

My Better-Dressed Demons

by

rainjoyswriting

AU || NC-17

'Choice' is complicated.

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Part I

There's a store in the mall that sells incense and tarot cards and basically all the junk in the world that Kurt would never touch with a single squeamish fingertip; it is not for him, the tackiness and the tawdriness and the smell of it all. Blaine moves through it calm and curious, that relaxed poise of his like a big cat picking through its jungle, one hand drawing along a line of hanging necklaces and making their pendants chime softly off each other.

Kurt shifts his weight from one foot to the other and holds his bag close to himself, very much out of his territory. "Something in black," he says. "Dirty brown is so hard to co-ordinate with."

Blaine glances across at him, looks down at the chunks of crystal in the glass display cabinet and then begins picking through the little wicker baskets of charms on top of it. "You're antsy."

"That smell's going to get into my clothes. This jacket is dry clean only."

"I just thought I'd be more nervy than you in here, I stole a ouija board from here once."

Kurt opens his mouth, stops, huddles himself into a narrower shape and glances at the dreadlocked girl behind the cash register, who's talking to a tall, broad boy with a matching lip piercing. He says, very low, "Tell me that's a joke."

"Hm? No. I tried to get in touch with Buddy Holly."

"Oh my god, Blaine."

"Unless he's a lot less coherent than I'd been led to believe," Blaine says, picking up a huge silver ring set with a grotesque glass eyeball, "it didn't work."

Kurt rubs his eyes, wriggles his shoulders. "Maybe we should look for one on the internet."

"I wanted to get it today."

"Well I don't want anyone to recognise you and call security," Kurt snaps at him. "I can't take you *anywhere*, god, come on."

"They didn't *know* I stole the ouija board. Grant me some professionalism."

"Come *on*." Kurt grabs his sleeve, heads for the exit. "That panpipe music is driving me nuts anyway."

"You should get into paganism," Blaine tells him, allowing himself to be dragged like a recalcitrant six year old back through the mall. "You'd be sexy as fuck all naked and Bacchic under a full moon."

Kurt's teeth grit. "It's really not my scene."

"I've never been able to work out what your scene is. You are your own unique trend of one." Blaine's wrist twists under his grip and then he's got Kurt by the arm, and he turns and with the weight of his whole body pins Kurt to the tiled wall between two stores, before Kurt in his surprise can make a sound. He's not actually so much stronger than Kurt, it's just that it never does occur to Kurt to respond in kind when he gets like this, so self-assuredly possessive. Kurt blinks at him, as Blaine slips a hand into his own jeans pocket, and a leg between Kurt's. He pulls out a little braid of black leather, and slots it around the wrist he's got pressed to the cool tiled wall.

"-did you just steal that?"

"No," Blaine says, eyes on the bracelet as he begins knotting it. "I paid for it while you weren't looking."

"You - what?"

"Of course I stole it." His leg shifts subtly *up* between Kurt's, and his entire body stills at Blaine's warm, solid weight against him, though all his limbs want to quiver a little. They're in the middle of the mall, in the afternoon after school, and there are crowds of people moving through the muzak, crowds of people to see and react the wrong way but all Blaine's concentrating on is his knot while Kurt's heart is beating so hard that he doesn't know how it doesn't knock Blaine right off him. "I did it for you. I think it's romantic."

"How is it *romantic*?" Kurt tries to pull his wrist free and Blaine pins it tighter, so Kurt makes a frustrated noise through his teeth, and tries not to look at the people walking past them while his face turns pink. "I thought you weren't doing things like that anymore, I thought you cared about your grades and your life and getting into a decent college-"

"Okay, so it's the last thing I'll ever steal." Blaine tugs the knot tight, and finally stands back off Kurt, who still has to lean against the wall to keep his wobbly knees upright. "That is the last stupid thing I'll ever do. So long as you're still wearing this-" His finger slips into the leather braid, and he tugs at it, same old familiar way and Kurt's not worn one of these things for all of a week and it's already strange having it back, too stiff, too new. It's not the worn old ratty one Blaine toyed with when nervous, it's new and wrong and Blaine is an idiot and could get into so much- could get *Kurt* into so much trouble -

"So long as you want this, I'll behave. I mean it," Blaine says quietly, fingers playing in the braid, and Kurt looks at his eyes, his head a little ducked, his eyes all dark and serious and *certain*. "You're the only person I ever could promise it to and mean it. But if you want it, fine. I'll behave. If it makes you happy."

