had simply trusted in Kurt and allowed himself to let go. That release had triggered several more. He hadn't been able to drag his eyes from Kurt's own, their sparkle and shine utterly mesmerizing him. For as long as he'd known Kurt, he'd never seen the boy so alive, so happy.

He hadn't been so vain as to believe himself solely responsible, but to think that he was even a part of that happiness had filled him with a sense of worth previously unknown to him.

And then Kurt had boldly - Will had literally been stunned to stillness in the middle of the dance floor - slid the splayed hand nestled in the small of Will's back even lower, his eyes pleading all the while for Will to stop him, to deny what they both knew they were feeling in that moment.

Will hadn't been able to bring himself to do it.

He suddenly snapped free of his reminiscences, eyes dilating at Kurt's heavy breathing.

"I know," Kurt whispered. "I feel it, too." He absently ran his tongue over his lower lip and Will was almost undone. "Will it always be like this?"

Will didn't know how to answer. In truth, he'd never before experienced the sexual chemistry he shared with Kurt. Certainly not with Terri, nor any of his various liaisons from before and after the marriage, including his few fumbling encounters with men.

He and Kurt were explosive together, almost violently so, their own supernova, experiencing all sensation and experience as though they were one.

The problem with supernovas was the inevitable explosion, and they had sensed that, even after only weeks, even though they knew they couldn't continue in the real world, that had they tried, they would have destroyed each other.

There was just too much; too much feeling, too much desire, too much passion. They would have burned each other out, so they had parted early as dear friends rather than later as enemies.

That knowledge did little to quell Will's raw, naked hunger for Kurt now and in this space. All he knew was that, at this particular moment, he didn't dare stand up. He didn't dare do what his body was desperately demanding of him.

Images of wide swaths of pale, silken skin bathed in moonlight invaded his mind, skin gently gliding over and then inside of him, the scent of Catalanian jasmine hanging heavy in the air. He recalled that skin with vivid clarity, how it had smelled and tasted. How that body had felt to kiss and to lick and to taste, to penetrate.

"I don't know," he finally answered, voice weak, his body aching, every single nerve-ending on fire. "We...we..."

"We can't, I know," Kurt quietly interrupted. "You're in love with Emma, and I respect that, but you have to stop blaming yourself, Will. You didn't do anything wrong. You weren't with her when we were together. You were in no way unfaithful."
Will miserably shook his head. "You're so young, Kurt. I shouldn't have...I had no right."

Kurt's eyes flashed with anger. "You had every right. We can engage in circular logic forever, but it doesn't change the facts. I was over the age of consent, both here and in Spain. It was completely my decision and I won't allow you to cheapen that."

"But..."

Kurt waved the objection away. "I know the statute, Will, and, yes, if we were continuing our..."

The corners of Will's mouth involuntarily quirked up. "Our...?"

Kurt flushed. "I don't know what to call it. It wasn't a relationship, but neither was it a one-night stand. I..." He looked away. "I fell in love with you," he whispered.

Will blinked away the tears threatening to spill over. "I fell in love with you, too, Kurt. Don't ever think that I didn't. Please don't ever think I don't consider the time we spent together to be precious, some of the best moments of my life."

"Really?" Kurt mumbled.

The disbelief in his voice almost broke Will's heart. "Absolutely." He exhaled. "You...were so unexpected, but so very welcome." He shook his head and loosed a brittle laugh. "You're one of the only things I don't regret in my life, Kurt." He shrugged helplessly. "You made me a better person." He sighed. "I just wish I had known everything you had been through, things I had willfully ignored because I was too consumed with my own petty problems."

Kurt growled. "Your wife, your partner since high school, lied to you. She allowed you to believe you were going to be a father. I know how much that meant to you. She plotted to substitute that imagined child with that of two of your students. She's lucky you didn't kill her. She's lucky I haven't killed her." He shook his head. "Your problems were in no way petty, Will, and, unfortunately, I've become quite adept at hiding my own."

He sighed. "So, did we decide what we're calling it? An encounter? An affair?"

Will smiled, as well, even though his heart was breaking. He did love Kurt and knew he always would. "Affair. I like that. It sounds romantic."

Kurt scoffed. "And you're such a romantic," he teased.

Will feigned offense.

Kurt smiled again, much softer this time. "You are, you know. You're very romantic. You made me feel like I mattered." He ducked his head shyly. "I'd never felt that way before."

And that just made Will want to kill things. Kill people. Kill anyone who had ever hurt Kurt, including how his own inaction had hurt the boy. He forced himself to calm down and breathe evenly.

"Affair," Kurt repeated. "If we were continuing our affair, yes, there would be issues, many of them legal," he grimaced, "despite the fact that you've never actually been my teacher and we aren't graded for our performance in Glee, only given credit." He sighed. "Regardless, I'd never want to be the one to cause you trouble." He looked away. "Realistically, I know we'd never have any kind of future together, and I never expected one. It's just...I can't stop myself from wanting that, either. It's very difficult being this close to you, being alone with you, but not being able to..." he trailed off, blushing.
"Say it, Kurt," Will ordered, voice raspy with need. "We've talked about this. Just because we can't act on our desires doesn't mean we should ignore them. That will just make it worse. Despite my martyr complex, we have nothing of which to be ashamed."

Kurt slowly turned his head to face Will once more. "It's quite difficult to be in your presence and not touch you the way I want. Yesterday in rehearsal, when you put your hand on my shoulder, it was all I could do not to lean into that touch. I wanted to purr with contentment."

He shook his head in bewilderment. "I've never had a reaction to someone like I have to you. We've been aware of each other for three years now and, until this summer, I'd never even considered you in that way, though many students have." He dropped his head. "I've never thought of myself as a very sexual person, but you awakened that in me, and now I'm having trouble being here with you and forcing myself not to bend you over and take you." He raised blazing eyes. "As I did so many times. As you did with me."

Will nodded mechanically as he shivered with suppressed longing. He understood all too well, as did his cock, which was straining painfully against his pants. He knew better than to acknowledge it verbally, knew he couldn't give voice to the fact that he had never wanted anyone the way he wanted Kurt Hummel; the way he suspected he would always want him.

"I want to run my hands all over your body," Kurt continued, voice thick and husky. "I want to pull you across that desk and rip your clothes right off of you." He closed his eyes and bit his lip. "I can still taste you, Will. I want you in my mouth so badly, it's taking everything I have inside of me to remain sitting and not get on my knees and beg you for it."

"Christ," Will raggedly muttered, dragging his hands through his hair.

Kurt painfully crossed his legs and cleared his throat before taking in a deep breath and slowly releasing it. "I agreed with you then and I agree with you now. Even if we tried to make this work, it never would. There's just too much standing in the way, no matter how much..." He gasped, tears pricking his eyes. "No matter how much I wish there wasn't." He blinked furiously. "So perhaps it's good that I've been removed from Glee."

"Not the least of which," Kurt added, "is because I don't want to share this with anyone else. Our time was special. You're special to me, Will." Tears began spilling down his face despite his best efforts to stop them. "And when the world gets cold and dark and I forget that there are people who are warm and caring and who love me, I'll think of you and our time together and cocoon myself in those memories, and I'll feel safe again."

Will screwed up his face but, despite his best efforts, a sob broke free.

"I should go," Kurt whispered, hastily scrubbing his face with a hand. "I sincerely hope it works out for you and Emma, Will. I want nothing more than your happiness."

"Do you think Sam might be your happiness, Kurt?" Will asked, tone curious and in no way judgmental or envious. "If so, I wish you the best." He mostly meant it. He wanted Kurt to be happy, even if that happiness couldn't be found with him. Sam appeared to be a kind, decent boy who would treat Kurt well.

Kurt laughed lightly, though it sounded hollow. "Everyone is so concerned about me and Sam." He
shook his head. "We're just friends."

"I want you to be happy," Will repeated.

"I will be," Kurt grinned, his smile genuine. "I'm happy now, Will, and you're responsible for a large part of that. Thank you."

"Thank you for saving the club." Will replied, trying to prolong the conversation as long as possible, for he knew they might not be able to share another for quite some time, now that they no longer would share Glee. "I still can't believe you did that, and I feel guilty you did. We don't deserve it."

"Finn and Mercedes..."

"Not them," Will interrupted. "I...I didn't treat you well last year, Kurt, and that hurts me. I was blinded by my own competitiveness, by my own narrow-mindedness and what I thought show choir should be, never realizing what it could be." He pressed his lips. "And, now, I won't be able to rectify that mistake and discover the answer for myself."

"Don't get carried away," Kurt warned. "We both know how judges in Ohio would've reacted to me if I were leading New Directions."

"They can go fuck themselves," Will snapped.

Kurt shrugged. "It's probably the only action they're getting."

They looked at each other and burst out laughing.

Kurt reached into his pocket and withdrew a sheet of paper, debating whether or not to hand it to Will, finally deciding to place it instead on the desk. He couldn't risk making contact. Why, oh why had it taken so long for his accursed hormones to kick in? He hated feeling so out of control, despite the giddy sense of liberation it engendered.

"Here's a list of those students I think are both talented and approachable. I'll spread the word for auditions."

Will shook his head. "Why are you doing this?"

Kurt shrugged a shoulder. "Because Glee saved me, Will. It saved all of us, including you. I hope it can do the same for others."

Will only barely refrained from storming across the room and pulling Kurt into a searing kiss. He dug his nails into his palms and forced his feet to remain planted. He had it taken so long for his accursed hormones to kick in? He hated feeling so out of control, despite the giddy sense of liberation it engendered.

"Thank you." He sighed. "I guess all that's left for me is to try and not kill three of my students before first period starts."

"Rachel..."

"Should have known better," Will declared. "As much as she believes she knows best, she in fact knows very little."

"No arguments here."

They laughed again.
Kurt opened the door, paused, and finally looked over his shoulder. "See you around, Mr. Schue."

Will nodded. "Be well, Kurt. Be happy."

Kurt stepped over the threshold and quietly closed the door behind him.

Will curled a lip and seethed.

"You have to be professional," he growled at himself. "You have to let him go. Keep him safe. You have to deal with Finn and Mercedes as your students, not as Kurt's betrayers."

He closed his eyes. He knew he was being irrational and that Kurt was more than capable of taking care of himself, but it hurt him to see Kurt hurt, and he wanted to punish those responsible. But he couldn't.

He could still smell Kurt's hair.

After his meeting with Will - and how odd to call him that; when their affair had begun, he'd stumbled repeatedly over how to address the man before finally settling on his given name. Now, he couldn't imagine calling him anything else but would have to force himself - Kurt planned to skip homeroom, courtesy of a Pillsbury pass, and sought refuge in the library, as his next period would be a free one.

Artie had already left for parts unknown, which made Kurt suspicious.

He was fairly certain that his friends had some scheme of retaliation in place, and he couldn't be bothered to call a halt to it. He hadn't asked them to do anything, but even had he forbidden it, they would do what they felt like doing; they were like people that way, and his permission wasn't required.

He wondered about that, about what it said about him as a person that he wasn't on planning to stop their revenge. He had been espousing his newfound enlightenment for all to hear: how he had matured, was more willing to let things go, was refocusing his efforts, let the past rest, etc.

It was all true, of course, but he also couldn't deny the sense of satisfaction he received from the knowledge that his friends would exact vengeance on his behalf. Finn and Mercedes would be punished, and he wouldn't have to lift a finger. It was cold, calculated, and cunning, for he had known that, once he had informed Brittany, she would take the reins and mete out justice. In fact, he had counted on it.

So the question was: did this satisfaction negate his new goals and ideals, the person he was becoming? Was his thirst to see his tormentors punished juvenile and petty, or was it righteous?

He shrugged as he opened his chemistry text.

He was a work in progress. He was tired of turning the other cheek; he'd been turning all four for a ridiculous number of years. He knew that if one his friends were in the position he now found himself, he would ride to their defense just as surely as Brittany was now.

He didn't think that was wrong of him. He didn't believe that people should be allowed to do
whatever they wanted with no consequences and with no thought to the devastation they left in their wake.

He could be a good person and still falter. He could strive for excellence and still regress. He didn't have to be a martyr to be a decent human being.

So if he found some measure of comfort and peace - and, yes, satisfaction - in knowing that Brittany was about to rain sulfur down on Finn and Mercedes, he could deal with that just fine. And as long as he was ignorant of her machinations prior to their commencement, he had plausible deniability.

Pleased, he began the assignments for next month's material.

He always worked ahead of the prescribed program.

Angela Gardner was feeling damn fine.

She wasn't the prettiest or the smartest or the most popular girl in her class, but she possessed some measure of all three.

Sure, her red hair was a little more orange than she liked and her skin might not be as flawless as she desired, but she still turned heads. Her boobs were slightly bigger than that with which she was comfortable, but they were firm and perky and filled out her clothes in all the right ways. She wished her legs were a little longer, but everyone had their problems.

What she did have was the leadership of the Cheerios' Secondary Council, which meant people knew who she was and, if they had any sense, appropriately feared or at least respected her. She would never wield the power of Quinn Fabray, Santana Lopez, or Brittany Pierce, but she had accepted that fact a while ago and was unperturbed. The bonus was that she was a year behind them so, in two years, after they graduated, she would rule her senior class with an iron fist.

They had been unofficially mentoring her since her freshman year and she was a very quick study. Quinn was the nominal leader of the school, or had been pre-pregnancy, but everyone knew that Santana was the real mastermind of their endeavors, just as everyone other than the mouthbreathers knew that Brittany was the power behind Santana.

So it had been Brittany's rubric she had adopted.

Outwardly, Angela Gardner appeared to be nothing more than a pleasant if vacuous girl, though she was smarter and her grades far better than most people realized. She took advanced courses, but since she didn't go out of her way to prove herself, the majority of her schoolmates had a tendency to gloss over or forget outright that a preponderance of her classes were at the honors or advanced placement level.

She was content to be yet another sycophant of the Unholy Trinity, but she had also paid close attention to their actions and had learned from their mistakes. She had her own minions, but had never shown herself to be a true leader, content to melt into the background where she was more able to observe and eavesdrop. She had an entire network of spies and informants throughout the freshman and sophomore classes but, as she was perceived by non-Cheerios as holding no real power of her own, she was viewed as nonthreatening and slavishly working for the agenda of another.
All part of the plan.

She understood that while Sue Sylvester was the Overlord, a moniker termed by Kurt Hummel, the Unholy Trinity had her ear, and Angela knew that all she had to do was wait and bide her time until an opportunity presented itself to make her existence known to Sylvester. Once Quinn, Santana, and Brittany were on the cusp of graduation, Sue would ask them who they felt should lead once they were gone. She wouldn't necessarily heed their advice, but she'd listen to it.

And that's when all of Angela's dreams would come true. Her rising star would finally begin to burn.

This morning would be her first real taste of leadership. That she had been tasked for it personally by the Unholy Trinity was gravy, but getting justice for a person she truly admired? That was her daily bread.

Kurt Hummel impressed her, as he did most of the underclassmen.

They had all borne witness to the torture he'd been forced to endure. As they themselves were considered the peasants of the school, they understood and empathized with Kurt. They also took pride in his determination never to give up or give in. They respected his resiliency, his sharp wit, his intelligence, and his blunt, no-nonsense demeanor. In the world of high school, where everyone kept knives at the ready to sink into the backs of whoever was closest, Kurt Hummel's bitchy honesty was very refreshing.

He wanted to be liked, but didn't care if you liked him. He wanted to be appreciated, but only by those whom he deemed worthy. He wanted to be acknowledged, but on the basis of his own merits and not because he'd won a genetic lottery. He was also one of them, an outcast, but one who had made good and now flew above the rabble.

He was his own person. To people who were constantly struggling to discover who they were and their place in the world, Kurt Hummel was a revelation.

Despite all evidence to the contrary, most of the students didn't care that Kurt was gay. Lima was a small town that had more than its share of idiots per capita, but they were a dying breed. Those who knew the score and had the talent left as soon as they were able, but even those that remained behind were of a new generation. They didn't let their churches, parents, or the talking boxes make their decisions for them. Homophobia was one of the last accepted prejudices, but as legislation and media attention caught up to the injustices, it was slowly but surely losing its stranglehold.

Even those who were opposed to homosexuality on principle really had no issue with Kurt. He had never demanded special rights or privileges, other than the basic right to live his life in peace. He had never shoved his orientation down their throats; he was simply proud of himself, as he had every right to be. He had never violated the schoolyard code and tattled on his bullies. He had never preyed on or bullied his own classmates.

Sure, the clothes were outlandish, but the girls drooled over his fashion sense. As for the boys, they didn't understand why clothes were important to anyone, but they didn't begrudge Kurt the right to wear what he wanted. His outfits might have been tightly fitted, but they weren't obscene.

The voice took many by surprise, but that was biology, not artifice; Kurt couldn't help what he sounded like. And when he opened his mouth to sing, he silenced most of his detractors. No matter what they thought of his sexuality, his clothes, or his speaking voice, no one could deny that he was truly gifted.

And then he had led the Cheerios to another national victory, his first of what many assumed would
be at least two more. Some had played it off, as though what Kurt had done wasn't impressive or could have been replicated by anyone. After all, Quinn, Santana, and Brittany could each sing.

The Cheerios knew what a load that was. Kurt had won them their title, no question, because when he took center stage, all eyes were immediately on him. The judges might have paid attention to the team as a whole in order to judge their unison and athletic ability, but it was Kurt who had riveted them.

Anyone - boy or girl, black or white or brown, gay or straight - who could sing a fifteen-minute nonstop medley of Celine Dion hits, in French, while doing splits, flips, cartwheels, and handsprings was a winner.

Everyone loved a winner, and everyone feared the Cheerios.

So when the Cheerio Phone Tree had been activated last night with news that one of their own, their winner, had been removed due to the interference of outsiders, the Cheerios had declared war.

Cheerios were a curious breed. They weren't all necessarily friends. They didn't always socialize together. Sometimes they didn't even acknowledge each other outside of practices and team events. At best, they considered themselves allies, warriors of a sort, and the common credo by which they lived was never leave a soldier behind. So there was no way in hell they were going to abandon Kurt. He might have been lost to the team, but once a Cheerio, always a Cheerio.

As more information had come to light, the sense of outrage had continued to grow. Those who didn't know Kurt personally, but were nonetheless familiar with how he was treated, were furious. Those who had been ignorant of his bullying, mostly the Cheerio boys, were indignant. Kurt was good to them, kind when he didn't have to be. Everyone had known that he would have been granted the headship and they had been pleased, because Kurt was genuinely a decent person. He knew all of their names, he tutored them, he was always willing to listen to their problems and offer help or advice where he could.

And since about half the male members of the squad were gay or bisexual themselves, they viewed him as something akin to a savior, his proud demeanor something to be emulated - eventually.

If he knew their orientations, he didn't speak of them. He didn't begrudge their lingering in the closet. He put a stop to caustic, if good-natured, speculation.

In sum, Kurt took care of his people.

Thus, all of them had been looking forward to him assuming his rightful position. That it had now fallen to Quinn - whom some liked and others feared - was met with acceptance if mild distaste. They all knew what she would expect of them, but they also knew not to expect much from her, unless the rumors were true and she had fully aligned herself with Kurt. They could only hope that was the case and that he had managed to exert some influence on her.

They didn't know the details of why Kurt had been removed, but neither did they care, because now it was their turn to take care of him. And they would.

They merely needed targets on whom to vent their frustration, and Quinn had happily provided them with two names: Finn Hudson and Mercedes Jones.

Finn Hudson was popular despite being a loser. He skated by on his looks and affable personality, but his intelligence was dubious and he had problems keeping his temper in check; thus he was easy to provoke. He had been done wrong by Quinn, but she had been suitably punished and their loyalty
would always be to her, as was only right.

Mercedes Jones was Kurt Hummel's best friend, but that was obviously no longer the case, which wasn't surprising, as she was a known traitor to Cheerios. She had made a big stink and sung a dated ballad to express her dissatisfaction with the squad, but the bottom line was that she was a quitter.

If she had bothered to learn anything about them, to understand them in any rudimentary fashion, she would've known that had she simply stood up for herself and refused to fast, starve, or do the cleanse and told Sylvester to go fuck herself, Sylvester would have supported her. What most people didn't comprehend was that as tyrannical as she could be, Sylvester wanted strong warriors. Starvation and eating disorders didn't lend themselves to that.

Jones had run, though. She thought she had taken some grand, impassioned stand, but instead had just abandoned them at the first challenge. Kurt hadn't, and she had resented him for that.

So if Jones and Hudson had cost them their winner, they had to pay.

Angela Gardner had coordinated the plan to make that happen. She was so proud of herself.

She also didn't pay it a second thought when a suspicious Sylvester had questioned her. After all, surely the woman knew why her Cheerios were targeting Hudson and Jones.

Finn knew something was wrong, really wrong, the moment he stepped through the entrance doors utilized by the upperclassmen.

He had been running about ten minutes behind his normal schedule, as he had hemmed and hawed about what to wear that day and ran through his song, which he would be performing during the morning Glee meeting.

He didn't know what to do about Kurt. His mother's anger had surprised and worried him, but a lot of what she had said he knew to be right. He just didn't know how to go about apologizing. It seemed like he was always apologizing to Kurt and promising to do better. Kurt would always accept and then buy him a soda. That was how things worked between them: one of them, usually Finn, would fuck up, and then the person responsible would apologize and they'd never discuss it again.

Now he realized how dangerous that had been, how it had allowed wounds and hurts to fester between them.

He didn't know how to fix this. He didn't think Kurt would let him and, honestly, he could understand that. In the cold, harsh light of day, he'd been appalled by his behavior, how he had gone out of his way to hurt and humiliate Kurt.

Once again, his attack had resulted in him being thrown out of the Hummel house. Kurt's house, he now knew. The worst part was that part of him was still pleased by what he had done.

Part of him was happy that he had driven a wedge between Kurt and Burt. Part of him was happy that Kurt had been exposed, especially in front of his father and best friend. Part of him was thrilled that all of Kurt's attention had been focused on him, even though the predominant emotions rolling off of Kurt had been disgust and horror.
He knew it was wrong. He knew he was a horrible person. No matter how he tried, however, he couldn't bring himself to stop hurting Kurt. It was what he did, it was how he interacted with Kurt. It was their pattern, and it was so very difficult to break.

But Kurt had surprised him. Finn had expected him to crumble and cry and beat his breast about the unfairness and injustice of it all, but none of that had happened. Kurt had remained calm and cool and completely rational. He had made everyone else out to be fools.

Kurt really had changed and, as he had left the house last night, Finn realized that his tired games and unsubtle manipulations were no longer going to work. He wouldn't be able to provoke Kurt's attention like that ever again.

His mom had laid down the law, and he knew she was right to do so. He felt terrible that his stupid scheme was now resulting in his mom pulling back from Burt. She had so little in her life to make her happy, and he had ruined the one thing that was important to her other than himself. He was always disappointing her.

He sighed.

He had to make this right somehow. He had to make it up to Kurt, because then Kurt would work his magic and make everything all right for their parents again.

So he would follow his mom's orders and stay away from Kurt, even though the very thought physically pained him, but they still had Glee together, so maybe he could pass the boy a note. He had always used his words better when he was writing them down.

As he crossed the threshold and entered the hall, his footfalls sent out a shockwave.

It seemed like every Cheerio in the school, as well as the entire rosters of Art Club, Environment Club, Language Club, and AV Club was standing in that hallway. And all of them were waiting for him.

He took another step and there was nothing but continued preternatural silence. He raised his head hesitantly and withered under the collective glare, for that what all of them were doing: glaring at him.

He saw the disgust plain on their faces. Even the guys were staring at him with hatred. Their eyes followed him as he stumbled down the hall and, while he did his best to avoid their nonverbal condemnation, he could feel the eyes of his friends in the collective.

They knew what he had done.

Santana and Artie looked as though they were ready to kill him. No surprise there.

The faces of Quinn and Puck were like stone. Once again they were united against him.

Sam couldn't even be bothered to look in his direction, not that the other boy meant anything to him.

Mike's eyes burned with righteous indignation, which was a little unsettling.

Brittany and Tina, however, terrified him. How he'd never realized, until this very moment, how truly scary they were was beyond him.

Rachel was absent, as was Mercedes.
He didn't know what to do about Rachel, and he and Mercedes had never gotten along.

Kurt was nowhere to be seen.

Finn knew this was bad.

He hurried toward his locker, growing more and more unnerved by the staring and the utter silence, and quickly stowed most of his belongings before taking off for the choir room.

Not three minutes later, Mercedes entered the hall. Though her presence had been noticed, she was paid no heed.

She looked miserable and as though she hadn't gotten a wink of sleep, which pleased Kurt's friends to no end. They didn't feel sorry for her. They knew exactly what she had been hoping to accomplish, and so had she. There was no way she could scapegoat Kurt for this.

She looked up, her face drawn and wan under the fluorescent lights, and blinked owlishly.

What the hell was going on?

Her eyes darted first toward Tina, who said nothing and merely turned to face her locker. As soon as she did, everyone followed her action.

Mercedes stood there, jaws agape, as everyone turned their backs on her.

This couldn't be happening.

Were they really siding with...

But then she remembered.

Kurt's best friends were Artie and Tina. Of course he would have told them.

Brittany was Kurt's devoted acolyte. He would have told her.

Kurt had grown impossibly close to Quinn and Santana. Brittany probably informed them.

Mike would follow Tina resolutely.

Sam was obviously infatuated with Kurt.

Kurt was a Cheerio. They always protected their own.

She had no one.

Everyone had chosen their side, and it was apparent that it wasn't hers.

She began trudging down the hallway, disbelief plain on her face, suppressing the tremors that had started in her fingers and were working their way up her arms, her feet suddenly feeling swollen and though they were made of lead.

A silver dollar landed at her feet.

She kept walking and the coins continued to be thrown on the floor.

She didn't need to count them. She knew there would be thirty.
Rachel had arrived early and hidden herself in a utility closet, desperate to suss out the situation and determine the best course of action. She wanted to find Kurt and apologize once again, but she was hesitant to do so. She didn't want to be a nag or some albatross around his neck.

She had caught glimpses of him, heading toward the principal's office with Coach Sylvester, and then on his way toward the guidance center. She could only hope that he wasn't transferring schools. She didn't dare approach to ask.

Then she had witnessed what had happened with Finn and her fear began to escalate.

Just as she had gotten herself somewhat under control, Mercedes had entered, and her reception had absolutely rocked Rachel to her core.

She didn't know what to do or where to turn. What if they did that to her? She could only expect that they would, and she knew she would have deserved it. Perhaps not as much as the other two, but the more she had thought about her part in it, the more stupid she felt.

But she also knew she had to face the music; literally, as homeroom and then Glee were about to start.

She smoothed down her skirt, flipped back her hair, and carefully exited the utility room. Stepping tentatively into the hall, she waited.

"Hey, Berry," Puck said casually.

Rachel stared.

"Oh, hi, Rachel," Brittany chirped.

Salutations were echoed by the other members. None of the Cheerios addressed her, but then, they never had. She was just grateful to escape their wrath.

Kurt had saved her.

She didn't know why and couldn't bring herself to care.

As far as she was concerned, Kurt could take every solo from now until graduation.
present. Finn, Rachel, and Mercedes had no idea that Kurt would not be returning, while the others feared that they were about to lose their only safe place in the school.

All were startled when the door was thrown open, cracking the plaster of the wall where the knob struck, and an absolutely enraged William Schuester stormed into the room.

He sized them all up, his furious glare resting the longest on Finn, Mercedes, and Rachel.

"For those of you unaware," he seethed, "Kurt Hummel has resigned from New Directions."

"No," gasped a horrified Rachel, eyes huge and wounded.

The eyes of Finn and Mercedes widened in incredulity. Surely not. Surely Kurt wouldn't quit over this, wouldn't give up something he loved so much, wouldn't hurt himself just to punish them.

"He was given no choice in the matter," Will continued. "His father forced him to resign from both New Directions and Cheerios. I'm sure we all know why."

"Oh, god," Finn whispered, shaking his head in disbelief.

Will snorted. "You can best believe that Sue Sylvester is not happy."

Finn, Mercedes, and Rachel flinched. Harshly.

"I'm not either," Will continued. "I've lost one of the best students I've ever had the privilege to teach because of the petty jealousies of those who were supposed to be his friends." He paused. "We are now down two members. Obviously, Sam is no longer considering joining us."

"So it's over," Tina whispered, closing her eyes.

Artie began to panic. Whatever Kurt had planned had obviously not panned out.

"No," Will said sharply. "We will continue."

Everyone stared at him.

"How?" Santana asked, her voice hopeful yet resigned.

Will was grinding his teeth. "Kurt, because he cares about this club and most of its members, went to Principal Figgins this morning and offered to underwrite our budget for the next two years. The principal accepted."

Puck's mouth fell open as Quinn gave an exaggerated blink.

"Say what?" Artie demanded.

Will set his jaw. "Kurt knew Figgins would disband the club the moment he learned we'd lost another member and were ineligible for competition. He therefore made a preemptive strike. The money that was being used to fund us has been reabsorbed into Sylvester's budget, and Kurt has made an endowment which will see us through until you graduate."

Rachel shook her head in wonderment.

Will restlessly drummed his fingers on top of the piano, so hard that it echoed. "In fact, Kurt tripled our previous budget, which means better costumes, better transportation, and more funding should we get new members. We might not be eligible for competition this year, but we still have official
"I loathe you," Brittany exploded, screaming at Finn and egged on by Artie. "Kurt should be here, not you! We've lost everything because of you! How many more times are you nearly going to ruin us?"

Quinn nodded. "The Cheerios are furious. Kurt was due to be named the new head."

Mercedes and Finn winced.

"And now Kurt has had to readjust his entire course load to make up the credit loss from being forced to give up something he loves and at which he kicks ass," Artie continued, his glare malevolent. "Plus, he has to scramble to find new extracurricular activities during his junior year, the most important one in our high school careers. It should be fun for him to explain to college representatives why he suddenly dropped out of a nationally-ranked cheerleading squad or an award-winning glee club."

Mercedes covered her mouth with a hand as Finn stared glumly at the floor.

Rachel said nothing. She knew better than to offer even a peep.

"You have nothing to fear from us, Berry," Santana said, sneering. "We know what went down. You were stupid, but your heart was in the right place. I don't know where the hell your brain was, but I don't really care, either."

"There will be no reprisals in this room," Will said forcefully. "I won't put up with it. I won't be putting up with many things. You're all welcome to be here, but that welcome is conditional. If you can't learn to get along for the hour that you're here, I'll have Figgins cut Kurt a check and we can call it a day." He raised a brow. "What happens outside of this room isn't my business, as long as it's nonviolent and I don't have to hand out detentions."

Santana and Puck smiled poisonously.

"Kurt has given me a list of students he think might fit in well with us," Will continued, "and, surprisingly, Sylvester has lifted the ban for other Cheerios to join us if they so wish." He shook his head. "Don't ask me why. I don't even want to know." He sighed. "I expect all of you to spread the word about upcoming auditions and encourage friends and acquaintances to consider dropping in to see what we're about."

They nodded.

"I expect all of you to be on your best behavior. No one is to interrogate Kurt about what has taken place. No one is to speak of it outside this room. In fact, we're not going to speak of it at all. There's really no point to it, anyway."

He rolled his neck. "Finn, Puck, work out between you who will perform first. Once you're done, we're going to discuss some changes as to how this club is run and debate possible numbers for the theoretical Invitationals meet. We can only hope we'll qualify in time." He then walked over to the nearest corner, sat down, and waited.

This was sure to be an interesting day.
I suppose it's time for a preemptive strike of my own, as I imagine I'll lose half my readers with this chapter.

Yes, Kurt and Will had an affair. No, this will not be a Kurt/Will story. No, no one will discover what happened between them; it's for them alone.

Why did I do this? Because Kurt/Will is one of my favorite pairings, even though I've never before written it. Yes, Schue is a douchebag in canon, but this isn't canon.

Yes, Kurt and Artie showered together. No, it wasn't sexual. Believe it or not, two men, one gay and one straight, can actually feel completely comfortable in each other's presence and, in this universe, Kurt and Artie have literally grown up together.

Yes, there is more to Sam's backstory. It will be explained as time goes on.

No, there is no set pairing in mind. Right now, there are obvious undertones of Hevans and Puckurt, and possibly even KumSuck, but I've yet to decide on a final pairing or if there will even be one.
Kurt sat in the library, working on a German translation just for the fun of it. He believed that he should have had more than a passing familiarity with the language, given that his father's side of the family was German, but it was giving him fits and starts.

Despite being what some deemed a quasi-guttural language with linguistic components similar to English, his brain was not easily assimilating the information, which was vexing. He had learned French at the foot of his mother, who had been fluent, and had added Spanish soon thereafter, the cognates and similar rules of grammar lending themselves to the study. He began Italian shortly after his mother's death, when his interest in fashion truly began to manifest itself.

He supposed he had, in essence, wired his brain early on to adapt to Romance languages quite easily, which explained the facility to which he had taken to Portuguese this summer.

Irish had been a challenge, one which he enjoyed, but his study was still in early days. Conversely, he had been diligently working on his German for almost three years and had little to show for it. His accent was acceptable, but nowhere near where he wanted it to be. He could participate in basic conversations, but routinely failed to grasp the nuances of idioms. Brittany's command of the language was beyond impressive yet, try as she might, she wasn't able to communicate to him the particulars. Still, holding conversations with her was a great help.

He knew he was being ridiculous, but it bothered him that he couldn't just absorb the language as he had so many others. Yes, he spoke more languages than perhaps any other student in McKinley, but languages had always come easily to him without requiring him to expend more than the bare minimum of effort. He supposed he had always assumed that non-European languages, like Chinese or Japanese, would have stymied him, and had prepared himself for it. That he was so befuddled by German, when the blood of its people literally flowed through his veins, was greatly annoying.

He sighed and pushed away his copy of Goethe, which was littered with margin notes and post-its.

All of a sudden, he felt the sense that someone was watching him. He knew it wasn't any of his friends, nor was it Finn or Mercedes. He stiffened his shoulders and waited.

"Hummel."

Kurt looked up and schooled his face into a blank mask. "Adams."

Azimio blinked, surprised that Hummel, for the first time he could remember, was addressing him by his surname. He supposed it made sense, given that he had never been on familiar terms with Kurt. Lately, they could at best be described as unwilling allies.

"Please, have a seat," Kurt said.

Azimio looked around and then rolled his eyes. What the fuck did he care if people saw him with Hummel? It was pretty damn obvious that Hummel wasn't into him, and since Azimio himself wasn't gay, what was the problem? Puckerman's words from the previous day came back to him, and he had to ask himself yet again what was it that bothered him about Hummel. So the dude was gay. It's not like anything would happen. Ever. He might not have liked or, more accurately, understood Hummel's orientation, but it wasn't like he could catch it, either. He felt like an idiot.
"How is your sister?" Kurt asked carefully. At Azimio's startled look, he added, "Noah texted me last night, though I didn't read it until this morning."

It was still weird to hear someone call Puckerman by his first name.

Azimio sighed with relief. "She's okay. Peterson never touched her." He snorted. "Apparently she's not the right skin color." He shook his head. "I've never been so grateful for racism."

"Thank god," Kurt whispered, closing his eyes, before remembering doing so in present company probably wasn't the best idea. His eyes snapped open. "Then what may I do for you?"

Azimio squirmed. "I just...wanted to thank you, or something. You know, for turning him in." He rubbed a hand over his face. "Thank Christ someone did."

"Do you know if he went after any of the siblings of our classmates?"

Azimio shook his head. "Not that I know, or not that anyone's said. Apparently he likes them young," he spat, disgusted. "Real young. Like, nursery school and shit."

Kurt thought he might vomit.

Azimio nodded at the look. "From what I've heard, the cops are interviewing families in the neighborhood. Pedos look first at what's around them. They're charging him with possession of kiddie porn." He shook his head and snorted. "But get this: his parents knew."

Kurt stared. "What?" he finally asked.

Azimio set his jaw and nodded. "The fuckers knew and were trying to get him help. They thought they had him contained, whatever that means."

Kurt thought about that for a moment. "Then they should be charged as accessories." He nodded. "I hope they are. They've been abetting a criminal."

Azimio, startled, just nodded.

"I have no sympathy or patience for pedophiles," Kurt hissed. "The rate of recidivism is so high, there's no point in trying to rehabilitate them. It doesn't work. They should just be executed and let that be the end of it. I don't like that my tax dollars go to house sexual predators. Why should they get free room and board, access to an education, and a movie night? Fuck them."

Azimio's mouth fell open.

Kurt shrugged. "Do you know how many people think that gay equals pedophile? Being gay is a sexual orientation, not a predilection for children. I think all pedophiles should face a firing squad comprised of their victims and their parents."

Against his will, Azimio smirked. He could appreciate such an attitude, and he could only imagine what being deemed a child-toucher must have felt like. He didn't understand the homo thing, but he sure as hell knew Kurt wasn't into kids, even though Hudson had the mental capacity of a toddler.

"I'm glad your sister's okay," Kurt said. "Was there something else?"

"How long did you know?" Azimio blurted. "About Peterson, I mean."
Kurt shook his head. "I found out yesterday after Glee, when I called my investigator while you were standing there." He exhaled. "Believe me, I was shocked and appalled. I knew he was doing something perverted, but I never suspected that. I found out earlier in the summer that his alleged girlfriend, Julie, is, in fact, only twelve."

"Fuck," Azimio muttered.

Kurt nodded. "I had him followed but, despite their relationship, he had done nothing inappropriate with her. Her parents were even aware they were dating and had no objection." He exchanged a glance with the other boy. "I know. I have no idea what the hell they were thinking, but they obviously weren't thinking at all. They were apparently flattered that a good-looking high school football player was interested in their daughter."

"Sick," Azimio hissed, shaking his head in incredulity.

"Absolutely. My investigators hacked in to Peterson's laptop to check his emails in order to determine if his relationship with the girl had progressed further than anyone realized." He gathered a breath. "Obviously, they found something much more disturbing."

He cleared his throat. "So they remote copied his hard drive and, combined with the other information they had unearthed, forwarded it to the police. I would have turned him in immediately, but I didn't want to take a chance Peterson would be able to wipe his hard drive. My team advised me that they were in the process of copying it while I was on the phone with them and they only needed an additional two hours. They also had to contact the FBI, as possession of child pornography is a federal crime."

Azimio gave a low whistle.

"What is everyone saying?" asked a curious Kurt. "As I'm sure you've heard, I've been avoiding most people."

Azimio released a bark of laughter. "Yeah, I'd guess so. I don't know what went down with you, Hudson, and Jones, but you really missed one hell of a show this morning."

"Oh?"

Azimio stared at him and quickly realized Hummel had no idea of what had gone down. Either he hadn't wanted to know prior to it happening, or his crew hadn't told him what they were planning in order to keep him out of it - which was pretty cool, actually. He was suddenly overcome by his own curiosity.

Kurt sighed, expecting this. "Fine. It's not as though it won't make the rounds soon enough."

"I won't tell anyone," Azimio said, shrugging.

Kurt eyed him. "You wouldn't, would you? Why?"

Another shrug. "Because whatever went down, it's pretty obvious Hudson and Jones deserved it, given how everyone's automatically taken your side. I don't care about either one of them, or about you, so there's no advantage to me by running my mouth."

Kurt blinked. "Acceptable." He took a deep breath. "As you may or may not be aware, I spent this summer in Europe. While there, I met a man with whom I fell in love." He paused.

Azimio didn't see what the problem was. Two dudes together didn't do it for him, but as long as he
didn't have to see it, it really wasn't his business. He frowned. So why the hell had he been bullying Hummel for so long?

His brows gathered. Actually, all of that shit had been instigated by Dave, whom Hummel was blackmailing. And that was when Azimio began to experience a very unwelcome realization.

Oh. Holy. Shit.

He stamped it down. Couldn't deal with that right now, if ever.

Still. Jesus, how blind had he been? Putting it all into perspective, it suddenly made so much damn sense. And he had helped Karofsky torture some kid because Dave didn't have the guts to own up to who he was? Goddamn it.

"So?" Azimio prompted, trying to keep the disgust from his voice.

"We slept together," Kurt continued nonchalantly. "Somehow, Finn found out, told Mercedes, and the two of them went to my house when they knew I wouldn't be home, and informed my father of this information."

Azimio's eyes widened and he then gave an exaggerated blink. "Seriously? What the fuck?"

"Indeed. So, I've been forced to resign from both Glee and Cheerios."

"Shit," Azimio said, drawing out the curse for several syllables, having no problem imagining just how pissed the Cheerios - and Sylvester - must have been. He'd always known Jones had carried a torch for the little homo, so he was sure the girl was just jealous, but what the fuck was Hudson's problem? Why be a fink like that? What did he hope to gain? "Hudson really is an idiot."

"Agreed," Kurt said flatly. "So, this morning?"

Azimio blinked and nodded. "There were like a hundred people in the hall when Hudson came in. They lined up and down either side and just stared at him. It was fucking spooky, man. They looked like Children of the Corn or something." He shook his head. "No one spoke or even moved; they just stared." He suppressed a shudder. "Creepy."

Kurt nodded slowly. "It makes sense. Finn loves attention, but only certain kinds. I'm positive that was Quinn's doing."

Azimio shivered. Fabray might have looked like an angel, but she had always been a scary bitch. Baby or not, he'd doubted that had changed. "Then Jones showed up. It started out as the same thing, but when she looked at the Goth Chick - er, Tina - Tina turned around toward her locker, and then every fucking person in the hall did the same. They all just turned their backs on her."

Kurt tilted his head. "A shunning. I suppose there was a preponderance of Cheerios present?"

Azimio nodded.

Kurt nodded in kind. "Well, I don't know if it was Quinn's idea, but she must have led the charge. I can only assume the Cheerio Phone Tree was activated, and only Quinn or Sylvester is in the position to do that. Interesting."

Azimio snorted. The fuck was a phone tree? "The best part was when they threw silver dollars at her. Thirty of them."
Kurt arched a brow. Likening Mercedes to Judas? Appropriate, if cruel. He chuckled darkly. "That's so Brittany."

Azimio stared. Sure, he knew that there was more to Pierce than what she let on, but never had he imagined she was so...eloquent. Even with a gesture. Whoa. "So what happens now?"

Kurt gave him the side-eye. "Why do you care?"

Azimio shrugged. "I don't, really, but the rumors are flying." He sighed. "Look, you did us a solid with Peterson. We don't need trash like that hanging with us. We're leaving you alone, and you've kept your end of the bargain. I don't really see the problem with putting out the information you want."

Kurt nodded. "All right. I would appreciate you telling the other jocks that Finn and Mercedes are no longer under my protection, but I don't want them touched. Go along with whatever the Unholy Trinity has planned. If you up the game, it will just draw unnecessary attention to you and Finn and Mercedes will then be able to whine about it to the faculty or administration, who will then feel compelled to intervene. Keep your hands clean and let the others deal with them."

"Cool. No skin off my nose," Azimio said. "I'm surprised you're letting it go that easily."

Kurt's eyes lighted. "Oh, I never said that."

Azimio smirked. Interesting. He didn't know why he cared. In fact, he probably didn't care, but this was fun, and he had always liked watching a master at work. Gay or not, Hummel had big ones. As long as Azimio himself wasn't going to be bit on the ass, he had no objection to the suffering of others.

"Care to share?" he asked.

Kurt shrugged a diffident shoulder. "Why not? In fact, this is something you might enjoy. With Finn sidelined in Glee and sliding down the social ladder, what does he have left?"

"Football."

"Exactly. I'm the Peer Mentor for Sam Evans, the new transfer student in our class. Sam used to play football at his old school. Rumor has it that he's quite good." Kurt smirked. "Guess which position."

Azimio snickered.

"I heard from Sylvester that there's a new coach - a woman - and she's going to make the entire team try out to keep their spots. Until now, Finn has had no competition for his, so I think I should encourage Sam to make a bid."

Azimio laughed outright, though he was worried about this new coach. He hadn't heard dick about this, nor about her making the team try out. He figured his position was safe; he was good at it, and he was big and strong, so it shouldn't be a problem, but there were several dudes who would probably be replaced. He didn't really give a shit, since most of them sucked and, as this was his senior year, he desperately needed a winning team. If this new coach - even if it was a woman - could deliver, he could've cared less.

"Sounds good to me," he said. "We haven't won a game since you quit." He cocked his head. "You going to try out again?"

Kurt shook his head. "I don't like football, mostly because I don't understand the rules, and no one
Azimio stared. "Say what?" he finally asked. "You were on the team. Hudson didn't tell you how to play?"