Blaine rubs the bracelet between his finger and thumb. Kurt swallows. "Okay."

"Okay?"

"Yes. It would make me happy."

"Okay. Then I'll behave." He gives the band one last tug and lets it go, and Kurt closes his eyes for a second, knows that the way Blaine reaches for it, it'll be as soft and worn as the other one in a matter of weeks. Every crack in the leather, every bruised edge, every increase in suppleness will be down to Blaine, Blaine's touch. It will come to mean something, different to the last one. Kurt asked for this one.

He opens his eyes, quirks an eyebrow. "It's really that simple?"

"You only had to ask."

"I've been asking you to behave yourself for *months*."

"You never specifically told me not to steal anything."

"Normal people don't have to be told not to steal anything!"

Blaine just laughs, and Kurt really could get angry if he wasn't so irritatingly sexy when he laughs, when someone calls, "Blaine! Blaine Anderson!"

Blaine looks over his shoulder, turns, and Kurt goes instantly, dumbly, stiff. There's a little group of four boys in private school uniform walking up, one of them grinning and waving, two more beginning to smile with recognition -

And haltingly behind them, out of place and looking as ridiculous in a tie as a bear in a tutu, is David Karofsky staring as appalled at Kurt as Kurt must be staring back at him. The ceiling seems to come down to meet him, and Kurt's legs could go but he's still leaning against the wall while his heart begins to beat again, a desperate gasp of *out get out get out just get out get out get out get out*-

"Hey," Blaine says, very guardedly, and his eyes are on Karofsky too, his entire posture changed to a step away from a spring, hands in fists at his sides. "It's been a while."

"How've you been? Haven't seen you since - this is David, he transferred after you left, after your time - do you -" The boy looks uneasily between the silent triangle of Kurt, who can't look away from Karofsky, who's now staring at Blaine, who's glaring back up at him with the air between them beginning to simmer under his fury - "Do you guys know each other?"

Kurt makes himself stand upright, makes himself breathe. He almost could do this, just be okay through this, until Blaine shrugs and says, "Sure I know him. He tried to rape my boyfriend once."

Dizziness nearly knocks him sideways. There's no consideration of saying something, fixing this, he can't even *look* at Karofsky, he just needs to be somewhere else. He has to push himself off the wall to move, sets off in a random direction, skipping into almost a run with his hands clenched at his sides and his eyes *burning* with wanting to cry and if he can just walk fast enough, just walk fast enough -

He hears Blaine's call but then through a crowd, through a blast of r'n'b outside a store, he loses track of him. He just concentrates on moving away from all of *that*. He walks too fast and with his heart hard like a stone in the back of his throat until he's through into the parking lot, cold outside and the wind's picked up, and he just needs to not be here, Blaine can get himself home, Kurt can't *do* this.

His phone is going off in his pocket. He climbs into his car, dries his eyes off, ignores it. He snaps the engine into life, roars too fast out of his parking space. He knows it's stupid, he feels so *stupid*, that after everything that's ever happened to him, after everything he's dealt with, *that* still feels like the worst thing.

His phone keeps ringing. He just keeps on ignoring it, until he's home, and safe.

*

He doesn't return Blaine's calls, Blaine doesn't deserve his calls returning. Quinn is here, now that she and Finn are officially a couple again, and Kurt has to hide in his room from them, he doesn't want to have to talk to them or anyone. So he hides, and makes a brooch out of a really amazing compass he found in a vintage store, and keeps having to dry his eyes off, and feels stupid. Just really, incredibly *stupid*. Like a stupid crying little boy. Like nothing that bad has ever really happened to him so why does he keep -

He sniffs, and turns the music up.