"No," Kurt said simply. "I wasn't welcome, despite my ability. I wasn't friends with Noah at that time, and the rest of you felt I was showing you up by succeeding where you failed. I didn't see the point of sticking around where I wasn't wanted, and there was certainly no effort to get me to stay."

Azimio was pissed off. He knew he hadn't made Hummel welcome on the team, nor had he encouraged the other guys to do so, but he had also thought that Hummel was all superior and acting like he was gracing them with his presence or some shit. He had no idea that Hummel had no fucking clue what was going on, or that Hudson and Puckerman, his little singing pals, hadn't been looking out for him. Gay or not, Hummel won them a game. He could have won them more. That was really all that mattered.

"Would you try out?" he asked. "If I could guarantee that you'd be treated okay and that shit was explained to you?"

Kurt hesitated. "I don't know. I really have no interest in the game, though I do like kicking." He smirked. "And winning." He sighed. "But I also don't know if I'd have the time. I need to find a new job, since I resigned from my father's shop."

"Shop?" Azimio dimly repeated. "Wait, the auto shop? That's yours? Your dad's, I mean? And you worked there?"

Hummel knew cars? What?

Kurt rolled his eyes. "Of course it's our shop. It has our name on it. And, yes, I'm a fully-certified mechanic."

Azimio stared, trying to reconcile this information with what he knew about Hummel, or what he thought he had known, but it just didn't compute. Hummel fixed cars. For a living.

He shook his head.

"What if you didn't have to attend practices?" he asked. "What if you just showed up for games?"

Kurt considered the question. "Perhaps, but, like I said, it would depend on my schedule. Also, even if Sam displaces Finn, I'd imagine Finn would remain on the team in some capacity, even if only as a reserve. He does have talent. Regardless, I don't wish to have anything to do with him."

Azimio thought they might be able to work around that. "What about Evans? Is he your...boyfriend? Is he under your protection?"

Kurt immediately opted for subterfuge, determined to protect Sam at all costs. "Sam is not my boyfriend. In fact, I think Santana and Quinn are determining which of them will date him first, but he is under my protection. Sam isn't like Finn, Azimio. He'll fight back." He quirked a brow. "And he'll win. He has a lot of people supporting him, including some faculty members."

"Understood," Azimio said, nodding.

Message totally received. Besides, he had nothing against Evans, and he certainly didn't want to become the target of the combined forces of Hummel, Fabray, and Lopez. He could only assume that Brittany, and thus the rest of the Cheerios and possibly Sylvester, would wield her considerable
power in defense of Evans, as well. No one wanted to be caught in that particular crossfire. Besides, if the dude proved to be a kickass quarterback, why would the team want to fuck that up?

"Excellent," Kurt said primly. "Have a good day, Azimio."

Azimio nodded, got up, and walked away, not at all troubled by the blatant dismissal. After all, it wouldn't do for anyone thinking he and Hummel were actual friends. Especially because they weren't.

Still.

This was some weird-ass shit!

First, Hummel wasn't a complete dick. Hummel just liked dicks, and it appeared that most people, regardless of what they said or implied, really didn't give a fuck.

So why the hell should he care? It didn't affect him. Hummel could bone whomever he wanted. It wasn't like he was harassing anyone to get laid. Apparently, he could get it with no problems. Well, except for jealous finks like Hudson and Jones, whatever the fuck that mess was all about. He didn't even want to know.

Hummel kept his business in-house, protected his friends, and punished his enemies.

That was how you ran an organization.

Second, Hummel could help the team and, despite how they had treated him, might be willing to try, which Azimio knew was more than they deserved.

Third, Hummel could possibly put in to position a quarterback who wasn't a total pussy.

Fourth, he knew Hummel helped the guy Cheerios with homework and shit, and a lot of the footballers were barely passing. No one knew the laws the new coach would be laying down, but he was willing to bet she'd more strictly adhere to the minimum GPA guidelines than Tanaka ever had. That could be a problem for some of them. Azimio himself was an average student and wasn't too worried, but some of the guys would be in for hell.

Bottom line, he didn't want to go out a loser.

He didn't like Hummel, didn't know if he ever would, but he also didn't hate him. Bullying Hummel had gotten him nothing except threats which he knew to heed. Hummel wasn't playing around - he'd turn their asses in at the slightest provocation. It was obvious he could only be pushed so far, which Azimio kind of respected.

Even though Hummel hadn't named himself a leader, it was obvious that was exactly what he was, and apparently other people thought of him as such. Also, he had some pretty damn powerful backup. Even the jocks knew not to fuck with Cheerios. They could be lethal, and Sylvester would always protect them.

So what did he really have to lose by getting along with Hummel? Not a damn thing, but he had everything to lose by antagonizing him.

Azimio Adams was no genius, but he also wasn't Hudson. He knew when to cut his losses and where to place his bets, and he was betting on Hummel.
Sam was experiencing a mild case of nervousness.

He still wasn't sure what it was that had made him confess as much of his past troubles as he had to New Directions, to his friends. It was odd to think of them that way. He was helpless to explain, even to himself, his feelings toward them, as well as how quickly those feelings had been established.

Still, he liked them. He trusted them.

Then he had arrived at school and taken a stand against one of the most popular boys of his class. He didn't like Finn and didn't regret siding with Kurt, but he also wasn't sure if there would be repercussions for his actions. He didn't know Finn, nor did he know about Finn's friends outside the glee club, if, in fact, he had any. He didn't regret his actions nor would he ever take them back, and while he knew the others would come to his defense if necessary, he didn't want to rely on them so heavily.

He had also learned that Finn, Puck, and Mike were all on the football team, which Sam himself wished to join. Tryouts were supposed to begin next week, and a new coach had been hired; the last one, said to have had a penchant for Daisy Dukes, had apparently suffered a nervous breakdown.

If he did make the team, he could only imagine how awkward practices and games would be among the four of them, as well as how the other team members would react to their dynamic. He well knew that strong teamwork was essential.

As his usual position was quarterback and, as Finn was the current quarterback, he rather thought it could get messy. On the other hand, the idea of displacing Finn filled him with a sense of malevolent glee.

After he and Puck had entered the school, Puck had quickly left him to help coordinate the Cheerios' Evil Plan. Sam, with the help of some freshman girl who unnervingly looked as though she wanted to lick him like a Tootsie Pop, had found Mr. Schue's office.

Sam still didn't know what to make of the guy. Schue was a good teacher, if a little overeager to placate his students, and he really seemed to care about the glee club. He had welcomed Sam into his office and listened patiently while the boy stutteringly explained why he didn't feel comfortable joining New Directions.

Schue had said nothing throughout Sam's monologue, merely nodding sympathetically and making murmurings of understanding, which suggested, to Sam at least, that the man was aware of everything that had gone down and was on Kurt's side. That was awesome. Sam was relieved that Kurt had supporters among the faculty, that there were people looking out for him.

What was weird was that Schue appeared to be studying him, scrutinizing him, as though determining his worth, which Sam didn't understand at all.

Oh, Schue had been nice and respectful and everything, but the whole encounter had felt off. It was only when he had gotten up to leave that he understood Schue was analyzing him in order to determine if he was good enough for Kurt. Apparently Schue had deemed that to be the case, which Sam honestly appreciated, considering he felt like he had passed a test he hadn't known he was taking.

He figured Schue was angry that Mercedes and Finn had turned on Kurt and had thus hurt the club,
and he wanted to make sure it didn't happen again. Schue was placing Kurt above the needs of the club, which was good, in Sam's books.

Most upsetting, however, was that he'd yet to lay eyes on Kurt this morning. Kurt hadn't been in homeroom, yet he knew the boy was present, since Ms. Wyatt specifically hadn't called his name from the roster and Kurt had obviously talked with Schue, but Sam wouldn't feel better until he saw Kurt for himself.

Again he was overwhelmed by feelings of protectiveness, as though it was his responsibility to care for Kurt. He didn't consider it a responsibility, however; or, if he did, it was a welcome one. This connection he felt with Kurt, so startling in its potency, despite its infancy, gave him a sense of purpose and flooded him with warmth.

He genuinely liked Kurt, wanted him to be happy, and that reaffirmed that his interest was more than just hormones.

He nodded and returned the greetings of several Cheerios, who, for whatever reason, acknowledged him. He assumed Quinn, Santana, and Brittany had arranged it so that their teammates would make him feel welcome. He made a mental note to thank them later.

He finally found his way to Study Hall, only getting lost once, and took a seat just as the bell rang. Mr. Combs, the monitor, took roll, and then everyone settled down and began preparing for their day.

Sam liked having Study Hall first thing. He preferred it to jumping into classes straight off. He was able to review his homework and read ahead, which helped in ameliorating some of his social anxiety. He had managed to complete his math assignment last night, with some help from Mike - who was seriously smart; like, the Kurt type of smart - and Puck, and was just about to go over his homework again when the door opened.

Kurt sauntered in and Sam almost passed away, because Kurt was wearing leather pants.

*Leather. Pants.*

Kurt smiled at Sam and then walked up to Mr. Combs. They greeted each other cordially and Kurt handed the man a pass. Sam didn't know what was going on, since Kurt had a free period now in place of Glee and didn't have Study Hall at all, but guessed some teacher had said Kurt could attend if he wanted.

Sam couldn't stop staring. Jesus, Kurt was gorgeous.

And that *ass.* It was just...perfect, and highlighted so beautifully by those pants.

Those pants!

They should have been outlawed.

They weren't indecent, or anything. Sure, they were fitted, probably made for Kurt's own body, judging by the cut, but he didn't look poured into them. They were well-tailored at the hips and somewhat snug around Kurt's powerful thighs, inadvertently drawing attention to his crotch, but they were straight-legged and were, from the knee down, loose.

Kurt had sexy legs, Sam thought. Unlike a lot of guys who worked out their upper bodies almost exclusively and were thus left with chicken legs, Kurt was in proportion. Not a lot of muscle mass, but completely toned from head to toe.
The shirt, however, was very tight, a bright cobalt blue which made Kurt's incredible eyes stand out even more. Sam didn't even know what kind of shirt it was. It had short sleeves - wow, Kurt's arms looked really good - but it wasn't a t-shirt. It didn't have buttons, though it did have what looked like a mock turtleneck. It was something akin to a tube top, as though it had been sewn directly onto Kurt's torso. The material looked soft and somewhat shimmered under the fluorescent lights.

A pair of Doc Martens, very different from the Cuban heels Kurt wore yesterday, Sam noted, completed the ensemble.

Sam was pretty sure he had just sighed like some simpering heroine out of a romance novel. He supposed he would soon be getting the vapors and felt like a love-struck moron. It wasn't enough, however, to stop him from glaring venomously at some random Cheerio who murmured something about her exploding ovaries.

He had told Puck all the right things: how, more than anything, he wanted to be Kurt's friend; how he didn't want to rush anything and thus potentially ruin said friendship; how he understood that Kurt was currently beleaguered by myriad problems, including the dissolution of a summer romance, the loss of his best friend, his problems with both his father and Finn, and losing two important positions in school.

All of it was true, absolutely.

That said, Sam knew that he was dangerously close to drooling. No matter how much he wanted to do the right thing, be an honorable person, he couldn't stop himself from entertaining some rather dirty fantasies involving himself and Kurt. He felt the telltale blush beginning.

Geez, he'd never felt so out of control before. It just didn't make sense, and he couldn't figure out what was going on in his own damn head. Okay, so Kurt was stunning, but...no, there were no buts. He'd never seen anyone, boy or girl, more beautiful than Kurt.

He sighed. He supposed he'd just have to accept that, no matter how hard he tried, he wanted to be more than Kurt's friend. However, he also accepted that he shouldn't push or make a nuisance of himself. He'd rather be close to Kurt, to love him in silence and suffer for it, than not be near him at all.

He blinked.

Love?

Was that what this was?

He shook his head.

No, of course not! It couldn't be. It was way too soon.

Wasn't it?

Sam bit his lip. He didn't know.

Was he supposed to know? This was something he should know, right?

Was this what love at first sight felt like? Because he was pretty sure he'd been into Kurt from the moment they had first met, from the moment Kurt had shook his hand.

He shivered. Kurt's skin was so soft.
Why couldn't he get control of himself?

Oh! Oh, no.

He felt a panic attack coming on. Shit! His lungs were already starting to close up, his chest tightening.

Suddenly there was a warm hand resting on his arm. A soft hand. Kurt's hand.

When had Kurt sat down next to him?

"Sam, are you all right?" Kurt quietly asked, his eyes very wide.

Sam looked at him, the lights suddenly too bright and giving him a headache. Waves crashed against his ears. If he tried to speak, he knew he'd start gasping and gurgling and everyone would think he was a freak. He attempted to communicate with his eyes that he was about to have a full-blown shit attack.

Kurt merely nodded, stood, pushed his desk toward the wall, and grabbed Sam's hand. "I'm taking Sam to the Nurse's office, Mr. Combs."

The teacher looked up, frowning at the disturbance, but one look at the Evans boy and he began nodding. Absolutely, he needed to be examined.

Kurt grabbed both their bookbags and led Sam from the room, shutting the door behind him, much to the consternation of several nosy students. He gently pushed Sam against the nearest wall.

"Sam, are you having a panic attack?"

Sam nodded weakly.

Kurt nodded in kind. "All right. I've had my own share of them, so this is what we're going to do." He cupped Sam's face in his hands. "Look into my eyes, Sam. Just look at me, not at anything else. Just concentrate on me, okay?"

Wow, had Kurt's voice always been that smooth? Sam thought it was lower, too. It was so soothing. He blinked owlishly and did as Kurt instructed.

"Good," Kurt murmured. "Now we're going to breathe together, Sam. Slow, controlled breaths. Not too much, or you'll choke." His eyes searched Sam's own. "Are you listening?"

Sam nodded once.

"Okay," Kurt said, smiling softly. "On the count of three, I want you to take a slow breath through your nose, just like this." He demonstrated and then began the countdown. "Now you."

Sam tried, and found he was somewhat able to manage.

"Good," Kurt said encouragingly. "Hold it for five seconds, and then slowly release the breath from your mouth." He then counted for him. "I'm right here with you, Sam."

It helped, it really did. Sam felt himself beginning to calm down, despite the fact that Kurt was standing so close to him and touching him, and it was Kurt...

His breathing increased sharply, but then it leveled out as Kurt continued to guide his respiration.
"Are you okay?" asked a gentle Kurt after several moments.

"I think so," Sam whispered, his voice rough and raw. "Thanks."

Kurt gnawed on his lip, which Sam thought the cutest thing ever, and averted his eyes.

"May I ask you something, Sam?"

"Sure."

"Do...do you like me?" Kurt then began babbling at a frenetic speed. "I mean, I know we're friends, or at least I consider you my friend, even though we only met yesterday, but I feel as though we've known each other for much longer. I can't explain it, but I feel protective of you. I feel very close to you, and I'm not sure why. It makes me a little uneasy, because I'm usually much better at controlling my emotions, but something about you..." He shook his head, face flushing. "I'm sure I'm reading far too much into the situation, so please forgive me if I..."

"Yes."

Kurt blinked. "I'm sorry?"

"Yes, I like you," Sam murmured. His face felt as though it was actually glowing, he was so warm. "Sorry. I didn't mean to be so obvious."

"You weren't," Kurt said, "and there's no reason to be sorry." He paused. "I just...I don't have a very good track record with reading people. I seem to fail as often as I succeed." His brow furrowed.

"Finn and Mercedes?"

Kurt grunted in exasperation, but finally nodded. He shouldn't have been surprised that Sam had known, yet he was. He could only assume one of the girls had told him. He was even more embarrassed.

"Finn and Mercedes are actually very good people, Sam. I'm unhappy with them at the moment, and I doubt I'll be able to bring myself to trust them ever again, but I don't hate them. This entire situation is as much my fault as it is theirs."

Sam sincerely doubted that, but decided it was best for him to stay out of it. Despite this conversation, it was really none of his business. He decided there and then that he wouldn't participate in what the others had planned for Finn and Mercedes, but neither would he interfere. He didn't owe them anything, and they had started all of this by being brainless, jealous assholes.

"You didn't read this wrong," Sam said quietly.

Kurt appeared to grow even more nervous, blinking harshly several times and looking very confused. "Oh."

Sam's nerves increased in response. "Does...does it bother you? That I like you, I mean?"

Kurt blushed and Sam wanted to coo.

"No," Kurt whispered. "I'm very happy and...and honored...that you like me."

Sam really wished Kurt wouldn't say stuff like that, because it was becoming increasingly difficult not to lean over and kiss him.
"But..."

Sam deflated. "You don't like me?"

Kurt's eyes widened. "Oh! No, I like you very much!"

Sam was desperate not to hear but only as a friend, so he didn't give time for Kurt to elaborate. "Are you not...am I not good-looking enough for you?"

Kurt gave him an incredulous look before promptly narrowing his eyes, trying to determine if Sam's question was merely humble or manipulative. He stepped closer and peered at Sam, surprised and dismayed to see the other boy was actually serious! He almost couldn't believe it. He knew Sam was shy and somewhat self-deprecating, but this was asinine. It made him angry.

Kurt wasn't immodest; he knew he was attractive, and despite his distaste for being considered pretty, he knew it was a compliment. Sam, however, was in a whole other league. Sam was so handsome it was almost blinding. Kurt knew he could never even compare to that kind of beauty.

"Don't be ridiculous, Sam Evans!" he snapped. "You're the perfect teen idol. You're a walking wet-dream!"

Sam's eyes widened and his face flooded with color.

Kurt tilted his head. "You don't believe me, do you?" he asked. "You honestly have no idea just how beautiful you are."

"B-Beautiful?" Sam sputtered.

Kurt had to force himself not to roll his eyes. "Beautiful," he repeated succinctly, in a tone that brooked no argument. "Sam, please know that I'm not exaggerating when I say that you're one of the most handsome boys I've ever seen, let alone met."

Sam frowned, searching his mind for other possibilities as to why Kurt wasn't as willing to give them a shot. "Is it because I'm bisexual?"

Kurt's pause before answering was noticeable. It was upsetting and disappointing, and made Sam feel vaguely angry.

Finally, Kurt sighed. "If you had asked me that question even a few months ago, my answer would have been yes." He scowled. "I'm disgusted with myself that I ever held that prejudice, but I did. I would even have been able to rationalize it then, but I no longer could."

He paused. "I am...an incredibly insecure person, Sam. I'm quite capable of putting on lovely, colorful masks with which to confront the world, but I am very insecure and rarely allow people close enough to see who I really am. Two of those people were Finn and Mercedes, and I'm sure you can understand why I'm now even more gun-shy than ever."

Sam nodded. Yeah, he imagined it sucked pretty hard being Kurt Hummel at the moment.

"Do you remember Quinn's words about herself yesterday, prior to her song?" Kurt asked. "She said she hadn't liked herself, hadn't liked the person that she was." He averted his eyes. "I didn't like myself much, either. I've never been ashamed of being gay or of my voice or of the many things which a lot of people have insisted I should be ashamed, but I didn't like myself. I would look in a mirror and see only flaws. My ears are too pointy, my teeth are too small, my lips are too big."
"I think I beat you on that score," Sam said quietly. "I know what you mean, Kurt. Believe me, I know all too well."

Kurt's eyes searched his for a very long time and, at last, he nodded slowly. He then tilted his head. "Sam, yesterday at lunch, you asked me if I had an eating disorder."

Sam's breath hitched.

"Do you have one?" Kurt gently asked.

Sam looked away and absently scratched his left arm. "They don't call it an eating disorder. I mean, I guess they group it in there, but I've never starved myself or purged." His face was growing more and more red. "It's called Body Dysmorphic Disorder." He bit his lip. "Do you know what that is?"

Kurt nodded hesitantly. "I have a vague understanding of it. I don't know the particulars."

Sam sighed. "There's a lot to it, but it basically means that I'm really overcritical about my appearance. I kind of obsess over it. I'm very careful about what I eat, and whenever I eat something I know isn't that healthy, I kind of...attack myself for eating it. I used to work out too much, trying to compensate, and the idea that I'm fat floats around my head about five hundred times a day." He shook his head. "My whole life, people have always made comments about my lips or that my mouth is too large or..." he trailed off.

"I understand," Kurt said.

Sam nodded. "I know." He fidgeted. "Sorry for dumping all of this on you."

"You didn't dump anything on me; I asked. I'm just glad you feel you can talk to me about it."

"That's what weird," Sam said. "I really can. I feel like I could tell you anything." He looked down at the floor. "I've never had that before. I've never trusted someone so much, and I don't understand why I'm doing it now. I mean, you're great and everything, but we've only just met and it's strange how open I am with you." He took in a sharp breath. "It's scary."

Kurt reached up and cupped his cheek. "I know. I feel the same way, and I'll always be there if you need to talk. I promise you that, Sam, and I don't make promises lightly."

Sam nodded.

Kurt exhaled. "Back to what I was saying about bisexuality. Like I said, if you had asked me a few months ago, I would have denied any such thing existed. I would have argued that bisexuals were girls trying to be trendy or boys who couldn't admit they were gay." He blushed severely, his shame obvious. "I know better now, and I'm appalled by my own arrogance and my ignorance."

Sam stared at him, hoping Kurt would explain himself more clearly.

Kurt stared back. "I can't tell you how brave I think you are for coming out to me and not being ashamed of who you are. I can't even imagine what it must be like to be bisexual, to have an orientation which is sneered at and ridiculed, to be called selfish or greedy or confused, especially by members of a community that should know better." He shook his head, sneering. "I think being bisexual is probably one of the most difficult things in the world. I don't believe I could ever be as courageous as you are."

Sam's mouth fell open. "So what made you change your mind?"
"Tina," Kurt promptly answered. "I was not very supportive of Santana and Brittany when they were together, despite the fact that I very well knew they truly loved one another. In the back of my mind was always an undercurrent that they were trying to titillate boys - and they were, but not in the way I imagined. It was more about them wanting acceptance while subversively thumbing their noses at a heteronormative culture.

"When Tina came out to me as bisexual, however, I was completely stunned. We had been best friends for a number of years, and I never suspected she had an attraction to other girls." His eyes suddenly looked vacant. "I can still see the look on her face when she told me. She was absolutely terrified that I was going to reject her or ridicule her."

He pressed his lips together tightly and his eyes welled with tears. "And all I could think of," he continued, his voice warbling, "was how ashamed I was. Because she was certain that's what I would do. There was this huge part of her life that she had never shared with me because she feared my reaction, and there must have been something about me that made her feel that way."

Tears slowly began leaking down his cheeks. "My whole life, I've known who I was and I fought for the right to be that person, but my best friend, who had been so supportive of me when I came out to her, thought I would deny her, and that just about broke me, Sam, because I think that, had it been anyone but her, I would've reacted exactly as she feared."

Kurt closed his eyes and fought to calm his breath, scrubbing his face with a hand. "I accepted her immediately, and it wasn't feigned. It wasn't conditional. I read up on bisexuality, and I was frankly stunned and horrified by how many people, gay people, dismiss it as a fallacy or a hoax or as simple indecision. That people who have been persecuted, who were fighting for the right to love who they loved, could be so callous, so cruel, so absolutely hypocritical, was devastating, and I knew I never wanted to be one of them."

He smiled, though it was pained. "So, no, the fact that you're bisexual would never be a deal-breaker if we were to end up dating."

He saw that Sam was about to interrupt, so he held up a finger to the other boy's lips to silence him. He suppressed a shiver when Sam's lips pressed against that finger, almost a kiss.

"But this is where my insecurity comes into play. Does the fact that you're bisexual scare me? Yes, but not because you're bisexual. It's because, if we were together, I would probably obsess constantly that you would leave me for a woman. Every time you looked at a girl, I would question if she was the one who would take you from me. Not because of anything you would or wouldn't do, but because of my own jealousy and inferiority complex, that she could give you things I never could. I'm scared that I would drive you away. I'm scared that I would hurt you."

Sam gave an exaggerated blink, rather stunned with the amount of information Kurt was imparting to him, as well as how honest he was being.

"Sam," Kurt began, his voice more sedate, "I am beyond flattered that you like me, and please know that I think you're absolutely gorgeous. You're...you're sweet," he said quietly, "and you're kind, and I am so very glad to call you my friend." He paused. "You said felt it too, this connection we have?"

A dazed Sam nodded.
Kurt wet his lips and swallowed. "Sam, I won't deny that I'm attracted to you, because I am, very much so, but I'm not ready to be in a relationship right now." He gave Sam a soft smile. "And I think both of us are the type of people who would want a relationship, not just casual sex."

*Don't think about sex with Kurt, don't think about sex with Kurt,* Sam chanted over and over in his mind, like a mantra. He nodded again.

Kurt sighed. "Despite whatever this is between us, we really don't know each other. I feel like I know you, for whatever reason, and I trust you, but I don't know you, and you definitely don't know me. I'm...not a nice person, Sam."

Sam snorted. "It's true," Kurt insisted, his voice deadly serious. "You've either seen me at my best or as more vulnerable than I usually allow myself to be seen. That doesn't mean I'm nice. I'm very cold, Sam. I'm aloof and often indifferent to the people around me. I have friends, yes, good friends whom I love, and they have increased in number this year. I would do anything to protect them, Sam. Anything."

Sam couldn't suppress the chill he felt at those words.

Kurt nodded, his eyes never leaving Sam's own, for it was important the other boy understood this. "I'm a person who requires a certain amount of solitude, and therefore can be sullen and moody when I feel overwhelmed by people, or even just one person in particular. I can be mean and very petty. I can be overly demanding and vengefully critical. Actually, I can be vicious; ruthless, even. I'm possessive and am quick to anger. I get jealous very easily. I can and have been very cruel with my words. I can be extremely manipulative when I choose to be."

He sighed again. "I've been working on these things, but I would be remiss not to inform you of them. It makes me happy that you like me, Sam, but I need to know that you like me, not some ideal or fantasy that you believe me to be. I did that with Finn, and we're both paying for that mistake."

Sam slowly nodded, his words to Puck this morning coming back to haunt him. "I get that, I really do, and it means a lot to me that you're being so honest, but there's more, isn't there? There's the guy you were with this summer, right?"

He winced at Kurt's flinch.

Kurt set his jaw and finally nodded, once. "I fell in love with him, Sam. I don't mean a crush or the unfortunate infatuation I had for Finn. I truly fell in love."

"And you still love him," Sam guessed.

"Very much. I always will. We're apart because we have to be, not because we want to be. We know we don't have a future together and, while we've both accepted that, it really doesn't change our feelings. They don't just go away. They will in time, I'm sure, but I'm not there yet." He stared into Sam's eyes. "I will not use you."

Sam nodded again. "I respect that. I appreciate that." He sighed. "So where do we go from here?"

"I'm not sure," Kurt said. "Sam, I believe you're going to become one of my best friends. I like you, but, more than that, I respect you. I don't respect many people." He turned pensive. "I don't know if we'll end up dating. What I can honestly say is that, were I to begin dating again, I believe I'd want to date you."
Sam felt something flutter in his chest.

"But I want us to go slowly," Kurt added. "I want us to get to know each other as friends. I don't want to try something for which neither of us is ready, only to lose what we already have."

Sam sighed, this time with relief. "I'd like that." He paused. "There's...there's a lot I'd like to tell you."

Kurt nodded, having suspected as much. His instincts and conversation with Emma had only confirmed it. "And I'd like to listen."

Sam gave him a watery smile.

Kurt returned it. "I think we're both worth waiting for." He cleared his throat. "So, no pressure, right? Just friends."


Kurt snorted and rolled his eyes. "I'm not averse to it."

He really wasn't, despite being uncomfortable with most people touching him. Of course, Sam wasn't most people, so Kurt hugged him.

As Sam rested his chin on Kurt's shoulder and clung to him more tightly than was necessary, his smile was blinding.

Sue stood at the end of the hall, leaning against the wall and looking surprisingly unobtrusive as she assessed the situation. A cord hung from her ear which had allowed her to listen to Special K's entire conversation with his new boytoy.

Well, at least the audio surveillance equipment she had installed the week previous in preparation for the new school term was functioning properly. She'd have to check the video later.

After her conversation with Guidance Counselor Barbie yesterday, she had thoroughly investigated one Samuel Evans and reached the conclusion that he presented no threat to Special K. Therefore, she would allow their friendship to continue.

She rolled her eyes at them. Evans was so thoroughly besotted with Special K that it was nauseating. She mentally calculated how much acetylcholine must be swimming around her cerebral cortex to invoke such a response. She arrived at the answer and was displeased.

Unsneaky gays and their overemotional insulin-oozing encounter sessions.

She would never admit it, but she was reluctantly impressed with them. Special K was really coming into his own, growing up and becoming a decent adult and perhaps a productive member of society. She wasn't one for personal analysis and self-reflection - she considered such concepts stupid and ridiculous, with a soundtrack scored by Enya - but they were paying off for Kurt Hummel.

There was the bonus that Fishlips wasn't entirely unattractive. She would not be averse to him squiring around her protégée until someone better came along.
And now she had to consider what to do about LaBelle and the Grape Ape.

Oh, it was all well and good that her Cheerios were plotting and exacting vengeance, but not good enough.

No one hurt her kids.

"You can go first," Puck said evenly to Finn.

Finn startled and then bit his lip. He knew he wasn't the smartest guy in the room, but he was certainly aware that most of the other members were against him. He was only nominally surprised that Schue appeared to have sided with them.

Finn had kind of been counting on Schue's support, because the man always supported him, but when he forced himself to consider the big picture, it made sense.

Once again he rued how impulsive he had been last night. He had been so desperate to control Kurt, somehow believing that, by controlling Kurt, he would also be able to control his own feelings for the boy, he had ended up ruining everything. His mom was putting the brakes on her relationship with Burt, and he had come between Kurt and his dad.

Kurt now wanted nothing to do with him. Kurt's friendship with Mercedes was over. Finn was fairly certain that his relationship with Rachel was in severe jeopardy. The entire glee club, save himself, Mercedes, and Rachel had sided with Kurt, and Finn wasn't too sure on Rachel's position; after all, he had left Kurt's house before she had, and had no idea what, if anything, the two had discussed.

If not for Kurt, Glee would've been over. As it was, they might not qualify for Invitations due to having too few members. Kurt had resigned and Sam had refused to join, and if the club didn't have competition to hold them together and focus their efforts, what did they really have left?

Plus, Finn now didn't know what to sing. He had planned on singing about Rachel but, after last night, that just seemed like pouring salt in a wound. He knew he couldn't get out of performing; even though the class wasn't graded, you had to complete your assignments in order to qualify for the credit.

Shit.

"I'm, uh, I'm not prepared," he croaked feebly, blushing with the admission.

Santana opened her mouth to ridicule him, but closed it when Tina shook her head. Annoyed, Santana raised an eyebrow. Tina smirked and looked in Finn's direction. Santana blinked and followed her gaze. She then grinned, gleaning Tina's plan and realizing that humiliating Hudson at this moment would be less effective than allowing him to humiliate himself. Plus, with keeping her mouth shut was the bonus of not encouraging anyone to feel sorry for him.

Goth Girl was good.

Schuester sighed. "All right. As you all know, you're allowed to skip one performance per quarter. Finn, you've just used yours, so I'd advise you to be better prepared in the future."
Finn nodded, saying nothing and ducking his head.

Will forced himself not to roll his eyes. "Puck, you're up."

Puck nodded and sauntered toward the front of the room, his iPod clutched in his hand. He turned around and blinked. "Um, can I call upon the Power of...Two?"

Tina and Brittany looked at each other with raised eyebrows.

Puck blushed. "Princess was going to ask you to help me. Well, he told me he had people he was going to ask, but I guess he forget, which, hey, I don't blame him." He scowled. "Anyway, do you mind?"

Brittany nodded kindly.

"Sure," Tina said brightly.

They walked over to him and listened as he quietly told them his selection.

"That's a good one!" Brittany exclaimed, as Tina nodded.

Puck blushed and cleared his throat. "Yeah, well, okay, yesterday I said that the Princess chose my song for me, but, like with Quinn and Brit, he didn't so much choose it as point me in the right direction."

Quinn nodded.

He frowned. "Whatever. This song is about me, because it's supposed to be about our summer, but I'm not real big on sharing feelings and whatnot." His frowned lessened. "Except with Kurt, because he listens and doesn't judge. I never really got that before, how much we all judge each other and how much it freaking hurts. Hell, if anyone has a right to judge me, it's the Princess."

He squirmed, embarrassed. "Anyway, you all know I apologized for all the crap I put him through, and he accepted, which was a huge deal for me, because I really never thought he would. That he did, that I walked away from it with a friend, well," he shook his head, "never saw that one coming."

He stared off into space. "Before he left for Europe, we talked a lot. I told him stuff I had never told anyone else, and it made me feel a lot better. Princess never told me what to do or anything, he just said I need to think more about who I want to be and then be that person."

Several people nodded.

Puck grimaced. "So, that's what the song is about, me thinking about some sh...stuff, and trying to figure out who I am, because I didn't much like the person I was. I don't know what went down between Q and the Princess, but I think they helped each other." He paused. "Well, I want to say flat-out that Princess helped me, just by listening and being there when I didn't think I was worth having a friend, particularly him, since I had hurt him so badly and stuff."

He looked so sincerely upset at his past treatment of Kurt that it took several of those present by surprise, particularly Finn and Rachel, who were now thinking that they had perhaps judged Puck's intentions toward Kurt a little too harshly.

Finn especially was troubled, because he couldn't help but wonder why Puck wanted to become a better person for Kurt rather than him. He wasn't exactly jealous - well, maybe a little bit - but what did it say about him as a friend that Puck was willing to change for Kurt but not for him? Was he not
as good a friend to Puck as he had thought?

Puck had done some really horrible stuff to him and had never apologized, but he had apologized to Kurt. Granted, Puck had been way worse to Kurt, so did that mean that Puck thought Finn deserved being treated like crap? If so, why?

Quinn was also having second thoughts about Puck and Kurt's bromance. By now, she knew Puck well enough to know when he was lying or scheming, and he wasn't. He truly liked Kurt and was happy that Kurt had forgiven him. Now he wanted to prove himself worthy of that forgiveness. Maybe Beth's birth and adoption really had set him on a new path. She was honestly happy for him.

Artie and Tina were relieved. They hadn't been sure what to think when Puck and Kurt had come out as friends as yesterday, particularly since they knew his reputation. They now realized that all they had ever known of the boy was his reputation. They had bought into the stereotype he represented just as everyone else had dismissed them as Wheels and Asian. Somehow, however, Kurt had managed to look past the stereotypes, and that lent weight to their belief that Kurt really had matured and wasn't just offering yet another new front to the world at large.

Quinn slyly withdrew her phone and prepared to record Puck's song. She figured Kurt would want to hear it later.

Santana just stared at Puck. Was this real life?

He coughed. "So, yeah, this is for the Princess," he muttered, dropping his iPod into the dock and cuing up the track. "Oh, word up, I changed some of the lyrics to make them more, um, applicable or something. I'm kind of violating my policy about only singing songs by Jews, but this chick is totally badass and her mom's a Jew, so...yeah."

Tina and Brittany took their place at his sides and slightly behind him. He thought it was pretty rad to have his own backup singers and, truthfully, he was glad he had some people up there with him, because this was probably going to hurt.

A scratchy electric guitar chord erupted from the speakers and the room watched as Puck appeared to drawn in on himself, centering himself for his performance.

Those who recognized the song were surprised, not because he couldn't handle the song, but because of how honest it was.

Puck stared sightlessly ahead of him, his signature cocky smirk on display for all to see, but, for the first time, there was a glimmer of something else behind it. No one could figure out if it had always been there - if they had never bothered to look - or if he was only now allowing them to see it.

"Never win first place. I don't support the team. I can't take direction, and my socks are never clean," Puck sang, inflecting the words with a measure of both smug prerogative and petulance.

It was disarming and a little unnerving to the listeners, who couldn't decide if he was lampooning his image or was distressed because no one had ever really questioned his motivations.

Regardless, he was singing with more confidence and more noticeable skill than he had the previous term. It was apparent he had been working on his voice over the summer, and many wondered if it had been Kurt's idea, or if Puck had been diligent in a bid to impress Kurt. In the end, they supposed it didn't really matter.

"Teachers dated me..."
Will blinked owlishly at that, his thoughts immediately going to Kurt, and he had to bite his lip and suppress a groan, even as his guilt reasserted itself with a vengeance. It was all well and good for Kurt to argue that Will had never been his teacher but, even though it was true, it didn't mitigate the fact that Will was so much older than him. In ten years, it wouldn't have made a difference, but, in the here and now, Will felt disgusted with himself for possibly influencing Kurt in some manner. Granted, Kurt had been the initial aggressor, but it had only been just enough for Will to drop his inhibitions. He should have said no.

Except...he hadn't wanted to, in the end. He had wanted to be with Kurt, and he couldn't bring himself to regret their affair. He regretted the circumstances and complications, certainly, but nothing else. He had meant his earlier words to Kurt: he could never regret the time they had shared together.

However, he also felt like a hypocrite, because he was almost positive that Puck in fact had dated some of his teachers. The scuttlebutt around the faculty room lent credence to that, and it made him nauseous. Those rumors dated back to Puck's freshman year, when he had most definitely been underage, making those teachers guilty of statutory rape.

Even if Puck had wanted to sleep with those women, they shouldn't have allowed it. They should have known better, and they probably had used their power differential to coerce Puck into bed, most likely with the promise of better grades. He didn't really understand that, since Puck was very bright. He simply put forth no effort, unlike Sam, who had a legitimate disability. Those teachers had taken advantage of the boy, and Will wanted to run them over with his junky car.

Will knew Puck was no innocent, but that was just beyond the pale, and he felt terrible that he had willfully ignored the rumors rather than actually doing something about them. He should have mentioned them to Emma, or, hell, even Sue. He couldn't imagine that they were aware of them, or they definitely would've stepped in.

"My parents hated me," Puck sang.

Finn and Quinn flinched. Quinn because she had lived with Puck for a while and knew how obnoxious and unsupportive Puck's mother was, and Finn because he remembered Puck's dad, who had been a first-class asshole. Truthfully, he had always felt Puck was better off without the jerk, though he had never said so, as he knew how abandoned Puck had felt.

Santana had also made the acquaintance of Mrs. Puckerman, whom had she had physically fought and clobbered when the woman had cast aspersions on her character. Said comments might have been justified at the time, but considering Mrs. Puckerman was always half in the bag, she should have refrained. Her friendship with Puck had suffered for that incident, though they had continued to sleep together.

"I was always in a fight, 'cause I can't do nothing right."

Puck delivered the line with an almost wistful recollection, one which suggested he really hadn't understood at the time why or whom he was fighting, and hindsight had gifted him with the realization that he had been fighting himself.

The lyric resonated on more than one level with more than one person. Despite the fact that Puck was now friends with Kurt, a few, mostly those who didn't really know him, hadn't realized that his analysis of his past behavior was as deep as it was, that he was as insecure as he was. Finn, Santana, and Quinn, who could arguably be described as having more insight into the real Puck, were surprised that he was so openly presenting himself.

The entire audience, however, could both sympathize and empathize with the words. They had all
felt like that at one time or another. Finn in particular was hit hard.

A steady, relentless percussion was added to the beat, and once again Finn's fingers automatically began pounding out its rhythm on his thigh. He surreptitiously looked across the room and saw Artie's fingers twitching on an imaginary electric guitar.

Puck closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Every day I fight a war against the mirror." He shook his head. "I can't take the person staring back at me."

His self-loathing was oppressive to the entire room and also informed the tone of his voice. It was more scratchy, almost bluesy, an eerie reflection of Pink, the original artist, but also teeming with repressed emotion, thick, as though filled with strangled tears.

"I'm a hazard to myself," Puck sang in defeat, his eyes shooting open, now glassy and dull, with Brittany and Tina joining in.

It was startling how well they matched his tone, so much so that it sounded as if one voice was singing three different parts, recalling how Kurt and Brittany backed up Tina the previous day. It was never more apparent how much the three of them must have been practicing, as well as how talented Tina and Brittany obviously were, if they could adapt to Puck's voice so easily.

"Don't let me get me," he sang, his voice almost pleading, to an empty chair, which everyone realized was where Kurt usually sat.

Puck recognized what he was doing only after he had done it, and his eyes narrowed in anger, either at Finn and Mercedes for causing Kurt's absence, or at himself for coming to depend on Kurt so greatly. Even Puck wasn't sure which one it was.

"I'm my own worst enemy," he grunted, his face flushing, hands curled into fists at his sides. He sighed. "It's bad when you annoy yourself," he spat, once again accompanied by a now uneasy Tina and Brittany, who were regarding each other with wide eyes.

"So irritating," Puck barked, shaking his head. "Don't wanna be my friend no more."

He really didn't. He was so fucking tired of being Puck, of the demands, self-imposed and otherwise, that went along with playing that role.

And what it had gotten him?

Nothing, so far as he could tell.

His dad was dust in the wind, while his mother was three sheets to it. Grace loved him and maybe he wasn't a total fucking failure at being a brother, which was something good in his miserable life, he supposed. He'd trashed Quinn's life, knocked her up, fucked around on her, and generally flaked out until the very last minute, then had the nerve to bitch at her for wanting to do right by their kid. He'd totally screwed up his friendship with Finn, but Finn was also turning out to be a much bigger douche than Puck had ever been.

Being Puck completely sucked.

"I wanna be somebody else."

And in the midst of all these revelations had also come the one that he'd totally dogged Kurt Hummel just because Kurt had the guts to be who he was and not apologize for it.
He couldn't do shit for Quinn or Beth, his parents were hopeless, and he really had no interest in reviving his relationship with Finn, but he could try to fix this thing with Kurt. He could at least be man enough to do that.

So he had gone to Kurt's house, tail tucked between his legs, and rang the bell. Burt Hummel had answered, and Puck had all but shit his pants, because in what level of reality could this redneck bear of a man have fathered prissy, bitchy Kurt Hummel?

Burt had looked him up and down once, focusing particularly on the mohawk, and Puck realized that his reputation had preceded him, as it fucking always did. Great.

But then Kurt had appeared like some kind of fantastic gay angel and spirited him inside, dismissed his father, and made them fucking cocoa.

What the actual fuck?

Puck had apologized to Kurt and had meant it, which Kurt could tell. After some gentle coaxing, Puck found himself babbling at Kurt for the better part of three hours, during which time Kurt made dinner for the both of them, as well as Burt, did two loads of laundry, packed some stuff for his upcoming trip, replied to several texts, and cleaned the kitchen - all while giving Puck his undivided attention.

Puck had been fascinated.

If you're tired of being Puck, Kurt had said, shrugging, then be Noah. I'd like to be friends with him.

And a big fucking stupid light bulb had gone off above Puck's head.

He could be Noah, at least with Kurt. Hopefully Kurt would help him figure out just who the fuck Noah was, because he sure as shit didn't know or remember.

But he wanted to try.

"Quinnie told me 'you can't be a good dad, 'cause everything about you is really just that bad.'"

He studiously avoided Quinn's eyes as he sang the rewritten lyric. He was fairly certain that she also had regrets about those months, but her disbelief in his ability to be a good father had broken something inside of him. He knew he wasn't really boyfriend material, but he had wanted Beth from the moment he learned Quinn was pregnant.

Sure, it was pretty much a delusion he had nursed for eight months, but he really would have tried, made a sincere effort to be a good dad. He figured that knowing firsthand what a bad father was and how having one fucked up the kid, he would have moved heaven and earth to do right by Beth.

He supposed, in the end, he had done that by signing her over to Shelby, to someone who could actually give her all the things he had wanted to give her. It still hurt, he knew it always would, like a part of him had just been ripped away and would scab over but never heal, but he had to move on. He felt pretty rudderless, though. All of that anticipation and expectation hadn't just evaporated after Beth's birth, and he had to do something with it.

He figured not being a dickhead was a good place to start.

"Tired of being compared to that damn Finny," he hissed, his tone venomous. "He's so perfect; that just ain't me."
It had been that way his whole life, people always comparing him to Finn and finding him lacking, as if Finn was some great prize.

When they were younger, he hadn't minded much. At that point, comparisons tended to be more about misbehavior than actual character assessments. After his father had left, however, and Puck was stuck with trying to help his mother pay bills and make sure Grace had clothes and whatnot, his grades had started falling. He'd entered puberty ahead of the other boys and had all of these fucking hormones to manage.

So he'd decided to combine his problems and had begun whoring himself to provide for his family. He'd spent the past few years laughing it off and accepting high-fives and promoting his own badassery, but it was all a sham. There was nothing cool about boning his mom's old high school classmates and the mothers of his friends.

It was fucking humiliating, selling his body to women who didn't give a shit about him, unless he didn't make them come. They cared a lot about that, and would begin berating him just like his mother always did. So he'd learned how to fuck. He fucked so well that it soon became a Pavlovian response whenever he encountered a vagina. His charm turned itself on, his dick got hard, money changed hands, and he fucked and ate box until women were screaming his name before throwing him the hell out of their McMansions.

He couldn't even remember the last time he'd enjoyed sex, and what the fuck did that say about him, when he did more banging than a screen door in a cyclone? He hadn't even enjoyed it with Quinn, because he knew sleeping with her was wrong, no matter how much he resented Finn. And it wasn't because she was drunk on wine coolers. Girl had not been drunk. Puck was many things, but he wasn't a rapist, and he didn't fuck girls when they couldn't give their consent.

He had been a mess. Not like Perfect Finn, who was so far from perfect it was laughable.

Puck's grades sucked because he'd never had time to do his work, not because he was dumb or lazy, which Finn most definitely was. He knew for a fact that if Kurt hadn't pulled Finn through sophomore year, he would have been held back. Finn had no ambition for anything other than contemplating his next sandwich.

Finn was a crap boyfriend. He could be sweet and charming, but he'd pushed Quinn for sex all the time, not caring that she didn't want it. He'd led Rachel around by the nose because he knew how desperate she was and how much she loved him. He had led Kurt on because he liked the attention, but didn't want to have to consider what that attention really meant. And now he'd shown his ass to everyone because Kurt's attention had waned, which was what Finn had claimed he'd wanted more than anything.

Even when he got what he wanted, Finn bitched. Fucking pussy.

"Doctor, doctor, won't you please prescribe me something? A day in the life of someone else? 'Cause I'm a hazard to myself."

So far, he was kind of digging being Noah again.

Noah had friends, real ones, like Kurt and Sam and maybe Tina.

Noah could transfer into an honors class and do well.

Noah was no longer responsible for making Finn look like the good one.

Noah could admit that, yeah, sometimes he liked dudes.
Noah didn't have to fuck every girl in sight to know he was worth something.

And Kurt had set him on that path. Well, Kurt had been the catalyst. Noah knew that it was up to him to see it through, and he was determined to give it his best shot.

"Don't let me get me. I'm my own worst enemy. It's bad when you annoy yourself. So irritating. Don't wanna be my friend no more. I wanna be somebody else."

Puck, along with Brittany and Tina, repeated the chorus several times, with the girls exchanging keys to keep it fresh as Puck's voice rose and fell and projected itself in ways it never had before. At certain points, he was actually wailing, his voice thick and almost painful to hear, as infused with emotion as it was. His range had markedly improved and his vibrato was much stronger than it had been just a few months ago.

Will was surprised and pleased. Puck had charisma to spare, but it had always been hit-or-miss depending on the material. Puck did best with songs which inspired some measure of passion within him, unlike Kurt, Rachel, Mercedes, or Tina, who were consummate professionals and could connect on some level with every assigned piece.

Puck was so closed-off, however, and Will had never learned how to access the boy's emotions for a performance. Regrettably, he now realized he had never really tried, content to let Finn take the male lead on all songs. He now understood that had merely reinforced Puck's lack of self worth while simultaneously pitting him against his former best friend and thus inadvertently spurring on their rivalry.

He winced. How had he mucked things up so badly? It was one thing to encourage competition, but something altogether different when inactively abetting war: Finn versus Puck, Rachel versus Kurt, and the others versus the leads.

Quinn and Finn couldn't find it in themselves to be angry at Puck's reworking of certain lyrics. He'd pretty much been blamed - and unfairly at that - for almost everything last year, for which they had been responsible. He had been a convenient scapegoat - not that he didn't bear culpability - but each of them had tried to save their tarnished reputations by maligning him, which was weak and pathetic.

The song was cut off at a point somehow magically agreed on by Puck and the girls, who stood silently as Puck glared at nothing in particular, his chest heaving and breath ragged.

"An excellent performance, Puck," Will said carefully, slowly rising to his feet and walking toward the center of the room. "Your voice has improved. I appreciate the effort you put into this performance."

Puck blinked and shook his head to clear it. "Thanks, Schue," he said tightly, stalking over to his seat, which happened to be next to Santana. They stared at each other for a long moment and, finally, Santana held out a fist. He bumped it with his own and they nodded simultaneously. They didn't believe in having Moments, at least not with each other.

"Hey, Mr. Schuester," Puck suddenly said, cocking his head, "I've never asked, but what's my vocal classification or whatever?"

Will startled. "You're a baritone, Puck." He blinked. "You didn't know that?"

Puck shrugged. "Never cared enough to find out. So, baritone, huh?" His brow furrowed in confusion. "What's Princess?"

Will blinked. "Kurt is a countertenor. His normal range is in a register much higher than yours."
"Okay."

"Mr. Schuester," Rachel hesitantly interrupted, "what would you guess Kurt's range to be? Now that he's not here, we're going to be missing key notes, and I'm not sure anyone else can make them."

Will nodded. "It's going to be a serious problem. We'll either require several new members, or you all will have to train much more rigorously to expand your own ranges. As for Kurt, I would estimate that he can manage about three, with some semitones, between his head and chest voices. In terms of total range, I would guess he possesses anywhere from three to four octaves."

Rachel's eyes bugged out. How had she not noticed that?

"Is that a lot?" Brittany asked.

"Yes," Will said. "Remember, a person's range is measured not just by the notes they can hit, but actually sing, and classification is difficult because the applied pedagogy is for classically-trained voices. Kurt is classically trained, but doesn't often sing in a classical manner. That said, he has total control over his falsetto and modal registers, but, as you've all heard, he can hit notes far above and below each."

"How do the rest of us measure up?" Santana demanded.

Will squirmed. This was a conversation he knew he should have with them a while ago, but was afraid would only drive the kids further apart.

"We want to know," Mercedes added softly.

He cleared his throat and nodded. "Fine, as long as you all realize that range does not determine the quality of a person's singing voice. It's merely a tool they can exploit to fit certain kinds of material. Other things can and should be considered, including tonality, agility, vibrato, and a host of other factors."

He sighed. "We are a show choir; this is not a master voice class. Some of you have better technical voices than others. Some of you have more range than others. Some of you have more power than others. All of you have a gift, and each of your voices is needed here."

Puck quirked a brow. "Are we going to hug this out now?"

Santana snorted.

Will rolled his eyes. "I'll give some examples. Rachel's voice is incredibly powerful, and she has total control over her chest voice. This means that all of her notes are fully supported and she doesn't have to mix her chest and head voices to achieve the higher notes. I'd classify her as a soprano and would guess her range to be slightly more than two octaves."

Rachel nodded. All in all, that sounded right to her.

"Mercedes would be classed as a lyric soprano with a slightly larger range than that of Rachel, augmented by her tremendous belting ability," he continued. "Santana would loosely be considered a contralto, but that's simply the easiest place to put her. Her range is larger than that of either Rachel or Mercedes, but isn't fully supported. This is something that can be corrected with training."

"And Berry and Jones don't need additional training?" Santana barked.

"I didn't say that," Will said carefully, though his eyes were hard and annoyed, "but Rachel has been
training for years, thus her impressive command of her voice, and, yes, there are issues that Mercedes could address, as well. If you're serious about singing, training will always be necessary, no matter how far you advance in your studies. However, I can't give you that kind of specialized training, so if you want it, you should search it out like Kurt and Rachel have done.”

Santana nodded. That was fair.

Will glanced down at his watch. "We're about out of time. Before I let you go, I want to make some things clear."

The ominous tone washed over those present.

"The mistakes that were made with Kurt, both by me and yourselves, will not be repeated. First of all, there is no such thing as a boy voice or a girl voice, there is only a person’s voice and what they can do with it. I will not stand for any snide comments or bullying about how you perceive a person's voice. If they're here, it's because I want them here and feel they have something to contribute. It was wrong of me not to correct your cruel taunts about how Kurt sings, especially considering he outclasses most of you."

Almost everyone hung their head at that comment, knowing they had all made some rather off-color remarks about Kurt's voice. It was mingled with a grudging respect for Schuester finally coming across in favor of Kurt, no matter how late.

"Second," Will continued, "from now on, there will be mandatory auditions for all solos."

Rachel swallowed the protestation burgeoning on her lips.

"Third, there will be no more co-opting others' ideas for songs. For example, if Brittany brings a song to our attention that she wishes to be considered for herself, she will audition the song. It won't just be handed over to someone who thinks their voice is better or better suited."

Brittany beamed.

Will's eyes bore into all of them. "I want everyone to feel that they belong here, that they're welcomed. I will not allow anyone to be shuttled off to the side ever again. As Kurt said yesterday, we are a choir, not the session singers for one or two lead voices."

The number of hopeful looks in his direction almost broke his heart. He had not been a good teacher last year, but he was determined to correct his mistakes.

"Finally, the club captains. Please bear in mind that this is in no way a comment on how Rachel or Finn has performed in their duties, but it upsets me that they were selected because the rest of you couldn't be bothered to take the lead. As far as I'm concerned, if you're unwilling to step up to the plate and hold some responsibility for this club and accountability for yourselves, you have no right to complain about things which make you unhappy. It's no better than not voting in an election and then whining about how the winner doesn't represent your interests."

More than a few people blushed at his words.

Will exhaled. "Next week, we will hold new elections, and will do so for every term. That way, if you feel your captains are not up to the job, they can be voted out earlier, rather than being ineffective for the entire school year."

He stared at each and every student in turn. "I want you think about who you want in those positions. If you're considering running, I want you to ask yourself if you feel you're the right person
for the job. Being a club captain is not about who has the best voice or who can hold the longest note; it's about who is a good leader, who can represent all of your interests, and who can communicate well with everyone."

Rachel's hand shot up.

Several people glowered and Will suppressed a sigh.

"Yes, Rachel?" he unenthusiastically asked.

"Can we make nominations?"

He thought about it and at last nodded.

"Then I nominate Tina," she said firmly.

"What!" Tina screeched, as everyone else stared stupidly at Rachel, who shrugged.

"You're friends with almost everyone here," Rachel explained, "or at least friendly. I don't really know how you feel about us, but I've never heard you say a bad word about anyone. You're always polite and supportive. You're impartial. You want the entire club to do well, not just certain people. So I'm voting for you."

Tina gave an exaggerated blink. "Th-Thanks?" she finally stuttered.

Rachel smiled happily and nodded.

"Does anyone else wish to make a nomination?" Will asked, pleased with Rachel's declaration. "Perhaps for the male captain? Of course, we don't necessarily have to have captains of opposite genders. The captains could both be male or female."

Puck snorted. "The dude who should be captain isn't here, is he?" His eyes slid toward Finn and Mercedes, who withered.

"The Puckhole speaks the truth," Santana hissed. "It should be Kurt, just like he should be leading the Cheerios, but he can't, so now we all have to suffer." She shrugged. "I nominate Wheels."

Artie repeated Tina's bulging eyes and stutters. Brittany squealed and grabbed Artie's head, burying it in her breasts.

Will smirked. "Does anyone second these nominations?"

"I do," said Quinn, Puck, Mike, and Brittany.

"Motion carried," Will said happily. "Nominations will be open for the rest of the week, and we'll vote the week after that. Now, for your next assignment. I was very impressed that Mike chose to sing in Chinese yesterday, so I want each of you to choose a song in another language to perform for the club.

"I know many of you are bilingual or multilingual, but don't feel reined in by only those languages with which you are familiar. That said, if you don't speak the language, make sure you get a good English translation of the lyrics so you understand what you'll be singing. YouTube is an excellent resource for this. Many videos have subtitles in other languages and translations of lyrics into English. The goal isn't how well you pronounce the words, but how you deliver the song. Music is universal. I want you to make your audience feel the song. If you do a good job, an understanding of
the language isn't necessary."

His eyes scanned the room. "Questions?" When no one had one, he nodded, not really caring if he had stunned them into silence. He wanted them to stretch their wings, and this was a good start. "Good. If any develop, I'm more than happy to help you. Drop by my office after school or shoot me an email. Dismissed, and I'll see you in two days' time."

Kurt slipped into his calculus class right before the bell rang, sliding into his seat next to Brittany, who beamed happily at him.

"Hi, Kurty!"

"Hello, Sweetness," he said.

"Are you okay?" she asked, her voice suddenly serious.

He took a moment to think about his answer. "I am."

She nodded, though her eyes were wary.

Kurt held his tongue until after Mr. Tobias read his name from the roster.

"I have to admit," he said slyly, "yesterday's manipulation of events was masterful. I am truly impressed."

Her face betrayed no emotion, save a very slight blush across her cheeks. "I don't know what you're talking about, Kurty," she said loftily.

"Hm."

Artie raised an eyebrow. "What's this all about?"

Amused eyes resting on Brittany, Kurt explained to Artie all about her shenanigans regarding Peterson. Artie's mouth fell open a third of the way through the recounting, and he gaped in incredulity until Kurt had finished. He then stared at Brittany in wonder.

"You're a genius."

She crossed her arms across her chest and glared at nothing in particular. "Not technically."

Kurt rolled his eyes. "I told you to get retested. I'm sure it was wrong."

She snorted. "Here!" she chirped, as Tobias called out her name.

Artie frowned. "What's going on?"

Kurt sighed. "Brittany is still upset because her IQ score falls just shy of the guidelines for admittance to MENSA."

Artie shook his head and then shrugged. "Big deal. What's so great about MENSA?"

"I honestly have no idea," Kurt replied. "Aside from their scholarship opportunities, I see no real
benefit to being a member."

"You're only saying that because you're both members," Brittany said, a sour look on her face. Kurt blinked. "I'm not a member, Brittany, and your IQ is higher than mine."

Her head turned toward him so fast, it almost snapped off. "What?"

He nodded. "It's true."

She stared. "I don't believe you," she said, her voice laced with suspicion.

He glared. "I don't make up stories in which I come out looking badly," he barked. "Artie's score is superior to both of ours, but yours is still higher than mine."

"But how?" she asked plaintively. "Everyone knows you're the smartest one, Kurty."

"Cleverness and intelligence are not the same thing, honey," he said, "and it helps that I have an eidetic memory. Also, I happen to do well on standardized tests, but that means little. Artie and Quinn are still ahead of me in the class ranking. Personally, I don't believe that the intelligence quotient measures anything of real import, so I don't know why you're basing so much of your self-worth on a score which is basically irrelevant. You're in the top five of the junior class. Any college would be happy to admit you."

She sighed. "But I don't *feel* smart."

Artie took her hand. "I think that's a good thing. It's been my experience that people who pride themselves so much on one aspect of their character are usually jerks."

She cocked her head and thought about his words. Finally, she nodded.

"How did you get the class rankings?" Artie suddenly asked Kurt.

"From Sylvester," he said.

Artie rolled his eyes. "Of course. So what are they?"

Kurt leaned in closely. "You, Quinn, me, Santana, and Brittany round out the top five."

"Sanny always beats me," Brittany said softly.

"Not true," Kurt said. "Santana and I may get the grades, sweetie, but in certain things, you sailed past us a while ago."

"Like what?" she asked, her eyes searching his.

He smiled sadly. "Like being a good person. People like you, darling. They want to be your friend. You're better at reading people than we are, and you read a lot of cues we miss because we're so self-involved. You don't hold on to your anger and let it rule you the way we do."

"You're the most decent person I know," Artie quietly said to his girlfriend.

She grabbed his hand more tightly and whispered her thanks.

Kurt gently cleared his throat. "Rachel, Tina, and Mike are in the top ten. Noah is in the top fifteen, and even though he's gone, Matt registered in the top twenty. Finn and Mercedes are in the top half."
Brittany snorted. "He's only there because of you."

"Not really," Kurt replied. "Finn's not dumb, despite the fact that he plays that role to perfection."

"It's weird that so many Glee members are in the top ten," Artie said.

Kurt shrugged. "Studying music has been proven to assist in studying other subjects, and we're all rather driven people. I don't find it particularly remarkable. Mercedes could easily place much higher if she applied herself, but she has a lot of hang-ups about her school performance. She's smarter than she thinks she is, but she also doesn't take advanced classes, which are weighted differently than the general courses."

"True enough," Artie said.

"Azimio is in the top third of his class," Kurt added.

"Shut the front door!" Brittany hissed.

Kurt nodded. "He is. I doubt he publicizes it, but he's surprisingly intelligent." He blinked. "We had an interesting conversation in the library this morning."

"About what?" asked an uneasy Artie.

"Mainly football," Kurt said. "He wants me back on the team."

Brittany and Artie stared at him.

"I have no intention of rejoining," Kurt said, "but I admit to being rather flattered that he asked." He frowned. "He's been almost decent to me over the past two days, actually. He seems...to respect me for standing up to him. It's kind of worrisome."

They nodded.

All three were suddenly aware that Tobias was staring at them.

"Apologies, sir," Kurt smoothly said. "We were discussing the homework. Each of us had trouble with number twelve."

The man's eyes lighted and he launched into a discussion of the problem, missing their collective smirk.

Mercedes slunk into her algebra class where, to her surprise, a substitute teacher was standing at the front of the room. She noticed that Rachel and Finn were not sitting together, and Rachel appeared to be ignoring Finn completely. Sam, of course, wasn't present, having transferred into the honors class the day before.

She was furious to find that Puck was also missing. For a moment, she thought he might be sacked out in the nurse's office, but then she remembered her visit to Ms. Pillsbury earlier that morning, in which she had been informed that she herself could not switch to the advanced class, as the one remaining spot had been taken by another student. She recalled that Pillsbury's tone had been almost gleeful.
She then understood that Puck must have switched, and had probably told Pillsbury the reason why.

He knew she had been planning to transfer and had beaten her to it. Ostensibly, he could have done so in order to be with Sam, but she was positive he had done it so that she would be trapped with Parks, Rachel, and Finn.

"Bastard," she muttered as she took her seat, even though she had trouble blaming him.

"Where's Mr. Parks?" Rachel demanded of the substitute.

Finn and Mercedes also wanted an answer.

The substitute, a woman named Mrs. Hooper, raised an eyebrow. "Mr. Parks, unfortunately, is in the hospital. He was taken this morning after finding a hornet nest in his car. He's deathly allergic, I'm afraid, and is lucky to be alive."

Finn, Mercedes, and Rachel stared. They remembered Puck and Sam discussing Parks and what an asshole he was yesterday during lunch and that Sam was switching out of the class. They remembered Kurt sitting very quietly and listening to what they said.

"He wouldn't," Finn whispered.

Rachel snorted.

"Hell, yes, he would," Mercedes said faintly.

They shuddered.

Fourth period saw most of the Glee Club, as well as Sam, reunited.

Finn entered the room and saw Rachel's face buried in her textbook. It was obvious she didn't plan on talking to him anytime soon. He really couldn't blame her.

His eyes panned the room and he noticed Sam and Puck, thick as thieves, whispering furiously to each other and snickering. Already paranoid, Finn's unease grew, sure they were talking about him. He then startled and realized how self-involved he was being. He had no reason to assume they were discussing him. He curled a lip. They were probably talking about Kurt, their mutual new best friend.

Mercedes was sitting gingerly on the edge of her seat, trying and failing not to be terrified by the arctic glares Quinn and Brittany were leveling at her. Finn thought she should be grateful Santana wasn't also in the class, but Brittany and Quinn were scary enough all on their own.

He sighed and took his seat next to Rachel, who didn't acknowledge him. He said nothing to her. The Cheerio who shared the desk unit with them, Callie, he thought her name was, sneered at him. He didn't have the guts to sneer back.

He watched the others from the corner of his eye, his stomach clenching when he saw Puck's arm was now draped across the shoulders of Sam, who was happily conversing with Mike.

Sam shook his head. "I can't believe I didn't notice this yesterday, but where's Tina? I'm surprised she's not in this class."
"Oh, she took it freshman year with Kurt, Artie, and Santana," Mike said.

"I haven't seen Princess all day," Puck whined.

Sam smirked. "Then you missed quite a show."

"Oh?" Quinn asked, brow raised.

Brittany heaved a dreamy sigh.

"Two words," Sam said. "Leather pants."

"No way," Quinn gasped.

"Damn," Puck murmured. "He's so hot. He could only be hotter in leather." He looked at Sam. "I think I'm getting the hang of the Bi Thing."

Sam snorted. "More like you've got a Kurt Thing."

"Both of you could only hope to see his thing," Brittany sneered.

Sam and Puck both flushed.

"I talked to him earlier," Sam said, a small smile on his face.

"Is he doing okay?" asked an anxious Mike, throwing a baleful look in Finn's direction.

"He's hurt," Sam said, "but he's dealing." He glared at Mercedes, who pointedly refused to meet his eyes. He quickly sent a look at the others which indicated there was more to his conversation with Kurt, but that he didn't feel comfortable discussing it in the open. They all understood.

"Matt's really worried," Mike said. "He asked me to text him with updates."

"Is it weird that they're friends now?" Quinn asked no one in particular. "I don't think they ever held a single conversation."

Mike shrugged nervously. "We always liked Kurt, but we were afraid what would happen to us if we tried to be friends with him." He blushed.

So did Puck, who also ground his teeth. "I was such an asshole."

Sam patted his thigh. "You've done right by him, though. He flat-out told me that he counts you as one of his best friends." He paused. "Kurt can be really scary."

Brittany narrowed her eyes. "What do you mean?"

Sam licked his lips. "He told me that he'd do anything to protect his friends, and I knew that he meant it." He swallowed heavily. "Then he told me a lot about himself, or at least how he sees himself. He doesn't think he's a nice person."

Quinn gave a slow blink. "Um, he's not, Sam."

Brittany nodded. "Don't think because he's nice to you that he's like that with everyone. Our first two years here, half the school bullied him and the other half were terrified of him."

"But why?" Sam asked plaintively.
"Because he's a ninja," Puck said. "The Princess knows things. All he has to do is look at you once and he knows everything about you." He paused. "Well, everything that matters. It's really hard to hide shit from him. Lopez is the same; she's just more confrontational about it. Whatever, the Princess is someone you don't want to screw over, because he'll get you back, and you'll never see him coming."

Quinn and Brittany nodded, pleased when Mercedes winced. They both knew Kurt would never do anything to hurt the girl, but they saw no problem with making her as paranoid as possible.

"Anything new on the rumor mill?" Mike asked.

Quinn rolled her eyes. "I swear, it's like we're trapped in an episode of Pretty Little Liars and we're all being targeted by the mysterious A."

Mike and Sam blinked dumbly at her.

"That show is awesome," Puck said. "Spencer's hot as hell."

Quinn stared at him for a moment before finally shaking her head in dismay. "At any rate, somehow everyone knows that we were all at Santana's house last night, which, of course, means we had an orgy."

"Bitchin," Puck said.

Quinn raised an eyebrow. "Really? Because you were seen driving Sam to and from Santana's house. I'm sure you can guess what people are saying."

Puck and Sam exchanged a glance.

Mike's eyes bulged. "No way."

Puck shrugged. "We talked about it. We agreed it'd be all kinds of hot, because, I mean, look at us, but Sam's working stuff out and I need to keep my dick in my pants for a while. If people think we're fucking, I really don't give a shit. Evans is Choice Cuts."

Sam blushed and ducked his head.

"Puck," Brittany said slowly, "are you really bi?"

He bobbed his head. "I think so, yeah. I mean, I know I said this morning that I didn't know what was going on, and I really don't, but ever since yesterday, I've been thinking about Sam and Princess doing each other, or both of them doing me." He quirked a brow. "And I wasn't laughing."

"Is that why you bullied him?" she demanded.

"Naw," he said, blushing. "I never cared that Kurt was gay, and I know I throw that word around too much to describe stupid shit, which I'm working on. Princess just has a way of making you feel like you don't much matter, especially if you already think that about yourself. It's not so much even anything that he says. He's just really smart and together and knows who he is and stuff.

"I'm trying not to think about it too much, you know?" he continued. "Sex is sex, and hot is hot. Princess and Sam are hot. Most of us are. I just...I realized I don't give a fuck about the parts." He looked at Sam. "Dude, no offense, but you need to take your hand off my leg, because it's getting me all bothered."
Sam turned to him and leered. ”Make me.”

Puck snorted. ”Don't let those awesome lips write checks your ass can't cash.”

”But what if my ass isn't the one that will be paying out the dividends?”

Puck's eyes widened to the size of saucers. ”Damn. Never thought about that one.” He blinked. ”Huh.” He licked his lips. ”Hey, do you think Princess pitches or catches?”

Sam balked and turned away, removing his hand.

”Both,” Brittany said.

”Is this really happening?” Mike asked Quinn, who shrugged.

”How do you know?” Puck asked Brittany.

”He told me,” she said. ”I asked him during math. He and the guy he met this summer took turns.”

”Wow, really?” Puck said. ”I didn't know that was a thing. I thought you had to be one or the other.” He looked at Sam. ”Which one are you?”

Sam flushed spectacularly. ”I...I don't know. That's not been an issue for me yet.”

”But how will I know if I like it?” Puck pressed. ”Should I get a dildo or something?”

”Oh, my god, Puck!” Quinn hissed. ”Stop it!”

”I can't,” he whined. ”Now that I'm thinking about it, I can't stop. I want to know. Maybe I should watch gay porn.”

”I'll send you some links,” Sam muttered, his face still on fire.

”Cool. Thanks, bro.” He looked at Mike. ”Sorry if this is making you uncomfortable, dude.”

Mike shrugged a shoulder. ”It's not. I was curious, so I looked some stuff up. It's not for me, but I don't have a problem with it.”

Puck nodded. ”I figured. I mean, you know I had a threesome with April Rhodes and your boy, and Rutherford was grabbing my ass every chance he could. I was kind of into it. I guess that should have told me something.”

Mike scowled. ”You need to keep that to yourself. Even though he's no longer here, Matt doesn't need his business going around the school, and I don't want that either, so belt up or I'll sic the diva on you.”

Puck paled. ”Sorry, man. Sometimes my mouth just won't listen to my brain, especially about sex stuff.”

Quinn rolled her eyes. ”We know, we know. You're a sex shark.”

He smirked. ”And now I've got a whole new school of fish to devour.”

Patrick Rice then entered the room and smiled winningly at his students.

”I would so do him,” Puck softly moaned.
"He's gorgeous," Quinn agreed.

Brittany frowned. "Kurty's ass is better."

Sam nodded.

Mike sighed.

Mercedes was sitting on her hands, rolling around all of these revelations in her head, desperate to repeat them to all and sundry. Then she realized she had no one to tell.

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Halfway through his lecture, Patrick looked out at his audience and frowned. He had made a mental note to check on Sam Evans at least once per class, knowing the boy was dyslexic and might be struggling with all of the notes the material demanded he take. Instead, Evans was placidly watching him while every so often highlighting a sheaf of papers on the desk before him.

"Sam, are you with me?" he asked.

The boy nodded. "Yes, sir."

"You aren't taking notes, Sam," Patrick said carefully. "This is an AP course, and there is material that isn't in your text book."

"I know, sir," Sam replied, holding up his sheaf of papers, which Patrick could now see was a bound packet of sorts. "Kurt Hummel gave me his notes."

Patrick was floored when over half the class turned around to glare jealously at Sam. He could hear Rachel Berry muttering under her breath about the unfairness of it all.

"Are you friends with Kurt, Sam?" Patrick asked.

"Yes, sir. He's also my Peer Mentor."

Patrick nodded. "Well, in that case, I will be expecting you to do well in this class. Kurt is an exceptional student. I know how rigorous he is in his studies, and I have no doubt he will demand a similar work ethic from you."

"I'll do my best, sir," said a now-blushing Sam.

Patrick nodded again. "May I see the notes, please?"

"Sure, I guess," Sam said, shuffling to his feet and walking toward the front of the room. He handed over the notes with an anxious look on his face, obviously afraid they would be taken from him.

Patrick thumbed through them, his eyes widening with every page. Kurt Hummel had been one of his best students, and he was looking forward to having him again next year, positive the boy would enroll in his Global Politics course. Kurt's grasp of history and his ability to correlate it with current events was enviable. In fact, it was on par with some of Patrick's fellow graduate students.
The book of notes was remarkable. It was at least three inches thick and encompassed both semesters. Patrick wasn't surprised that it was typeset, as Kurt often took notes on his laptop rather than by hand; in fact, Kurt typed faster than he wrote. He noticed that his lectures had been transcribed verbatim and then correlated with the appropriate textbook readings, including page numbers, as well as illustrations, maps, genealogies, applicable art, and even an index.

There were even properly-formatted footnotes which offered secondary sources and supplemental readings!

It was gorgeously and obviously lovingly put together. He wasn't too surprised, given how obsessive Kurt was known to be over his studies. In freshman year, Kurt had always been prepared, often with more detail than a college course would require, and had to be reminded several times of the page limits of term papers and research assignments. It was all vaguely unnerving, considering that history wasn't even his best subject. Still, it had been no surprise to Patrick that Kurt had aced the AP exam.

"Wow," he murmured.

He flipped through once more, only to ensure that Kurt hadn't included copies of his exams and term papers, which, of course, he hadn't. Kurt would never encourage plagiarism or cheating, let alone partake in it.

Frankly, Kurt's notes were better than the course text.

Patrick cleared his throat. "I have no problem with you using the notes, Sam. They're incredibly thorough, which is unsurprising, considering who prepared them. Please tell Kurt I am most impressed."

Sam nodded happily. "I will. Kurt loved this class. He said it was his favorite."

Patrick smiled. Kurt was not only one of best students, but also one of his favorites. He and Kurt hadn't much interacted outside of the classroom, which, he realized now, had perhaps been a mistake on his part. In fact, he had never heard the faculty, those with whom he was familiar at any rate, say one negative word about Kurt Hummel, save Daniel Parks, who was a homophobic idiot and had never even been one of Kurt's teachers.

He frowned. Now that he thought about it, he didn't believe Kurt was close to any of his teachers, which might be a problem when it came time for the boy to need recommendations for college. Then again, Kurt had the grades to go anywhere he wanted. Still, perhaps he should initiate some kind of relationship. He didn't want to be the kind of teacher who never really got to know his students, and not all learning was conducted in a classroom.

He should probably ask the other faculty members about Kurt's interests, but the only ones he knew for sure as having any semblance of a familiarity with the boy was Will Schuester and Sue Sylvester. Patrick wasn't very close with either. He avoided Sylvester as much as possible, and while he was cordial with Will, they weren't friends. Odd, considering how close they were in age.

Regardless, he was thrilled that Kurt was tutoring his classmates, particularly in history. It suddenly struck him that recruiting the boy for the History Club would be a wise course of action. He sent Sam back to his seat, mulling over another thought. If he could obtain the appropriate clearances, he would have liked to have published Kurt's notes as an accompanying workbook for the class.

Kurt hadn't included passages from the textbook, other than references, which could be eliminated if absolutely necessary, so there were no copyright issues at play. The intellectual property was his own, as were those observations and conclusions Kurt had contributed.
He'd have to try and find Kurt later and ask for his thoughts on the matter.

As soon as the bell rang, Patrick again called out to Sam, surprised when Noah Puckerman, Quinn Fabray, Brittany Pierce, and Mike Chang all huddled around him protectively. The rest of the students filed out, not really paying attention, except for Rachel Berry, Finn Hudson, and Mercedes Jones, all of whom threw varying inquisitive looks at the other kids.

"Sam," Patrick asked, "do you know what class Kurt has next? I'd like to discuss an idea with him before the lunch period."

"Kurty has a free period now," Brittany said. "He used to hang out in the choir room, but since he quit Glee, he's probably in the library."

Patrick frowned. "Kurt quit the glee club?" That made no sense. He didn't know much about Kurt, but he knew the boy loved to sing. Patrick had been in attendance for the few school performances the choir had offered, and Kurt was very talented.

Puck scowled. "Not his decision."

"Puck," Quinn warned, "it's not our place to tell."

Puck nodded and angrily looked away.

"Okay," Patrick said slowly. "I guess I'll look for him in the library. Thank you all."

The kids either nodded or smiled before quickly leaving.

Patrick shook his head, quickly erased the board, gathered up his belongings, and left for the library.

After receiving vague directions from Mrs. Morris, the elderly librarian who reeked of mothballs and depression, Patrick weaved in and out among the stacks until he found Kurt at a secluded table in the back of the library.

He raised an eyebrow as he watched Kurt devour the book in his hands, his eyes moving so quickly, it was almost as if he were scanning the text rather than reading it.

Was Kurt reading Nietzsche?

He delicately cleared his throat, amused when it had no effect.

"Kurt?"

The boy startled, jumping slightly in his seat, before looking around wildly. "Oh! Hello, Mr. Rice."

Patrick smiled and waved at an empty chair. "May I?"

Kurt cocked his head, his eyes narrowing slightly. "Yes, of course. Please sit down."

"Thank you." Patrick settled himself and was rather unnerved by Kurt's stare. "I'm sure you know that I just finished the AP European History class."
"Is Sam okay?" Kurt blurted. He then blushed.

Patrick had to bite the insides of his cheeks so that he wouldn't coo over how adorable this all suddenly became. Sam and Kurt? Well, he would never have imagined it, but they would certainly make a very handsome couple. His brow furrowed. Best to watch out for them, he thought. He knew he wasn't the most observant person outside of the classroom, and he thought that should be rectified.

"Sam's just fine, Kurt," he said. "He told me you're his Peer Mentor?"

Kurt nodded. "Yes, that's right. Is there a problem?"

"Not at all," Patrick said. "He showed me the notes you gave him, and I was most impressed."

Kurt blinked. "Thank you," he said.

"I was wondering if you would be interested in publishing them?"

Kurt's eyes widened. "Do you mean for other people to purchase?"

Patrick nodded. "Exactly. Frankly, your notes and, in particular, the way they are organized and cross-referenced, are better than the assigned text."

Kurt bit his lip and looked down at the table. "I'm sure they're not."

Patrick frowned at the vulnerability in the boy's voice. This wasn't the Kurt Hummel he knew. Kurt had always been assertive and assured in class.

"They very much are," he countered, "and I think they would make an excellent aid for the other students. I doubt that I could assign them as mandatory, but they would be superlative for supplemental study and I am sure would help prepare the students for the AP exam."

Kurt was beyond flattered and not a little embarrassed. "I'm not sure what to say."

Patrick smiled. "You don't have to say anything right now, but I would appreciate it if you considered it. I have a friend at OSU who's an attorney, and she could tell me how to file a copyright claim. We could have the notes published under both our names, as the lectures are mine, and then self-print them as a manual and offer them for sale to the students."

Kurt finally began to exhibit some excitement.

"If the response is good enough, it's possible we could interest a publishing house in mass production. Regardless, you would be a co-author of a textbook, and that would look very impressive on your college CV."

Kurt blinked rapidly. "I'll definitely consider it, Mr. Rice. I would probably need to discuss it with my father. If contracts were involved, I'm sure I would require his permission, as I'm still a minor." He beamed. "Thank you for this opportunity."

Patrick grinned in reply. "The other thing I wanted to discuss was if you would consider joining the History Club." He sighed. "I don't mean to put you on the spot, but I'm the new sponsor for the club, and from what I've been able to gather, interest in it is rather low. If I can't recruit some new members, the principal will probably disband it."

Kurt nodded. "I understand. He threatened to do it often enough with Glee, until I finally underwrote the club myself."
Patrick blinked owlishly and then stared for a long moment. "I beg your pardon? Did you just say you're underwriting the budget for the glee club?"

Kurt nodded again. "There aren't enough members, and I knew Principal Figgins would disband the club, so I endowed it."

Patrick shook his head dumbly. "I'm sorry I'm so...floored." He paused. "Kurt, forgive me for being indelicate, but Ms. Pierce told me that you had resigned from the glee club. She and Mr. Puckerman were very upset about it."

Kurt suddenly became guarded, his eyes shadowed. Then he sighed. "I suppose there's no point in avoiding explanations. The rumor mill has been working overtime since last night and you'll undoubtedly hear myriad versions. I would prefer you hear the truth from me."

"I would like that," Patrick said, "but only if you feel comfortable telling me. It's really not my business, and I certainly don't want to embarrass you."

Kurt gave him a watery smile. "Thank you. I appreciate that." He hesitated. "This is a very personal matter for me and, frankly, it involves, er, sexual relations." He bit his lip and averted his eyes. "I'm sure you know of my orientation, but I'm unfamiliar with your stance on the...issue. I don't wish to offend you."

Patrick stared. "Kurt," he finally said, his voice gravely serious, "I want to table this discussion for the moment. Instead, I'd like to talk about why you're suddenly so nervous around me. You never have been before." He raised a brow. "Of course I know you're gay. You've never bothered to hide the fact, and I certainly have no objection. I'm gay."

Kurt flinched harshly, eyes bulging. "W-What?"

"I'm gay," Patrick easily repeated. He waved a hand. "I don't announce it - I've never felt the need to do so - but I've never denied it. My personal life is my own, so I don't discuss it, particularly not with students, but the faculty is well aware." At Kurt's wince, he frowned deeply. "Kurt, have you had problems with other faculty members because of your orientation?"

The boy's silence was answer enough.

"I see," Patrick said, his voice low. "Well." He sighed. "I wish I knew what to say. I honestly had no idea. This is only my third year at McKinley and I was previously a part-time instructor with only one or two classes to teach. Admittedly, I've never spent much time on campus, as I'm pursuing my doctorate at OSU, so I would usually arrive just before my classes and leave soon after." He paused. "Would you tell me about what's happened?"

Kurt was silent for a very long time, his mouth opening and closing, but no sound emerging. His eyes welled with tears, and as much as he tried to fight it, he couldn't stop himself. He quietly began speaking of the bullying, the phone calls, the locker vandalism, and several of the teachers who knew of his treatment and did nothing to stop it. Frustratingly, he never provided names.

Patrick was furious, but forced himself to calm down and think rationally. He exhaled slowly. "Kurt, first let me say how very sorry I am that you've been made to endure this. There is absolutely no excuse." He sighed. "Unfortunately, there's little recourse available. As I'm sure you know, sexual orientation does not have protected status in Ohio."

Kurt nodded miserably.

"However," Patrick continued, "the school district does have a policy against bullying. It's obvious
that it's not being enforced, but if you were to challenge Principal Figgins about how he has handled things, you could take him in front of the school board and demand a hearing. I would support you every step of the way."

"What...what if I didn't want to do that?" Kurt asked, his voice small.

"Then that is entirely your decision," Patrick said kindly.

"You wouldn't think me a coward?"

It was clear to Patrick that Kurt thought himself a coward for not fighting harder against the intolerance he had been forced to face.

"Absolutely not. Kurt, there is no shame in being who you are. Instead, the students who have tormented you and the teachers who have so badly failed you should be ashamed." He paused. "There is no right or wrong way to handle this. There's only the way that's right for you, and you should do what makes you comfortable. Incidentally, I find nothing cowardly about confronting hatred in the straightforward manner you have."

Kurt's breath hitched. "Thank you," he warbled.

Patrick nodded. "That said, I want you to come to me if this bullying continues. If you don't want to pursue the issue, I'll abide your wishes, but I want you to come and talk to me. If you do decide to pursue it, I'll help in any way I can. Most of all, I want you to know that you are not alone."

Kurt's hand flew up to cover his mouth and his eyes shut as he fought back the tears.

Patrick wanted to scream about the injustice of this, but he didn't wish to upset the boy any further. He'd had no idea that things were this bad for Kurt, and he felt horribly guilty that he had been so oblivious. Granted, his schedule didn't allow much interaction with his students beyond the classroom, but if anyone should have seen these signs, it should have been him.

"Do you have any allies on the faculty?" Patrick asked.

Kurt nodded. "Coach Sylvester and Mr. Schuester."

Patrick nodded in kind. "I don't know them well, but I'm pleased that they're aware of the situation and have reached out to you."

Kurt sighed.

Patrick hesitated for a moment, and then pressed forward. "Will you tell me what happened with your glee club?"

Kurt drew in on himself, his arms folded protectively about his person. "I went to Europe this summer to visit my grandmother and...and I met someone."

Patrick nodded encouragingly.

"I fell in love with him," Kurt whispered, "and I slept with him. It was my first time."

"And that was your decision?"

Kurt nodded. "Very much so, and it...it was wonderful."

Patrick smiled. "I'm happy to hear that your experience was a positive one."
"It was really was," Kurt said, his voice warbling again. "It was perfect. It was everything I had ever wanted it to be."

"Are you still in love with him?" Patrick asked gently.

Kurt fell silent and ducked his head, but at last nodded.

"And you still want to be with him?"

Kurt nodded again.

"And he wants to be with you, but can't?" Patrick asked.

Kurt nodded once more, misery plain on his face.

"I'm sorry," Patrick said. "I know how painful that can be."

Kurt sighed and wiped his face. "But I was doing well. I had accepted it. I didn't have any regrets."

His fingers curled into fists. "My father is dating Finn Hudson's mother."

Patrick frowned, not understanding the correlation.

"Finn somehow deduced that I had lost my virginity and, with Mercedes and Rachel in tow, ran to tell my father."

Patrick was stunned. And appalled. Such childish and truly hurtful behavior was beyond the pale.

Kurt sighed. "Dad made me quit Glee and Cheerios."

Patrick shook his head dumbly. What a ridiculous punishment. Surely the man didn't believe or expect that his son would forever remain a virgin? Shouldn't Kurt's father instead have been proud that his son had waited as long as he had, and had waited for the right person?

He couldn't say these things, of course, couldn't say everything he wanted, lest he be accused of being inappropriate. In fact, he was fairly certain that this discussion was verging on dangerous territory and decided it was best to veer away from it.

"I'm very sorry you're having to go through this, Kurt," he said, "but I trust you will comport yourself with dignity. Do your best to ignore the rumors and hold tight to your true friends."

Kurt nodded, his face clearing. "Artie, Santana, and Brittany have been wonderful, and Sam and Noah have helped a lot." He smiled. "So have Quinn, Mike, and Tina."

Patrick couldn't possibly imagine how Noah Puckerman would be any help whatsoever, but he did recall how defensive the boy had been over Kurt at the end of class. Santana, Artie, and Tina had been in Kurt's class during their freshman year, and Patrick recalled in particular how close Kurt and Artie had appeared. Kurt and Santana, by the end of the year, were having intellectual intercourse, but he never would have believed them to be friends; obviously, that had changed. He was glad the boy had them.

"I think Santana and Tina might consider joining the History Club, Mr. Rice," Kurt said. "I'll ask them about it. I'm interested, but it would depend on what's involved and when the club meets. I have other responsibilities, and I'm looking for a new job."

Patrick blinked. "I wasn't aware you had a job."
"I'm a mechanic."

Patrick stared and then shook his head, snorting. "You know what, Kurt? That's awesome. Good for you for proving how erroneous stereotypes can be."

Kurt blushed, but smiled.

"As for the club, I haven't decided on a set schedule yet. If we can garner enough interest, I'd like it to be a proper club with officers, and perhaps field trips and the like. At the very least, I thought we could read articles based on the interests of the members and discuss them, especially topics that aren't adequately addressed in the various history classes."

Kurt nodded, his excitement growing. "I've recently developed a fascination with Greco-Roman history and mythology. I spent time in Athens this summer, as well as Rome, Pompeii, and Tuscany."

"That sounds wonderful," Patrick said, smiling. "If you decide to join, I'd like you to lead a discussion about the things you saw and the places you went. If you have pictures or souvenirs, I'd encourage you to bring them."

Kurt beamed. "I've never belonged to an academic club before. Glee, and then Cheerios, took up so much time." His sigh was gentle. "And I guess I never felt welcome, or assumed I wouldn't be welcomed."

Patrick nodded. "High school is a scary time for everyone, Kurt. Those who have been bullying you are most likely either jealous of you, or they're acting out because they're unhappy with their own lives." He gave Kurt an encouraging smile. "Times are changing. I'm sure once you escaped this town this summer, you realized that not every place is Lima, and even Lima isn't as harsh and bigoted as your experience in this school has led you to believe."

Kurt raised a brow.

"Don't misunderstand me," Patrick added. "I know what Lima is, but there's more to it than you think. There will always be bullies. There will always be homophobic people. But there will also always be racists of all colors. There will always be misogynists and misandrists. There will always be people who hate, but they're not important enough to define your life in reaction to their hatred. Don't give them that power."

Kurt took a deep breath and slowly released it. "I really wish I had been able to talk to you about all of this before. Thank you for taking the time."

Patrick smiled. "I don't think I've told you anything you didn't already know, but I understand that sometimes..."

"You need someone to validate your beliefs," Kurt finished. "Thank you," he said quietly.