It's nearly nine when something rattles off his window and he starts back from his laptop, glares across at it. He folds his arms, thinks about just ignoring him, but something else hits his window harder this time, and he stamps over annoyed. He jerks the blinds up, opens the window, leans out. "You're going to break the glass and you *are* paying for it."

Blaine throws his arms out on Kurt's front yard. "What the hell, Kurt! I called you five *million* times!"

"It's not my fault that you didn't get the message the first time I didn't pick up!"

"What the hell have I done? For once in my *fucking* life I don't actually know what the hell I even did-"

"What the *hell* do you think you did, you-" Kurt puts a hand over his mouth, he does not want to cry again *now*, sucks his breath in and blinks hard and he's not shouting this out of his window at his idiot boyfriend for all the world to hear, *again*. "Stay there. I'm coming down."

"I'll be in my car," Blaine mutters, and stalks off before Kurt's even closed the blinds. Kurt draws his breath in, lets it slowly go again. At least he's not the only stupid little boy in this relationship, anyway.

He takes the trash out, to give him a good excuse for going outside. He dumps it in the can at the foot of the yard and then walks to Blaine's car and lets himself in at the passenger side, closes the door behind himself and sits with his arms folded, glaring through the windshield. He'll look at Blaine when he actually feels like he *can* look at Blaine.

"So are you going to tell me what the hell I did?" Blaine says, and Kurt's breath jolts as it comes in.

"What do you *think* you did, what were you even-"

"I don't know what the hell it was but I sincerely doubt it warrants this enormous drama-fest! God dating you is like dating Marilyn and Princess Di wrapped into one-"

"-*thinking* I just don't know how your brain even-"

"-had to catch a bus home to get my car to come make sure you hadn't done something *even more stupid* I don't-"

"Fuck you," Kurt spits back at him, because he's learned just enough from Blaine by now, and wrenches the car door handle open. Blaine grabs his arm, Kurt nearly trips face-first onto the road, and between the shrieking and yelping and the sudden honk of the car screeching past and nearly clipping the door, they at least stop yelling at each other.

In his seat again, Blaine gripping his wrist too tight, Kurt swallows, and closes his door with a deliberate click. He listens to his heart banging like a disco in his ears, and thinks that the only way Blaine won't be able to hear it is if his own heart is half as loud right now. He purposefully, determinedly, forces Blaine's hand off his wrist. "Do you think I want-" He stops, but he makes himself go on. "Do you think I want you just - in front of a bunch of random people I don't even know - just *announcing* - that, don't you -"

"Do you want them to think he's some great guy they should be friends with? He should be-"

"This isn't about him! I don't care what happens to *him*! Why didn't you take even half a *second* to think how it would make *me* feel-"

Blaine stops, eyebrows tightening, jaw held hard. Then he says stubbornly, "They shouldn't think he's a decent guy. They shouldn't go around thinking-"

"Oh *Jesus* Blaine I don't *care* what they think, I don't *care*. If he can find some actual friends and become less of a sociopath of a human being then everyone wins, I don't *care*. You don't even *know*, you don't know what he-"

"Will you *stop* defending *him*, fucking hell Kurt, he would've done anything to you, he would've-"

"You don't know! You weren't there!"

"What the fuck do you think he was going to do, give you a *hug*? Jesus fucking-"

"It's *my business*. Don't just - just announce it to anyone who walks up and - don't *touch* me - oh, fuck." Kurt finishes with, because there's nothing else left to say, and he puts his hands over his eyes because, no, he can't stop crying. Blaine doesn't say anything for a moment, apparently just watches him while he really does try not to cry so fucking *hard*, and then there's a rustle, and he says very low, "Here." and shoves a tissue into one of Kurt's hands.

He shudders his breath in, blows his nose, wipes his eyes, stuffs the tissue into an empty Coke can in the cupholder. Then he smacks Blaine in the arm and sits back, arms folded, swallowing and staring at the dashboard. He can't explain it. He can't make Blaine understand what it makes him feel like, when something he's managed to put in a box in his mind labelled *Horrible occurrence, never to be repeated, Do Not Open* is dredged up in front of him and *Karofsky* and a bunch of boys he's never seen before in his life -

He feels like Blaine dragged them into the room to watch. And he still can't stop crying. He wipes his eyes on his hands again, and Blaine touches his leg, a nervous little stroke of the knuckles. "I hate making you cry, but I don't know how to apologise," he says, a little rough. "I don't even really know what I did."

Kurt closes his eyes, swallows again, opens them. "How about we just never talk about him again. How about next time you see him, you turn around and walk in the opposite direction and don't open your idiot mouth and for once in your life don't make things *worse*-"

He pauses, then looks across at Blaine, at the frozen expression turning black. "I didn't mean that," he says quietly, and reaches across for his wrist. "Blaine -"

"No. It's fine. You're right. Clearly everything always is my fault anyway, I did already know that."

"God, Blaine-" Kurt could pull his own hair for frustration, settles for digging his palms into his eyes. "I'm sorry. Okay? Can we just count this as one of those times when we both fuck up and just forget this whole damn day-?"

There's a second of silence, then two of Blaine's fingers slip down his wrist, into his new leather collar. "I don't want to forget all of it."

Kurt looks across at him, at his eyes so quiet and dark, and his mouth, and the way the streetlight picks out the still-young angle of his cheek. He feels his body, for the first time, relax. When Blaine starts to smile, Kurt reaches across, holds his cheek and runs his thumb over his mouth, then leans in to kiss him.

Okay. Both of them suck. At least they're good at *this*.

He twists his body in over the seat and Blaine bends his head back for him, his free hand settling just tight enough over his hip, biting the waistband of his jeans into his skin. Kurt doesn't care what Karofsky did or tried to do or didn't do, there's nothing wrong with him, he's no-one's *victim*, Blaine touches him and Kurt's never been so strong. Blaine pulls at him and Kurt gives a little grunt into the kiss, shuffles himself across the last distance, one knee between Blaine's legs so he can rest over his body and he's so *warm*, and Kurt feels the old helplessness well up in his heart and run out through his arteries, flooding his whole body; Blaine will do these fucking stupid things again, just as Kurt will, and the hurt will only be a part of what they have, this huge and hopeless thing they have, as tangled as their veins. He is never safer, never more vulnerable, than he is here with Blaine.

As for Blaine, as Kurt digs his fingers into his hair and pulls at his mouth, Kurt could kill him but if anyone ever tried to hurt Blaine then he *would* kill them. The violence of what he feels worried him, once. Now it's just what love is, everything about Blaine, the tension between tenderness and threat. Blaine so beautiful, Blaine so fragile sometimes, and Kurt who needs to badger and protect and bicker with and bare his throat for him, every time.

He breaks back from the kiss, breathes in, checks Blaine's eyes searching his and lets the breath shudder out, sits back on his heels, on Blaine's knee. "My dad's going to wonder how long it takes me to take the trash out."

Blaine strokes with one knuckle at the side of Kurt's knee. "Maybe he won't actually come out to check you haven't been kidnapped for a little while longer?"

Kurt rests his arms around his shoulders, tilts his head back to consider Blaine's hopefully raised eyebrows. "And since when exactly, Blaine Anderson, were you ever an optimist?"

"I've always been an optimist. The first time I saw you the first thing I thought was *I bet every MP3 I own that I'm getting into that boy's crazy-tight jeans*. Optimism."

Kurt snorts, swings his body off Blaine's and back into his seat. "I don't know what the hell I was thinking, letting you tag along after me."

"You were thinking I was sexy?"

Kurt opens the door. "I'll see you at school tomorrow."

Blaine's hand catches his arm, slips down the length of it until it grazes off the edge of his hand and is gone. "I love you."

Kurt's heels hit the road, he glances back into the car and then smiles, puts his hands on the seat and leans in for Blaine to lean down, for one last little kiss he can't stop smiling through. "I love you too. Now go home and sleep, it's a school night, Blaine."