"You're welcome." Patrick stood. "I'll post an announcement on the Student Activities board about the first club meeting. Like I said, I'd love it if you could attend, but there's no pressure, and I promise that I won't take it personally if you decide not to join, okay?"

Kurt bobbed his head. "Thank you, Mr. Rice. For everything."

Patrick smiled. "Now, it's just about time for lunch, and I'm starving. I hope to see you soon, Kurt, and I meant what I said: if you need to talk, come and find me. Do you have my email address?"
Kurt nodded. "I still have the syllabus from last year."

"Then you can always get in touch with me. I'll speak with you soon."

Sam and Puck were doing their best to get through Spanish, but it was rather difficult, considering the basilisk stare Tina was leveling at Finn and Mercedes, both of whom squirmed under the relentless assault. Sam and Puck were trying very hard not to laugh and were only barely succeeding.

Puck had never before realized Tina was such a badass, and he was really digging it. Sam could only guess that how Kurt had described himself as willing to do anything to protect his friends was also true of Tina, who had the bonus of being considered not as threatening.

Unsurprisingly, Will was practically oblivious to the entire matter until he called on Tina in a bid of desperation, as none of the other students could be bothered to participate. When the girl didn't immediately answer, Will turned away from the board and glanced in her direction.

His eyes widened at the rancor that was rolling off her in waves.

"Tina?" he hesitantly prompted.

She ignored him as if he hadn't even spoken, continuing to glare at Finn and Mercedes, who were withering more and more with every passing second.

Sam's hand shot into the air and he nervously rambled off the correct answer.

Will blinked, nodded, and then smiled, thanking Sam.

Puck and Sam were almost positive that their teacher then looked at Tina and smirked with approval. The gesture was so quick, they might have misinterpreted or imagined it, but they truly didn't think so. The boys looked at each other and smirked as well.

Santana had not been amused to walk into her French class and find Rachel Berry sitting at her row of desks, talking with Brittany. Despite her promise not to do anything horrible to Rachel, Santana was debating if there were any way she could get herself out of that oath.

She took her seat, greeted Brittany, ignored Rachel, and tuned out of the class once she had handed in her homework. She was already fluent and the class presented no challenge for her. She just needed the credit and it was good practice for the AP exam she'd take at the end of the year.

It had never really made sense to her that McKinley offered courses like AP Art History and AP Studio Art, but no advanced placement language courses. She was sure Figgins was responsible. He probably got extra money for the school by offering the more obscure AP classes. She also kind of resented that there were no languages to take other than French and Spanish. She had been fluent in Spanish since she began talking, and had picked up French as a hobby. Meanwhile, Kurt and Brittany spoke about ten languages between them. Whatever.
She kicked back in her chair and decided to work over in her mind the conundrum that was Berry.

It wasn't that she hated Rachel. Hating someone required a certain level of passion and commitment, and Santana just wasn't willing to expend that amount of effort on someone like Rachel Berry.

It wasn't even about solos anymore. Sure, it pissed her off that Rachel was always hogging the spotlight, but some of her rancor was mitigated by the fact that Rachel was legitimately talented. Of course, the fact that Rachel had always refused to recognize the talent of anyone else was grating, but Santana, perhaps more than any other club member, understood such a level of selfishness.

What really pissed her off was that Berry refused to acknowledge that she herself was, in fact, a huge bitch.

That was the crux of her dilemma. Rachel, while not necessarily a horrible person, was certainly not the picture of innocence she proclaimed herself to be.

Berry was egotistical, ruthless, conniving, and cruel - and that would have been fine, if only she would admit it.

Instead, Rachel had deemed it permissible for her to pick apart the personality flaws of all of the other Glee members while steadfastly refusing to believe that she had any herself, and that was just not okay.

Santana Lopez knew people. She understood how they operated, what made them tick, and she had figured Berry out a long time ago. She had done so by following her father's practice of observing facts and cataloguing them, as one would present them to a jury.

*Fact the First: Rachel Berry was not a nice person.*

She slopped sugar with the best of them, had snowed the majority of their teachers, and was held up as the example to follow by many parents of her fellow students. The problem was that, in a cutthroat environment like high school, where it was everyone for themselves, her classmates saw Rachel for exactly who she was. Rachel knew it, too, and it frustrated her to no end.

Granted, Kurt and Santana herself shared many character traits with Rachel, but they never denied them; instead, they touted them. That was why even those who absolutely hated them - for being gay or being smart or having money - nevertheless respected them. And feared them.

Children were often cruel, but they were also excellent judges of character, and they hated phonies more than anything else.

Rachel Berry was a phony.

*Fact the Second: Rachel Berry was obsessed with Kurt Hummel.*

As much as Santana watched people, so too did Rachel.

Santana watched people to learn their behavior and their secrets so that she could maneuver them into positions where they would be most useful to her. Quinn might have ruled the school during their freshman year, but only because Santana had allowed it.

Rachel watched people because she had nothing else to do. She had alienated herself from everyone, and Santana had often wondered if it was purposeful. She rather thought it was, but could never figure out if Rachel's goal was to be a martyr or to protect herself. Either one was lame.
Rachel had been orbiting around Kurt for as long as anyone could remember, all the way back to elementary school. The problem, for Rachel, was that Kurt hadn't even noticed her existence until McKinley. Rachel also had never tried to get Kurt's attention. Instead, she had always preferred to linger on his periphery, like some kind of ghoul, all but stalking him.

In a way, Santana could almost understand. Rachel and Kurt had always been outsiders and they shared several common interests, particularly dance and voice. She was also fairly certain that Rachel had recognized Kurt was gay probably before even he did, and he had represented to her the safety and security of her fathers.

As far as Santana knew, they had never shared the same music teachers, but they had both attended the same dancing school, as had Brittany and Mike.

She knew that all four had taken ballet, but only Brittany and Kurt had become friends through the experience. They had never been particularly close, not until McKinley, but they had always gotten along and Kurt had been very protective of Brittany for as long as anyone could remember.

For years, Mike's only friend had been Matt, and while Santana had nothing against Rutherford and would even admit to being his friend, she thought it was good that he had moved. It had forced Chang to man up and grow a pair. She wouldn't wax poetic on the subject, as she and Brittany had been as insular as Matt and Mike, though never to quite the same degree. They'd had other friends, although they'd never been as close to them as they had to each other, but they weren't completely codependent. Mike and Matt had all but shared a brain.

By the time Kurt had begun taking ballet, he was already best friends with Artie, and Tina had come along soon after. That was why he could be friendly with Brittany, but not desperate for her friendship. He could appreciate Mike's talent without ever having to speak to him. He had never noticed Rachel because he'd never needed her.

Santana was fairly sure that, if asked, Kurt, Mike, and Brittany wouldn't have even remembered that Rachel had been in their ballet class.

All through elementary school, if you had looked at Rachel Berry, you would have seen her looking at Kurt Hummel. It had been obvious that she desperately wanted to be his friend, but didn't know how to go about it.

Early on, Rachel had established her persona as being better than everyone else, and so no one had ever wanted anything to do with her. Rather than trying to change her behavior, she had clung to it even more tenaciously, which was a trait that would eventually define everything she did. She had never learned the art of surrender, or how to be gracious or humble.

She'd paid for those mistakes over and over again, but had never learned from them.

By the time high school rolled around, Rachel had decided that, instead of stalking Kurt, she would do everything she could to get his attention. The outfits had been the first step. Everyone knew Kurt was very particular about fashion and extremely critical of fashion he did not like.

Once upon a time, Rachel had worn normal clothes that were cute and age-appropriate, but on the first day of freshman year, she had pranced into McKinley wearing an outfit that made her look like a cross between a nymphomaniac and a constipated Quaker schoolmarm. Everyone had noticed, including Kurt, and Rachel had been ecstatic.

Santana had been completely unsurprised when, later during their first week, as she headed off to cheerleading tryouts, she had seen Rachel slinking after Kurt as he headed to the choir room.
On that day, a legendary rivalry had been born.

Everyone had known it. Everyone had talked about it. Even those who didn't know Kurt or Rachel, or those who despised them, had weighed in on it.

A lot of people had been amused; the idea of two social rejects battling to decide which of them was less pathetic had been titillating.

Kurt had always had quiet supporters, unknown even to him - especially to him - but they had not escaped Santana's notice. Kurt had always been a featured player, just by virtue of being himself, and the fact that he had noticed Rachel Berry, when he rarely noticed anyone, had been the cause of much speculation. In the end, most people had sided with Kurt; Rachel had made a pest of herself far too often for anyone to bother defending her.

As deep as prejudice could run in a town like Lima, more people were offended by Rachel's personality than Kurt's sexuality.

During the first week of last year, Santana had seen Finn scold Puck for checking Kurt against a locker. She had seen the dazed look on Kurt's face shift from confusion to admiration and, finally, to infatuation.

And she had seen Rachel notice it, as well.

It wasn't long after the fact that Rachel was leveling the same look at Finn.

After she had joined Glee, Santana's observations had borne fruit: Rachel was now doing everything in her power to get under Kurt's skin, to get him to pay her any attention whatsoever, even if that attention was negative. Whether it was fighting for solos or over Finn, Rachel did her best to antagonize Kurt at every opportunity.

Her actions were often dismissed as simple jealousy, an unhealthy rivalry, insecurity, or sincere arrogance, but Santana had looked more deeply. Rachel was desperate for his approval, for his acknowledgment. Somewhere along the way, her desire to be his friend had shifted on a fundamental level, and her obsession to prove herself better than everyone else refocused: she needed to be better than him and she needed him to admit it.

The problem was that Kurt didn't really consider her competition and never had. That drove Rachel nuts. Even when they were fighting like two cats in a box, Kurt had never realized that he was supposed to be competing with her; he just didn't like her and couldn't allow her snide comments and commandant attitude to pass without comment. He fought for solos because he wanted them, of course, but also because no one else had the temerity or patience to stand up to Rachel.

He had no problem admitting Rachel had a superior singing voice; in fact, he had said so at last year's Sectionals, when he declared her their star. The difference was that Kurt understood how unique his own voice was; while Rachel's was much commercial and thus socially acceptable, it wasn't particularly special. He had never been interested in sounding like her; he'd only ever wanted to be heard.

He was perfectly willing to acknowledge that Rachel was no dummy, but everyone knew her intelligence was no match for his. Rachel made the honor roll every term, but she rarely took honors or advanced classes. She followed the general curriculum and made sure she outpaced her fellow classmates, but even she knew that she didn't possess the academic prowess of Kurt, Tina, and Artie. Perhaps she could have, had she expended any real effort, but scholarship wasn't a priority for her.
She didn't even stop to consider that the other members might have better grades because, if it wasn't about her, it didn't matter.

Rachel had flushed horribly when, at the end of Regionals last term, Kurt had wished her and Finn nothing but the best. Most of the other club members had mistaken it for a blush, but Santana knew that it was anger which had caused Rachel's face to purple, not contentment. She was fairly certain that Quinn also had seen through the charade. Kurt had finally accepted that Finn was straight and not interested in him; all he wanted was for Finn to be happy. If Finn had found that happiness with Rachel, Kurt would be happy for him, even if he personally didn't like Rachel.

Even when Rachel won, she still lost.

**Fact the Third: Rachel Berry had been victimized by her classmates.**

Santana didn't feel guilty over this. She herself hadn't bothered much with Rachel one way or the other, but Quinn had attacked the girl relentlessly through words and actions. Santana hadn't participated, but neither had she stopped it. She simply hadn't cared enough to interfere. It wasn't like it had been with Kurt, when she had feared helping him meant exposing something of herself, of forcing herself to admit who she really was.

What most people didn't realize, however, was that Rachel had retaliated. She might have been victimized, but she was no one's victim. Defaced yearbooks, messages on bathroom walls, threatening notes with disguised handwriting placed in lockers, stolen items, and vicious rumor-mongering became the norm for those who harassed Rachel.

It was a cunning plan implemented with brutish efficiency and feigned meekness. Nothing Rachel had done could really be traced back to her, and if the incidents had been taken to the faculty, Rachel's sterling reputation as a hard worker and an object of mockery and ridicule would have instantly dismissed any claims against her. Also, those involved couldn't risk revealing themselves as instigators. So Rachel's little reprisals went unpunished and mostly unacknowledged.

It had always baffled Santana that Rachel had never used their shared bullying to make inroads with Kurt. It offered the perfect opportunity to bond over their mutual torment, especially considering that Rachel had been harassed, in part, because of her parents' sexuality. Surely she could have related to Kurt on that level, if no other.

But she had never tried, and it made Santana wonder what it was that Rachel wanted from Kurt. Had she wanted an ally, a friend, or even just co-commiseration?

Or had wanted him to make the first move, to acknowledge their similarities so that she could then deign to offer an olive branch?

Perhaps that had been the goal: she had wanted Kurt's attention, but only on her terms. When he continually refused to provide it to her, she sought to punish him by taking away things he wanted or, in the case of solos, had earned.

But yesterday's Glee meeting had been a revelation.

Kurt had opened a dialogue with Rachel in a calm and rational manner, and she had responded. She had actually listened to his words and paid them heed. They had brokered if not a truce, at least a mutual understanding.

Then she had blown it all to hell by accompanying Finn and Mercedes to Kurt's house.

It didn't compute. Why had Rachel done that? She had to have known how Kurt would react; she
certainly knew enough about him to predict that much.

Rachel had willingly allowed herself to consider that Finn's allegations of Kurt being attacked over the summer had merit. Why? Even if they had some basis in reality, she should've known better than to go behind Kurt's back in such a manner. So why had she?

When the bell rang and announced lunch, Santana had quietly put to Rachel that very question.

Rachel was silent for a very long time. "I think, on some level, I knew what Finn was doing," she finally said, "and I went along with it because I was afraid to choose Kurt over him. I chose my boyfriend."

Santana said nothing and Brittany regarded Rachel with cool eyes.

"It was the wrong choice," Rachel continued, "and now I'm left with the realization that Finn was probably never really mine."

"You think he wants Kurt?" Brittany asked.

Rachel shrugged with diffidence. "I don't know, but I'm pretty sure he doesn't want anyone else to have Kurt, either," she whispered.

At last, Santana understood. Finn and Rachel had been drawn together partly because of their shared desire for Kurt's notice. When he hadn't given it to them, when he had wished them all the happiness in the world, when he had given his attention to someone else, they had sought to punish him.

Kurt hadn't retaliated; he had allowed his friends to do it for them. Now Finn was the outcast and Rachel understood she was hanging on only by a thread, and only by Kurt's command. He could cut that thread at anytime, and Rachel would know that she had deserved it.

"Why did he spare me?" Rachel asked, surprisingly, of Santana.

Santana stared at her for a long moment. "Because, whatever your other motivations, you were honestly concerned. You care for him in your own scary way, and he knows it." Her eyes flared with suppressed rage. "Don't fuck with him again."

Rachel nodded fearfully and slowly trailed after Brittany and Santana as they headed for the cafeteria.

_Fact the Fourth: Rachel Berry was trying to get herself together._

"Dude," Puck whispered to Sam, "why am I so nervous? It's not like I've never seen him before or anything. This is so weird."

Sam suppressed a smile. "Maybe it's because you've accepted that you might like him as more than just a friend?"

Puck sighed. "Sorry. I shouldn't be laying this on you, I know. Still, at the same time, you're the only one who might possibly understand."

"That's why I'm not mad," Sam said. "How can I be? It's not like you're trying to steal him or
anything, and even if you were, he's not mine for you to steal." He paused. "Besides, at least your feelings for him are real. You're not playing him." He sighed. "Just...be careful, Puck."

Puck quirked a brow. "What'd he tell you?"

Sam said nothing for a moment. "That he was in love with that guy hardcore, man," he finally said. "He still wants to be with him. He...he's hurting, Puck. I told him that I liked him, and he was great about it, really. He told me that he was flattered and that maybe something could happen in the future, but, for right now, he just wants to be friends. He doesn't want to hurt me or use me as a rebound."

Puck nodded slowly. "At least he's honest." He shoved his hands in his pockets. "Besides, it's not like I don't know that I have no real chance with him."

"I didn't say that," Sam said quickly.

Puck shot him a painful smile. "You didn't have to. I treated him like shit for years, Sam. Even though he said he forgave me, and I know he does, that's a lot for him to work through. There's no way I can just walk up to him and say I like him now and expect him to be happy about it." He shook his head. "This is like some lame Afterschool Special or something, where the bully realizes he was pulling pigtails to get attention."

"Yeah, but that's not why you were doing it," Sam countered. "You lashed out because he made you feel insecure. It was never about him being gay, right?"

Puck nodded. "Yeah, but I doubt he'll ever really believe that. Some part of him will probably always think I'm homophobic. Can't blame him either."

Sam chewed on his lip. "Well, then, maybe you shouldn't say anything. Just be his friend. Let him know that you really do accept him for who he is and that you don't want anything from him. Let him know he can depend on you."

Puck fell silent as they continued toward the cafeteria.

"Yeah, but what if he can't?" Puck eventually muttered. "My track record sucks. I'm not...I'm not the kind of person other people depend on, never have been. I'm not...the strong one."

"But you can be," Sam insisted, "if you want to be. Only you can decide if he's worth the effort."

"This isn't a competition," Puck said. "I really like you, dude. You're the first real friend I've made since, like, second grade. I don't want to fuck that up. Besides, we all know that if he's going to choose anyone, it'll be you. And that's good, you know? You'll do right by him."

Sam snorted. "I'm not Mr. Perfect. I've still got a lot of crazy to work through. I didn't tell you guys everything that happened; there's more. I'm not going to put that on Kurt. I don't want him to feel like he has to fix me or something."

Puck nodded seriously. "I get that. I don't want to do that to him either."

They walked in contented silence, very closely together and all but holding hands, not recognizing the sly looks they were receiving.

"Did Princess tell you anything about him?" Puck asked. "The boyfriend, or whatever he was?"

Sam shook his head. "Not really. I think he wants to keep that private, which I respect." He paused.
"I got the sense the dude was older, like maybe in college or something. The way Kurt talked about him...it was all very adult, you know? It didn't sound like the typical teenage summer romance."

Puck frowned and nodded. "Not surprising. Princess isn't one to do things half-ass. If he fell in love and gave it up, it would've been because he really did love the guy and wanted to be with him. I can't see some random jackass getting through his defenses. An older dude makes sense, you know? He probably took care of Kurt without..."

"Handling him," Sam supplied.

Puck nodded again. "Exactly. You see how all his friends want to protect him and whatnot, but I don't think he likes that very much. I mean, he appreciates it, but he's not like most kids our age." He blinked. "I'm not even sure he was a kid when we were kids. He was always more mature than the rest of us. Sure, he could get pissy and act childish, but he got stuff in a way most people didn't, you know what I mean?"

Sam nodded. "Yeah, I agree. At any rate, he said he really wants us to be friends, which is awesome, because I don't think he lets most people get that close. We even hugged."

Puck smirked. "Like, Christian side hug, or full body contact?"

Sam blushed lightly but smirked right back. "Full body."

"Nice!"

Sam snorted. "We're totally perving on him."

"Yeah, but there's a lot of awesome to perv on."

"We have to be able to control ourselves."

Puck sighed. "I know. I don't even get where all this is coming from, or why it's so sudden. I was serious when I said I never thought of guys that way, and then I started thinking about Princess that way, and there was nothing funny or wrong about it. Then you show up, and you're awesome, and hot, and I don't know what to do."

Sam bit his lip. "Well, I think you should talk to Kurt about it. The bi thing, I mean, so he knows that it's real. Remember yesterday in Glee, when you hinted that maybe you were bi and he just laughed? I don't think he was trying to be hurtful. I think he thought it was as weird as you did. You should prepare him, so he knows you're not trying to trick him or play games."

"Yeah, but will he believe me?" Puck asked. "I've never gotten the sense that bisexuality is something he actually thinks is real."

Sam shook his head. "He talked to me about that and, you're right, he didn't believe in it. Then Tina came out to him, and that changed everything. He'll totally support you, man."

They entered the cafeteria and looked around for a seat.

"Hey, Evans?" Puck said quietly. "I was serious this morning. If you asked me out, I think I'd say yes."

Sam turned to stare at him. "Dude..."

Puck shrugged. "He might never be ready, man, and when he is, there's no way of saying he'd
choose either one of us."

Sam's eyes turned downcast.

"I'm just saying that maybe it's an option we should keep open," Puck said, a tremor of fear working into his voice. "I know I'm not him. Never could be."

"I don't want you to be," Sam softly interrupted, "but it's the same for me as it is for him, Puck. I'm not ready. Right now, I'm...damaged goods. And I like you too much to lay that on you."

Puck was suffused with warm pleasure at Sam's words. He blushed and punched Sam's shoulder. "Let's go get some grub."

"Hi, Mike!" a voice brightly chirped.

Mike startled slightly and turned around in the cafeteria line. Seeing Kurt, he gave the other boy a warm smile. "Hey, man. How's it going?"

"Very well, thank you," Kurt said primly. He then leaned toward him. "I've heard all sorts of rumors today," he whispered, "so I thought I'd play a little game and see how many people take notice that I'm talking with you." He bit his lip and looked at Mike uncertainly. "Is that okay?"

"Sure," Mike said. "In fact, let's give them something to talk about." With that, he stepped back and wrapped an arm around Kurt's shoulders, drawing the boy against him.

Both snickered when a wave of whispers shot out across the cafeteria.

"So what's making the rounds today?" Mike quietly asked. "Quinn filled us in on some of the gory."

Kurt snorted. "Well, let's see. We could start with the rumor that Artie, Brittany, and myself are having awesome threeway wheelchair sex." He arched a brow. "As limber as Brittany and I are, I'm not quite sure how that would work, or that it would be at all comfortable."

Mike chuckled. "Did Brittany start that rumor?"

Kurt gave him the side-eye. "You mean like the one she started about Peterson calling her retarded?"

"You knew about that?" asked a floored Mike. Then he thought better of it and shook his head. "Of course you did."

Kurt buffed his nails on his shirt. "Not to toot my own horn, but beep beep."

Mike laughed. "So what else?"

Kurt waved a hand. "Oh, the usual. Sam and Noah are fighting over me..."

Mike decided not to comment on that one, especially considering he wasn't sure that it was untrue.

"...Finn and I had some summer affair that ended badly, despite the fact that we were separated by an ocean the entire time. Quinn and I are really fraternal twins who were separated at birth and we finally found out that we're related. Santana has drugged us all with ancient lust potions laced with
Spanish fly." He snorted indelicately. "Nothing racist about that, I'm sure. Let's see. I've also somehow managed to get Mercedes pregnant. Oh, and the one that you and Tina are incestuous cousins is still floating about." He shook his head. "It's almost impressive how aggressively ignorant some of the people in this school strive to be."

Mike grimaced and shook his head.

"You know what's really strange?" Kurt whispered. "There doesn't seem to be the usual homophobia attached to the rumors. People aren't disgusted, they're intrigued. They're almost...titillated."

Mike blinked. "That is weird, but I guess it's good. I think it lends credence to the belief that the jocks who were targeting you spearheaded most of the hate. Now that they're removed from the picture and Azimio has subtly let it be known that you took down Peterson, maybe people are ready to start looking at who you are and not who you like."

Kurt's eyes turned misty. "That would be really nice, even if they are disturbingly preoccupied with my sex life or lack thereof."

Mike bumped his shoulder. "Hey, I've been meaning to ask, are you okay?" His eyes widened. "Sorry. I know we really aren't friends and I don't mean..."

"We are friends," Kurt insisted, much to Mike's pleasure, "and I suppose I'm doing well, or as well as can be expected, given what Mercedes and Finn did."

Mike growled. "I am so sorry that happened. Matt was so pissed off, I thought he was going to fly back here and kick some ass."

Kurt smiled. "He's really a great guy. I wish the three of us had been friends when he was still here."

"Me too," Mike quietly agreed. "I need to apologize for that."

"You don't," Kurt said. "I know you were scared, Mike, and I don't begrudge you that. I'm very happy that we're friends now. There's no point in dwelling on the past."

Mike grinned. "You're kind of awesome, you know?"

"I do," Kurt tinkled. "I'm glad you've realized it."

Mike laughed again, pulling Kurt flush against him. "So am I," he whispered in Kurt's ear.

They both laughed when the whispers became dull roars.

Tina sat down next to Santana and nudged her.

Santana flinched, unused to contact with someone she didn't really know, even though she had started considering Tina a good friend. She didn't know what the hell that was about or when it had begun, but it was nice to have another female friend. She'd never really gotten along with chicks.

She looked at the girl and, as Tina inclined her head, Santana followed her line of sight and smirked when she spied Mike and Kurt being all chummy - Chummely? - in the lunch line, as well as how people were reacting to it.
"They're totally playing it up," she observed. "Awesome."

Tina snickered and nodded. She then shivered. "Can you imagine what they'd look like fucking each other?" she asked, voice dreamy.

Santana's eyes bulged out and she slowly turned to face Tina, an incredulous look on her face. "Say what?"

Tina licked her lips. "You've slept with Mike. You've seen his body. Imagine it lined up against Kurt's flawless, silky skin, the disparity of their skin tones highlighting their perfection. I can see Kurt's long, slender fingers carding through Mike's hair, tugging on it, making Mike whimper with pain and desire."

"Holy shit," Santana gasped.

"They're so flexible," Tina continued, groaning, as though in a haze of lust which refused to be dispelled. "I can picture perfectly the muscles of Kurt's back, the play of them as he rides Mike's cock, writhing in ecstasy and moaning Mike's name. I see Kurt's hands on Mike's hard chest, pinching his nipples and muttering filth under his breath. I can see Mike's eyes rolling back in his head as his hands grip Kurt's tiny waist so hard that his fingerprints leave bruises, marking Kurt as his."

"Where have you been all my life?" Santana demanded. "Somebody seriously needs to be writing this down."

"I bet they'd fuck like they dance, with abandon and wanton passion. They would use every muscle, explore every contour with teeth and tongues, locked into positions about which we could only dream, never hoping to replicate. They would stare into each other's eyes, feral snarls on their lips, wrecking themselves and each other as they wrecked the bed fortunate enough to cradle them. And then Matt would come into the room..."

"I'm about to come right here," Santana said.

Tina turned glittering eyes on her. "Don't let me stop you."

Santana's eyes narrowed. "I get it. You're another ninja, like Tink, aren't you?"

Tina smirked and said nothing.


"Oh, look! Sam and Puck just walked in and saw Mike's arm around Kurt!"

Santana's head actually made a whoosh sound, it turned so fast. She looked at the two sullen, glaring boys and cackled. "They've got it so bad."

"Which one do you think will get him?" Tina asked.

Santana cocked her head. "Honestly? Neither one."

Tina slowly nodded. "I think you're right. Kurt wants to be alone for a while." She shrugged. "Maybe Sam and Puck will end up dating each other."

Santana quirked a brow. "Are you planning on narrating that scene, as well?"

"I might be."
"Let's sell tickets. I'll bring the popcorn."

"Done."

"What's going on?" Artie asked, rolling up to them and setting his lunch on the table.

"Your ex was just describing an awesome sex scene between Tink and Chang."

Artie raised a brow. "Writing RPF now, Tina?"

"Maybe," the girl answered.

"What?" asked a confused Santana.

"Tina writes fanfiction," Artie explained. "You know, stories about characters from movies, books, and television. Slash fictions are romantic stories about two male characters, like, say, Harry Potter and Cedric Diggory."

Santana sighed. "Back when RPattz was hot and didn't have panface."

Tina gave a doleful nod.

Artie snorted. "At any rate, femslash stories are romances with two female characters, and RPF stands for Real Person Fiction. In this case, Kurt and Mike."

Santana blinked and looked at Tina with a new respect. "Write it up, okay? I need some new fapping material, and you have a real flair for the hot."

Tina blushed lightly. She looked at Artie. "Are you okay with them hanging out?" she asked, nodding toward Kurt and Mike.

"Sure," Artie said. "I'm not Mercedes. I don't want or need to choose Kurt's friends for him." He shrugged. "Besides, we've already talked about it. I know things are weird between you, me, and Mike, but he's a good guy. If he and Kurt become friends, it'll be because they like each other, not because they're lonely or settling."

Tina smiled at him.

Santana grunted. "Look, I've got to say something here."

Artie sighed, but nodded. "Go ahead. I knew this was coming."

She rolled her eyes. "Oh, goody. Look, Wheels, do I like the fact that you and Brit are together? No, but I'll accept it because you're actually a decent guy. I think you'll treat her well, and you know what will happen if you don't."

Artie scoffed. "You don't scare me, Lopez. Kurt already gave me that lecture and, believe me, it was a lot more frightening coming from him."

She curled a lip, and then thought about it. Finally, she nodded. "As long as we understand each other."

"We do," he agreed, "but let's not pretend that Brittany and I have any kind of future together. Everyone knows she belongs with you."

Santana shook her head. "I'm not good for her right now. You are. Let's just leave it at that."
"Works for me."

Tina marveled at how civilized they were being, especially considering they'd never before held a real conversation and *especially* considering that Santana was, well, Santana.

Still, that they were putting forth an effort, over Brittany no less, was enlightening. It was obvious they both cared for her, much as each cared for Kurt. Tina was still of the opinion that Brittany would be good for Artie, forcing him to stop and think before he spoke, as well as considering the consequences of his actions. She didn't even feel a trace of jealousy. She was happy for them, and she was happy with Mike.

Speaking of whom, Mike was suddenly before her, looking down upon her with concern. Kurt was similarly worried.

"Are you okay?" Mike asked.

"She's fine," Santana said. "She was just describing for us the awesome sex you and Tink would have together."

Mike's mouth fell open and he turned to Kurt, who arched a brow and shrugged.

"You wouldn't survive it, Mike," he said evenly. "Trust me when I tell you that I'm more than you can handle."

Mike's eyes narrowed. If Kurt wanted to play, then he would indulge him. After all, he couldn't allow Kurt to think him weak prey. "Perhaps if Matt helped me..."

Kurt's eyes widened and he appeared to consider the words. Finally, he shook his head. "I don't think so. It's much more likely I'd leave the both of you dehydrated husks begging for mercy from every god you could name after I wrought delicious agony upon your admittedly stunning bodies."

Mike paled, licked his lips, and abruptly sat down next to his girlfriend.

"He often comes out of his mouth like that," Artie advised him. "He may look like a Precious Moments figurine, but he loves to shock people and will try and render you a speechless idiot whenever possible. You either need to learn to ignore him or how to banter effectively with innuendo."

"You've never managed the latter," Kurt snidely observed.

Artie shrugged. "I don't even try. I know there's no way I could ever beat you at that game, so I just let it roll off me like deodorant off Tanaka."

Kurt wrinkled his nose. "Ew."

"See? I win."

Kurt glared. "This time, my friend, but I shall live to triumph anew."

Artie waved him off, unconcerned. "Don't be so melodramatic. You're starting to sound like Rachel."

Kurt's eyes all but fell out of his head. "Blasphemy," he hissed, baring his teeth.

Mike turned to Tina. "Is it always like this?"
She shook her head. "No, usually it's worse, with curse words, emphatic gestures, threats of vengeance, and vows of retribution thrown about willy-nilly. Artie pits his technological ingenuity against Kurt's mysterious and indefinable ninja powers. It's all very medieval. I switch teams according to my shifting moods and whether or not I'm pre-periodic."

He nodded. "Cool."

"You're all dorks," Santana proclaimed. "That said, Team Kurtana for the win."

Kurt threw back his head and cackled, drawing the attention of delighted Cheerios and worried jocks. Finn, standing on the lunch line, and Mercedes, who had just entered the cafeteria, shuddered.

Brittany had bounded over and insisted on eating her lunch while in Artie's lap. Artie didn't appear to mind.

Puck and Sam soon joined the table, both of them annoyed that there wasn't a free seat next to Kurt, who was sitting between Quinn and Mike. Artie was also tamping down a bit of jealousy caused by Mike and Kurt's fledgling friendship. Despite his words to Tina, he was slightly bothered.

He'd never had to share Kurt with another guy in a platonic fashion. It was strange enough that Puck had been added to the mix, but Mike, well, as much as Artie knew he had lost Tina all on his own, he still felt like Mike had taken her from him. He was worried Kurt might follow. Intellectually, he knew it would never happen, but Kurt had always been one of his only male friends. Hell, Kurt was one of his only friends period. Regardless, he refused to go the way of Mercedes and instigate confrontations which would drive Kurt away from him.

"Hi, Sam! Hi, Noah!" Kurt gushed.

"Hey, Princess," Puck purred.

Sam grinned. "Hi, Kurt. Did Mr. Rice catch up to you?"

Kurt nodded. "Yes. He asked if I'd be interested in joining the History Club." He cocked his head. "Apparently, it's about to suffer the same fate as Glee would have, given its lack of members. I'm considering joining, since I now have a noticeable lack of extracurricular activities." He turned toward Santana. "Mr. Rice also asked if you'd be interested. You are one of the best history students in the school, after all."

She shrugged noncommittally. "It depends on when he's holding it. You know that Cheerios can be a full-time gig." She paused. "I could use another club for my college applications, though."

"I'll join," Tina said, "as long as one of you will be there."

Santana felt a curious sensation, a strange kind of warmth due to the fact that Tina was actively attempting to be her friend. She'd never had any issues with the girl, and Tina was turning out to be pretty awesome. It would be...nice...to have another friend. She wondered if this was how Puck felt about Kurt. Of course, she wasn't having any sexy thoughts about Tina...although Tina was pretty hot.

Whoa.
She shook her head to clear it. "I probably won't know until next week," she said, "after Sylvester finalizes the schedule."

Kurt frowned. "Actually, I really need to endeavor to join more clubs now that I'm out of Glee and Cheerios. Azimio is trying to recruit me for football..."

"What?" Puck demanded.

"...but I have no interest," Kurt continued. "The History Club might be a good fit." He looked around the table. "Recommendations?"

Puck suppressed a growl, making a silent vow to interrogate Azimio later. He didn't want the douche around his Princess, even if he was trying to make nice or whatnot.

Quinn shrugged. "I'm out of the Celibacy Club for obvious reasons, and the whole thing was just a waste of time anyway. More than half the members were hooking up with each other while they were supposed to be lending support to resist their craven natures."

Puck snorted.

"What about the languages club?" Brittany asked. "I don't really know anything about it, but I've heard that it mostly deals with readings in French and Spanish. It would be easy enough."

Kurt had a pensive look on his face. "I don't know. I suppose it's worth considering, but do they actually do anything? From what I've learned, its meetings are more tutoring sessions than anything else."

Tina looked solemn. "You know, the best person to ask would be..."

Several people sighed. "Rachel."

"She hasn't spoken to Finn all day," Brittany said.

"That's not good," Kurt said quietly. "We all know a confrontation will be inevitable."

"Team Berry," Artie said.

A few others nodded.

Kurt looked down at his half-eaten lunch. "Please don't shut him out for my sake. I don't want that on my conscience."

Sam shrugged. "He was never my friend."

"Nor mine," Santana blithely added.

"He's never forgiven me," said an unconcerned Quinn, "and, frankly, I could care less."

"Your conscience is clear, Princess," Puck said. "We've all had issues with Hudson, and he has his own with us. This whole thing with your dad might have pushed the envelope, but it was coming sooner or later."

Kurt nodded and averted his eyes.

"Kurt," Tina said softly, "you're not responsible for Finn's behavior. I think he can actually be a nice guy, but he has to learn how to control his temper and to think before he speaks."
Artie nodded. "And he had no right to do what he did to you. For so long, he was the school's Golden Boy. He just expects to get everything he wants without actually having to work for it. He believes people should behave according to how he wants them to act." He shook his head. "That's not the real world, and he needs to learn that."

Kurt sighed, but looked unsure. Artie and Tina knew well that Kurt had a tendency to blame himself for everything, even events over which he had no control and little participation. It was very annoying and they had spent too much time over the past several years placating him without actually making him feel any better. They exchanged a look, rolled their eyes, and gave up. The others picked up on it and followed their lead.

Quinn frowned. "Well, Rachel's in almost every single club this school has, yet she always has time for Glee. There must be a way to tweak your schedule to allow for more activities, Kurt."

He nodded. "I also have to find a new job."

"You had a job?" asked a surprised Puck.

"Kurt's the best mechanic under thirty in this town," Artie crowed.

Puck stared at Kurt with something akin to hero worship. "You know trucks?"

Kurt arched a brow. "And cars and motorcycles. I'm passable with boats."

Puck managed to refrain from swooning, but only barely. Just when he thought Kurt couldn't get any more awesome, his Little Dude went and kicked Awesome's ass.

Kurt shrugged. "I told Dad to think about Finn as a replacement for me." His face darkened. "Why not let him take over every aspect of my life?"

Santana blinked. "Well, it's about time. I couldn't believe you were dealing with this as well as you appeared."

Kurt glowered at her. "Of course I'm angry," he spat. "I'm furious, but I refuse to allow Finn or my father to have so much control over me."

Sam thought it best to distract Kurt from his rage. "What kind of clubs are you interested in?"

Kurt released a slow breath. "I'm really not sure," he admitted. "I've never given it much thought before, because I always made Glee my priority."

"Well, what do you like to do?" Sam pressed.

Kurt shrugged. "Performing, mainly."

"Is there a drama club?"

Everyone shuddered. Sam looked around quizzically.

"Drama Club's run by this dude named Ryerson," Santana explained. "Creepy fucker. He has child-touchers eyes."

"And hands," Puck muttered.

Kurt slowly turned to face him. "What."
Puck squirmed.

"Did he touch you, Noah?" Kurt demanded, eyes narrowed and flinty.

"He just made a pass, is all, back in freshman year," Puck said, his discomfiture obvious.

Santana glared.

"Let's kill him," Brittany suggested.

Tina nodded. "I'm in."

"He's always given me the creeps," Mike said.

"He's an equal opportunity pervert," Quinn hissed. "Last year, he kept trying to touch my stomach."

Puck curled a lip. The thought of that Chester Molester putting his hands anywhere near Beth made him want to bellow with rage.

"Why is this guy still teaching?" Sam asked.

"No proof," Artie said, "and no one around here takes the word of kids."

Kurt thought Ms. Pillsbury or Sylvester might. As long as they were cleaning house, why not provide them another target? His restless eyes scanned the room and saw an anxious Rachel looking for a place to sit. He waved her over and snorted when she gaped at him.

The noise caught the attention of the others.

"Are you sure?" Santana whispered.

Kurt nodded and smirked. "If nothing else, Rachel sitting here will drive Finn and Mercedes up the wall."

She grinned.

"H-Hello," Rachel said nervously, taking a seat next to Puck.

"Sup Berry?" he drawled.

"Rachel," Kurt interrupted, "we were just discussing Mr. Ryerson and his penchant for trolling the students."

Rachel shuddered.

"You too?" he asked.

She nodded hesitantly. "I had my dads serve him with a restraining order. Quietly."

"He put the moves on Puck and Q, too," Santana said.

Rachel huffed. "He's a disgusting cretin who must have a very small penis."

A pregnant silence reigned after her proclamation.

Tina was the first to burst out laughing. Soon, others joined in. Rachel blushed.
"Why were you discussing him?" she asked.

"We're trying to find other clubs for Kurty to join," Brittany said. "He doesn't have any activities, now that Glee and Cheerios have been taken from him."

Rachel winced. "I am so sorry, Kurt."

He waved her off. "I know."

He wasn't ready to absolve her, and Rachel was fine with that. She still had penance to make. She cleared her throat. "Well, I'm in a lot of clubs. I can offer some suggestions, if you're interested."

Kurt smiled. "Thank you, Rachel."

Finn watched his former friends with envy, which segued into anger and fear when Rachel was included.

He had sat with the football team for lack of anyplace else to go, though it was fairly obvious he wasn't welcome. Azimio kept staring at him, silent judgment in his eyes, and Finn knew it was bad when even Azimio Adams was siding with Kurt against him.

He was more than willing to bite the bullet and apologize to Kurt, but the problem was getting to him in order to say the words. He didn't share any classes with Kurt, and the girls had all but blockaded him, one of them always glued to his side. If, for whatever reason, they were unavailable, some nameless Cheerios would appear to shepherd him through the halls. Finn thought Angela Gardner was responsible for that, but he couldn't talk to her about it because she had never liked him. His goofy charm didn't work on her like it did most of the Cheerios.

Plus, he knew he shouldn't apologize to Kurt until he understood why he was apologizing. His mom's words had been harsh, but he knew they were true. He had to get it together and figure out exactly what it was he wanted from Kurt, because he really didn't know.

He knew that he had missed Kurt terribly this summer. He knew how jealous and angry he had been, listening to Kurt sing yesterday. He knew he had felt vindicated in turning Burt against his son, and he knew that was wrong.

But he didn't know what he felt for Kurt.

Finn didn't think it was love. Well, it wasn't gay love. He was pretty sure he wasn't gay. He didn't get hard thinking about dudes, and whatever else he was, Kurt was a dude, with dude parts. But Kurt was awesome and Finn did love him.

He didn't want Kurt, but he didn't want anyone else to want Kurt either. He didn't want Kurt dating guys. He didn't want guys putting their hands on Kurt. He wanted Kurt all for himself.

So what did that mean?

Well, probably that he was a jealous and possessive asshole. He didn't want Kurt, but wanted Kurt to want him. He wanted Kurt to still be in love with him and always be in love with him. He wanted Kurt to look at him with hero worship again. And, okay, with love and lust and the promise of doing
anything Finn wanted.

He blinked owlishly.

He wanted to own Kurt.

That was a sick thing.

That was how Quinn had once treated him. He remembered how much he had hated it. He remembered how he knew he was being manipulated, but loved Quinn so much that he didn't care. He remembered that he kind of let Rachel do that to him, too, and how he was starting to return the favor. Last night's fuckup was a prime example.

And now he wanted to do that to Kurt?

He hated himself.

Nothing new there.

So how was he going to stop?

He didn't know, and that scared him. It scared him because, right at that moment, he was watching his friends sharing their lunch together. Among them was his ex-girlfriend, his ex-best friend, his current girlfriend, and Kurt.

And, out of all of them, Kurt was the one he wished would look over at him and smile.

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Five minutes after collecting her lunch and watching Rachel Freaking Berry sit down at the table at which she knew she herself would not be welcome, Mercedes dumped her food in the trash and skulked out of the cafeteria.

If one thing had been made plain this day, it was that she had no friends. She had never before made the connection that what friends she once had, namely Tina and Artie, were thanks to Kurt.

Now that she had no choice but to consider such things, she realized that Tina, while once cordial, had never really been that interested in hanging out with her when Kurt wasn't involved. She was fairly certain that Artie had only tolerated her for Kurt's sake.

She and Rachel had never been, and never would be, friends. And while Rachel respected Kurt, it was obvious that hadn't held true for her.

Puck, Finn, Mike, and Matt had never been her friends. Puck had used her to boost his rep, but she had used him for the same reason. After all was said and done, they really had no further use for each other.

Finn had never liked her, mostly stemming from the fact that she had told everyone but him about who Beth's father really was. It had bothered her for a long time that Kurt had somehow been exempt from Finn's anger, but it had been Rachel of all people who had explained it to her. Apparently, Finn had confronted Kurt, who had told him plainly that he hadn't wanted to be involved; it hadn't been his secret to tell.
It had annoyed her that Rachel seemed to respect Kurt for that decision, but when she thought about it, she realized that Kurt didn't really gossip. Oh, sure, he'd talk about what people wore and the exploits of celebrities he didn't like, but he didn't spread rumors or discuss the private affairs of others, probably because he knew how it felt to be the subject of constant gossip.

She probably should have remembered that before staging her last stand at his house yesterday.

Mike and Matt would talk to her in Glee, but not outside it. Of course, they had never really talked to anyone but each other outside of glee club. Now, Matt was gone and Mike was with Tina, who would probably make him part of Kurt's circle. As if she needed any more proof that she had been displaced.

She thought she and Quinn had grown close, but that obviously wasn't the case. She didn't know what had changed, or when, and wracked her brain for the answer. She thought back on the handful of times Quinn had visited her this summer. She remembered how the conversation would always stall whenever Kurt was mentioned. She wondered if Quinn had always preferred Kurt to her.

She sighed.

Or maybe her constant and unsubtle warnings for Quinn to stay away from Kurt had not been appreciated.

Santana had never liked her, and the feeling had always been entirely mutual.

Brittany had been nice to her because she had never given the girl a reason to be otherwise. Until now.

Sam was new and all about Kurt. He had no interest in getting to know her.

Was she really that bad a friend?

She flashed on her revelation in yesterday's rehearsal, when she had questioned if she was jealous of Kurt. She supposed she was. She was jealous of his grades and his money. That was pretty shallow, she knew. It wasn't Kurt's fault that he was smart, nor was it his fault that school didn't much interest her and she had never really bothered to apply herself. With college looming on the horizon, her lackluster academic performance had been preying on her mind, and perhaps she had inadvertently and unfairly transferred that anxiety on to Kurt.

She thought about last night, about Kurt's words to her.

No, he never had made any promises to her. He had never implied that romance was in their future. She had known he was gay. If she were honest with herself, she had known even before he had told her, but she had deluded herself into believing his coming out was perhaps his way of distancing himself from her, that maybe it was all a feint. And, really, after he had dated Brittany and then started off this school year by making out with Santana, could he really blame her for her false hope?

Well, yeah, probably. She had known there was nothing between him and Brittany, at least not on Kurt's part. And as for making out with Santana, it was the world's worst kept secret that Santana was a lesbian. Their kisses were probably nothing more than token affection designed to titillate their audience.

Still, why hadn't Kurt ever made out with her?

Was she so unlikable?
She had crushed on Kurt, who was gay and would never want her that way. She had crushed on Matt, but had done nothing about it; now he was gone and that ship had sailed. Perhaps if she had spoken up, they could have at least been friends, as he now was with Kurt.

None of the Cheerios liked her. Of course, she had never been interested in trying to win them over.

In fact, she had never really put herself out there in a quest to make friends, content with leeching off of Kurt and his friends. She hadn't even joined any of the school's organizations for minority students, though Rachel had. Part of that stemmed from the fact that she didn't want to be recognized only because of the color of her skin, but that begged the question as for what exactly she did want to be known.

Now that she wasn't Kurt Hummel's sassy best friend, who the hell was she?

She didn't know.

Chapter End Notes

Regarding Patrick Rice, I don't believe his role in this story will be a large one, but I wanted to include him because there are such teachers out there, teachers who truly want to help their students. I was lucky enough to have one in high school, and I'm still very close friends with her almost twenty years later. It was important for me to have another faculty member aware of Kurt's plight, someone other than Sue and Will, who won't be interacting with him very much, and Emma, who's not really a teacher.

One of the reasons I'm writing this story is because I want to present Kurt as something other than a victim. That's why I'm not focusing too much on Lima's homophobia and prejudice. Of course it exists, we all know it exists, but I'm frankly tired of reading about it in so many Kurt-centric fanfictions. I'm tired of reading about a Kurt constantly beaten down by life, with no real support system and friends who are so self-involved that they can't be bothered. That's not fun or exciting or revelatory to read, let alone write. Please understand that I'm not insulting those types of stories, I just have no interest in writing them. My high school experience was much like Kurt's in canon, complete with my own Karofsky. I feel no need to revisit those feelings, especially not for a hobby.

Puck performed P!nk's "Don't Let Me Get Me," off her album Missundaztood. BTW, P!nk kicks so much ass.
Burt sighed and exited the accounting program to check his email.

Nothing.

He had bumbled through his day as though in a fog, his fight with Kurt repeating on a loop inside his head.

He closed his eyes and rolled his neck.

He had handled things badly, he knew. Suzanne had always told him that he was far too hotheaded for his own good, and while he had believed he had learned his lesson a while ago, it was apparent he could do with a refresher.

Kurt, on the other hand, had inherited his massive temper from both of his parents. He could be rash and explosive, like Burt himself, but when cornered, Kurt became his mother: cold, detached, and absurdly rational. Last night had seen both, and Burt knew that Kurt, like his mother, could hold and nurse a grudge indefinitely.

Perhaps he wouldn't have been so depressed if Kurt hadn't made so many valid points. He hadn't wanted to acknowledge them at the time, or even now, but Kurt's arguments had indeed resonated.

The truth of the matter was that he had never really taken much interest in Kurt's pursuits. He knew his boy liked to sing and dance, always had, but he had never it paid much attention. He supposed he had always allowed himself to consider that he was a big man for letting Kurt chase after his dreams, but now he realized that he had unconsciously considered those dreams to be unmanly. That he had, in fact, believed they were stereotypical pastimes for effeminate little boys like Kurt had always been.

Jesus Christ. He really was a homophobe.

He had rationalized that allowing Kurt to do what he wanted was progressive and supportive, when the truth of the matter was that he had also been punishing his boy for being gay by making excuses or outright refusing to attend Kurt's performances. That was...really shitty of him.

He knew Kurt could sing, he'd heard him often enough, but he'd never seen Kurt perform, never seen Kurt go all out. He hadn't watched Kurt lead that cereal team to their championship because he hadn't wanted to see his son as a goddamn cheerleader. But how many of his redneck friends could say their kid had been on fucking ESPN and kicking ass?

Did it really matter that Kurt was a cheerleader when his win proved that he was the best in the country? In the country. Damn. Wouldn't any other father, any real father who wanted the best for his kid, have been proud?

He really didn't know of what Kurt was capable. He'd never bothered to discover the answers.

What did he want from his son? As Kurt had pointed out, he got terrific grades, he led his teams to accomplished victories, and he expertly played an instrument. He'd never done drugs, and his one stint with alcohol had proven that some experiments should never be repeated, far better than any punishment he could've devised would have done. Kurt didn't sleep around.
Kurt had had sex.

He still couldn't wrap his head around it. Intellectually, he knew that Kurt had waited a lot longer than other kids his age. He was sure that Kurt would've used protection. And he knew that Kurt wouldn't have slept with someone for whom he didn't have genuine feelings.

He'd never spoken with Kurt about sex. He'd told himself it was because he didn't know anything about how things went down between two guys but, truthfully, he wasn't sure he would've fared any better if Kurt had been straight. Sex was something he wasn't comfortable discussing, and given Kurt's intelligence and inquisitive nature, he'd always assumed Kurt would figure things out on his own.

Apparently, the kid had, so why was he being such a hardass about this? He hadn't taken the bull by the horns, expecting Kurt to do it, and now he was punishing his son for acting in the exact manner he'd predicted?

He'd also instinctively known that Kurt never would have come to him with questions about sex. What Kurt didn't already know about gay sex, he'd either be afraid to ask, or he was sure to think his questions couldn't have been answered by his ignorant father.

He'd always known Kurt was gay, but he'd avoided the issue altogether for as long as possible. He'd placed the onus on Kurt to come out to him and, now, with Kurt's charges against him hanging in the air, he had to admit that he'd been hypocritical about so many things, perhaps the greatest was that he'd lost it when he was much younger than Kurt was now.

He'd had several partners before he'd met and married Suzanne, and he hadn't always treated them well. Now he realized that he had, for so long, equated Kurt's being gay with being a girl, that he was haunted by his past treatment of women, scared that was how other guys would treat his son. He was hanging all of his old shit around Kurt's neck, never discussing it with him, and just expecting Kurt to operate within parameters which had never been explained.

And, really, what had he expected? He had accepted Kurt as being gay for over a decade. What had he expected when Kurt was ready to have sex? That he'd have it with a girl? Of course Kurt would have sex with men.

Burt coughed and turned his head.

He supposed a lot of his discomfort stemmed from his belief that Kurt would be the...passive partner. Well, no, Kurt had never been passive. The receiving partner, he then supposed. Of course, he really didn't know that for a fact, and he didn't want to know. Still, it was yet another example of him assuming to understand his son, of believing stereotypes as valid, even though Kurt shattered them with regularity.

But the thought, just the thought, of some, some man invading his son in such a way - and that's the only way he could consider it - made him want to reach for the nearest gun.

It wasn't right, wasn't manly, wasn't what he wanted for his son.

You say you don't think of me as your daughter, Kurt had said, but neither do you think of me as a man, Dad, and that's what I am. Gay or not, I am a man.

Would he have reacted as he had last night had Kurt been a girl, had he a daughter instead of a son? He didn't know. He honestly didn't know, and it worried him. At worst, he was a homophobe, a misogynist, or both; at best, he held double standards for his son, had overreacted, and possibly
permanently alienated his only child.

Kurt was a man, Burt now understood, but not the type of man with whom Burt was familiar, and rather than trying to understand who Kurt was, he had preferred to step back, cross his fingers, and hope that Kurt would become...him.

That would never happen, he knew. Even if Kurt were straight, he'd never grow up to be another Burt Hummel. Kurt was too smart, had too much going for him, to settle down in this pathetic excuse for a town and spend his days fixing cars. Burt was proud of what he had done with his life. He'd married a good woman, had fathered an incredible kid, and made a successful business, but was that what he truly wanted for Kurt, especially knowing Kurt didn't want those things? Weren't parents supposed to want their kids to do better than them?

He heaved a sigh and stood on creaky knees to cross the room and refill his coffee, adding more sugar than was probably healthy, but he hadn't slept well the night previous. He didn't believe he'd be sleeping well anytime soon.

Kurt wasn't stupid; Burt knew this as a fact. Yes, Kurt could sometimes be immature, but he supposed it always surprised him when his son acted as such because Kurt had always presented himself as an adult. Even before Suzanne had died, Kurt had been far too mature for his age, and Burt had counted on that, needed it even, in the days and months after Suzanne's death. As much as he'd wanted to take care of his son, the truth was that Kurt had mostly had to take care of himself, as well as his father.

Kurt had been on his own for so long, with Burt only randomly checking in, and only then for unimportant things, was it really all that surprising that Kurt was so very private, so very unsure of what his father would be willing to discuss? How many times had Kurt wanted to come to him, to ask questions or express concerns, but felt he wouldn't have been welcomed?

Too often, Burt was sure, which was why he hadn't known about how badly Kurt had been bullied at school until the worst of the damage was done. There had been signs, he knew: the layers of clothes, Kurt packing extra outfits for school, mysterious bruises explained away with weak excuses, picking up Kurt's clothes up from the dry cleaner's only to be told that, sorry, the bloodstain couldn't be removed.

And Burt had excused it all because he hadn't wanted to know what it meant, despite knowing exactly what it meant. He had justified it with more rationalizing, that if something serious were happening, Kurt would come to him. But Kurt never had, and it was only now that Burt realized that his own son had probably believed his father either didn't care or expected him to deal with it himself.

So Kurt had dealt with it himself, as he had with so very many things.

From the day Suzanne had died, Burt had treated his son as an adult and Kurt had acted accordingly, bearing responsibilities that would've broken most other children. What other twelve year old worked on cars professionally? What other fourteen year old studied for licensing exams as he also studied for English tests? What twelve year old had his own checking account, used it to pay the household bills, and balanced his checkbook to the penny every month? What other kid did the books for his father's business?

What other kid ran a house the way Kurt ran theirs? It wasn't just a simple matter of dusting and cooking dinner. Kurt had total control over the house and ran it like a well-oiled machine. The kid made up schedules for when the baseboards should be dusted and the air filter changed. He sanded, scraped, spackled, primed, and painted entire rooms. He did all the grocery shopping and the
majority of meal preparation. He did all the laundry and ironing. He did all of these things according to his mother's exacting standards.

Again, Burt had rationalized. He had told himself that Kurt had been doing these things, and in a particular manner, in a bid to be closer to his mother, which Burt thought was a good thing. When he tried to help out, he invariably did something wrong or in a way which threw Kurt's entire system off kilter, and then Kurt would get upset and redo everything himself, excusing his father from further participation.

Burt had let him because, truthfully, he didn't know how to do housework, wasn't really interested in learning, and thought having Kurt perform chores was the responsible thing a father should do for his son. He hadn't realized that his inattention was directly contributing to Kurt's obsessive-compulsive disorder until it was too late. Even after the behavioral therapy, Kurt hadn't wanted his help.

Perhaps that was the real problem: Kurt had never really needed him, and Burt wanted to be needed by his son. That Kurt didn't need him had been, and continued to be, a severe blow to his ego. After Suzanne had died, Burt had so little left that he had reconstructed his identity solely as him being Kurt's father, even though he treated Kurt like an equal.

It had been so easy to do because, for the most part, Kurt was his equal, if not his superior. It had been easier to let Kurt assume so much responsibility because, frankly, Kurt had managed far better than he ever could.

What hadn't been easy was trying to raise a kid who was so much smarter than you, who could do things better than you, who knew all the buttons to press to get what he wanted.

Kurt didn't manipulate him with regularity, or with malicious purpose, but he knew how to get his father to capitulate. Usually, it was over small, petty matters that didn't amount to much; for the really big stuff, like allowances, driving, and major purchases, Kurt allowed him to make the decisions. Or at least allowed him the illusion that he was in charge.

The lines of their relationship had been blurred so badly and so long ago, that Burt no longer understood the nature of their relationship.

Kurt should have the right to expect some measure of privacy in his personal life. What else did Burt want from him? A chart that told him how often his kid jacked off? A catalogue of his porn?

Burt shook his head to clear it.

Maybe that was part of the problem. He'd never really considered the idea of Kurt having sex. Asking questions about it, and scientific ones at that, yes, but the idea of Kurt having sex was mind-boggling.

Kurt didn't like being touched. He didn't even like Burt touching him. Kurt and Artie were close, but not affectionate.

He flinched as he recalled the furious look Artie had leveled at him last night. He'd never before seen the boy so angry, and he had borne witness to some of the vicious tantrums Artie had thrown over the years.

Burt was fairly certain that Kurt allowed the girls to touch him only because he couldn't think of a way to avoid it without hurting their feelings. He also wondered if Kurt felt safer letting girls touch him, or if their touches reminded him of Suzanne.

The thought at the foremost of his mind, however, was what it said about this mysterious guy that
Kurt had allowed him touch him, and so intimately. As discriminating and picky as Kurt was, Burt could only assume that also transmitted to his choice in partners.

If Kurt had had sex, had wanted to have sex, he would've done so only with a man who was deserving of him, someone with whom Kurt had wanted to experience such closeness. Clearly, this other boy had meant something special to Kurt. Kurt may have been in love with him, still could be.

And Burt had all but demonized that.

He blinked away tears and went to sit back down.

This was the first boy for whom Kurt had real romantic feelings - that stupid crush on Finn didn't even bear consideration - and Burt could only hope those feelings had been returned. He rather thought they had been.

Was Kurt still in love with him? Did Kurt miss him? Did Kurt still want to be with him?

Kurt had returned home, but Burt had sensed from their telephone conversation prior to the flight that he had been reluctant to do so. Burt had supposed his son hadn't want to leave his grandmother, or Europe, but never had it entered his mind that Kurt would be leaving behind a lover.

That's what this other guy was, right? A lover. Not a boyfriend, because they weren't together. Not a one-night stand, because Burt doubted Kurt would ever engage in such behavior. Sex would mean something to Kurt. It would mean...everything.

For Kurt to...surrender in that way, and it would indeed have been a surrender, considering how emotionally withdrawn Kurt often was, it must have been for someone he loved.

Burt's stomach began roiling with regret.

Kurt had said that he hadn't been forced, and Burt had no choice but to believe him, though he still held on to that fear, terrified it might one day happen, that Kurt might meet some guy who wouldn't take no for an answer.

But that wasn't now, and it wasn't with this guy, whoever he was.

Was Kurt suffering from a broken heart? Had Kurt met his Suzanne?

The thought made Burt sick. Not because they were both guys, but because of how Kurt might be reacting to their scene last night.

Suzanne's family hadn't liked him. His family hadn't liked her. They had fought everything and everyone to be together, and they had won, until they had been faced with something they simply couldn't fight. They had been so young, but so very much in love.

Kurt might be in love.

Kurt might be in pain, might be hurting.

And his own father had made it worse.

"Oh, god," he muttered.

And that was just the tip of the iceberg of the things with which Kurt was dealing.

Now that he was better able to process the feelings, better able to put himself in Kurt's place, he
cringed, drawing in on himself.

He pictured himself as Kurt, coming home from his first day back at school, carrying groceries and planning to prepare dinner for his makeshift family, laughing with the woman who, for all intents and purposes, would eventually be taking his mother's place.

Kurt had always been really kind to Carole, which had surprised Burt. He'd long suspected Kurt had machinated their first meeting to get closer to Finn, but he would never ask Kurt about it directly. He didn't need or want confirmation. That he and Carole had ended up as they had, well, why quibble over motivations?

He'd never consciously thought about Kurt's relationship with Carole, how accepting he had been of her; he'd been far too worried about whether Carole could accept Kurt. That thought shamed him now, that he had been worried about how some woman would react to blending their families, rather than how his son would react.

Carole was the first woman in whom he'd been truly interested since Suzanne, and he wasn't sure he would've been able to give her up. He probably would have, in order to protect Kurt, but, even now, he worried that he would've held it against Kurt, would've come to resent him.

And that forced him to admit that he already somewhat resented Kurt.

He resented his son for being so strong, so independent, despite the fact that it was Burt himself who was partially responsible for Kurt being that way.

He resented that Kurt didn't need him, that he, on occasion, went out of his way to reinforce that notion. He resented that Kurt was growing up, because his encroaching adulthood signaled to Burt that the next stage of his life was about to begin. Even when he married Carole, it wouldn't change the fact that Kurt would soon be out of the house. Kurt would go away to whatever college he wanted to attend, would study his chosen path, would meet people - boys - of whom Burt might not approve, might not like.

And then Kurt would get married, or have a civil union or whatever. Kurt would want children, would find some way to get them, and make Burt a grandfather.

Kurt's maturation signaled Burt's deceleration. Kurt growing up meant that Burt was winding down.

Suddenly, his own mortality was looming before him.

But didn't he want Kurt to find someone special? Someone with whom he could make a life?

Burt often wondered, if something happened to him, how Kurt would fare. Kurt had the essentials; he had the life tools necessary to go on, and more than enough money to live comfortably. But Burt was getting older. Katrine would be considered elderly by their society, though the woman had more verve than most teenagers.

Other than his father and grandmother, Kurt was alone.

Burt didn't want his son to be alone.

At least Kurt had friends.

Except...

He pictured himself, once again as Kurt, walking through the front door, seeing his father and three
of his friends - or two, depending on whatever the hell that Rachel person was - lying in wait for him.

Because that was exactly what it had been, and Kurt must have thought that's what it had looked like.

And as the entire scene had devolved into a clusterfuck of epic proportions, Kurt must have flashed back on that night with Finn in the basement. He would have remembered how his father had stood up for him and wondered why his father wasn't doing so now, wondering why his father was the ringleader of his degradation.

Burt dropped his head into his hands and moaned softly.

Finn and Mercedes. He didn't know what the fuck to think about that pair. Obviously, they'd had their own agendas for coming to him with their information, and he should have questioned it. He should have thought about why they had done it.

Mercedes shouldn't have been a surprise. He'd seen the way she would look at Kurt when Kurt wasn't looking. He'd recognized that look for what it was, but, again, he'd done nothing, so sure that Kurt was handling it, would take care of it as he took care of everything.

How could he expect his child to act like an adult and then punish him for doing just that?

As for Finn, well, who the hell knew what was going on in that boy's mind?

Of course, there was the one obvious thing. So damn obvious that Burt had blinded himself to it. But who could blame him? Why would he, why would anyone, have thought Finn harbored romantic feelings for Kurt, if that's even what they were? After that scene in the basement, everyone had simply assumed that Finn was not only freaked out by Kurt's affection for him, but appalled.

Hadin't he been?

But then he thought back to those times he'd seen Finn over the summer, how the boy was always trying to kiss up to him. He'd believed it was because Finn was feeling guilty over the debacle, especially because they'd never really arrived at any kind of resolution, but he'd been hesitant to offer blanket forgiveness.

That was mostly because it wasn't his place - Kurt had been the one wronged, and he should be the one to accept Finn's apology - but it was also because he had sensed that Finn was insincere, giving him meaningless words Finn only thought he had wanted to hear.

Why hadn't he trusted his instincts? Why hadn't he remembered that Finn had never really apologized to Kurt? Why hadn't he questioned as to how Finn had come by the information that Kurt had lost his virginity, as well as why Finn had come to him?

It was so obvious now what Finn had been doing. He had been trying to turn Burt against his own damn kid, and Burt had let him do just that.

Even after he and Carole were married, they would never be a family.

Oh, sure, like he'd said last night, Kurt would play nice and pose for pictures and turn up for family events, but he would never forgive Finn for betraying him, and he would never forgive his father for taking the side of someone who was not his son.

Burt shoved a fist in his mouth to stifle his scream.
His mind screamed Kurt's accusation that Finn was the son he wanted, while Kurt himself was the son with whom he'd been burdened.

But that wasn't true! It absolutely wasn't! He loved Kurt more than anything.

_I know you love me, Dad, but I really don't think you like me._

How could Kurt think that?

Burt sighed.

How could he not?

The truth was, he didn't know if he liked Kurt as a person, because the truth was that he didn't know his own son. For so long, it had been just the two of them against the world, and that had been terrific. It had been _real_. As Kurt had said, Burt had always gone to bat for him...in public at least. In private, well, they never talked about private things, and it was only now that Burt was realizing what a horrible mistake that had been.

He'd always seen Kurt as not necessarily a possession, but not precisely as a person, either. At least not as a person in his own right. He'd always seen Kurt as an extension of him. Now, forced to face the reality that Kurt was, in fact, not a combination of his parents but a unique individual, he wanted more than anything to know Kurt Hummel.

So why hadn't he just told Kurt that? Why had he blown up and dismissed Kurt's arguments as if they had no merit? He had _dismissed_ his son and his son's feelings as if they weren't important enough for him to hear or understand. He had simply confirmed, with that action, everything Kurt had said.

And what was so heartbreaking was that, had he taken the time to listen, he would have realized then and there how desperate Kurt was for Burt to like him, that he desperately wanted his father's love.

Burt had been so afraid, so terrified, that Kurt was growing up, would leave him behind, and he had just ensured that would probably happen.

Kurt had suffered a triple betrayal last night, led by his own father, and, in the process, had lost his best friend, the boy who was to be his brother, and, Burt was sad to admit, his father.

There was still Artie and Tina, as well as that sweet girl, Brittany, and Burt knew the first two meant more to Kurt than Mercedes and Finn ever had or would, but it was still a loss. It was yet something else that Kurt should not be forced to bear.

And then Burt had taken away the two things which meant the most to Kurt at this point in his life, the two activities which he used in part to identify himself, two things at which Kurt was damn good.

Burt snorted. Not that he knew. He'd never bothered to find out.

He thought about the box in Kurt's closet, the one where he kept all of his awards for piano, for the choir he'd been in during elementary school, the art competitions he'd won, the dozens of academic prizes he'd been given. All the things which had proven to Kurt that he mattered, that he had skills, that he'd been _recognized_.

They were kept in a _box_ in a _closet_, not displayed throughout the house as they should have been.

All those things Burt hadn't really thought meant anything, because they weren't sports trophies.
Because they were things he could never do.

He was jealous.

He was jealous of his own kid.

He was jealous because Kurt was just so much...more than Burt had ever believed himself capable of being.

He was jealous because he didn't understand Kurt, had never really been able to relate to him, because he'd never tried. Wasn't his son with that effort? Wasn't getting to know his son a reward in and of itself? Wasn't any discomfort worth it, to be able to talk to his son? Was the fact that Kurt was gay really more important than the fact that Kurt was his son?

No.

No fucking way.

He rubbed his temples as his head began to throb.

He would make this up to Kurt somehow. He hadn't the foggiest fucking clue as to how he was going to do that, but he would.

He was certain of that as he collapsed on top of his desk and then slipped to the floor.

Sam was once again reminded of how glad he was of his vow never to judge by appearances.

Jessica MacKenzie was no raving beauty, but she was incredibly smart, very witty, and one hell of a teacher. This was only his second class with the woman, but between her and Patrick Rice, Sam was, for the first time in a long time, looking forward to a school year.

This was his last class of the day, and he got to spend it discussing Shakespeare, his perhaps nerdiest obsession. Plus, there was the bonus that Kurt was now enrolled in the class, along with Quinn and Mike.

Also, Kurt was sitting next to him.

For the rest of the year, he'd get to sit next to Kurt. He'd get to look at him and smell him and maybe accidentally-on-purpose brush up against him. All normal things that occurred between two good friends. There existed the possibility of shared homework, group projects, and cramming for exams, and he'd make sure Kurt was his partner for all of it.

Sam Evans was very smug about this.

And they were starting off the year with his favorite of the tragic plays, Othello. Sam was almost beside himself as his geekery threatened to ooze from every pore. He'd first been inspired to read the play, and subsequently the rest of the Shakespearean canon, when he'd stumbled across a video of poor quality on the internet.

In it, Patrick Stewart - Jean-Luc Picard! - was playing Othello opposite an all-black cast, and he was brilliant. The way the somewhat archaic words just slid off his tongue like honey, the passion and
fury etched into every syllable, and the near-suffocating sensuality he brought to the role had left Sam panting and desperate for more.

Now he was in a class where he'd be tested on stuff he already knew, and knew well! He might even be able to show off a little to Kurt, maybe impress him or something. This was a win-win situation!

"It's good to see you all again," Jessica MacKenzie said, smiling around the classroom. "As we discussed yesterday, we're beginning the term with a reading of Othello. The worksheets I gave you, as well as the introduction in your Folger translations, should provide enough background for you to understand and appreciate the play. So, before we begin properly, does anyone have any questions regarding the material?"

She looked around the room, eyes patient, though thrilled that only eager faces stared back at her. How exciting and refreshing to have a class of young people who were excited to learn Shakespeare! She wanted to clap with excitement, but she didn't want to scare off any students until after the drop-add period. After she was sure of her final roster, then she'd allow her inner Tinkerbell to emerge.

"Excellent! Now, have any of you previously read Othello?"

Sam, Kurt, and Quinn raised their hands.

"Perfect!" Jessica shrieked.

The three students eyed each other warily.

"Still as crafty as ever, Ms. MacKenzie," Kurt drawled. "I can't believe I fell for this again."

Jessica smirked. "Whatever do you mean, Kurt?"

He rolled his eyes, dropped his chin in a hand, and looked at Sam and Quinn. "We've just inadvertently volunteered to read the major parts of the play for as long as we're studying it."

Quinn sighed, knowing there was probably no way she could get out of this and, after last year, she needed to make sure that she remained at the top of her game. She knew only Artie was ahead of her in the class ranking, but Kurt was just behind, and he was a wily little bastard.

"I suppose that means I'm Desdemona?" she asked.

Kurt nodded. "I'll be Iago, as I'm so very dark and menacing." He twisted his fingers into a claw and raked the air. "Grr. Argh."

Sam almost popped a boner. A Buffy reference!

Mike snickered at Kurt, who sent him a withering glare.

"And Sam will be Othello," Kurt said, turning to congratulate the other boy. "You're a star!"

Sam blushed and mumbled curse words under his breath, at which both Mike and Quinn snickered.

Jessica was loving this. She was ecstatic to have both Kurt and Quinn in the same class, because they would actually participate, even if she had to force them initially. She'd had both as students in previous classes, and she knew how dedicated they were to their studies. She had also been informed by Emma of Sam's learning disability and that he was being mentored by Kurt, whom she was positive would ensure Sam did well.

"How familiar are you three with the play?" she asked.
Quinn frowned. "Well, I've read it several times, and have seen it performed in Dayton."

Jessica beamed.

"I have a lot of it memorized," Kurt said.

Jessica stared at him. "Really?"

He nodded. Hooray for eidetic memory.

"Um, so do I," Sam said, blushing.

"Do you?" asked a floored Kurt. "Impressive."

In the Safe Place within his mind, Sam did the Snoopy Dance.

"Excellent!" Jessica crowed. "How about a small demonstration?"

"I suppose," said a reluctant Kurt, "if said demonstration comes with bonus class participation points." He gave his teacher a sly look.

Jessica rolled her eyes. "Very well."

Kurt nodded and turned to Sam. "Pick a scene."

Sam's mind raced furiously as he scanned his inner files for a scene which would maximize this time spent with Kurt. Flirting via literature was awesome.

Christ, he was such a dork.

"Act Three, Scene Three," he said, "Othello's entrance after Emilia's exit."

Kurt raised a brow. "All right."

Quinn smirked, recalling the scene and wise to Sam's shenanigans. "I'll just sit this one out, shall I?"

Kurt shrugged. "I'm sure you'll be very busy fretting about your handkerchief and primping your hair."

"I can only hope I'll bring the same level of gravitas and bitchery to the role of Desdemona as you would," she shot back, sneering.

Mike burst out laughing as the other students tittered nervously. Mike was grateful that the room was filled predominantly with the geeks of their year, most of whom considered Kurt one of their own, so there was likely to be little fallout if Kurt starting acting like, well, himself.


They exchanged a high five over Sam's head.

Kurt stood, smoothed out his shirt, and crossed to the front of the room. He glanced over his shoulder at Sam. "Well?" he purred.

Sam scrambled to get to his side.

Jessica smirked. Oh. So that's how it was. She was going to have fun with them throughout the year. Quinn also looked victorious, and Mike was pissed that students were no longer allowed to text
during classes, because Tina needed to be informed about all of this immediately.

Kurt and Sam both opened their texts and refreshed their memories with the scene they were about to play. Kurt's eyes roamed over the words, which were like small keys fitting into various locks in his brain. His eyes scanned several pages quickly and he at last nodded to himself before exchanging a glance with Sam, who was patiently waiting for him.

Kurt was now beyond impressed. Someone his age who looked like Sam looked and knew Shakespeare?

He slowly tilted his head and his eyes became both glassy and calculated. He indicated, with a the slightest of nods, that Sam should begin wherever he was most comfortable; Kurt himself would merely follow.

Sam placed his text on the nearest desk, his hands then curling into fists. He stared over Kurt's shoulder at the wall behind him, glaring at it menacingly, as though it had personally offended him.

"If thou dost slander her and torture me," Sam said slowly, his voice gravely and scornful, "never pray more." His eyes slowly turned to face Kurt and locked with the boy's own. "Abandon all remorse; on horror's head horrors accumulate." He shook his head, face torn with disbelief and resignation. "Do deeds to make heaven weep, all earth amazed." He raised a brow. "For nothing canst thou to damnation add greater than that."

Sam was a more than decent actor, Kurt observed, at least where this scene was concerned. He truly felt the pathos of Othello, of being caught between that which one knew and one what assumed, or what one feared to know. His eyes, usually green whenever Kurt looked into them, were now more hazel, like those of Noah, darkening as he steeped himself in the role.

Kurt swallowed heavily, feeling something fluttering in his chest, something he didn't want or was yet unready to recognize. He batted it away and affixed a cold, mocking sneer to his face. "O grace! O heaven forgive me!" He raised an imperious brow and, with a curl of a lip, expressed his character's frustration. "Are you a man? Have you a soul or sense?"

Sam flushed with embarrassment and anger, having been asked those questions in various forms throughout the years, and Kurt's tone perfectly mimicked the snobby, dulcet tones of his former tormenters.

Kurt rolled his eyes. "God b' wi' you. Take mine office. - O wretched fool that liv'st to make thine honesty a vice! - O monstrous world!" He turned on his heel to his side, his wide eyes now gleaming and lighted with rage, taking in the audience, who now stared back at him, entranced. "Take note, take note, O world: to be direct and honest is not safe," he spat.

Quinn and Mike flinched slightly, as they suddenly gleaned that the role which Kurt was inhabiting was blending perhaps a little too closely with his own life. The other students, who were either familiar with how Kurt was once treated or had borne direct witness to it, shifted uncomfortably in their seats.

No, it wasn't always safe to be Kurt Hummel.

Kurt slowly turned his neck to look over his shoulder at Sam. "I thank you for this profit, and from hence I'll love no friend, since love breeds such offense," he hissed, voice cold and verging on robotic, devoid of any emotion or even humanity.

It would have been so easy to do, Kurt realized. Had he not other friends, the incident with Finn and
Mercedes last night could have turned him away from everyone for a very long time. It was far easier to deny oneself love than to surrender to it, even when it hurt. He thought of the person he had been last term, so angry and bitter all of the time, so desperate to be loved and wanted that Finn's rejection had almost caused him to retreat so far into himself that he might never have again emerged.

But Will had changed all of that, had changed him.

A sliver of desire flooded his system and Kurt fought to repress it. Fortunately, it worked well for this scene. He'd always thought Iago was a little too into Othello.

"Nay, stay," Sam murmured, reaching out to grasp Kurt's shoulder and stepping directly behind him, all but whispering into his ear. "Thou shouldst be honest."

Kurt bit his lip as his desire increased, though he was no longer sure just what had triggered it. His mind - his soul, if he had one - wanted Will, longed for Will, but Sam's very presence, his physical closeness, had sparked a mutiny within him.

It was so tempting, would be so easy, to surrender to Sam, Kurt knew. Sam, who was kind and beautiful and good. Sam, who actually wanted him and had the temerity to say as much. He could imagine them going on dates, having dinner at Breadstix, and going to the mall. He could picture himself cheering Sam on from the bleachers at football games.

Everything he had wanted with Finn.

And there was the rub. While he was completely over Finn, he didn't want to fall back into old patterns. There were parts of Sam which recalled the best of Finn, and Kurt didn't want to regress to the lonely, stupid boy he had been only a handful of months ago. He didn't want to be that confused and sullen whiner he once was, foolishly believing the makeover of a room would somehow lead to the next great American love story.

Also, he didn't want those things anymore. In a very real way, he now felt so removed from his peers and their typical teenage desires, far more so than he ever had previously. When he now considered all of the couples he had observed in his freshman and sophomore years, desperately wanting to be counted among them with his own boyfriend, he didn't believe that any of them, with the exception of Santana and Brittany, had been in love with each other.

Oh, he was sure they had felt affection and attraction, maybe the beginnings of love, but had they really been in love? Had they been as consumed with one another as he was with Will?

Perhaps they had and he was judging them incorrectly, as so often happened when one made judgments without all the facts.

But he couldn't be that boy now, the one he had imagined in his head as the picture of happiness. He didn't feel like a boy, didn't feel his physical age. He felt beyond it, like his time with Will had seen him cross the threshold from adolescence into adulthood.

Maybe he was wrong. Maybe he was just arrogant. He couldn't tell for certain.

What he did know, or at least thought, was that the dating scene in Lima no longer interested him. He had no desire for a quick bite at Breadstix before rushing off to the latest teen slasher flick. He didn't want to make out with someone in the back of his car. He didn't want notes passed between classes or left in lockers.

He wanted to explore museums and watch art films and drink coffee while completing the *Sunday New York Times* crossword puzzle, and he wanted to do those things with a partner.
That's what he wanted, he realized, a partner. He didn't want to date people. He didn't want to search through Lima's small LGBT population for someone with whom he might share a common interest.

He wanted someone settled, someone who, for better or worse, knew who they were and what they wanted. He wanted someone to take care of him, because he was so very tired of having to take care of himself and everyone else.

Will had taken care of him. Will had held his hand as they traversed the streets of Madrid in search of the best cup of coffee, or trinkets to bring back to Ohio. Will had held him at night when they slept and, for the first time, Kurt had felt safe and protected. Will had paid such careful attention when they made love, had learned everything about Kurt's body and how best to make it respond.

Will had known...him. The deepest parts of himself that he had hidden away because he had been too scared to be himself, Will had come to know and love.

Kurt had learned those things of Will, too, and he wanted them again.

They'd had so little time together, yet it seemed as though they had spent an eternity in the other's company. It was so strange, the passage of time, and how deceptive it could be. Now he felt that time had been stolen from them, and he wanted it back.

He certainly didn't want to hurt Sam or lead him on, which would happen eventually if he began some halfhearted romance, because he was still very much in love with Will.

Will had changed him, had unlocked something within him that he'd never even known existed, and he couldn't imagine having that, sharing that, with someone other than Will. He wasn't even sure he wanted to try.

It hurt, was physically painful, to be so close to Will and not be able to touch him as he wanted, as he desired, and as he deserved.

Perhaps it would have been better had he never known Will's touch, had he never known that his love and passion weren't so fully reciprocated. How was he to move on when it had been circumstance, and not Will himself, that had broken his heart? How could he even consider beginning something with Sam when Will still lived so deeply under his skin?

That wasn't fair to Sam. It wasn't fair to Will. It wasn't fair to Kurt himself.

He knew what he had with Will was over, that it had to be, but the feelings, the joy and the laughter, still lingered. He wanted them to linger. He didn't ever want to forget that which Will had made him feel.

He wanted to throw up.

He wanted to be back in Madrid, where the world had stopped, and thinking wasn't necessary. Where he had writhed atop Will as the man fell apart beneath him, looking up at him with feverish desire and unyielding ecstasy.

How was he going to bear this? How had he ever thought that he and Will could manage this, seeing each other every day, but not as lovers, or even as friends? It was unfathomable. It was agonizing.

And in that moment, it was Will's touch he felt on his shoulder, not Sam's. It was Will who was trying to infuse him with strength, with understanding and commiseration. It was Will who coursed through his veins, wrapping him in an illusory cocoon, and Kurt clung to it desperately, if in vain.
He felt tears prick at his eyes and he angrily shook his head. "I should be wise," he hissed, "for honesty's a fool and loses that it works for."

Sam was silent for a moment, realizing that Kurt was not truly there, but lost in the haze of memory. He could only assume Kurt was thinking of the other dude, and his compassion for Kurt, for what he was going through, overrode his desire. If he thought he could've gotten away with it, he would've wrapped Kurt in his arms and held him for as long as Kurt would allow, but he knew that wasn't what Kurt wanted or needed. Best to keep things on track, then.

"By the world, I think my wife be honest and think she is not," he said quietly, stiltedly, injecting his words with both confusion and venom as his own mind flashed back to Tennessee and what had happened after...the incident. "I think that thou art just and thou art not. I'll have some proof!"

Sam's eyes unfocused as his hand reflexively tightened on Kurt's shoulder. "Her name, that was as fresh as Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black as mine own face," he said through clenched teeth, recalling the rumors and the stares that had followed him around during his last months at Lincoln. "If there be cords, or knives, or poison, or fire, or suffocating streams, I'll not endure it."

But he had, and for so very long. He supposed he always would be, even if only in his own mind.

"Would I were satisfied!" he exclaimed, impossibly, through a sigh.

Satisfaction in regard to that time in his life would be forever denied him. Kurt at last snapped out of his fog just in time to realize that Sam was now enveloped by one of his own. Deciding that such maudlin thoughts wouldn't do for either of them, he was unfairly going to tease and shock Sam out of his stupor.

He turned around and stood flush against Sam, their chests touching. Sam's eyes widened with surprise, mostly because he hadn't thought his initial plan would work so well. He had been so lost in his memories, he had forgotten he had chosen this scene for just this reason: to get Kurt close to him, counting on the other boy to pick up on the blatant homoerotic subtext and run with it.

"I see you are eaten up with passion," Kurt said in a low voice, almost a groan. "I do repent me that I put it to you."

Sam blinked owlishly. Perhaps this hadn't been such a good idea after all, especially considering he was starting to get hard. Thank god Kurt was blocking him from the rest of the class. His eyes quickly darted to the side, landing accidentally on Quinn, who was smirking at him in a fashion very reminiscent of one Santana Lopez.

"You would be satisfied?" Kurt hummed, eyebrow arched so high that it almost approached his hairline. He would not now, or ever, make mention of the fact that Sam Evans' erection was poking at his hip - although, he had to admit, it made him feel powerful that he could elicit such a response.

Sam swallowed heavily, his eyes darkening now for an altogether reason. He leaned closer toward Kurt, their noses almost touching. "Would? Nay, and I will."

Kurt flushed lightly and pulled back slightly, eyes dilated. "And may, but how? How satisfied," he wondered, demurely averting his eyes, "my lord? Would you, the supervisor, grossly gape on," his voice now light and airy, almost simpering, "behold her topped?"

Sam gaped and shuffled away, blushing furiously.

Mike watched them both with wide eyes. Who knew Shakespeare was sexy? Who knew Kurt was
so sexy? Whoa. Mike was happily straight, but damn. Of course, sexy knew no gender or orientation.

"Death and damnation! O!" Sam whispered, voice trembling, regarding Kurt with large, gleaming, hungry eyes.

The clearing of a throat broke the spell the two boys had cast over the room. Kurt turned and frowned at Sue Sylvester, who stood in the doorway.

"MacKenzie," she said gruffly to the teacher, "sorry to interrupt.

She looked physically pained to say the words.

Jessica MacKenzie stared, stupefied.

"Kurt," Sue began, "I need to speak with you, please."

Quinn's eyes were the size of saucers. A polite Sue Sylvester?

Mike's mouth went slack. Sylvester was calling Kurt by his first name?

Kurt didn't notice any of this. It was the way she stood. It was the way she looked at him.

He said nothing, separated from Sam, and packed up his bag before drifting toward the door.

He looked up into her eyes and knew.

He edged past her into the hall and began walking slowly toward the principal's office, similar to a trek he had made ten years ago.

He hated redundancy.

He entered the room and didn't acknowledge Figgins, who mopped his brow and leapt to his feet. He was unsurprised to find Emma Pillsbury sitting on the sofa against the wall, her knees pressed tightly against each other, and a look of sorrowful panic on her face.

He felt rather than saw Sue walk in behind him.

"Is he dead?" he whispered.

"No!" Emma blurted. "No, Kurt."

"He collapsed at work," Sue said, matter-of-factly. "He was taken to St. Rita's by ambulance."

Kurt stared past Figgins, through the windows behind him, as trees swayed and birds flew and students were already leaving the campus or gathering for activities, even though the last bell had not yet rung.

It was all so normal.

How could the world still look normal, like nothing had happened, like his entire world hadn't just tilted on its axis.
"Was it a heart attack?" he asked dully.

Emma looked away and Figgins averted his eyes.

"We don't know," Sue said. "The hospital called us, as you're listed as his next-of-kin."

"The hospital," he repeated, his eyes glassy. "I should go there."

"You're not driving anywhere, Kurt," she barked. "You're in no condition."

"I could drive you, if you'd like," Emma sputtered.

Kurt blinked. He couldn't ask that of her, not with her phobia of germs and her obsessive-compulsive disorder. He appreciated her offer, but he didn't think he could stand her sitting next to him and reciting facts about nosocomial infections and the generally unsanitary conditions of medical facilities.

He then realized he had no one to call. His father's family were all dead. His grandmother was in France. He supposed he could call his aunt, but their relationship, while loving, wasn't particularly close. They had only met a handful of times.

He had no one, other than his father. He was alone.

"Is there someone you would like to go with you?" Sue quietly asked.

Kurt blinked once more, his mind running through the possibilities, but there was only one he wanted, and that was the one person for whom he could never ask.

Sue would go with him, he knew, but the entire situation would make her feel impotent and cause her to act out. He couldn't deal with that right now.

He thought of his friends. Artie and Tina were out. They were close to his father in their own ways. They would try too hard to be comforting and would just end up smothering him with their worry.

Mercedes was also out, for obvious reasons.

There was no way he would ask Finn, but he knew the boy would eventually put in an appearance.

Carole. He'd have to call Carole.

He certainly didn't want Rachel.

He didn't know Mike well enough.

Same with Sam. It would be too awkward.

Brittany didn't deal well with hospitals. She would have gone with him, he knew, but it was more than likely that he'd end up spending his time trying to comfort her. It might have proven a nice distraction, but he couldn't afford to be distracted at the moment.

Quinn was an option, but she was still coping with her settling hormones and would try to mother him. She'd also want him to pray, or watch as she prayed.

He needed someone who could be calm, could help him to be calm, but who would also leave him alone.
"Santana," he finally said. "Santana and Noah."

Emma nodded. "I'll get them," she said, hurrying out the door.

"I'll just leave you two alone," said an awkward Figgins, beating a hasty retreat.

Kurt and Sue stood in silence for several long moments as he tried to process what was happening.

But he couldn't. He didn't understand any of this. What was he supposed to do? What was he supposed to feel? He didn't know.

There was too much. Too much of everything.

The lights were too bright, and the birds outside were too loud, and his heart was beating too fast.

What was he going to do?

"Coach?" he whispered.

"What is it, kid?"

He was quiet for several seconds. "I'm afraid."

She nodded swiftly. "I'd be surprised if you weren't. Fear isn't unnatural, Kurt, and no one is immune to it. Fear tells you that you're alive. It makes you fight for survival. It's not something to be ashamed of, Kurt. It's how you respond to your fear that counts."

He nodded slowly.

"Take a deep breath," she advised, "and deal with each piece as it comes. That's really all you can do until you know what's happening."

So he breathed. Or he thought he did. He couldn't really tell. Was he actually awake?

"I wish I could help you, kid," Sue said, sighing. "I sure as hell don't envy what you're going through. What I do know is this: you're strong. Obviously, you get that from someone, and I'm betting it's your dad. So don't count him out. Don't let yourself think of the worst case scenario, because that doesn't help anyone."

He nodded, filing her words away. He couldn't hear them right now - she sounded like one of Charlie Brown's teachers - but maybe he'd be able to make sense of them later.