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Another day at McKinley, another lunchtime glee practise; they get into a paper ball fight in the choir room but there aren't actually any particularsides, just lots of shrieking and direct hits between the eyes from Santana's scarily accurate aiming and Kurt eventually pulls Mercedes down behind a row of chairs with him - she's laughing too hard to protest - while Blaine manages to bounce a paper ball right off Mr Schuester's head as he walks in, and throws both arms into the air in triumph even as he leaves himself open to a New Directions-wide barrage and goes down under sheer weight of paper.

"Okay, guys," Mr Schuester says, giving the paper-scattered choir room floor an eyebrows raised look, then smiling uncertainly at them. "Bonding exercise?"

"Every woman for herself," Santana announces, sitting with a flump and arms folded. Brittany sits down next to her, and lets loose the paper plane she'd stood on her chair and constructed while chaos reigned all around her; it skims the air, skates over the varnished surface of the piano and vanishes through the open door. Kurt helps Blaine up, slipping two fingers down the neck of his polo shirt to retrieve some crumpled paper. "You were very impressive," he tells him, and Blaine *grins*.

Sometimes Mr Schue remembers that he is supposed to be a teacher and puts them through their scales. Kurt clasps his hands behind his back and plays innocently along, while Blaine's hip gently nudges off his now and then, and his own happiness surprises him so much still sometimes. This room, full of his noisy

friends and his boyfriend hooking a finger close into the belt loop of his pants, used to be somewhere he came to hide. He didn't feel like eating on a lunchtime, couldn't risk the rest of the school during break, he just came here while he knew it was empty and sat hunched on one of the chairs, trying to think what the hell to do. Tell his dad. Tell Mr Schue. Tell *someone*, but there was no way to do without forcibly outing Karofsky, without tipping that threat of his over the edge, without cracking his life right open -

Until the day he felt eyes on him in here, and when he looked up his heart squeezed down so small like a pinprick, and Karofsky's face twitched at the eyes, and he closed the door behind himself.

Now he looks at Blaine, who keeps his eyes front and smiles like an angel and, with one finger tight in Kurt's belt loop, caresses the top of Kurt's back pocket with his thumb. Kurt runs a hand down his arm and unpeels Blaine's hand from his pants before this can become so problematic that he'll drop a note, and Blaine's fingers quickly catch into that stiff leather braid instead.

Kurt had not anticipated finding that a great deal more arousing than a hand on his ass, and has to miss a note just to grab a breath in.

When the glee club are gathering their things, trailing out of the choir room in their casually chaotic fashion, Kurt passes Blaine his bag and says, "See you in math?"

"We could skip," Blaine offers, eyebrows offering multiple opportunities of how they could otherwise fill the hour. Kurt says, "I'll see you in math." with his eyebrows brooking no argument, and Blaine just grins as Kurt rolls his eyes, and heads off for his locker and his French books.

He switches books and glances, gives a little smile to the photograph of Blaine tacked in the door (it's one of his multiple previous school photographs, head tilted down a little, just a small smile, eyes all wicked and dangerous; Kurt is glad now that he didn't choose the one from Blaine's previous school, impossibly smart as he had looked in it, he doesn't want to see *that* uniform again for as long as he lives), turns neatly away. He's just thinking what they can do after school - TV and unfortunately probably video games with Finn at their house (Kurt will stipulate *Portal II* if they must, which he happens to excel at), or heading over to Blaine's for some 'us' time (never do they get enough 'us' time) - when something catches his shin hard and he goes thankfully more sideways than down, banging his shoulder off a locker and catching himself upright.

There's a football jacket swaggering away up the corridor, and fury closes Kurt's body into something solid and hot and quivering. "Hey!" he yells up the corridor, but the jacket doesn't stop walking, and Kurt's breath comes shallow with rage.

"I can understand why getting repeatedly creamed on the football field would compromise your coordination and your IQ," Kurt shouts after him, his entire body *shaking* now, arms *hurting* they're gripping his books so tightly to himself. "But you're the one responsible for your manners!" Oh fuck everything Kurt's known Blaine too long by now. "You and your mom!"