She stalked over and glared down at him, cupping his chin in her hand and forcing him to look up into her eyes.

"I don't know what's going to happen," she said, "but you're Kurt Hummel." She raised a brow. "Don't you ever forget that."

Thundering footsteps announced what could only be Noah's arrival, and Sue quickly moved away.

"Princess!"

Sue narrowed her eyes at the moniker. Even she thought it insulting. She was then stunned when Puckerman stormed into the room and swept Special K into a hug, swinging him around like a cat does a mouse caught in its teeth.
Kurt absently patted Puck on the back a few times. "Put me down, please, Noah."

Puck blushed and complied.

Santana stood in the doorway watching them, her eyes appraising everything. She caught a glance from Sue and recognized the look for what it was. She nodded back. Once she knew what was going on, she'd call her coach and fill her in.

She walked slowly toward Kurt, making sure that he could see her coming. She stood before him, close enough for him to hug her, if he wanted.

He didn't.

It was obvious that he was uncomfortable with Puck's attention and proximity, most likely having forgotten, or never having known, that Puck got handsy when distressed.

"What do you want to do?" she asked him.

His unfocused eyes found her face and appeared to settle on her nose.

"I need you to drive me to the hospital," he said in a curiously blank voice.

She nodded. "My mother's on staff. I'll have her find out whatever she can and she'll meet us in the lobby."

"Okay," he sang, his voice high and thin.

Santana's eyes widened as she watched him pale beyond what she thought him capable. She noticed the faint sheen of sweat break out across his brow. When he began to sag, she pushed Puck at him.

"Catch him!"

Puck's arms immediately wrapped around him and locked him into place, despite the other boy's best efforts to dislodge them.

"I'm not going to faint!" screeched an affronted Kurt. "I don't faint!"

"You will let the Puckhole support you, or I will have him carry you to your car," Santana said evenly.

Sue nodded with approval.

"Please don't push me away," Puck murmured into Kurt's ear. "You were there for me. Let me be there for you?"

Kurt just didn't have it in him to protest. "Carole," he said.

"I'll call her," Puck said.

"Finn."

Santana shook her head. "No. He'll freak out and start hovering. You don't need that right now." She paused. "He'll also tell everyone, and they'll all follow us to the hospital. All of them."

Kurt shivered and nodded.

"Are you ready to go?" Puck asked softly.
"No," Kurt warbled, after a long moment, his teeth chattering.

"You'll feel better once you have some answers. Putting it off won't help," said a quiet Santana.

Kurt shrugged, withdrew his keys from his bag, and passed them over to her.

She nodded at Puck, and he began to shepherd Kurt toward the exit.

"He can get through his," Sue said to Santana, "but he'll need help."

Santana stood with her back to the woman. "He's got it."

Then she left.

Chapter End Notes

I could have elaborated at length about the feelings Kurt is experiencing, but felt it inauthentic. At this point, he's in shock, and I felt it important to communicate that. He'll have enough to deal with later. Future chapters may include a small crossover with another fandom, insofar as I'm borrowing a character, though their presence won't be too intrusive. If you're not familiar with the character or fandom, you won't have any problem following the story.

Kurt and Sam performed an excerpt from Shakespeare's Othello, Act Three, Scene Three, lines 421-453. I very much prefer the Folger editions of Shakespeare plays, mainly because they're clear, concise, and have excellent line notes. Also, the Folger Shakespeare Theater is convenient and I'm an avid attendant:


Again and, hopefully, for the last time, this is an AU. If you don't like my story choices or my characterization, that's just fine. Stop reading and have a pleasant day.
Chapter Notes

This chapter introduces a character from another fandom, specifically *Bones*. Knowledge of the fandom is unnecessary, I'm only borrowing a few characters, one in particular, who won't much impact the story. I foresee them being around for, at most, only three chapters.

Kurt sat rigidly in the backseat of his own car as Santana chauffeured him to the hospital. There were thoughts racing in his head, but he couldn't hear them, let alone pay attention to their whispers. He felt so disconnected from reality that the only thing he was able to posit was how numb he felt.

There were twinges of anger and fear and regret, but all were dwarfed by this pervasive torpor which had enshrouded him. He felt as though he were drowning, or was being smothered. His brain was so addled that he actually had to remind himself to breathe.

He closed his eyes, knowing that he had to pull himself together. He pressed his lips tightly closed, forcing himself not to give in to the hysterical laughter threatening to explode from his mouth. The simple fact of the matter was that he had no idea what was going on, and it wouldn't help anyone, most especially his father, if he was to retreat inside himself and pretend nothing was happening, though the option was incredibly alluring.

There were decisions that would have to be made, regardless of the circumstances, and he would have to make them. There was simply no one else who could.

That overwhelming sense of isolation and abandonment that had arrested him in the principal's office reasserted itself, and he resented it. No, it wasn't fair that he had almost no family. It wasn't fair that he had only one parent. Still, in the end, those facts would never change, and it was his responsibility to assume control of the situation and handle matters. It was his job to make things all right for his father.

He drew in a quiet breath, conscious of Santana's worried eyes on him via the rearview mirror, and then gently expelled it. That was better. Breathing was good.

He forced the panic and fear to recede, knowing they had no place right now. He could be calm. He could be rational. Those were some of his best traits, and he needed them right then. He had to be strong, and he knew he that he could be. There really was no other choice.

Right. Time to examine the facts.

First, he had no idea what had happened to his father. Until they arrived at the hospital, he would have no answers. He pushed away his worry, telling himself that his father would be okay, because he wouldn't give the man another option.

Second, he would have to alert his grandmother once he had a better understanding of the situation. If the worst happened, and he could only think of *that* in the vaguest possible terms, he would be an orphan. There would be legal issues he would have to deal with, including the house and his own personal care. He was, after all, still a minor in the eyes of the law.
Did his father have a will? He felt annoyed that he didn't know. Clearly, he had been lax in his duties. It wasn't as though he hadn't before considered something happening to his father. After his mother had died, he had been obsessed with what might happen should his father also be taken from him. Those fears had never been adequately addressed, as he had never discussed them with his father, convinced that, if he had, Murphy's Law would have gone into effect.

Was he being cold? Unfeeling? He didn't think so. Until he knew what he was facing, he refused to worry about the worst happening. It wouldn't do himself or his father any good. As far as he knew, his father was still alive, and he clung to that desperate hope with everything inside of him.

Third, he should call his aunt. Though they weren't particularly close, they loved each other and he knew she would help him as much as she could. She also resided much closer than his grandmother and could conceivably get there before Katrine could.

He would wait to make the calls until he had all the facts before him.

Fourth, St. Rita's was a good hospital, with a reputation far superior to that of Lima General. He knew they would do the best they could to help his father. Thankfully, their family's medical insurance was one of the best private plans offered. Even though they had more than enough money between them to cover every contingency, Kurt was relieved that his father would receive quality care.

Fifth, he would have to do something about school. It was far too early to worry about having to pull himself out, but it was more than likely that he wouldn't be attending any time soon. He would be able to keep up with his reading and assignments, but there were some things, like class participation and labs, which would suffer. He could only hope his teachers would be willing to work with him. If they weren't, well, he would cross that bridge when he came to it.

"Noah," he said softly.

"What can I do, Princess?" Puck gently asked.

"Would you please call Carole?" Kurt hated that he sounded as though he were begging. "I just can't deal with it right now. She'll want answers, and I have none to give. Hopefully she'll understand that you don't either."

"Not a problem." He withdrew his cell phone and scrolled through the directory, finding Carole's work number. He'd had it for years, ever since he and Finn were kids. There had been more than one instance when he'd had to call her and ask for a ride home because his own mother couldn't be bothered or even found.

He placed the call and waited for it to go through, wondering just what in the hell he was going to say. He and Carole hadn't been that tight for a while now, ever since all the shit that had happened between him and Finn. Truth was, he was embarrassed by his own behavior and had gone out of his way to avoid the woman. In a strange way, it was her disappointment in him, rather than Finn's anger, which had so bothered him.

"How are you doing, Tink?" Santana asked Kurt in a measured voice.

"I'm fine."

She rolled her eyes. Great. Now he had slipped into Harry Potter Mode, where he denied everything he was feeling and accepted the weight of the world on his shoulders, as though it were his responsibility. The fact that Kurt was so often a willing martyr was one of the things she liked least
about him.

Puck startled and blinked owlishly when he heard Carole's voice come on the line. "Uh, hi, Carole. I mean, Mrs. Hudson. It's Puck. I mean, it's Noah."

Her cautious greeting made him want to cry. For better or worse, this woman had been more of a mother to him than his own had ever been, and he had fucked all of that up because he had been jealous and resentful of her son. Christ, he was a tool.

"Mrs. H, something really bad happened." He paused. "No, Finn's fine. It's, uh, it's Kurt's dad."

As he stuttered through what he knew of the situation, he felt like shit for what the woman was going through, because it was pretty damn obvious that she loved Burt Hummel. Still, his primary concern was Kurt, and he wanted to get off the phone and help his friend, though he knew there was little he could do.

When he explained that he and Santana were with Kurt and that Finn didn't know what was going on, he winced at Kurt's hum of annoyance at the other boy's name, knowing the last thing Kurt needed to be confronted with at the hospital was Finn. Still, his primary concern was Kurt, and he wanted to get off the phone and help his friend, though he knew there was little he could do.

"Noah," Kurt whispered, "what about Grace?"

Puck closed his eyes. "Shit." He'd forgotten about his little sister! She'd be waiting for him to pick her up from school. He checked his watch and mumbled another expletive.

"Can Quinn pick her up?" Kurt suggested.

Santana shook her head. "Quinn and Brittany's cars are at my house," she said. "We'd planned to go there after school to iron out the new routine, so Quinn rode with me this morning, and Brit went with Mike and Tina."

"I could call Tina," Puck said, biting his lip and wondering when Tina had become his go-to person, "but Grace doesn't know her and won't go with a stranger."

"Call Brittany," Santana told him. "She has a spare key to my car, which is still in the lot. She can pick up your sister and take her home and stay with her until your mom gets there. Then she can drive my car back to my house."

Puck nodded, but looked over his shoulder at Kurt. "I'd have to tell her what's going on."

Kurt nodded, his eyes distant. "Can she deal with it?" he asked Santana.

"She'll be upset," Santana said, "and she'll want to be with you, but she knows and likes Grace. Doing something that will actually help will make her feel better."

He nodded at Puck. "I'd appreciate it if you would call her and explain the situation, Noah. Please ask her not to tell the others. There's a chance that one of them would tell Finn, and if he hears about this from someone other than his mother or me, it will just make the whole situation that much worse."

Puck soured and nodded, knowing that Finn had a tendency to make everything about himself and would probably argue that Kurt had kept this information from him in a bid to pay him back. He quickly called Brittany, who was initially hysterical, but soon calmed down once she had something
constructive to do. She agreed to pick up Grace and wait with her at home until his mom got off work.

He sighed. He should probably call her, too, though he certainly wasn't looking forward to it. Still, it was the responsible thing to do, and any chance he had of proving to her that he wasn't a total asshole was one he would take.

To his utter shock, she had had been completely accepting, and had even praised him for being responsible and a good friend. Puck didn't really understand it, but his mom liked Kurt, which made no sense, given that they'd never met. He'd told her only the basics about their friendship, namely that he bullied Kurt pretty badly for a number of years, but had apologized for it and that Kurt had forgiven him. She took it as a sign that he was growing up, and she had nothing but good things to say about the boy who had become his friend.

All too soon, and yet all too quickly, they had arrived at the hospital.

"Do you want to get out while I find a place to park?" Santana asked Kurt, who shook his head.

"I'd appreciate it if you and Noah would come in with me."

She stared at him. "Of course we're coming in with you, Tink. That was never a question. What I'm asking is do you want to get out now while I take your ride over to the garage?"

He shook his head again but said nothing more.

She nodded and swerved to the right, heading for the underground parking complex. She lowered the window and accepted a ticket from the automated vendor before flipping on the headlights and looking for a spot. She wanted to find one near an elevator, and preferably one with overhead lighting, because she imagined Kurt wouldn't be leaving until after night had fallen. She could catch a ride with her mom, and she was pretty sure Puck would drive Kurt home.

She quickly navigated the truck around several corners, able to drive this obstacle course in her sleep, given the number of times she'd been there. She found one space open near a bank of elevators and the set of stairs and rushed toward it, cutting off another driver, who gave her the finger. She lowered the window and screamed at him in Spanish, English, and French. He soon drove off, looking like a frightened rabbit.

She turned off the headlights, parked the car, and removed the keys. She looked into the rearview mirror with an expression of worry on her face.

"Kurt," she said softly, "we're here."

He startled and looked around. "Oh. We should go inside, then."

She shared a glance with Puck, who was looking at Kurt with concern and devotion, like some big stupid dog. She shook her head. She didn't know what the fuck was up with him, but she was determined to find out, because the more she spent time in their company, the more convinced she was that Puck was actually falling in love with Kurt, which was just fucking strange.

She'd already texted her mother from school, while Puck had shepherded Kurt toward the car, asking her to find out whatever she could and meet them in the lobby. She knew her mother would be waiting for her, despite whatever patients she'd have to shuffle to the side.

Kurt hummed absentely along with the muzak in the elevator, which only made Santana frown that much more deeply. She kept sneaking glances at him, just to make sure he was actually conscious.
They emerged into the lobby, all metal and glass with fake plants which Santana found depressing. She stalked toward the information desk, smiled politely at the elderly volunteer in her ugly smock, signed all of them in, and took three guest passes. Security was pretty much a joke, though she supposed that they made any effort at all was a good thing.

She tossed a pass at Puck and then affixed one to Kurt's collar, which wasn't easy, given the awesome but weird shirt he was wearing.

He blinked at her and then stared down at himself. "These clothes are inappropriate for the situation."

"Don't worry about it," she said, though she knew he would. It was probably preferable to worrying about his father.

"Santana!"

She turned to look behind her and wilted with relief as she saw her mother striding toward them, her starched lab coat gleaming like overly whitened teeth under the fluorescent lighting.

Lydia Lopez smiled tightly at her daughter, acknowledged Puck's presence with a brief nod, and looked with concern upon Kurt, who was staring blankly ahead.

"Hello, Kurt," she said carefully.

"Hello."

She snuck another glance at Santana, who gave a mild shrug in return.

"Your father is on the fifth floor," she said, voice gentle.

Kurt blinked. "ICU."

Lydia startled, but at last nodded.

"My mother was in ICU."

She and Santana both winced. Puck gnawed on his lip.

"We should probably head up," Lydia said.

Kurt nodded vaguely. "Of course."

Kurt walked slowly down the hall toward the nurse's desk, his mind taking note and categorizing every smell and sound as he passed.

Despite the warm blue walls, the relatively decent grade of carpet, and the overabundance of fake green plants, he found the decor anything but cheerful or optimistic.

He smelled the undercurrent of lemon-scented ammonia, its sterility assaulting his nose only slightly less than bleach would have, overlaid by a collective wispy floral scent emanating from a corner, where bouquets not allowed in the rooms themselves were left like offerings upon an altar. He wanted to set fire to them.
He observed the tacky, generic paintings by local artists lining the walls. How was it possible anyone believed they were comforting or interesting?

The footfalls of his heavy boots on the carpet made him wince with every step, as he recalled the last time he had been here.

Lydia Lopez hurried in front of them and caught up with the charge nurse, asking that Burt Hummel's doctor be paged.

Kurt continued to hum the chorus from the song in the elevator, his breath hitching every now and then, as Santana continued to observe him with feigned cool detachment.

"We forgot about Carole and Finn," Puck muttered.

Santana rolled her eyes. "I'll go get them. Stay with Tink."

Puck nodded and saluted her as she stormed back toward the elevator.

Lydia stepped close to Kurt and stared at him before withdrawing a penlight from the pocket of her lab coat and shining it in his eyes. There was no reaction.

"He's in shock. Puck, take off your jacket and put in on him."

He raced to obey, though Kurt was oblivious to his actions.

Just as Lydia was about to order Kurt to lie down on one of the waiting room sofas, she noted a colleague striding toward her. When she realized whom it was, she threw up a silent prayer. James Huntsman was a gifted neurosurgeon, but had the bedside manner of Severus Snape.

She didn't know Kurt well, though she definitely liked what she had heard, but she was fairly certain this debriefing was about to go up in flames.

"James," she nodded. "We're just waiting for Mr. Hummel's fiancée and her son to join us. My daughter went to get them."

The man made some impatient noise in his throat, but the combined glare of Puck and Lydia Lopez, whose reputation as one not to cross pervaded the entire institution, quelled his impatience.

"Of course," he said, his voice nasal and grating.

Just as Puck opened his mouth to rip this asshole a new one, the elevator dinged and Santana ushered Carole and Finn toward the desk.

"Kurt, honey?" Carole softly asked, her eyes dimming when her words provoked no reaction.

Finn stared at Kurt, his mother's words from this morning - that Burt was all Kurt had in the world - ringing loudly in his ears. He was to blame for this, he knew, at least in part. He also knew that he would never get over it, and Kurt sure as hell wouldn't.

He said nothing. He would not make this anymore difficult for Kurt than it was already, and his mother had warned him not to speak unless directly addressed.

Santana took it upon herself to introduce the players to her mother and Huntsman, a physician she had loathed ever since she had caught him going through her underwear drawer during a function her mother had hosted at their house.
Huntsman nodded robotically at each name, not bothering to commit them to memory. He wanted to get through this as quickly as possible. He knew he wasn't a people person and had a tendency to run roughshod over the emotions of others, and had found it was in his best interest to stick to the facts and not waste time offering sympathy which everyone could tell was disingenuous.

"Mr. Hummel," he began, looking down his nose at Kurt, who didn't acknowledge him, "your father has suffered a severe cerebral vascular accident."

Lydia closed her eyes.

"What's that mean?" asked a pleading Carole.

"He had a stroke," Kurt softly said. He looked up at Huntsman. "Ischemic or hemorrhagic?"

Huntsman blinked as Carole and Lydia stared.

"Ischemic," Huntsman said slowly, "most likely resulting from hypertension and hypercholesterolemia."

Kurt nodded absently. "Thrombosis or arterial embolism?"

Huntsman visibly relaxed, obviously relieved to be interacting with an individual who was somewhat knowledgeable and not hysterical. "Embolism."

"Dad had a stroke due to an interruption of blood flow in an arterial vessel," Kurt translated, "most likely brought on by high cholesterol and high blood pressure."

"How do you know all this?" Puck asked.

Kurt shrugged. "I've taken AP Biology and the Honors Microbiology course. Last summer, I audited Anatomy and Physiology at Rhodes. I plan to become a physician."

Santana, Puck, and Finn gave him incredulous looks. This was the first they'd ever heard about such plans. Didn't Kurt want to be on Broadway or some shit?

He ignored them. "What is my father's prognosis?"

"Fair to good," Huntsman replied. "He was lucky in that he received quick medical attention and was brought here within minutes of his collapse. We were able to stabilize him quickly. However, he will require immediate emergency surgery."

"Brain surgery?" Carole gasped, eyes horrified as a hand flew up to cover her mouth.

Finn placed a steadying hand on her shoulder.

Kurt sat down and stared at the floor, saying nothing as Huntsman explained the procedure to the others. He knew that ischemic strokes were often treated with thrombolysis and anti-coagulants. If the doctor felt that the standard regime was insufficient, that meant that his father was worse koff than he was being led to believe. He didn't appreciate be coddled or deceived.

His father would need a decompressive craniectomy, an alternative therapy designed to relieve the intracranial pressure by creating a compensatory space to accommodate the swollen brain. It involved surgically removing a large bone flap, ipsilateral to the side of the infarction, followed by dural reconstruction.

It was a last-ditch effort, and he knew his father's chances of survival more than doubled if he had the
surgery as early as possible.

He shook his head to clear it and stood. "I'm his next of kin, his only kin, but I'm a minor and can't consent to the surgery. Carole, as his fiancée, you'll have to do it."

Carole blinked. What was Kurt talking about? Yes, she and Burt had discussed getting married but hadn't made any definite plans. They considered themselves engaged, but there was no ring on her finger. She understood that Kurt was a minor and couldn't consent, but why was he putting the onus of this decision on her?

"He'll die without the surgery," Kurt said quietly. "The longer we wait, the less chance he has of survival."

Carole's eyes widened and she abruptly turned to stare at Huntsman, who nodded. At last, she understood: Burt would die if she didn't do this, and she wasn't about to let that happen. "Give me the form."

"I have to make a phone call," Kurt announced, before turning on his heel and walking away.

Camille was rummaging through the thorax of her latest patient, looking for evidence of cause of death. That none was immediately forthcoming annoyed her. She absently blew away a lock of hair that had fallen free of her chignon, trying to ignore the insipid chatter of her colleagues, which they insisted qualified as banter.

They were wrong.

Brennan and Booth were discussing the notes from their latest case. Well, Brennan was discussing what they knew for certain, while Booth was attempting to extrapolate theories based on the information at hand, with Brennan derailing from her convoluted monologue just long enough to scold him.

Sweets, Angela, and Hodgins were quietly giggling about something that Camille was positive was both stupid and inappropriate.

She missed Zack. As off the beam as he was, at least he got his work done with maximum efficiency. She should look into replacing him with a Borg drone. Then she wondered how the hell she even knew what a Borg drone was.

Damn that Hodgins.

She quickly decided that Brennan had far too many interns while she herself had none. This would no longer stand. She would put out the word tomorrow in search of some lowly graduate student desperately trying to prove themselves.

She grunted with satisfaction, missing the phone that began to trill.

"Dr. Saroyan," Daisy whined.

Camille closed her eyes and forced herself to breathe. God, she hated that girl. Daisy was competent when she allowed herself the chance, but was otherwise obnoxiously neurotic and far too eager to
"Dr. Saroyan!

Camille curled a lip and looked up, her hands still inside the chest cavity.

"What?" she snarled.

Daisy's already wide eyes grew impossibly wider. "You have a phone call," she said meekly.

Camille gave her an incredulous look. "In case it escaped your notice, Ms. Wick, I am presently conducting an autopsy and am otherwise engaged. Take a message."

Daisy nervously pulled on her ponytail. "I tried!" she insisted. "He was so mean! He wouldn't let me take a message. He said that he was your nephew and that there was a family emergency and, that if I didn't stop questioning him, he was going to cut out my tongue with a spork, remove it with rusty forceps, and display it in the window of my local kosher butcher shop!"

Camille gave a slow blink as a smirk appeared on her face. Oh, Kurt. That was so...so him. Then Daisy's words registered and she hastily threw off her mask, removed her gloves and apron, and raced toward the phone.

"Cam doesn't have a nephew," remarked a puzzled Brennan.

"Yes, she does," Seeley murmured. "Something must be really wrong if Kurt asked for Cam to be interrupted."

"Gossip!" Angela cheered, clapping her hands. She sidled up to Seeley. "Nephew, huh? Tell me all about him!"

Seeley rolled his eyes, looked toward a now overwrought Cam, and decided to accede to the request. After all, Cam would probably tell them anyway, now that the cat was out of the bag.

"Felicia doesn't have a child, does she?" asked an appalled Brennan.

Seeley shuddered. "God, no, and never say those words again." He sighed. "Look, what you don't know is that Cam's father is actually her stepfather. He married Cam's mother when Cam was a little girl, and then they had Felicia. Cam's real father had an affair with her mother while he was married. Cam never knew this until she was in college. Her mother told her right after her biological father died."

Hodgins blinked. "That's some soap opera."

"Shut up," Seeley barked. "Anyway, Felicia doesn't know about any of this, so the next time she pops up, if one of you says anything, I'll drop your ass in Abu Dhabi and be done with it."

They all nodded.

"Anyway, Cam had another sister, a half-sister named Suzanne. She didn't know about Cam either, and they met for the first time not long after Suzanne got married. It's Suzanne son, Kurt, who's on the phone."

As one, they all turned toward Cam, who was wiping tears from her face.

"Suzanne died about ten years ago," Seeley continued. "Ovarian cancer."
Brennan winced. "That's a horrible disease."

Seeley nodded. "By the time they found it, it was too late. Kurt was six at the time."

The wind had left Angela's sails a while ago, and now she was just sad, for both Cam and the boy.

"How do you know all of this?" Sweets asked. "It doesn't seem like the kind of thing Dr. Saroyan would discuss."

Seeley grunted. "We were dating when Suzanne died. I went with her to the funeral." He sighed. "She and Kurt aren't particularly close, but they love each other. If he's calling now, I can only guess that something happened to his dad."

"He could be an orphan," Brennan said softly.

Seeley quickly did the math. "Kurt's seventeen now, and he's not without resources. He's old money. He's probably got more money than Hodgins. His grandmother's some French countess or something. Their family goes back centuries."

An intrigued Hodgins quirked a brow. "What family?"

Seeley shrugged.

"Delacroix."

They all jumped and turned around at the sound of Cam's voice.

"Kurt's grandmother is Katrine Valois, the Comtesse Delacroix. Kurt will become the Comte on his eighteenth birthday."

Hodgins' eyes widened. Even he, despite his eschewing privilege whenever possible, had heard of Katrine Valois, the French philanthropist who had raised hundreds of millions of dollars for a variety of charitable organizations.

"I didn't think the aristocracy was still a real thing," said a surprised Angela.

"It's not, for the most part," Camille said. "The titles are more ceremonial than anything else. I'd be surprised if Kurt actually accepts it when the time comes."

"How's he doing?" Seeley asked.

Camille sighed and closed her eyes. "Burt's had a stroke."

Seeley winced. "Shit."

"It's severe," she continued, "and he's going to require emergency brain surgery if he has any chance of survival. Kurt had his father's girlfriend pose as his fiancée to authorize the procedure, since Kurt's still a minor."

"That's illegal!" Brennan hissed.

Cam rolled her eyes. "Spare me. If it means my nephew doesn't end up an orphan, I could really care less."

Brennan found it hard to believe she agreed with the woman, but she did. She didn't voice that agreement, however.
"Are you going?" Seeley asked Camille, who nodded.

"He's terrified. At least with Suzanne, he knew it was coming. It was over fairly quickly, but he was somewhat able to acclimate to the situation." She shook her head. "This just came out of nowhere. They pulled him out of school to get him to the hospital, and though he has some friends with him, he's effectively alone. He's worried Social Services will interfere."

Brennan scowled. She had no love for that agency.

Camille sighed again. "He's very upset, though you would never know if from his tone, which gives you some idea how bad the situation truly is."

Seeley nodded tightly.

"He and Burt weren't on speaking terms, and though he says he doesn't feel guilty, I can tell that he does. There's a very real chance that the last words he spoke to his father will be the final ones."

Seeley frowned. "They weren't speaking? That's not like them."

She averted her eyes. "I'll tell you later."

Angela pouted.

"I'll get you on a plane," Seeley told Cam. "I'm sure there's one leaving Andrews soon. There will be a chopper on standby once you arrive in Dayton."

She eyed him. "While I'm all for abusing my authority, I don't think that's a good idea."

He grinned. "You're not abusing your authority. You're abusing mine, and I'm letting you." He placed a hand on her shoulder. "Let me do this for you, Cam. Let me do it for Kurt. I love him, too."

She nodded sadly, her lips pressed tightly together. "Thank you." She turned to Angela. "I have a huge favor to ask."

Angela waved a dismissive hand. "Of course I'll pick Michelle up from school and explain everything. I'll be happy to stay with her until you're back."

Camille stared. "You scare me."

Angela beamed and skipped off.

Camille looked at Brennan. "If it looks like I'll be gone for any length of time, I'll arrange to have a pathologist temporarily appointed in my stead."

Brennan nodded. "Thank you, Cam. We all appreciate it. Just go be with your family."

Seeley nodded for the both of them and led Camille away.

Will was quietly seething as he oversaw that afternoon's detention.

Rachel was present as demanded for causing problems in Glee the other day, but Finn and Puck
were nowhere to be found. He was frustrated with himself because he knew that, last year, he would have just made excuses for them and never brought it up again.

Now, however, he was furious at their blatant disregard for his authority, as though he wasn't a legitimate teacher and that brawling during an extracurricular activity was in any way acceptable. He had silently vowed that he would do better by those children, make a concerted effort to include all of them, not just his once chosen few, and part of that demanded he hold them accountable for their bad behavior.

One look at Rachel told him she was just as angry. He was sure she resented that she had managed to get herself here while Finn and Puck had not. Any minute, he expected she would be begin whining that she was being held to a different standard because she was more talented, because she was female, because she had two gay fathers, because she was Jewish, etcetera, ad nauseum.

Indeed, she had opened her mouth to deliver a blistering tirade, but was interrupted when Emma Pillsbury darted into the room.

Will raised a brow. "Emma?"

She looked as though one good startle would cause her to keel over. Then, miraculously, a noticeable wave of calm washed over her and she nodded coolly at him. "Will. I thought you would want to know that Misters Hudson and Puckerman will not be attending today's detention. You will have to issue another one."

"Why?" Will demanded.

Her eyes dimmed. "Burt Hummel collapsed at his place of business and was rushed to the hospital. Sue pulled Kurt from his last class and we explained the situation. He asked for Ms. Lopez and Mr. Puckerman to accompany him to the hospital. Mrs. Hudson came to collect Finn and were meeting them there."

Will stopped breathing. Kurt, Kurt, Kurt chanted itself over and over in his now-pounding skull, the sound of racing blood roaring his ears.

Predictably, Rachel burst into tears.

"What happened?" he croaked.

Emma's eyes became dewy. "We don't know," she said quietly. "Kurt wondered as to whether it might have been a heart attack, but the hospital didn't release that information to Principal Figgins." She hesitated. "Would you like me to take over for you? I'm sure you want to go to the hospital."

Of course he wanted to go to the hospital, he silently screamed, but he couldn't. He knew that he couldn't, because he wouldn't be able to control himself. He wouldn't be able to keep his hands off of Kurt, wanting to provide any comfort he could.

His chest hurt as his heart attempted to burst forth from it. He felt impotent and useless, hating himself for not rushing to the side of the man he...to Kurt, but he knew he couldn't. He would give them away, he would, because there was no possible way he could pretend that Kurt was just his, now former, student.

Tears burned his eyes and he harshly blinked them away, well aware of the scrutiny which Rachel and Emma were about to level at him, waiting to see how he would react.

Will gathered a breath and, with considerable effort, schooled his features. "I'm sure Kurt neither
wants nor needs to be overwhelmed by an outpouring of sympathy, no matter how well-intentioned," he said in an even voice. "That's not who he is. He has enough to think about and worry over without the rest of getting us in the way."

Rachel nodded miserably, which suggested she perhaps understood Kurt better than most people realized.

Emma gave Will a proud but watery look of approval, which just made him feel like an asshole.

"But where will he stay?" asked an alarmed Rachel. "His dad is all he has, and I doubt he'd consent to stay with Finn and his mother."

Emma scowled at the mention of Finn's name, which led Will to conclude she was aware of what had occurred among Finn, Kurt, Mercedes, and Rachel. Had Kurt told her? He wasn't aware they had any kind of relationship.

"I'm sure Kurt will, by now, have contacted his grandmother," Emma said quietly. "He also has an aunt who lives in Washington, DC."

Rachel stared. She'd never heard of any aunt.

Will frowned, nodding. "Camille. She works for the government, if I remember correctly."

Emma gave him a puzzled look. "How did you know that?"

He blinked, marveling at his own stupidity. "Kurt mentioned it, of course."

Rachel and Emma gave him confused looks, but thankfully dropped the matter.

"I doubt he'll be at school tomorrow," Will added. "I'll drop by his house in the morning to check on him. My first class isn't until late." He looked up at Emma. "What about his classes? Have you spoken with his other teachers?"

She smirked, and he was disconcerted by its rather evil nature. "I asked Ms. Sylvester to see to that."

She said without saying that she not only expected Sue to bully the faculty into cutting Kurt a great deal of slack, but wholly approved of said action. "I'll coordinate with Artie, Santana, and Quinn regarding Kurt's assignments."

Rachel regarded her with wide eyes.

Will couldn't help but shudder that Emma and Sue were on such familiar terms, though he wasn't too surprised. He knew both took the care of their students very seriously, and they were fond of Kurt, though Sue would never admit it. He glanced down at his watch.

"You're dismissed, Rachel," he said. "I'll see you back here tomorrow, and Finn and Puck will be joining you."

She gave him a quelling glare, wilted when it had no effect, gathered her belongings, and stomped from the room.

Emma watched her departure with amused eyes. "I have to admit, Will, I was very surprised and pleased when I learned you punished her for her behavior."

He frowned. "How did you even know about it?"

She gave a mild shrug. "Sam Evans told me. I had him in conference yesterday to discuss his classes
and he told me about his audition."

Will nodded, rose to his feet, and stretched. "I was disappointed he didn't join, but I certainly understand and respect his reasons." He slung his bag over his shoulder. "How is he settling in otherwise?"

"Very well," Emma said, walking with him toward the door, "though it's still early days." She paused. "He did have an interaction with Daniel which caused Sam to request a change in classes."

Will scowled. He hated Daniel Parks. "Did Daniel say something regarding Sam's dyslexia?"

Emma scowled in concert. "Yes, he did, but I gather Sam has had to confront that prejudice many times. What bothered him was that Daniel leveled a personal attack against Kurt, and Sam wouldn't put up with it."

Will's hands curled into fists. "What did he say?" he hissed.

Emma waved her hand dismissively. "The usual. He intimated that Sam should be careful or else Kurt would become infatuated with him and pursue him as he did Finn, which we both know is ridiculous." Her eyes darkened. "He then made some rather untoward comments about Kurt and gays in general."

"And Sam told you?" asked a skeptical Will.

"He filed an official complaint," Emma chirped, "which I took to Figgins, who promptly ignored it."

Will ground his teeth. "Asshole," he hissed.

Surprisingly, Emma nodded in agreement.

"Good for Sam for having the guts to do something about it," Will said, with considerable cheer. "He appears to be a very decent young man."

Emma nodded again. "He is. He's very protective of Kurt, who's the first friend he's made here. He insisted Kurt not be told about Daniel's remarks, and while I'm not sure that's a good idea, I agreed."

Will sighed. "Sam was probably right. Kurt has enough to deal with." He blinked. "I wonder if there's any correlation between Daniel's words about Kurt and the fact that Daniel was attacked by a swarm of bees."

Emma smirked. "Anything's possible."

And enter Sue, Will thought. He chuckled, refrained from commenting on his suspicions, and wished Emma a good evening. He had an appointment at his apartment with a stiff drink.

Kurt stared at Janine Goodman, deciding she absolutely did not live up to her surname.

Damn that doctor for calling Social Services.

"This is premature," Kurt said, not about to put up with this nonsense.
"Nevertheless..." the woman began.

"Stop now," Kurt said, holding up a hand. "I'm sure you're very good at your job and only wish to help me, but my father is not dead. Your presence is upsetting and unnecessary."

The woman winced. "I'm sorry you feel that way, but..."

"But nothing." Kurt interrupted, some dark emotion now present in his tone. "You have no business here and your insistence that you do is cruel. I am not an orphan; my father is receiving treatment."

"You will not be allowed to stay with Mrs. Hudson," Janine stated patiently. "She has no legal rights where you're concerned, and you cannot stay by yourself. I understand that this is a difficult time, but decisions must be made for your welfare."

"They won't be made by you," Kurt said plainly. "I have already explained that my aunt is on her way and should be here in a matter of hours. My grandmother is flying in from Europe and should be here tomorrow."

"I have only your word for that."

Kurt was not about to allow this officious bitch to impugn his integrity. "If you persist with this," he warned, "I will be forced to contact my attorney. I have no legal recourse against you performing your responsibilities, but I can and will file suit against you for intentional infliction of emotional distress. My father is currently undergoing brain surgery and fighting for his life. For the past thirty minutes, you have been attempting to bully me into complying with your commands, though you have shown no interest in the fact that I have actual family who can and will care for me."

She stared at him with wide eyes.

"I don't do well with threats," Kurt continued. "If necessary, I can have myself emancipated as soon as tomorrow and that will be the end of our interaction until I haul you into a courtroom."

"You can't..."

"I assure you that I can."

He turned on his heel and walked away.

Lydia Lopez, who had insisted on her own presence, though she had said nothing, smirked.

While Kurt was otherwise occupied, Santana had taken point and began alerting the other club members of the situation. She was sure word had since leaked about Burt Hummel's condition, and she didn't want a scene at the hospital, positive Kurt's more wayward friends would insist on putting in an appearance, and Finn's presence was already more than enough.

Her first call was to Quinn, for she wanted the Cheerios put on notice that one of their own would need their unquestioning loyalty and support.

Quinn's anger had been righteous and she had spewed hatred for Finn, who she blamed for the stroke. Whether or not that was correct was of no interest to Santana, who encouraged Quinn's wrath solely on principle. Quinn demanded that Santana hug and kiss Kurt for her, with which Santana
fully intended to comply, and promised to activate the Phone Tree and pray for Burt.

The next call was to Tina, who would be able to call Artie for her, as Santana didn't have his number. Tina would also presumably tell Mike, who would tell Matt. Tina was appropriately beside herself, wailing about her Uncle Burt, which reminded Santana that Tina was one of Kurt's best friends and had been since childhood. Tina had promised to keep the others away, but insisted on coming to the hospital herself, in part, and shockingly, to bring them all dinner and changes of clothes for Kurt and Santana herself.

Santana had thanked her and hung up, swallowing heavily.

Tina truly regarded her as a friend.

She snapped at Puck to call Sam.

Sam was helping his mother prepare dinner and relating to her the events of the day. Stacy and Stevie were in the dining room working on their homework and listening with half an ear, no matter how many times their mother and elder brother admonished them from eavesdropping. Since neither Sam nor Savannah had bothered to banish them to their bedrooms, they merely shrugged and went on about their business.

Savannah cooed over Kurt's maturity and his obvious affection for her son, while cursing under her breath about what Finn, Mercedes, and Rachel had done. More than once Sam had second-guessed telling his mother everything, but knew it would have been worse had he not. The woman had a talent for unearthing information and wouldn't have rested until she had wrung every last drop of intelligence from Sam's desiccated form.

Besides, he and his mother were very close. He trusted her and valued her insights. Also, he was somewhat smug that her take on the entire situation buttressed his own. He drew the line, however, at reenacting his *Othello* performance, and ignored her glare of indignation.

As Savannah scolded Sam for not yet having taken any pictures of Kurt so she could put a face with the name, his phone rang. Sam rolled his eyes at her, snatched the phone off the counter, and glanced down at the screen.

"It's Puck," he said.

She waved him off.

"Hey," Sam said into the receiver.

Savannah's eyebrows gathered as she noted her son's long stretch of silence. Her mother antenna shot up.

"Oh, god," Sam whispered.

She frowned and turned toward him, hands on hips.

"Is Kurt all right?" Sam quietly asked.

Her eyes widened.
"Should I come over?" Sam prompted. He then shook his head. "No, you're right. He wouldn't want that."

He mumbled and alternately nodded or shook his head for several moments until the conversation drew to a close, Sam extracting a promise that Puck would call him with any further developments.

"What happened?" Savannah demanded before Sam had even disconnected.

He swallowed heavily. "Kurt's dad had a stroke."

Her breath caught in her throat and it took her a moment to force an exhalation. "Damn."

"He collapsed at work," Sam said, staring out the window above the sink, "and they took him to the hospital." He sighed and rubbed his watering eyes with a hand. "I guess that's why that lady pulled Kurt from class. Puck and Santana went to the hospital with him."

"Do you want to go over there?" she gently asked.

He shook his head. "Kurt's not like that. He doesn't like people to see him when he's vulnerable." He shrugged. "I mean, I want to go, I really do, but I need to do what's best for him, you know?"

She nodded, proud of him.

"I'll wait until he calls me," Sam continued, nodding to himself. "Puck said he'd stop by later with more information."

She nodded. "So it's just him and Santana with Kurt?"

Sam shook his head angrily. "Finn's there," he growled, "along with his mom and Santana's mom. She's a doctor. Santana's mom, I mean." He crossed his arms defensively across his chest. "I just hope Finn's not making things worse."

Savannah grunted. "You said last night that Kurt didn't have any other family?"

Sam shrugged again. "Not here. Puck said Kurt called his grandmother, and she's flying in from France. He also called his aunt. I guess she's his mom's sister? I don't know how close they are, though. Puck was surprised Kurt had an aunt."

Savannah nodded, deciding she'd bake something for Sam to take to Kurt tomorrow. She didn't understand why people made food in times of crisis, but far be it from her to go against tradition.

"I'll take over here," she said. "Why don't you start your homework?" She could see from his reaction that Sam could have cared less, but she wasn't about to let her son start off a new year in a new school at a disadvantage. "Sam."

He waved her off. "I know, I know." He bit his lip. "I feel guilty because I want Kurt to look it over for me, and I know it would be wrong to bother him with it."

She wrapped an arm around him. "I think it's much more likely that you just want to be with your friend," she said softly. "That's not wrong, Sam, and I'm proud of you for placing Kurt's needs above your own."

He flushed and patted her hand. "This sucks."

"Big time," she agreed.
Tina had called Mike, who had been appropriately upset and wanted to rush over to the hospital. As bizarre as it was, she was happy for this, that Mike honestly cared about Kurt and was trying to make friends with hers. Mike knew how important Kurt was to her, but he wasn't trying to suck up to impress her. He genuinely liked Kurt and wanted to form a friendship with him.

When they had begun going out, she had been irrationally worried that Mike would have wanted her to distance herself from Kurt. She would have kicked his ass if he had, but she'd never really before had to deal with the homophobia aimed at Kurt, at least not where her own relationships were concerned. If there had been one thing she and Artie had agreed upon, it was how necessary Kurt was to their lives.

That was why she was driving to Artie's house to explain what had happened in person. She owed him at least that much. What worried her was how Artie would react. She knew how angry he was with Uncle Burt and that he would feel useless guilt, as though that anger had contributed to the stroke, which was ridiculous. She also knew Artie would want to be with Kurt, and that he would blow up when she told him that wasn't possible.

When Santana had called her, Tina immediately understood why Kurt hadn't asked for her and Artie to accompany him. She just hoped she could make Artie understand that as well.

She pulled into the Abrams' driveway and, sighing, put her car in park. Steeling herself, she got out and trudged to the front door, ringing the bell.

"Hello, Sheila," she said, smiling weakly when Artie's mother opened the door.

"Hello, Tina," the woman said warmly, stepping aside to allow the girl entrance. At the pinched look on Tina's face, Sheila paused. "Are you all right?"

Tina shook her head. "No," she warbled, "not really." She cleared her throat. "Is Artie home?"

Sheila nodded. "Of course. I'll get him."

"I'm here," Artie said, rolling into the room and announcing his presence. He took one look at Tina and blanched. "What's wrong?"

Tina burst into tears. "Uncle Burt had a stroke."

Sheila gasped and covered her mouth with a hand, eyes filling with tears.

Artie cocked his head and gave a slow blink. "What?"

"Uncle Burt had a stroke," Tina repeated, this time more clearly as she attempted to rein in her emotions. "He's in surgery right now."

"Brain surgery?" Artie asked faintly.

She nodded.

Artie stared at a point above her head. "Kurt."

"He's at the hospital," Tina said, forcing out a breath. "Santana and Puck are with him."
Artie scowled.

"It can't be us," she said softly. "You know that, Artie. You know how Kurt is in these situations. I remember you telling me what he was like when his mother died."

Artie nodded tightly, but his face was defiant.

"He'll see how upset we are, for both him and Uncle Burt," she continued. "He'll want to take care of us, to make it easier on us." She shook her head. "We can't do that to him."

Artie screwed up his face and his tears began to fall.

She rushed over and bent down to hug him. "Santana's mother is with them. She's a doctor at St. Rita's. Santana promised that she and Puck would stay with Kurt as long as he'd allow."

Artie nodded and sobbed into her neck.

"Kurt called Katrine. She's on her way, and so is Camille."

"I haven't seen them since Aunt Suzanne's funeral," Artie said thickly, pulling away from her. He shook his head. "He'll hate this. It will remind him of when she died."

"I know," Tina whispered.

Sheila felt at loose ends. She didn't know what to do, how to comfort them. Of course, they appeared to be managing well enough on their own. Her head was swimming with memories of Suzanne's death, of her funeral, of little Kurt sitting in the pew in his perfect suit, not making a sound, not saying a word, just staring into space.

She bit her lip. This was so unfair. If Burt died, she was sure Kurt would be destroyed.

Tina swallowed, knowing what she next said would not be well received. "Mrs. Hudson's there." She paused. "So is Finn."

Artie exploded.

"That fucking asshole!" he roared, his face reddening with every syllable. "This is all his fault! He just couldn't leave well enough alone. He couldn't let Kurt be happy."

Sheila meant to interfere, to scold her son for blaming another child, but was cut off.

"You're right," Tina said fiercely, "and we'll make him pay for that, but this isn't the time. We need to think about Kurt, about what he needs and not what we want. This isn't about Finn. This isn't about us. This is about Kurt."

Artie lost his bluster, wrapping his arms around himself. "Does Brittany know?" he whispered, biting his lip, knowing his girlfriend would be devastated.

Tina nodded. "She does. Santana wouldn't let her come to the hospital. She had Puck call Brittany, and Brittany agreed to pick Grace up from school and watch her until Mrs. Puckerman got home."

"Good," Artie said, nodding to himself. "That will keep her occupied. As much as she loves Kurt, if she went to the hospital and saw Finn, she'd probably kill him."

He raised his eyes and looked at Tina, and Sheila was startled by the unspoken communication between them. Again she mourned the loss of that relationship. She strongly disagreed with how
Tina had ended things, but she knew how difficult her son could be, how set in his ways, and she understood why Tina had left him.

"Sam?" he asked.

Sheila frowned at the unfamiliar name.

"Puck's calling him," Tina replied, "and Quinn's calling the other Cheerios. I've told Mike, who's going to call Matt. I'm sure Rachel will hear about it eventually."

He nodded absently. "And what about her?" he seethed.

Tina's eyes lighted with menace. "Oh, I'm going to see to her personally. She's my next stop."

Artie grinned. "Give her my regards, won't you?"

Sheila found it difficult to feel any sympathy for Mercedes Jones, about whom she shared her son's opinion.

Mike shuffled restlessly about the house, not sure what to do with himself. He'd finished most of his homework, but couldn't have cared less about completing it. He wanted to go to the hospital in a show of support for Kurt, but understood Tina's warning that it wouldn't be welcome at the moment. The last thing he wanted was to upset Kurt further.

At least Santana and Puck were with Kurt. Mike had taken careful note of Kurt's relationships with them, his new friends, and knew they would take care of Kurt as much as possible. After Puck's performance in Glee that morning, it was obvious that Puck genuinely liked Kurt, thought of him as a close friend, and possibly even more.

Mike didn't know what to think about that, but he knew Puck would never intentionally hurt Kurt. Puck was well aware he would be in a world of pain should that happen.

He felt so useless. He and Kurt weren't close, not yet, but he still regarded Kurt as a good friend. It felt wrong staying home. Intellectually, however, he knew there was really nothing he could do for Kurt.

Matt had been truly upset, and Mike knew his best friend felt even more useless than he himself did, given how far away he was. It made him think that perhaps Kurt and Matt were closer than he realized. He didn't care; he wasn't jealous. He knew Matt had nursed a small crush on Kurt a few years ago, when Matt had been struggling to accept his bisexuality.

Watching Kurt had been a revelation for Matt. Kurt lived his life openly, even if he hadn't given voice to the truth that he was gay. It had been unnecessary; everyone had known. Kurt might not have said the words until last year, but there had never been any indication that Kurt felt nothing less than complete pride in who he was, and that was enviable.

Mike wandered into the living room and collapsed on the sofa, sighing.

His mother looked up from her needlepoint. "What is wrong, Michael?"

Mike hesitated, and then finally shook his head. "Do you remember Kurt Hummel?"
She frowned, searching her mind to place the name. At last she nodded. "Yes, from your dance classes. He was very talented. Also very polite and well-mannered." Her eyes narrowed in thought. "He lost his mother several years back, yes?" She clucked her tongue. "I remember reading about the funeral." She shook her head. "Poor child."

Mike nodded. "He's Tina's best friend," he said. "He's also friends with Matt, and he and I are becoming friends."

He said the words cautiously, wondering if his mother knew if Kurt was gay, and, if she did, what she thought about it. Sexuality was something they hadn't discussed in their home. He had no idea as to his parents' opinion on the matter. He hoped they wouldn't disappoint them.

She blinked, a puzzled look on his face. "Yes? Friends are good."

He looked down at his hands. "Tina called. Kurt's dad had a stroke. He's having emergency brain surgery right now."

Wen-Ling gasped and quickly crossed herself, muttering a prayer under her breath. "Oh, that poor boy," she then whispered, shaking her head and tears pricking at her eyes. "For one so young to have such troubles is truly unfair." She sighed gently. "Is Tina with him?"

"No," Mike said quietly. "She went to tell Artie."

"Her former boyfriend?"

Mike nodded. "Kurt is Artie's Matt."

Wen-Ling's eyes widened with understanding. "Is there anything we can do to help?"

"No," Mike said sadly, "and that's why I'm upset. I feel so stupid for just sitting here, but Kurt is...complex."

"Please explain," his mother asked.

Mike struggled for words. "You would like him," he finally said. "You would understand him. He's very strong, but very private. He doesn't like people to see him when he's afraid. He doesn't want to appear weak in their eyes. He's a very...caring person, but also really controlled. He takes care of others before he'll take care of himself, and Tina says if we go there, he'll be so busy trying to take care of us, he'd neglect himself."

He blinked. "Kurt's the whitest Chinese I've ever met."

Wen-Ling laughed gently, but with obvious approval. "I would like to meet him when possible."

"He asked me to teach him Chinese."

"He must be a very impressive young man," she said. "It is an exceedingly difficult language to learn, as you know."

Mike nodded. "Yeah, but he already speaks six others."

She stared. "What else do you know about him?"

"He's gay," Mike blurted.

She blinked. "Is that the extent of your knowledge?" she asked.
He blushed. "I didn't know what you would think about that, or about me having a gay friend."

Her brows gathered in confusion. "It does not trouble me."

"But do you approve?" Mike demanded, somewhat defensively.

"I neither approve nor disapprove; I merely accept. It is not my business with whom Kurt falls in
love."

Mike curled his hands in frustration.

"Ah," she said, nodding, "this is about Matthew. Michael, I am aware that he is attracted to both men
and woman. I do not judge him for this. I never asked that you not keep company with him. He is a
fine young man, and I'm sure that Kurt is, as well."

"You don't care?"

Wen-Ling placed her needlepoint on the table and regarded her son. "I am not explaining myself
well," she ruefully said. "It is not up to me to pass judgment on others. I have no opinion on this
issue because I do not understand why it is an issue at all. It should not be. People have the right to
be happy. If loving men makes Kurt happy, then he should love men. If loving both men and women
makes Matthew happy, then he should do so."

Mike gaped.

"Kurt loving another man affects no one but Kurt and his partner," she continued. "It is not my
business. It is no one's business. If Matthew began dating a man, I would not object, as long as that
man treated Matthew well and with the respect Matthew deserves."

"But, the Bible..." Mike said, trailing off weakly.

"I believe in the Word of God," Wen-Ling said, nodding, "but I do not take everything in the Holy
Book literally. The Old Testament condemns homosexuality, but condones rape and slavery. I do
not. I believe that Christ is my Savior, and He compelled me not to judge others. He asked that I love
my fellow man and do unto them as I would hope they would do unto me. And so I shall."

"I love you," Mike said, surprising himself with the declaration. Such words were not often spoken
in his house, but the emotion behind them was always present.

Wen-Ling's eyes dampened. "And I love you, my son." She sniffled gently. "I want you to know
that, if you were gay, I would accept this, and I would accept your partner, were that the case. I do
not want you to be afraid to confide in me and your father. We both love you very much."

"I'm not gay," Mike quietly said, "but thank you."

She nodded. "Now, please tell me more about Kurt."

Mike became somewhat more animated as he began describing Kurt to his mother. He told of Kurt's
dancing ability, how Kurt had led the Cheerios to a national victory last year, and Kurt's intelligence.
He explained what he had gleaned about Kurt's friendships with Artie and Tina, and how Kurt had
refused to take a side in Artie and Tina's breakup, including how he had made overtures of
friendship to Mike himself.

Wen-Ling was pleased. Indeed, Kurt sounded like a very fine young man.
It culminated with Mike playing for his mother the recording Brittany had made of Kurt's performance the day prior. As Wen-Ling sat and listened, her eyes closed and she made soft humming noises of awe.

"Such a voice is a gift," she whispered, profoundly moved by both Kurt's talent and the message of the song. "I can tell that he cherishes it."

Mike nodded and then launched into the recent actions of Finn, Mercedes, and Rachel, and she realized her son held these people partially responsible for Burt Hummel's ill health, including the fact that Burt Hummel had removed his son from both the glee club and the cheerleading team.

She scowled. She didn't know if she agreed with that assessment, nor was it her place to judge, but these children had behaved wholly inappropriately and without regard for the people who would be harmed by their words.

"Shame on them," she said. "Shame on them for gossiping and revealing information which was not theirs to share."

Mike nodded fervently and then threw up his hands. "I don't know how to help him."

"I don't believe there is anything you can do at the moment," Wen-Ling said. "I will pray for Kurt and his father. If you feel moved to do so, then you should, as well.

"Trust in Tina," she counseled. "She knows Kurt well. Trust her to help him, and to ask for your help when it is required."

Mike nodded again. His mother was right, as usual.

There were moments when Tina wished she were a better person.

This wasn't one of them.

She ached for Kurt and was terrified that Uncle Burt would die, but she was also furious with Mercedes. She hadn't done much more than glare at the girl while in school, but now free from that hindrance, she had no problems delivering a few home truths, which is exactly what she was going to do.

Tina rang the bell and waited.

"Hello, Mrs. Jones," she said, her voice curiously blank.

Mavis Jones smiled. "Hello, Tina. Please come in."

"No, thank you. Is your daughter home?"

Mavis frowned, struggling to maintain the polite expression on her face, which was now warring with concern. "Yes," she said slowly. "Would you like to speak with her?"

"Yes, please, thank you."

Mavis turned and walked toward the stairs, wondering what in the world was going on here.
Mercedes had been upset all day, as well as last night, but hadn't explained what the trouble was. From what Mavis had gathered, her daughter had had a fight with Kurt, which hadn't happened since that confusion last year over the broken windshield.

She inwardly sighed and posited whether Mercedes still had romantic feelings for Kurt, which would have been absolutely ridiculous. The first time Mercedes had dragged that boy home, it had been obvious that Kurt was gay. Why Mercedes hadn't seen it, Mavis had no idea. Shaking her head, she called up the stairs.

"Mercedes! Tina is here to see you."

"Send her up, Mom!"

Mavis paused, looked over her shoulder at a bored Tina, then shook her head once more. "Please come downstairs, Mercedes."

It took a few seconds before she heard her daughter's footsteps on the stairway.

Mercedes hesitantly made her way down, looking overly cautious, and glancing at her mother to determine how much the woman knew, if anything.

"Hey," she said to Tina in a small voice, throwing a little wave. When Tina immediately didn't respond, Mercedes began defending herself. "I don't know what Kurt told you..."

"Everything," Tina curtly lied, not bothering to clarify that it had not been Kurt who had informed her, "so don't waste your breath trying to suck up to me. I could care less."

Mercedes flinched.

"What on earth is going on here?" Mavis demanded.

Tina blinked. "You mean she didn't tell you?" Her eyes hardened as a smug, victorious smirk appeared on her face. She then gleefully proceeded to explain, in painstaking detail, all of last night's events.

If Mercedes had any doubts that Tina was unaware of all the facts at hand, they were resolved.

"What were you thinking?" Mavis shrieked at her daughter.

Mercedes didn't answer, preferring to stare at the floor. She hadn't been thinking, she now understood, but reacting.

Tina shrugged. "Whatever. I just thought you'd like to know that my Uncle Burt," she said, placing an emphasis on the proprietary pronoun, knowing it rankled Mercedes that she had never been okayed to address the man as such, "had a major stroke this afternoon while at work."

Mavis's eyes widened and she covered her mouth with both hands, shaking her head.

Mercedes swallowed heavily, eyes filling with tears. "What?" she whispered.

"He's having emergency brain surgery right now," Tina continued, completely uncaring as to how her message and tone were received. "We don't know what's going to happen."

Mercedes choked. "K-K-K..."

"Is with Santana and Puck," Tina smoothly said. "They're taking care of him. His grandmother and
aunt are on their way." She cocked her head. "I hope you're proud of yourself."

"Tina!" Mavis screeched, filled with disbelief that the normally shy if effervescent girl could be so hateful.

Tina shot the woman a dispassionate look. "I'm not saying your daughter is responsible." She cocked her head. "Of course, I'm also not saying she isn't." She looked at Mercedes. "You wanted to hurt Kurt. Congratulations."

Mercedes shook her head in denial.

"By the way, Artie says hi," Tina finished, reaching out for the doorknob, twirling on her heel, and slamming the door behind her.

Her breath hitched as she walked to her car.

That had gone exactly as she had expected, had wanted, so why didn't she feel any better?
A Regent Arrives

After metaphorically crucifying Mercedes, Tina decided she had to atone for her behavior, though not necessarily to Mercedes herself. The fact of the matter was that she was still too angry at the girl, too fearful of what would happen to Burt, and too resentful of Mercedes and Finn's attempts at martyrdom to apologize. The words would have been empty, and she wasn't one to offer worthless platitudes to make herself, or anyone else, feel better.

The person who needed help was Kurt, so she was going to help him whether he liked it or not. He probably wouldn't like it, she knew, so she decided to couch her helpfulness in allegedly assisting others. She called Brittany, who told her that Puck's mother had returned home from work, and they hatched a plan.

Tina drove to Puck's house, which was not too far from her own, and then followed Brittany, who was driving Santana's car, to Santana's house. Brittany exited the borrowed car, fled into Tina's arms, and then proceeded to sob about her dolphin for several long moments. Rather than give in to her own emotions, Tina took strength from Brittany's breakdown to shore up her own insecurities before shepherding the other girl into the Lopez mansion, to which Brittany had a key.

They went to Santana's room and gathered for her a change of comfortable clothes. At the last minute, Brittany remembered Kurt had left some things from the most recent Cheerio sleepover, which had taken place the previous term. They were only sweats, which all of the cheerleaders had been shocked to discover Kurt even owned, but they were sure he'd be grateful for the option. Leather pants, though absolutely delicious on Kurt Hummel, were not meant to be worn all day.

They locked up behind them, left Santana's car for her, and Tina hightailed it to the Lima Bean, calling to check in with her mother on the way. Tina's mother was hysterical, which was no surprise, considering she loved Kurt as her own and had been on the phone with Sheila Abrams for the past half hour. Their children might no longer be dating, but they still had Kurt in common.

That was kind of weird to consider, actually, that both her mother as well as Artie's treated Kurt as though he were their second child. Taken in conjunction with the fact that Tina and Artie had dated, it made the entire affair seem somewhat incestuous, and Tina couldn't help but examine more closely her new relationship with Mike. That led to some unwelcome comparisons to Finn and Quinn, Finn and Rachel, Quinn and Puck, and Puck and Rachel.

Tina had absolutely no interest in becoming another New Directions statistic, and she planned on addressing that problem with Mike as soon as possible. They would learn from the mistakes of the others.

It took almost ten minutes for Tina to talk her mother down and convince her that storming the hospital was in no one's best interest. She disconnected and then pulled into the parking lot.

They entered the shop, placed a coffee order large enough to fuel a small banana republic, and debated the relatively few foodstuffs available.

"Kurty would never eat any of this," Brittany said, wrinkling her nose at the glass display cases.

Tina nodded. "They have organic nutrition bars."

"Get a few," Brittany said. "I'll make sure he eats them."

Tina nodded once more, positive that Brittany would somehow find a way to keep her word. The
girl was not above playing, or perhaps even *preying*, upon Kurt's guilt; and if she were to become upset because Kurt wasn't taking care of himself, he was sure to feel guilty indeed. Just as Kurt had the power to get Artie to do anything, Brittany held that same power over Kurt.

As if reading her mind, Brittany turned toward Tina. "How's Artie?" she asked softly.


Brittany nodded miserably.

Tina gave her a gentle smile. "Right after I told him, his second concern, after Kurt, was you."

Brittany's eyes welled. "I knew they were best friends, but it's more than that, isn't it?"

Tina nodded. "Even if Mrs. Hudson marries Uncle Burt, Finn will be Kurt's brother in name only. Artie has always, and always will, hold that title. They would not only die for each other, but kill for each other."

Brittany nodded solemnly. Her relationship with Santana, whatever that was right now, was similar. Anyone who hurt one would earn the eternal wrath of the other. The only real difference was that she and Santana had had lots of awesome sex. Brittany was hoping Kurt and Artie would have some awesome sex and that she would be invited to observe or participate.

She bit her lip. "How do you think Kurt is doing? Really?"

Tina exhaled slowly. "I'm sure it's killing him, but he'll never show it. Not to me, not to Artie, not to you, not to anyone, except possibly..."

"Quinn."

Tina nodded, her surprise obvious. Although, she reconsidered, perhaps she shouldn't have been. If she had learned anything in the past few days, it was that Brittany had more moments of sheer genius and calculated connivance than she ever would have believed possible.

The girl was obviously intelligent. Tina had, on some level, always known this, but had likened Brittany to some kind of eccentric mad scientist. Now, however, she was forced to reconsider her perceptions and wonder if they were, in fact, preconceptions. Oh, she was quite sure that Brittany had some bats in her belfry, but she doubted there were as many roosting as Brittany would have most people presume.

Her manipulation of Kurt regarding Peterson had been a sight to behold. The only thing more impressive was that Kurt had been aware of the machinations and authorized them, which meant Kurt was probably a direct descendent of Machiavelli, which was just awesome.

"They get each other," Brittany said, shrugging a shoulder. "I know what you mean about Artie and Kurt being brothers, but Kurty and Quinn have, like, a mind-twin thing."

Tina nodded again.

"Should we pick her up, too?" Brittany asked.

Tina hesitated. "I don't think so," she finally said. "I'm pretty certain Sylvester or Pillsbury asked Kurt who he wanted to go with him. He chose Puck and Santana, and there's a reason for that."

Brittany tugged on her ponytail. "Probably the god thing," she said. "Quinn gets super-religious
when she's scared or angry, and Kurty doesn't like that." She nodded. "Okay, no Quinn." She
handed the clerk her credit card. "What else can we do?"

"We should probably avoid Kurt at all costs," Tina sadly replied. "It's likely he doesn't want anyone
with him. It was one thing for Santana and Puck to take him, but now that he knows what's going
on, what he can expect, he probably wants to be alone." She nodded to herself. "In fact, I bet he
chose them specifically because he knew they would leave him alone."

Brittany bit her lip and nodded again. "You'll probably have to stop me from killing Finn."

Tina snorted. "Right now, I'm sure either his mother or his own conscience is punishing him far
better than we ever could." She sighed. "The thing is, Finn likes Kurt. I mean, he really likes him. I
don't know if he likes Kurt as a friend or something more, and Finn doesn't know that either. He's
scared, so he lashes out at the person who's causing the confusion."

"But that's not fair," Brittany said quietly. "You can't make someone like you. If Finn likes Kurt,
that's on him. No one can make you gay."

"I think Finn knows that," Tina said, "but knowing and understanding are two different things."

Brittany glared at the barista. "Boys are stupid," she savagely announced. "Except for Kurt."

Tina smiled, nodded, grabbed their purchases, and shepherded Brittany out to the parking lot.

Burt's surgery was expected to go for at least another hour.

Finn restlessly paced about the waiting room, much to the annoyance of everyone else, who did their
best to ignore him. Santana and Puck did so only out of deference to Kurt, sensing he was too close
to an edge from which they would not be the ones to push him. Part of Carole wanted to send her
son home, as she knew he was fraying the nerves of the others, but worried what Finn would do
without her supervision.

She knew he felt responsible and guilty. She also knew she couldn't absolve him of those emotions
and that he would continue to feel them regardless of any comforting words she could offer. The
truth of the matter was that she was very angry with Finn. She didn't hold him accountable for Burt's
stroke, but she also couldn't help but wonder how much of Finn's behavior might have contributed to
it.

She repressed a sigh and said another silent prayer.

Santana, after suitably distracting Puck with a *Highlights* magazine, sat with her legs crossed and
arms folded defensively across her chest.

She hated hospitals.

She respected her mother, a doctor who literally saved lives every single day, but she herself hated
hospitals. Every time she had stepped foot in this building, it was the specter of Death that grabbed
her attention, not the miraculous operations and innovative treatments that shined a spotlight on the
best of what medicine could offer.

Hospitals reminded her of when she was ten and her brother died. They reminded her of when she
was twelve and her mother had a miscarriage. They reminded her of her first HIV test, after which
she had never again engaged in unsafe sex.
But she would sit here until Kurt no longer wished her to do so, leaving as soon as he asked. He had had too many choices taken from him in the past few days, and she wouldn't be the one to take another. Besides, she well understood his need to grieve and regret and bargain in solitude.

She narrowed her eyes as that idiotic social worker began circling their little cabal as though she were a shark. If the stupid bitch made another power play, Santana herself would be leading the revolt. Despite what he may have insisted, Kurt was too fragile right now.

She vaguely registered the dinging of the elevator, but paid it no mind until Kurt abruptly leapt to his feet and began charging toward the doors.

"Aunt Cam!" he exclaimed, voice fraught with tension and anguish.

Santana raised her head and an interested brow, curious as to this previously unknown aunt. Kurt had dropped the woman's name a few times, but none of them had ever gotten the feeling that he was especially close to the woman.

As Camille Saroyan enveloped her nephew in her arms, Santana's eyebrows skyrocketed.

The woman was beautiful. Dressed in slim dark-washed jeans, a fitted white Oxford, and black patent leather spiked heels, she was both petite and voluptuous. A lightweight black leather blazer completed an ensemble which was at once both classic and trendy. Her long ebony hair was worn down, and Santana had never seen a woman look so good with bangs.

Camille Saroyan was also black.

Kurt Hummel, the whitest white boy to ever white, had a black aunt.

A black biological aunt.

Santana was annoyed at her own surprise. She was annoyed Kurt had never mentioned that his aunt was black, despite the fact that she knew he had a tendency not to focus on stereotypical hallmarks used to classify people. He had never made mention of the races of Matt, Mercedes, Tina, or Mike. He'd never made mention of Santana's own ethnicity, or of Puck and Rachel's Jewish identities. He recognized them, of course, but they really had no impact on him.

Kurt was often blind to that which caused so much attention, probably because he had been judged so often and solely on his sexuality. He didn't care about things like race or creed, and while he respected the differences amongst his friends and acquaintances, he was very much a part of that post-deconstructionalist trend which tended to judge the individual on their merit rather than their makeup.

And judge people, Kurt did. However, his judging could be boiled down to one salient point: whether or not one was an asshole. If a person was an asshole, Kurt wanted nothing to do with them, which explained why he had almost never spoken to Puck or Quinn until the last year. After Quinn and Puck had been put through their travails, arguably emerging as better people, Kurt embraced them.

Santana didn't know how that explained Finn - or even herself, for that matter - but she supposed even Kurt was entitled to a few mistakes.

She shook her head to clear it and watched as Kurt raised his head and blinked uncertainly at a huge man who was towering over him.

"Uncle Seeley?" he asked in a confused voice.
In reply, the man bent down and actually *picked Kurt up*, balancing the boy on his hip. Kurt turned extremely red and buried his face in Seeley's shoulder as his legs automatically wound around the man's waist.

"I'm not a little boy anymore!" an indignant Kurt squawked in protestation, despite all evidence to the contrary.

"You'll always be my baby boy," Seeley cooed.

Kurt groaned and dropped his chin on to the man's shoulder.

Camille rolled her eyes. "Seeley, stop being...you."

He gave her a sullen glare and deposited Kurt back on the ground, beaming when a shy Kurt held on to his hand.

Santana took a moment to look at the others.

Puck, unsurprisingly, was staring at Camille as though dinner had been served. Santana was sure he'd be punished at a more appropriate time, especially given the narrowing of Kurt's eyes, which suggested to her he had noticed Puck's unsubtle attentions.

Finn, also unsurprisingly, was all but frothing at the mouth that some unknown man was touching Kurt.

Carole looked absolutely baffled by the entire display.

Santana then looked at her mother, who was smirking back at her.

Huh.

All these years, Santana had believed she had inherited her smirk from her lawyer father, but no.

Her mom really was awesome.

Kurt rambled semi-coherently about everything that had happened as Camille took note of the signs of physical exhaustion he was exhibiting. His posture was rather poor and his shoulders hunched, which was so far from the nephew she knew as to be alien. There was a reason Seeley's old nickname for Kurt had been *Wadsworth*.

Violent purple smudges were just beginning to set in under his eyes, which were dull and lifeless. Those eyes were slightly red, but there was no indication Kurt had been crying. Knowing him, he was probably holding it in until he was alone. She repressed a sigh. One of the things she liked least about her nephew was how abnormally controlled he was, at least where his own emotions were concerned.

She disliked it precisely because he had inherited it from her. She didn't like to be reminded of her own foibles.

She studied Kurt, who had all but glued himself to Seeley's side. It was only now Camille could admit, albeit silently, how grateful she was that Seeley had insisted on coming with her.

Seeley and Kurt were a strange pair. They had absolutely nothing in common except for a fondness for Camille herself. They looked nothing alike. Seeley was *very* Catholic and Kurt was most definitely...not. Seeley was smart, particularly about people and their motivations, but Kurt was
practically a genius, even if his IQ score didn't definitively state as much.

Kurt, despite living in this tiny, repressive town, was extremely cosmopolitan. He was witty and urbane and sophisticated beyond his years. Seeley, conversely, and despite living in the nation's capital, was pretty much a farmboy who had traded in bib overalls for the black suits required by his employer.

They didn't share political or religious ideologies. They didn't like the same music, television programs, or films. They didn't share a fashion sense. They didn't read the same books.

Yet, somehow, they adored each other.

Camille once believed it was because Seeley in fact shared many traits with Burt Hummel, and thus Kurt had come to view Seeley as a surrogate father, but that didn't exactly make sense. Why go in search of a surrogate father so similar to your own when your own father was right next to you? Granted, she knew that Kurt and Burt's relationship had been strained at times, but they were absolutely devoted to each other.

Perhaps it was because Seeley had been the first adult male who had recognized and accepted Kurt's sexuality. Seeley had known since Kurt was a child that the boy was gay. Of course, Burt had, as well, but had trouble reconciling it.

It always surprised Camille just how nonjudgmental Seeley was when it came to Kurt. Although not racist, Seeley did have his prejudices, and he certainly had never been politically correct. Despite the fact that they had dated, Camille had heard him make off-color remarks about blacks. And Jews. And Protestants. And Asians. And gays. And everyone else. It was just his way, and it was only the fact that he truly didn't mean any offense that kept him from being beaten like a piñata.

Kurt, for whatever reason, however, had always been exempt from Seeley's mocking humor. Camille didn't know why. She would have considered it was because of Parker, Seeley's son, and that perhaps he could see Kurt in place of Parker...

But that didn't make sense. Kurt was almost a decade older than Parker, who hadn't even been born when she and Seeley had dated.

Maybe it was just Kurt. People tended to become very defensive of him. She certainly was.

So she let Seeley coddle her nephew while she studied the others who had stepped forward. She didn't know who any of them were. The heart of the matter was that she and Kurt were not that close, despite the fact that they loved each other deeply. Part of it was that Camille had never been comfortable around children. Another part was that she had always felt awkward and resented by her sister's family, as they were not her own, even though none of them had ever made her feel that way.

Camille Saroyan was the product of an affair between Barbara Babbs and Luc Valois, a married French aristocrat. Luc Valois had been, and continued until his death to be, married to Katrine Delacroix. Luc and Katrine were old French money, though Katrine's family was much wealthier and far more prominent. That basically meant that, while Luc had the pedigree, Katrine had the cash.

Barbara had met Luc during her junior year of college, while studying abroad in France. Camille didn't know most of the details, her mother had never told her, but her parents had met at a jazz club in the Marais one night in April, during which a tipsy Barbara, spurred on by her giggly fellow students, stood up and performed an impromptu number with the band.

Luc had been instantly smitten, and Barbara, young and idealistic and very sheltered, had fallen
hopelessly in love. Their affair was torrid but brief, resulting in Camille.

Camille wanted to hate the older married man who had seduced her very young mother, who had left her alone and pregnant while he went back to his wife and their château.

It wasn't that easy, however.

Barbara had told Camille the truth only on her deathbed, right before Camille was to start medical school, and only because Luc was long dead.

That truth was that Luc had never known he had fathered a child with Barbara, not until long after the fact. Barbara had returned to the United States, finished college a semester early, had her baby, and then fallen in love with Anthony Saroyan, who had adopted Camille without a second thought. They went on to have a second daughter, Felicia.

When Camille was nine, she developed aplastic anemia, an autoimmune disease in which the bone marrow does not produce sufficient new cells to replace red blood cells. She had needed a bone marrow transplant and no one in her family had been a match. Barbara had reached out to Luc, who came to the United States, donated, and then quietly left. Camille recovered and dedicated her life to medicine.

Camille had never been told the identity of her donor and lived in blissful ignorance until her mother was dying of cancer. Barbara then told her of her biological father, their history, and that Luc had left her a large trust fund upon his death.

She had never received the answers she so desperately needed. Why hadn't her mother told Luc sooner about their child? Why hadn't Luc revealed himself to his daughter before his death? Why had he never claimed her? Had he ever wanted her, loved her?

She didn't know, and Barbara didn't have the answers. All Barbara knew was that Luc had saved their child's life and had provided for her.

Camille had resolved that she had no desire for children of her own.

Then Barbara had died and the trust was left to Camille to oversee. Katrine Valois had somehow learned this and contacted her, revealing that Camille had a half-sister, Suzanne, who lived in the United States.

Camille hadn't wanted anything to do with these people. She wasn't a charity case. She already had a family. She had a promising career ahead of her.

She had tried to give back the money, but Katrine refused. If Camille never wanted to spend the money, fine, but it would always be waiting for her.

Camille went on to finish medical school and began working for the State of New York. She was dating Seeley Booth and enjoying it quite a bit. And then Katrine had contacted her once more. Suzanne was dying.

Camille didn't know how she was supposed to process this information. She had a biological sister whom she had never met, and that sister was now dying and wanted to meet her. That sister was married and had a young child and lived a short plane ride away.

Camille hadn't cared; it was Seeley who had changed her mind.

He had argued, quite convincingly, that despite Camille's sense of abandonment where Luc was
concerned, regardless of the facts at hand, Suzanne had had nothing to do with any of it. She had barely begun talking when Camille was born. She had grown up believing she had no siblings. She had gone to school, married, had a child, and was dying. She wanted to meet her only sister. How could Camille deny her that?

She couldn't. So she had gone to Ohio and met Suzanne, who had been a beautiful, kind, and generous woman who embraced her with an immediate ferocity.

Camille paused in her reminiscences as she blinked back tears.

It was so unfair.

It was so unfair that her sister, her lovely sister, had died before they had ever truly gotten to know each other. It was unfair that Suzanne had grown up alone. It was unfair that Camille had felt more of a connection to Suzanne in those brief weeks than she ever had in a lifetime with Felicia.

It was unfair that Burt had lost his wife. It was horrifying that Kurt had lost his mother.

*Kurt.*

And, now, he might be facing it again.

Camille pulled Kurt from Seeley, who squawked with protest, and wrapped her arms around her nephew.

"I'm okay," Kurt whispered.

"Bullshit," she said quietly, "but I'm here for you."

"You always have been, Aunt Cam," he said, "and I've always known that."

She swallowed heavily. The truth was that she had been a shit aunt who had buried herself in her work to escape the soap opera of her family. She had promised Suzanne that she would always look out for Kurt, and in some ways, she supposed she had. She had never forgotten a birthday or holiday. She always took time for his calls. Always answered his emails.

But the onus of continuing their relationship had always fallen to Kurt, and Camille knew that wasn't fair, that it was wrong, that *she* was the adult. It wasn't that she resented him or didn't love him - she loved him so much that it frightened her. It frightened her to know she was capable of that much emotion.

She didn't *know* Kurt. She knew that he liked singing and that he was a in a glee club, but she had never heard him sing. She knew that he was incredibly intelligent, but had no idea as to his favorite subjects or professional plans. The only friend of his she had ever met was Artie Abrams, and that was almost a decade ago. She didn't know if Kurt had a boyfriend or even if he had started dating.

She didn't know anything of absolutely *any* import and had never really asked. She was absolutely appalled with herself.

Yet Kurt wasn't. He loved her. He was grateful she was here, she could tell.

She *would* do better by her nephew, she vowed.

She pulled back from him when an impatient throat cleared itself. She turned around to see a young Latina glaring at her.
Camille raised a brow. "Would you like to introduce us to your companions?"

Kurt nodded and smoothly took over. "Of course. This is Santana Lopez, one of my best friends."

Camille noticed the girl's eyes softened unwillingly at the description before the glare reasserted itself. Interesting.

"Her mother, Dr. Lydia Lopez," he continued.

The two women nodded at each other.

"Our friend Noah Puckerman," Kurt added.

Santana scoffed at being referred to as *Puck's friend*.

"And this is Carole Hudson, Dad's fiancée, and her son, Finn," Kurt finished, averting his eyes. He then cleared his throat. "Please allow me to introduce my aunt, Dr. Camille Saroyan."

Lydia's eyes bulged. "Of the Jeffersonian?" she said incredulously.

Camille nodded politely and extended a hand. "I'm pleased to meet you, Dr. Lopez."

"Aunt Cam is a forensic pathologist and the Director of the Medico-Legal Division of the Jeffersonian Institute," Kurt explained for the benefit of the others. "And this is Special Agent Seeley Booth of the FBI. He and Aunt Cam used to date, and I've always considered him to be my uncle."

Seeley placed a strong hand of support on Kurt's shoulder and nodded to the others, his suspicious gaze lingering on Puck and Finn, both of whom wilted.

Santana looked Camille up and down before turning toward Kurt. "Is she the reason you want to be a doctor?"

Camille balked and looked at her nephew, who was bright red.

"Yeah. How come you never told us that, Princess?" Puck gently asked. "We all thought you wanted to be a big Broadway star." He cocked his head. "When did Dr. Homo become the grand plan?"

Seeley growled. "What did you just say, boy?"

Kurt waved a hand. "That's just Noah, Uncle Seeley. He doesn't mean any offense, and you, more than anyone else, should understand that. Noah's my friend."

Seeley didn't appear to be convinced, and his glower deepened at Finn's snort.

"Right," the other boy said. "He sure was your friend when he was throwing you in the trash every day."

Kurt glared, filled with disbelief that Finn was doing this *again*. Had he learned nothing in the past twenty-four hours?

"What?" Camille hissed in a low, deadly voice that sent delightful shivers down Santana's spine.

"And you were right there helping him, Hudson." Santana spat, "so shut the fuck up."

"What!" Carole roared.
“Santana, watch your mouth!” Lydia warned.

Santana ignored all of them, looking to Seeley, who, for some reason, she respected. "Here's the rundown: the Puckhole, here, used to bully Rainbow - badly - but he's since reformed. He apologized, and Rainbow, for whatever reason, forgave him." She waved a hand. "Some bullshit about being honestly contrite or something." She shrugged. "Whatever."

She turned her condemning glare on Finn. "But this dickhead was there for all of it, helping and not doing a damn thing to stop it. Even after their parents began dating, Hudson gave Tink nothing but shit. Then he goes to Mr. H last night and tells him that Kurt got lucky while in Europe this summer. Next day, Mr. H has a stroke. You do the math."

"Santana!" Lydia screamed, grabbing her daughter by the arm and hauling her away to scold her in private.

Santana went along gamely, looking over her shoulder and smirking at Finn.

Carole began yelling at her son, interrogating him ruthlessly about Santana's charges, while Seeley listened keenly for whatever information she might unearth. Camille was trying to process this information, wondering why Kurt had never told her.

Meanwhile, Puck looked at Kurt, who had turned chalky, and shook his head angrily.

"Maybe you all should shut the hell up for a minute and remember where we are and why we're here!" he shouted.

He crossed the small space separating them and threw his arms around Kurt, who stood there bewildered and utterly mortified.

Carole blanched and hauled Finn away in the same manner which Lydia had just employed, although rather than grabbing an arm, she went for an ear, causing Finn to yelp.

Puck, knowing his efforts were not doing much, pushed Kurt at Camille, who shook herself from her stupor and shepherded him down the hall.

Seeley stood at attention, glaring at Puck, who sighed.

"What do you want me to say?"

"The truth," Seeley barked. "What the hell has happened to my nephew in this town?"

Camille understood the last thing Kurt needed was to be pressured. She wouldn't do that to him.

Instead, she sought to calm him, and did so by asking him to recite the facts of his father's case as he knew them. Shockingly, it worked, and he offered a quiet and concise, yet thorough, summary of Burt's diagnosis and prognosis. She knew many interns who wouldn't have performed half as well.

She was startled by his knowledge and precocity, but most of all by how eerily he reminded her of herself. His tone was unemotional but guarded, and his grasp of the medical jargon was superlative. She'd had no idea he had been considering a career in medicine, but even this brief interaction suggested that he would do well.

Screw that. He would dominate whatever field he entered, and she was looking forward to it. She couldn't help but feel some small measure of pride, no matter how inappropriate the situation or
circumstances. Despite being a lackluster aunt, perhaps she had inspired him on some small scale, and she flushed with triumph.

"Don't ask me about anything Santana said," he softly said. "I've spent the entire summer dealing with it, trying to move past it." He paused. "I suspect I will always have some difficulty with how I've been treated in this town, but I will not be ruled by it. I won't give anyone that kind of power over me."

Camille understood, though she worried. He was so much like her, so controlled and focused, so unwilling to deal with things as they came; rather, he absorbed them and later dissected them in a cold, clinical manner. She knew she couldn't argue with him, with his methods, for they were her own.

She nodded. "And this summer?"

He shrugged mildly. "I went to Europe to visit Katrine and, in the process, fell in love with a wonderful man who treated me like I was something precious, something beautiful and unfathomable to behold. We made love. We admitted our love." His eyes turned distant. "And then it was over. It had to be. Neither of us wanted it to be, but circumstances conspired against us."

He chin began to tremble. "I love you Aunt Cam, and I'm so grateful that you and Uncle Seeley are here, but right now, all I want is him." He shook his head in misery as his tears spilled over. "But I can't have him."

There was nothing she could say. Physicians had spent centuries trying to cure heartbreak and had never developed any surefire method. So she held him and let him cry.
Santana had thrown herself into a chair and feigned paying attention to her mother's furiously whispered scolding. She nodded in all the right places and made some grunting noises to indicate she was listening. It kind of reminded her of her last date with a guy.

The entire time, however, she was looking past her mother's shoulder and inwardly smirking at how Fink Hudson was being raked over the coals by his irate mother. It was almost orgasmic.

"Santana Maria Esperanza Lopez!" Lydia growled.

Santana decided she'd had enough. She'd had enough trying to placate people, enough of conforming to social conventions which were antithetical to her own ideals, and enough of trying to be someone she wasn't so that other people would just leave her the hell alone.

"You know what, Mom?" she quietly interrupted. "I'm not sorry. I don't feel guilty. I would do it again in a heartbeat. I wish I hadn't waited so long to do it. I have zero fucks to give when it comes to Finn Hudson."

Lydia stared, unused to her daughter not capitulating for the sake of it. Santana would eventually cave, at least where her parents were concerned, if only to keep the peace. She wouldn't always admit to being wrong, but she would apologize for her tactlessness.

"You have no idea how badly that son of a bitch has hurt my friend," Santana seethed, "and Kurt is my friend." She arched a brow. "Do you know why he is? Because he accepts me for who I am. He neither needs nor wants me to change. He doesn't want me to censor myself for the sake of other people. He doesn't want me to be inauthentic because it's easier. He doesn't want me to lie to spare the feelings of others. And you know what? I like that."

Lydia blinked.

"I like who I am when I'm with Kurt. He makes me happy. He makes me feel like the person I've been trying to be for as long as I can remember. I don't have to apologize for my thoughts or feelings." She set her jaw. "I'm not a nice person, Mom, but I'm a good person. Kurt knows that, and he loves me for that."

"I..."

"No," Santana interjected. "I wasn't finished. All of my life, I've lied to myself about who I am and what I want, and it's cost me the most important person I'll ever know. I love Brittany. I want to be with Brittany. What we had wasn't some passing fling. It wasn't a phase. I'm not going to get over it. It's not some teenage rebellion. It's not me being corrupted. It's not anything you and Dad did or didn't do, or did or didn't buy me when I was kid. It's not from lack of hugs. It's not because I was secretly molested and never told you, because that never happened.

"It's who I am, Mom, and who I am is a lesbian."

Tears filled Lydia's eyes.

"It's not going to change," Santana said flatly. "I'm not going to change. I don't want to change. I couldn't admit it before; not to you, and not even to myself. I've lost Brittany, probably for good. I treated her horribly, as though she were an experiment or an afterthought. She had always been there for me. There was nothing I couldn't tell her." She paused. "Except how much I love her."
She dropped her eyes. "And, in the end, that's what drove her away. That's how I drove her away." She shook her head and hastily wiped away angry tears from her eyes. "Well, fuck that. I'm tired of compromising. I'm tired of living a half-life. I'm tired of pretending that I'm not terrified of what people will think of me. I'm tired of wondering if I'm going to lose you and Dad. I've already lost myself, and, frankly, that's so much worse than anything anyone else could say or do."

Lydia covered her mouth with a hand.

Santana looked past her, down the hall where Kurt had disappeared. "He makes me strong. He doesn't resent the strength I already possess. He knows everything about me and loves me anyway, and you have no idea how much that means to me." She finally met her mother's gaze. "I will hurt those who hurt him. Not because he asked me to, because he never would, but because they deserve it."

Her hands curled into fists. "For ten years I've watched people torment him, physically and verbally and emotionally. I've heard the taunts and the plots. I've seen the sneers and the disgust. I've felt their rancor and their own self-loathing. Finn was one of those people who did that to him, and I said nothing. I did nothing. Do you know why? Because whenever I saw Kurt being attacked, I understood how easily it could have been me. How likely it would have been me."

She tugged on her ponytail. "You have no idea how much I hate myself for that, how much I despise myself for being so weak. But Kurt doesn't hate me. He loves me, and that means everything."

Her hands shook with rage. "He was destroyed last night. Kurt was one of the few virgins I knew, not because no one would have him, but because he wanted to wait for the right person. Because he respects himself. And he did wait, and he found that person, and he fell in love. He came back here smiling and confident and...and joyous, and then Finn and Mercedes just shat all over him. And that is not okay."

She shook her head in anger. "I wish I had waited. I wish I had the love and respect for myself that Kurt has, that he has for me, but I didn't. I acted out. I slept around. I gave it away. Not because I enjoyed it, but because I thought I could overcome what I knew to be true, that I could lock it away and drown it out, but I couldn't, and I won't do it any longer."

She stared into her mother's eyes. "I deserve better than that. I'm worth more than that. And Kurt's the one who made me realize it. So, yeah, if I can make his life easier, I will. If I can dilute some of the poison with which he surrounds himself because he wants to be fair or be a nice guy, then I will. I won't be sorry. I won't regret it. Because that's exactly what he would do for me. He stands up for every one of his friends, and I won't do any less for him, because that's not the person I want to be. Not anymore."

She bit her lip. "I understand if you can't accept this, and I'm sorry if this upsets you or makes you uncomfortable, but I won't be sorry for being who I am. I've apologized for that enough, and I'm not going to continue doing it. Not for you, not for Dad, not for the kids at school. I'm angry with myself for not being able to do it for Brittany, and I hope one day she can forgive me, but if she can't, it's no less than I deserve."

She took a deep breath. "But I will be strong for Kurt, because I couldn't live with myself if I wasn't. I won't be yet another person who tells him that he needs to forgive and forget. I won't tell him that he needs to turn the other cheek, because he's already been struck across all four. I won't tell him that he needs to change in order to make other people feel more comfortable about being assholes. I will be the friend to him that I was never able to be for myself."

Unbeknownst to Santana and Lydia, they had acquired an audience. Kurt and Camille, Seeley and
Puck, Carole and Finn, and Tina and Brittany had all gathered around, staring at mother and daughter.

Puck was nodding his head so furiously, at any moment it might have snapped off and rolled into Oncology. Finally, he had the words to express his own revelation with regard to Kurt and Finn and their fucked-up high school. He wanted to be friends with Kurt not just because Kurt was awesome, but because there were aspects of himself in Kurt, ones he couldn't or wouldn't previously acknowledge. Like Santana, he had acted out, but he had channeled his anger toward Kurt because his lizard brain had viewed Kurt as the source of his turmoil.

But that was over now, and Noah was all the better for it. If Kurt could forgive him, then perhaps Noah would one day be able to forgive Puck.

Finn was gawking at Santana as though he had no idea who the girl before him was, and it was in that moment that he realized how true that was. He didn't know Santana.

Oh, he knew Santana Lopez, had known her for more years than he wanted to admit, but he had never known the girl behind the name, behind the mask, either because he hadn't been looking or he hadn't wanted to look. Or, because Santana had never allowed it. He supposed it was some combination of the three.

Her words were like a kick in the nuts, and Finn wondered why it always took the intervention of another for him to recognize that Kurt was an awesome dude. Sure, Kurt had his bad points, everyone did, but at least Kurt acknowledged his faults, and he did so to others. Finn, meanwhile, only admitted his deficits in the privacy of his own mind, or to one other person, like his mother or Rachel.

For the past year, he had continually fucked up where Kurt was concerned, and while he had known it and that Kurt would always forgive him for it, he finally got that that time was now over. It had to be, for all of their sakes, but also because, for the first time ever, he totally understood he had pushed Kurt to the limit. It was only a matter of time before Kurt started pushing back, and Finn knew just how hard Kurt could push.

Also, Kurt no longer stood alone. Artie, Tina, and Brittany were still in his corner, as they had always been, but now there was Sam, an unknown; and Rachel, who could actually be pretty damned scary when she put her mind to it.

He suspected that she had put her mind to it. He had manipulated her last night and it had cost her whatever ground she had managed to gain with Kurt. He well knew that Rachel was, for whatever reason, kind of obsessed with Kurt. His opinion mattered to her, was one of the few that did, and she would never again let herself be backed into a corner where either Kurt, or Finn himself, was concerned.

He had pushed her to make a choice, and she had, but it had been the wrong one. She wouldn't make that mistake again.

Not to mention others had sided with Kurt, including Mike, Matt, and Mr. Schuester. Hell, if even Schue was now willing to come across for Kurt, Finn knew he had no hope of coming out of this with any shred of dignity intact. Not like he had one, or ever had.

Somehow, and against every law of probability, Quinn, Puck, and even Santana had joined Team Kurt.
Finn knew just how monumental an achievement that was. Quinn had never cared about having friends. Puck had never really cared about anyone except himself and maybe his sister. Santana...well, he'd never understand her. He'd never trust her, despite her words just moments ago.

Of course, his opinion didn't really matter, and that realization was finally starting to sink in. The entire club had turned against him. It wasn't a matter of taking sides as they had done when various members had gotten together or broken up; this had been a universal declaration. All of them supported Kurt, and he and Mercedes had been left out in the cold.

Finn didn't like the cold, and he really didn't like being in the same boat as Mercedes. He also didn't understand what the hell was wrong with that girl. Sure, he was jealous, too. He was jealous of Kurt, he was jealous of the friendships Kurt had with other people, and, yeah, he was finally recognizing that he wanted Kurt all to himself. He guessed the same was true of Mercedes, but it still didn't make sense.

Kurt had been her best friend and that was a major thing. Kurt had never let anyone as close to him as he had Mercedes, and that should have told the girl how much he valued her and their friendship. Yeah, they'd had their squabbles and silences, but they had always made up and appeared to come out stronger for the strife.

Finn supposed that had all been a sham, a front both of them had put forward to disguise their vulnerabilities from each other and everyone else.

But why was Mercedes so pissed off that Kurt had had sex? Finn knew he was upset because his feelings for Kurt were all conflicted and he understood he was going to have to spend a lot of time working them out, but what was Mercedes' deal? She knew Kurt was gay. Everyone knew Kurt was gay, that he'd never end up with a girl. Mercedes had to know that, so he was positive there was something more going on than Mercedes just being jealous that Kurt got laid. He wondered what it was.

He'd certainly never ask. He didn't like Mercedes, never had, and especially not after she had blabbed about Beth's paternity to everyone in the club except for him and then convinced them to keep their mouths shut about it. Finn was still confused about that, particularly about why Kurt had gone along with it. At that point in time, Kurt's feelings for him had been at their strongest, and Kurt wasn't the kind of person to keep secrets that would end up hurting someone he loved.

It was all so weird.

He wanted to run away. He knew he didn't belong here, that he never should have come. He really cared about Burt, maybe even loved him like a dad, but this wasn't his place, and he didn't need the earlier angry gazes of Puck and Santana to tell him that.

He had been devastated when he'd heard of Burt's stroke. He'd also been angry, furious that Kurt hadn't been the one to tell him. He'd stupidly admitted that to his mother, who had been quick to bring him to heel, blasting at him that Kurt didn't owe him anything, particularly after the events of last night. Her lecture from this morning came back to him in full-force and she screamed her fury that he had basically ignored everything she had told him.

Kurt wasn't his brother; Kurt wasn't even his friend anymore.

God, that hurt.

If he didn't have Kurt, who did he have? At the end of last year, the club had united for the competition, but the distance between them had been greater than ever before. Sure, he had Rachel,
which was what he had told himself was all he wanted, but now he knew that wasn't strictly true. Rachel wanted him, but he was pretty sure it wasn't for the right reasons. He had paid careful attention to her watching Sam and Kurt's performance yesterday, and then Kurt's solo later. Rachel may have loved him, but not enough to curtail her need to be number one.

And, if he was being honest with himself, which was way overdue, part of what had attracted him to Rachel was how much she had wanted him, whatever the reasons.

Kurt...Kurt had just loved him.

And Finn had thrown it away like so much garbage, as though it hadn't meant anything. Now that he saw Kurt giving love to other people, he was angry, and hurt, and sad. He was feeling everything he had put Kurt through, and, as usual, he was trying to blame everyone but himself.

Kurt loving him had meant everything. He was just too stupid to see it at the time.

He'd been so stupid about so many things. The problem was that he didn't know how to stop being stupid, and that terrified him, especially now that there were so many others waiting in the wings to be the friend to Kurt he should have been.

That he had wanted to be.

Finn knew there was nothing he could ever say, nothing he could ever do, that would ever compare to the words Santana had just so freely given.

It was sobering to realize that, for all her evilness, she was a better person than he was.
Cocoon

A resentful Finn watched from the corner of his eye as Tina and Brittany swarmed about Kurt, trying to take care of him. For the first time, Finn realized that Kurt didn't like it when other people tried to handle him. He didn't understand why he hadn't gotten that before, especially when it was so obvious. He was fairly certain that the only reason Kurt hadn't demanded they leave was because it might have hurt Brittany's feelings, which was something Kurt - and anyone else, really - was loath to do.

Kurt had fallen silent and obeyed Brittany's instructions, most likely in a bid to get her to leave and take Tina, Puck, and Santana with her. He allowed Brittany to escort him to the bathroom, which she entered with him. Less than five minutes later, they both emerged, Kurt dressed in a drab gray sweatsuit that made him look about twelve years old.

It suddenly struck Finn just how young Kurt was. Oh, they were practically the same age, but Kurt had always acted so much older, like an adult. It was hard to reconcile the fact that Kurt was, like him, still just a kid. A kid who'd had to deal with far more than anyone else their age.

He knew better than to open his mouth to anyone, so he just sat and observed. He watched an anxious and slightly fearful Puck be interrogated by that FBI guy. Seeley Booth was the first person Finn had ever met that didn't make him feel like a giraffe. Granted, Booth had a lot more muscle mass, but he moved with a fluid grace while Finn lumbered about like a big puppy who hadn't yet grown into his feet. He wondered where this guy had been all this time, why he hadn't been checking on Kurt.

Most likely because Kurt hadn't wanted to involve him. He liked to handle his own business. Finn admired that, but he couldn't help but think that Kurt's life might be very different if he would just accept that people wanted and were able to help him. He knew Kurt still hadn't told Burt all the shit he and Puck had used to do to him. He wasn't sure why. Maybe because Kurt wanted their parents to be happy? Probably.

Why was he always so suspicious of Kurt's motives? Yeah, Kurt could scheme like a boss, but he wasn't malicious. He wasn't vengeful unless his friends were hurt. So Kurt had probably let him slide because it was more important that his father was happy, which just made Finn like a huge asshole all over again.

He watched as Kurt called the auto shop's assistant manager to let him know what had happened to Burt. He listened as Kurt explained that he himself would come in tomorrow to do the books, adjust the schedule, and submit the payroll. It somewhat shocked him that Kurt could do all that stuff, that he even knew how. Then he remembered that Kurt actually worked at the shop, was certified and everything. Why didn't he ever think about that whenever he became jealous about Kurt's newest whatsit?

He had complained to his mother about Kurt's truck and Kurt's bookbag and Kurt's everything. She had stared at him for a very long time before asking if he was aware that, while Burt had bought the truck for Kurt, it was Kurt who paid for the insurance and the gas while doing the maintenance work himself; that Kurt, in fact, paid for all of his own clothes, shoes, school supplies, and almost everything else; that Kurt had been working since he was twelve.

Kurt worked and sang in Glee and led the Cheerios, all while maintaining an almost perfect GPA and listening to his friends' myriad problems, in addition to keeping the house.
How?

How did Kurt do it all?

Because he had to, him mom had once explained. Kurt had been doing most of that since Suzanne had died. It was just what he knew.

Finn, by comparison, knew he did very little. He went to football practice and games; he went to Glee and learned his songs; and then he went home. He did the bare minimum to scrape by in school, he almost never cleaned his room or made a meal, and he never did his laundry or any housework. The most he did was mow and rake the yard, and that was only because Puck had dropped by one day and asked why the fuck Finn was in the air-conditioned house when his mom was out killing herself to mow the lawn? Ashamed, Finn had started and continued to do that one chore.

He looked over at his mom. She was so tired. She had been tired for as long as he could remember. She worked so hard to take care of him. He had things pretty easy, really. All his mom expected of him was to do the best that he could in school and help out around the house when he had time. He couldn't even manage to do that much for her.

He looked again toward Kurt. It wasn't just that he was jealous of Kurt; it was also that he felt so completely inadequate when compared to him. Kurt was able to manage his time and do everything he needed to do while making plans with Mercedes or Artie or Tina. It was awesome, really, so why was he always trying to blame Kurt for his own shortcomings? Was he really blaming Kurt for being capable?

How fucking pathetic was that?

Finn's scrutiny intensified.

What was it that he felt for Kurt?


And also love. Yes, love. He was certain about this. But what kind?

He knew he loved Kurt as a friend. He was pretty sure he already saw Kurt as something of a brother.

He swallowed heavily and looked down, his cheeks pinking. It wasn't brotherly feelings he had experienced upon realizing Kurt had slept with someone else. It wasn't just friendship he had felt last term when he had been jacking off and his fantasy had switched from Rachel in her naughty schoolgirl outfit to Kurt in his Cheerios uniform.

He sighed.

He'd been playing dumb for far too long.

It was no longer working and everyone was starting to see through it. He knew he had romantic feelings for Kurt, or at least sexual ones, but he had been trying to suppress them, to forget about them, but he couldn't. He was jealous of Puck's relationship with Kurt. He was jealous of Sam. He was jealous of Kurt's summer boyfriend.

If he had just been jealous of Kurt's friends monopolizing his time, he would have been jealous of Artie or Mercedes or Tina or Brittany, but he never had been. He had been jealous of Quinn and
Santana, but he realized he also viewed them, in some fashion, as his. He didn't know why. He didn't want Quinn back and he wished he'd never had Santana, but he was still jealous. He was jealous of Kurt having them and of them for having Kurt.

He wasn't gay. Well, he was pretty sure he wasn't. He'd never had feelings for any boy except Kurt, so he didn't know if those feelings were real or if they were specific to Kurt or if they were symptomatic of something else.

He knew he was wrong for blaming Kurt. He knew he was wrong for treating Kurt like property and not as a person in his own right. He knew Kurt didn't exist to make him feel better about himself.

But he didn't want to be gay. He didn't want to be bisexual. He didn't want to be so confused all the time.

He also wasn't blind. He had seen how Puck had been looking at Kurt. He’d seen that Sam was looking at Kurt the same way. They weren't confused, so why was he? If he liked Kurt, he liked Kurt. He didn't even have to tell Kurt if he didn't want to, nor did he have to tell anyone else. Why couldn't he just deal with his shit instead of trying to offload it onto Kurt at every opportunity?

Why was he such a dickhead all the time?

Santana was passively watching Finn as she listened to the conversations around her. She was pretty sure he'd just had an a-ha moment and she didn't like it. She also knew there was nothing she could do about it. She wanted to protect Kurt and make things okay for him but knew she couldn't do that either, and he would resent her interference.

Also, some small part of herself understood what Finn was going through, knowing your feelings might make you ... something ... and not wanting to admit it. Not wanting to admit you'd had those feelings at all. Maybe that's why she was always so frustrated with his blatant idiocy: she saw him stumbling along a path she had once walked and it made her question her own behavior.

What she had told her mother was true: she had always seen the hell Kurt had been made to endure, but she hadn't done anything about it because she herself didn't want to be seen through that lens.

The Gay Lens.

As badass as she knew she was, she knew she probably couldn't have handled all of the volleys that had been thrown at Kurt. Of course, she also knew she was luckier than him. She'd always had Brittany by her side. She knew that, if push came to shove, Puck would kick all kinds of ass to keep her safe. Even Quinn, as brittle as their frenemy relationship was, would've used her pull to keep her out of the crosshairs. Hell, Sylvester probably would have done the same.

Kurt had never had any of that, yet he had dealt with his lot far better than she ever had hers.

He was so much stronger than her, so why was she trying to take care of him now? He didn't need it. He might not even want it. Was it just to soothe her guilty conscience? She had to admit, part of her had been extremely flattered and validated that, in one of his darkest moments, Kurt had asked for her.

That shit was important; it had meant something.

So she'd do what she had told her mom. She would protect Kurt with everything inside of her, even from herself if necessary, and woe unto those who tried to stop her.
Seeley could feel his pressure rising with every revelation this punk made with regard to Kurt's life in this miserable hellhole. What Kurt had had to put up with, what he'd been made to endure, that law enforcement and the school administration had done nothing to help him ... it made him see red.

Vandalism, telephonic harassment, verbal and physical assault, death threats ... what the fuck was this? This was America, land of the free and home of the brave; there was nothing brave about hiding behind a phone receiver or scrawled threats on a locker.

It killed him that Kurt had been going through this with no help, because he knew there was no way Kurt would have brought this stuff to Burt. That just wasn't Kurt's way and never had been. He had always tried to handle things himself, had never wanted to involve his father, had wanted to deal with his own problems.

That was admirable, certainly, but also shortsighted. The bottom line was the Kurt shouldn't have to deal with this shit on his own, but because no one had ever stepped in, stepped up, he now probably believed that there was no one to help him, either because they couldn't or wouldn't.

Well, Seeley was going to do something about that.

What he wasn't going to do was reveal any of this to Camille. He knew her. He knew her far better than their colleagues at the Jeffersonian, who had never seen her truly angry. Camille Saroyan was a fearsome woman. You didn't want to incur her wrath if at all possible. The Queen of the Damned had nothing on this broad.

Tomorrow morning, Principal Figgins was going to get the shit scared out of him. Then he'd pay a visit to the local police precinct. Sexual orientation might not be a protected class in Ohio, but laws had been broken and nothing had been done; that was going to change. He very much doubted the Lima Police Department would welcome a federal investigation into their practices.

Of course, Seeley might not give them the choice.

He thought it was strange that he could only find solitude in his father's hospital room.

They were doing their best, trying to help him. He knew and appreciated that.

He needed them gone.

He needed to be alone so that he could begin truly processing what was happening.

He was terrified. He was absolutely terrified.

His father was going to die. Perhaps not today or tomorrow or within the year, but Burt Hummel would eventually die and Kurt would be alone.

He felt alone all the time. In many areas of his life, it was even true. Still, some part of him understood that Burt was always with him, always in his thoughts and actions. His mother was fading with each passing year and it made him furious. It made him angry and it made him sad and it made him hurt.

It was hard to remember her voice, what she had sounded like. He remembered her singing to him, but he only remembered the songs, not her voice. He would sometimes watch old home movies to remind him and for just a second a spark lighted within his mind and he could remember her voice, but it wasn't a real memory. It was an echo. It was fuzzy and imprecise and it hurt so badly.
He should remember her voice. He should remember what it felt like when she had carded her fingers through his hair. He should remember the smell of her perfume without that stupid dresser.

He was a bad son.

He had yelled at his father for the first time either of them could remember and then his father had a stroke. He knew it was irrational. He knew that it was poor diet and sedentary lifestyle and genetics and luck of the draw and a cruel universe, not him.

But he felt responsible.

He always felt responsible for everything and everyone.

He had a martyr complex, but since he really was often persecuted, he at least came by it honestly.

What was he going to do?

What was he going to do if his father died?

He would have to leave.

He wouldn't be able to bear living in that house, not with the ghosts of two parents.

He would be an orphan.

He was almost eighteen years old, an adult in the eyes of the law, and he would be an orphan.

That wasn't how this was supposed to work. Children were orphans, not almost-adults.

He wondered what he had ever done, what he had ever said, that he deserved this life. He knew he wasn't a nice person. He knew he wasn't even necessarily a good person. He tried. He was trying a lot harder now. He wanted to be happy. Every time he found some small piece of happiness for himself, some glimmer of hope, it was always snatched away.

Why did he never have any control over his own life?

Oh, he knew others had it worse; that he was indeed very fortunate. He had Camille and Katrine and his friends. He had Seeley. He had ...

He ached for Will.

He hated Will.

He hated Will for not trying. He hated Will for not being here. He hated Will for not being able fix everything with the magic he didn't possess.

He hated Will for loving him.

He had known that Will loved him, but until Will admitted it, he didn't have to deal with it. He could push it all down and mourn that it was a lost cause, that they were two ships, that the timing was just off.
Now that he knew, now that Will had said it, it couldn't be taken back.

He wanted it taken back.

He never wanted it taken back.

He was going insane.

He was probably in shock.

He probably should be doing something about it.

He probably should care more.

But he didn't.

Caring never did anything for him.

Caring had never helped him.

All caring had ever done was hurt him.

He wished he could just turn it off. Many people thought he did.

But he didn't. He felt things. He felt them all the time. He felt them keenly.

He just didn't want to.

It would be so much easier, he thought, not to care. Sure, not caring about anything made you a sociopath, but at least sociopaths didn't experience the pain of living. They just existed. It was probably nice, comfortable even.

You never loved but were never unloved. You never hoped but never lost hope. You never knew you were hurting because you didn't know what hurt was.

But that wasn't him and never could be, no matter how desperately he wished it was.

So he would have deal with this. That didn't mean he had to feel it, not right now. He could go through the motions, put on a show, pretend everything was fine. He'd been rehearsing for this role his entire life.

It would have been nice if he believed in god. It would be a relief to just let Jesus take the wheel.

But that wasn't him either.

Being pragmatic was a real bitch, but it was what he knew.

So he would go home. He would do the dishes his father had left in the sink that morning. He would do a few loads of laundry and vacuum the floor and take out the trash. He would make up the guest rooms for his aunt and grandmother. He would arrange to get his assignments. He would actually do them. He would not fall behind in school. He would take care of his father until his father could take care of himself.

He would be Kurt Hummel.

There was just one thing he had to do first.
He stood and looked down passively at his comatose father.

"Don't you die. Don't you dare."
September

Chapter Notes

Yep, an update.

I have no idea whence the next will come, so don't get excited.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was a fight to get out of the hospital.

Carole pleaded with him not to go lest Burt’s diagnosis change, which Kurt understood, he did, but he’d already watched one parent die. He had no desire for an encore. He knew it was selfish but it was what he needed right now. If the worst happened … well, he would probably regret for the rest of his life not being there, but he had to get his house in order.

Not just the dwelling, but his life. Everything had been so easy these past few months, and he knew it was because he had been out of Lima and away from the incessant drama that surrounded everyone he knew. Sure, the summer had been psychologically difficult and emotionally draining, but he had done hard work on himself. He wasn’t going to backtrack now.

He felt Finn’s silent judgment that he would dare leave his father’s bedside.

Well, Finn could go fuck himself.

Kurt knew if he didn’t get away from his pseudo-sibling soon, he would probably attack him with a scalpel. He understood Finn was experiencing an existential crisis, but he had neither the time nor inclination to shepherd him through it. He was so tired and had not even been home a week.

It had taken him a long time, much too long, to realize he didn’t owe Finn anything. They had some bizarre connection to each other – they both recognized it, though not tacitly – and perhaps even loved one another on some level, but the days of him living his life to suit Finn’s double standards and mercurial morality were over.

He had kept Santana and Noah at his side long enough and insisted they go home. They protested vociferously, but it was obvious how exhausted they were. They shouted over him with denials, but ceased once he leveled his Glare of Malevolence at them, regarding him with large eyes.

“I love you,” Kurt said. “I love both of you very much.”

He was somewhat unnerved by the tears which appeared in Noah’s eyes and wondered when the last time his friend heard those words directed at him. It hurt his heart, and he vowed to say them more often.

“I can’t tell you how much I appreciate everything you have done for me. You came to my side with no questions asked, made no demands on me, and let me process this at my own speed and in my own time. I couldn’t ask for better friends than you.”

Santana offered a suspicious snuffle before asserting a glare of her own.
“I’m okay,” he said. “I’m not good and probably won’t be for a very long time, but I am okay. At least for right now.”

Santana opened her mouth.

“Yes, I will tell you when I’m not. I’m not that terrified little boy anymore, Santana. I’m not waiting for anyone to let me out of a dumpster.”

Carole sent a seething glare in Finn’s direction.

“There are things I need to do,” Kurt insisted, “and I need you to allow me to do them. If I need help, I promise I will ask.” He paused. “I know that it might look to some of you that I’m in denial. Tina and Brittany know I’m not.”

The girls nodded in unison.

“This is how I am under severe stress. I have to take a step back and remove myself from the situation so that I can consider my options in a logical manner. I cannot allow my emotions to rule me at this time. I never make good decisions when I do that, and there are important decisions to be made.”

“What do you mean, sweetheart?” asked an anxious Carole.

“I have to be pragmatic because there is no one else who can be. Thank you for covering with the surgery. You gave Dad his best chance at survival. However, the bottom line is that, if he … if he dies, I’ll be on my own.”

He held up a hand to stave off her protests.

“Please let’s not make this any more difficult with best-case scenarios. Of course I’m hoping for that with all of my heart, but if the worst happens, I need to be prepared.”

She sighed in defeat, her shoulders slumping, and nodded.

“Prepared to do what, Kurty?” Brittany whispered.

He looked down at the floor. “What to do with the house, the shop, his things. I’m the only one who can make those decisions, honey. If the worst happens, I can tell you now that it’s very likely I’ll fall apart completely and won’t be able to make rational choices.”

He closed his eyes and blew out a breath. “Dad has a living will. If he doesn’t come out of the coma, life support will be disconnected. That decision will not be left to me and I can’t fight it. I wouldn’t anyway. I would never go against his wishes.”

Brittany took his hand and nodded sadly.

He opened his eyes and looked at Cam. “You know he has maybe a sixty percent chance. Even less that he’ll come out of this fully functional.”

She bit her lip and nodded.

“Fuck,” Seeley hissed.

“What will you do?” Finn asked softly.

“Sell the house and the garage, and most likely move to Paris with Katrine.”
Finn felt as though someone dropped an anvil on his head.

“I could never stay in that house after losing both of them,” Kurt said, shaking his head. “Those years after Mom … Dad and I were like ghosts haunting a space. I’m just not that strong. The guys at the shop, they helped raise me and I love them. Selling it to someone is their best chance of keeping their jobs. If they can raise some capital, I’ll happily sell it to them, even at a loss.

“I’m not making any major decisions yet, but I need to start preparing myself. If Dad recovers, he’s going to need a lot of help, certainly more than I can provide on my own. The house will not be conducive to that. If he’s not mobile, it’s poorly equipped for handicapped access, save the basement, and it would be very difficult to care for him there. A one-story house would be better.

“I have to go over our accounts and see about our liquid assets. Our health insurance is good, but we have a PPO and coinsurance rather than copays. The hospital will want its money or they’ll refuse care. Dad might require a long term care facility or private nursing. He’ll need physical therapy, and probably speech and occupational therapy as well.”

He sighed. “I’m not dwelling on the negatives, but I have to consider them. Dad has no other family. It’s all down to me. I’m the only one legally authorized to make decisions for him. I’ll have to get emancipated so that I can access my trust funds and make decisions about the house and business. Until Dad can return to the shop, I need to manage it. Payroll needs to be done. Our vendors have to be paid.”

“You can’t possibly expect to do all of this yourself, Kurt,” Tina said quietly, but with finality. “That’s completely unreasonable. No one’s questioning your competence or dedication, but you’re taking on far, far too much. I won’t let you do that, neither will Artie, and you know how annoying we can be.”

He arched a brow before smirking. He then quickly sobered. “There’s no one else, Tina.”

Cam opened her mouth and he whirled on her.

“No.”

She blinked in surprise.

“This is not your responsibility, Aunt Cam. You have a job. You have a life. I won’t let you put those on hold for this. Dad wouldn’t want that either.”

“I’d like to see you try and stop me.”

They stared at each other for what seemed like minutes.

“You won’t win this, Kurt, and you know it. We’re too much alike and I have more than twenty years of experience on you in getting what I want. So listen closely, because this is how things are going to go.”
Dr. Camille Saroyan was Santana’s new lord and personal savior. She was amazing.

It figured she was Kurt’s aunt because of course the only person who could out-Kurt Kurt was related to him. She watched as Camille forced Kurt to make a seat before withdrawing her cell phone and recording voice memos.

Finally she looked up and into her nephew’s eyes.

“Let’s deal with the obvious first. You and I both know we have innumerable relatives who would be more than happy to drop everything they’re doing and jump on a flight. You’re not alone; you just don’t want to be a burden. I can appreciate that to an extent, but your insistence that you’re some solitary island is both hurtful and offensive.”

Kurt met her glare but held his tongue.

“What other relatives?” asked a surprised Carole.

Camille slid her eyes up toward the other woman. “Kurt and I have a very large extended family. We’re not close geographically and, in some cases, even by blood, but we make up for that with emotional connectedness. Once word gets out that Burt is … in a precarious situation … they will be lining up to offer support. In person.”

Kurt cleared his throat. “That’s not …”

“I wasn’t finished,” Camille cut in, eyes flashing. “Regardless of what you want or believe, the simple matter is that this is not your decision. These people care about you and about Burt. Even if you do emancipate yourself, and that is something I will not fight, our family deserves to know what is happening to Burt. How dare you deny them?”

They stared at each other for what seemed like minutes, before Kurt finally averted his eyes.

“Second, you obviously don’t know the contents of your mother’s will. She made it very clear that if she predeceased Burt and then something happened to him while you were still a minor, there were a number of people who were asked and then agreed to take custody of you. If you want emancipation, fine. I can’t foresee any court blocking it, but you owe your named guardians an explanation.”

Kurt maintained his silence, but Brittany was pleased by how clever Camille truly was. Everyone knew that Kurt was highly intelligent and had the resources to do whatever he wished, but by reminding him of his familial obligations, Camille thwarted him from doing something he might later regret. She was forcing him to take the time to consider his options, even if he eventually decided to pursue his original path.

“I guess Kurt’s mom chose you?” Tina asked.

Camille shook her head. “I’m on the list, but I wasn’t the first choice, and that’s fine. I never expected to be. Suzanne and I didn’t even know about each other until we were adults. She lived an entire life before we met, so of course there were others she placed before me.”

She turned to Kurt. “Your mother named Olivia as your guardian if something happened to Burt. That means, as he’s currently incapacitated, she has legal custody of you. Of course I informed her as soon as you told me about your father. She had some things to wrap up, but I imagine she’s on her way now.”
Kurt’s pursed his lips, though his respiration slightly increased. He hadn’t given a thought to Olivia, and only now wondered why. He supposed he didn’t want to bother her, to make her relive her best friend’s death. He certainly didn’t want her to be saddled with him. She was doing important work and didn’t have time to deal with a teenager.

He also knew that was bullshit and Olivia would likely slap him across the face if he repeated those thoughts to her. Suddenly, he desperately wanted her here. It wouldn’t be the same as having Will, but there was no adult he trusted more than Olivia. Not Will, not Camille, and not even his father. Even though Olivia had been his mother’s best friend, her only loyalty now was to him.

With no warning and to the surprise and upset of all, including himself, Kurt burst into tears.

It truly was like a dam had burst. Tears began flowing from his eyes as great heaving sobs were torn from his throat. No matter what he might have wanted, his body had decided to override his executive orders. Against his will, his subconscious had accepted the situation in which he had found himself and just how uncertain and terrifying it truly was. His body was unwilling to wait for him to deal with matters when he thought best. Instead, it was forcing him to feel it all right this minute.

Tina and Brittany immediately followed suit, their worry for Kurt and their fear for Burt finally pushing through their attempts to remain calm for Kurt’s sake. Puck tended to Tina, wrapping her in one arm while texting Mike with the other. Santana and her mother wrapped Brittany between them and held her.

Finn stared at Kurt. He had seen Kurt cry before, perfect tears slipping from his beautiful eyes, but that was nothing like this. This … this was horrible. This was devastating and awful and real.

This hurt.

Regardless of his feelings for Kurt, regardless of what Kurt currently thought of him, Kurt was hurting in part because of Finn. For the first time, Finn was truly cognizant of his actions and how they affected other people, particularly Kurt.

He started crying and immediately left the area, because he didn’t deserve to be comforted and he wasn’t about to take attention from Kurt, attention that Kurt deserved and never allowed himself to receive.

Camille had a hell of a time restraining Seeley from again picking Kurt up. She knew her nephew and understood that, while this release was overdue, he was furious with himself for losing control in front of other people. He would deeply resent anyone who tried to console him now. It was best to let him cry it out and then allow him to pull himself together. He would come to them when he was ready and not before.

She didn’t like it. In fact, she hated it, but she knew it was true. The others present probably thought her heartless, but their opinions didn’t matter. She wasn’t here to score points, but to do what Kurt needed.

All of a sudden, Kurt stood and hastily scrubbed his eyes. Only a few seconds later, Camille heard the telltale heels clicking on the linoleum outside the elevator. For such a tiny thing, that woman made more noise than should have been possible.

Then again, Kurt’s godmother didn’t merely walk. She fucking stomped. It was really no surprise Kurt had been the first to hear her. They had always been acutely attuned to each other.

Camille looked down the hall and sharply inhaled.
Olivia Pope had indeed arrived and, as usual, had a coterie of people with her, including Katrine Valois and the President of the United States.

Chapter End Notes

Yep, some *Runs in the Family* stuff, but don't expect Cam, Seeley, or Olivia to hang around very long. Katrine might, though.

In my mind and in every story in which she has been mentioned, she has always been played by Helen Mirren. Because the idea of she and Chris Colfer together is beautiful.
Thank you, and gods bless.
Peaks and Valleys

Chapter Notes

I'm not sure if I'll ever get back to writing mammoth chapters for this story. I believe it will happen eventually, once there's more action and character involvement. Thanks to everyone who's stuck with me on this crazy journey!

It was a very surreal moment for Olivia, and she didn’t particularly care for it.

The last time she had set foot in this godforsaken town was to hold the hand of her best friend and watch her die. Same hospital, even the same floor. The moment she stepped off the elevator, memories assailed her like daggers lying in wait for a dozen years, now seizing the opportunity to strike.

There was not a single moment of a single day she did not miss Suzanne. It was a constant ache that had dimmed to a dull throb over the years, only to flare up on occasion and almost cause her to double over. Being in Lima was agony.

Meeting Katrine at the airport was another agony. The last time they had met was also at an airport, not so many years ago, when Katrine Valois made her inaugural trip to America to bury her daughter. Burt had been too devastated to leave Kurt’s side for even a moment, so Olivia had volunteered. Watching Katrine disembark from the plane, the look on her face, was like watching Suzanne die all over again.

She wished Fitz hadn’t insisted on coming. She had agreed because, in the end, he had gotten them there faster. She knew he had a soft spot for Kurt, and her godson adored his Uncle Fitz, but this was neither the time nor place for a reunion. She needed useful people, and Fitz would not be useful. Mellie would have been useful. Olivia should’ve insisted she accompany them.

She deeply resented the very useful Camille. It wasn’t personal. She would have celebrated any other woman, particularly a fellow woman of color, who was as successful and accomplished as Camille Saroyan. In fact, she firmly believed Camille wasn’t celebrated nearly enough.

It was that every time she looked at that woman, she was painfully reminded that Camille was Suzanne’s sister by blood, even though they looked nothing alike and had only known each other for a year. She was Kurt’s aunt by blood, even though they hardly saw each other. Camille was family.

At the end of the day, Olivia had only been Suzanne’s dearest and closest friend. She was Kurt’s godmother, not relative. She remembered once saying those words to Burt Hummel. She remembered him grabbing her shoulders and telling her that she was crazy, that Suzanne had loved her more than she had loved anyone but her own child. Yes, Suzanne and Camille were sisters by blood, but Suzanne and Olivia were sisters by choice.

It wasn’t the first or last time Olivia envied Suzanne for having found and marrying that man.

There was no competition, not for Suzanne’s love or Kurt’s attention. Cam only had less than a year with her sister before Suzanne died, while Olivia had a lifetime of memories. She just had to keep reminding herself of that.
Sometimes Olivia wondered who had it worse: Cam, for having so little time with Suzanne; or herself for having twenty years that still weren’t, and never would be, enough. She still picked up the phone to call Suzanne when something of note happened. She still wandered into Neiman Marcus at the end of April to buy a birthday present to mail out before that May day.

She knew it was as difficult for Cam, who had been denied the chance to grow up with her sister. The truth was she had far more in common with Camille than she ever had with Suzanne, but perhaps the old adage was true and opposites just attracted. It wasn’t that she didn’t like Camille, because she did, even loved her in some way, but the woman was a constant reminder of loss.

She knew Cam felt similarly. They lived and worked in the same city and yet almost never saw each other. Olivia felt bad about that sometimes, but knew Camille also went out of her way to avoid a moment together.

Olivia would never get over Suzanne’s death. She would never again allow someone to get that close to her, for she knew she couldn’t survive such a loss a second time. Except for her boy, who had been grandfathered into her heart, which is why this hurt so much now. She loved Burt, she did, and he had been a wonderful husband to Suzanne, but it was what this was doing to Kurt that consumed her.

Kurt was the closest she would ever come to having a child of her own. She knew Fitz wanted them to have children together, and she played at considering it, but it was never going to happen. So many things were never really going to happen for them.

Camille had waited for similar reasons, Olivia believed, though she had heard Cam had taken in a foster daughter, which she found commendable. Cam had basically rescued the black daughter of a former lover who would have fallen into the foster care system, likely to emerge thoroughly disillusioned and probably abused. Instead, the girl – Michelle, Olivia remembered – was now being raised by one of the most powerful black women in the country.

That was incredible and Olivia was here for it. When Michelle was ready for college, Olivia would do some discreet digging and put in a good word. It probably wasn’t necessary, given Cam’s stature, but it also couldn’t hurt. Olivia firmly believed that women, particularly black women, needed to stick together.

But this was about Kurt, one of the few people she truly loved. She also knew that she, like her godson, had obsessive-compulsive instances, particularly where he was concerned. She had to play this carefully so that she didn’t overwhelm him, certain he was already overwhelmed enough.

She would be useful to her godson. No other outcome was acceptable.

There was much she could have done for Kurt, that she had wanted to do for him, but he had never really needed her help. He was very conscious of the privilege his skin color and money afforded him. Sometimes Olivia felt he was too aware of it, and therefore unable to ask for assistance when it was truly needed.

The things he had hidden from her, the things this town and its citizens had done to him, made her want to do the secret hood rat shit of which people suspected but could never prove her responsible. When he had admitted what he had endured – all delivered in a horrid monotone which clearly suggested he was inured to the inaction of the people who should have helped him – she had wanted to kill things.

She had wanted to kill people.
She was very conscious she had people on her payroll who gladly would have done so.

People – *multiple people* – had *hurt her baby*. And they would pay.

She had helped him, of course. She had listened with a deft ear and a song in her heart when he presented his blackmail plan. It was so simple yet so elegant, and it was nothing for her to put Huck and Quinn on the job. Less than a day later, they had more information on Kurt’s bullies than even Homeland Security could have unearthed.

Abby had led the charge and Olivia was content to let her do it. There was nothing that propelled Abby further than helping someone who had been abused. And Kurt *had* been abused. Why more people didn’t see that, didn’t understand it, turned a blind eye to it, or outright *denied* it …

Olivia slowly exhaled. This hilljack cracker town was making her pressure go up and she was not in the mood. While she was in Lima, she was going to deliver a few home truths to some people, along with threats and possible violence, but that was not now. Now was for Kurt.

But then she saw him and her heart almost lurched out of her chest.

Kurt had been *crying*. Of course he would have been crying, given the circumstances, but just the sight of it was so unnatural, so bizarre. So *wrong*. It angered her.

Camille was present, naturally, along with Seeley Booth. Olivia had never understood that relationship, but she had witnessed enough of it to believe Cam and Booth truly loved each other. They just made better friends than lovers. That Booth so adored Kurt helped matters.

Olivia just couldn’t posit the attraction. Cam was beautiful and Seeley … well, *rugged* was a good word to describe him. Olivia knew she herself had a weakness for pretty boys. Fitz had matured nicely, but she had seen the pictures of when he was younger and stupidly pretty. Jake was pretty. Booth, conversely, was very tall and very broad, with a terrific body. His brow was heavy, verging on Neanderthal, and his eyes beady.

But when he smiled? Well, even Olivia’s pulse raced then. The man was utterly gorgeous when he smiled.

She didn’t recognize the others. There was a woman a few years older than her who appeared very protective of Kurt, a woman in a lab coat Olivia assumed was a physician, and two kids around the age of her godson who looked thoroughly angry and helpless.

She did recognize Brittany and Tina, both of whom had also been crying.

“Aunt Liv!”

The heads of the others snapped to attention at Kurt’s exclamation. They were then stunned to complete silence.

Camille knew Olivia of course, and Brittany and Tina knew the woman was Kurt’s godmother, as did Seeley, but for the rest, this was obviously brand new information. Coincidentally, this was the exact moment Finn decided to return.
It was an utterly fantastical moment. Olivia Pope was rushing toward Kurt like a steamroller, as the President of the United States nipped at her heels like a terrier who refused to be left behind.

“Uh,” said an eloquent Finn.

Carole’s eyes were the size of small planets as her mouth hung open. Santana, for the first time in her entire life, was utterly speechless. Noah couldn’t wait to go back to school and tell all the jocks being blackmailed that Kurt Hummel literally knew the man who could answer the question you and what army?

All of Kurt’s attention, however, was focused only on Olivia, even to the exclusion of his grandmother and the President. That indicated particularly to a few just how much this woman meant to him.

Despite his recent growth spurt, Kurt, as he was pulled into her arms, appeared almost dwarfed by the enormity of Olivia’s overwhelming presence. She commanded attention and respect simply by breathing. She outshined even the leader of the free world.

Several Secret Servicemen planted themselves throughout the floor, watching everything and everyone from behind the stereotypical Ray Bans. By now the rest of the hospital had been alerted and were either outright staring or whispering to each other.

Kurt looked over Olivia’s shoulder, his eyes filling with tears. “Aunt Abby, Uncle Huck, you didn’t have to come.”

Abby glared at perhaps the only male she actually respected. “Of course we did.”

“Hi, Kurty,” Huck said quietly.

Kurt looked up when he felt a hand ghosting over his hair, frowning in confusion. “Hi, Uncle Fitz.”

“Hi, baby,” Fitz said, forcing a smile. “How are you?”

“Oh, not so good right now, but better than I was,” Kurt admitted. “Aunt Cam gave me several verbal slaps upside the head.”

“It was necessary,” Cam demurred. “Hello, Olivia, Mr. President.”

“This is actually happening,” Finn muttered to himself. “This can’t be Vitamin D.”

“I’ve told you before, Cam, just call me Fitz.”

She blinked at him and turned to Olivia. “Thank you for getting here so quickly.”

“Thank you for telling me,” Olivia replied, “and for getting him to listen. That’s more than I’ve ever managed to accomplish.”

“Right here,” Kurt complained.

Camille shrugged. “You tend to favor the stick-and-carrot approach, Liv. That doesn’t work with Kurt. You have to go straight for the guilt. He’s the most Catholic non-Catholic walking the planet.”

“Still here,” Kurt growled.

“We know, baby,” Olivia said, patting his shoulder. “Tina, Brittany, it’s wonderful to see you again. You’re both so beautiful.”
Tina blushed and looked down at the floor as Brittany beamed and actually curtsied.

“I’m surprised Artie isn’t here,” Olivia said, looking around with a raised brow.

“I didn’t think Kurt should have to deal with more than one of us at a time right now,” Tina confessed, “but I did promise to call him.” She turned to Kurt. “Are you positive?”

“Tina, it’s fine,” he insisted. “I can’t thank you enough for the clothes and the food and, most of all, for being here.”

“There’s nowhere else I’d be. I love you. I love him.”

She drew him into her arms, despite knowing he had already more than surpassed his daily tolerance for physical affection. He was just going to have to suck it up. She kissed his cheek.

“If you need me, call me. No matter where you are, no matter how far.”

Brittany wrapped her arms around both of them. “Just call my name. I’ll be there in a hurry. On that you can depend, and never worry.”

“No wind,” Santana sang.

“No wind,” Puck awkwardly echoed.

“No rain,” Tina sang.

“No rain,” sang a sunny Brittany.

“Nor winter’s cold,” they all harmonized, with Santana throwing in an ascending run that would have made Rachel seethe.

“Can stop us, babe,” Puck said, placing a hand on Kurt’s shoulder.

“Oh, babe,” Brittany affirmed.

“Baby,” Tina repeated lovingly.

“Baby,” Santana sang, gently touching his cheek.

“If you are our goal,” they sang.

Kurt blushed and looked way, eyes wetting once more. “Noah, how do you even know that song?”

Puck glared. “Hey, you don’t have to be gay to know Diana Ross. She’s the Boss.”

“Did you decide if you’re gay yet?” Brittany asked.

He shook his head. “Pretty sure I’m bi, but there’s other stuff out there, right? Gothica said something about pots.”

“What?” Finn asked. He wasn’t sure whether or not he was grateful to be ignored.

“Pan, Puck,” said a long-suffering Tina. “Pansexual.”

He nodded. “Right, that. Maybe that’s me. I don’t know yet, but I have time to figure it out.”

Tina looped her arm through his. “Sam and I will be there when you need us.”
“Thanks. That means a lot. You know, that you care or whatever.”

“We do,” she said firmly.

Puck felt a blush rise high in his cheeks and he turned away, only to meet the ensnaring gaze of Santana. After a long moment, she nodded.

“Let’s go. Kurt’s not alone anymore and I think he’s seen enough of you for today. God knows I have.”

She accomplished exactly what she wanted when she heard Kurt try and fail to suppress an indelicate snort. She gave him a slow wink and a quick, chaste kiss on the lips.

“Whatever you need, when you need it. Ain't no mountain high enough.”

He placed his forehead against her own. “Thank you,” he whispered.

There was a lot Lydia Lopez wanted to say about the revelations surrounding these children and their relationships with one another, but she quickly decided discretion was the better part of valor. She had been waiting for years for Santana to come out, but she had never expected it to be like this, or as belligerent and beautiful as it had been.

She still didn’t know what she thought of her daughter being a lesbian, or Santana’s relationship with Brittany, whatever that was or had been, but what she did know was that Kurt Hummel was good for her daughter. He made her think. He had turned her from a vengeful demon to an avenging angel, at least in some matters. He supported her without suffocating her, loved her without smothering her.

This boy knew better how to love her daughter than she did. It was a sobering and upsetting realization.

“I'll see you at home, baby,” she finally said. “I love you.”

Santana stared at her mother for what felt like eternity, surprise and wariness in her eyes. It was agonizing for Lydia to behold. Finally Santana nodded and shepherded Puck toward the elevator, trusting Tina to see to Brittany.

“Kurty, I love you,” Brittany said softly.

“I love you too, Sweetness.”

“You’ll call? Not for any reason, but just because?”

“I will.”


Tina clutched Kurt’s hand in her own, conscious of all the eyes upon them, witnessing their silent conversation. She eventually released him and led Brittany toward the elevator.

“You have amazing friends,” Olivia told him.

He pressed his lips together very tightly and offered a shaky nod. “Yes, I do,” he warbled.

“I’m glad.”
“Me too.”

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