The jacket has stopped. The jacket turns. Kurt tucks his head in, breathes quick and hard as the jacket and its fleshy, mean-eyed contents march back up to him and squint down into his face. "You are *pushing* it, Hummel."

"By not walking around with my eyes on the floor apologising for getting in the way of your shoulders and elbows and disgustingly filthy sneakers?" Kurt snaps back at him. He's been here before, too many times, and he's cringed back and hoped for it to stop too many times, and he's never, never acting like he deserves this again. "I'm not going to hold on for an apology but you will *never* touch me again, do you understand?"

"Or what?" The jacket says, and cracks his knuckles. "Or your little psychopath boyfriend'll come after me?"

"It says a lot about your moral IQ that you need an 'or' instead of just understanding what behaviour is reprehensible," Kurt snorts, and sees the complete lack of comprehension in the jacket's dumb eyes. "Clearly he will break your arms so how about you just walk on and keep walking, caveman."

The jacket raises a deliberate hand and shoves Kurt half a step backwards, Kurt's admittedly not very practical shoes skidding on the floor. "How about you stop *pushing* it, fag, 'cause we got a *pact*."

"What?" Kurt narrows his eyes. "Do you actually know what that word means or did you think it meant 'problematic lack of intelligence'?"

He shoves him again, harder this time, and Kurt just scrambles back into his face again. "*You are going to regret this.*"

"We're playin' the long game," the jacket snarls back. "Whichever one of us your fuckin' tiny guard dog hospitalises and gets thrown back in juvie over? The guy's a *hero*. So yeah." He shoves Kurt again, and Kurt's hands are cramping from gripping his books too tight for too long. "Don't push it, Hummel."

"Don't push me," Kurt says darkly, quietly, back, and as the jacket's eyes narrow further someone yells down the corridor, "Hey!"

Not Blaine, is the first relieving and muscle-slackening thought, as Puck comes striding up to them looking really *pissed* and Kurt is aware now of the audience to this little altercation, and he flicks a glare around the corridor at them. Gawp but don't help, well, thank you all very much; god, they live in the century of the bystander, everyone's so suffocated under reality TV that they think everything's entertainment now. Kurt's generation *sucks*.

"Get off my boy or I break your face, Reiss." Puck says from Kurt's shoulder, and the jacket gives Kurt one last black look and then steps back, hands raised in surrender.

"Not like I wanna touch him, don't wanna catch gay off him like you did, Puckerman."

Puck doesn't seem unduly upset by this accusation. "Maybe if you guys could keep your eyes off his ass for five seconds then you'd stop worrying about that."

Kurt says, "It's a good thing for me that stupidity isn't infectious." and the jacket spits out one last, "You *watch* yourself, fag." and turns, strides off. Kurt watches him go, shoulders hunched and grinding his teeth on the things he knows he shouldn't shout after him, the things his inner Blaine is straining at his leash to shout. Down, boy, he thinks, because the fallout is never worth it, and he sighs, and glances up at Puck.

"Thank you. I was dealing with that perfectly well, though."

Puck shrugs. "Not saying you don't punch above your weight. Just, he seriously will go all *Kill Bill* if you walk up to him with a black eye."

Puck and Blaine have a friendship based on a shared history of juvenile correctional facilities and a mutual love of awful eighties power rock, and yes, Kurt knows who Puck means by 'he'. He presses his mouth closed, chews his lip a little, nods. 'He' will; Kurt can mostly make Blaine behave, but not if Kurt actually

does get smacked by a footballer without the brains to correctly weigh up the moment's satisfaction of knocking down a gay kid with spending six months in traction. Blaine will go nuclear, and they'll all pay for that.

Puck says, "You okay?"

"What? I'm fine." Kurt tugs his jacket straight with one hand, smoothes his t-shirt and tucks his books to himself again. "He's an amateur."

Puck looks up the corridor, tilts his head. "Want me to walk you to class?"

"What?" Kurt says again, and blinks. "No. Why do you think I need-"

"Not sayin' you need it, just, it's nice to get the opportunity to punch someone for a good cause now and then."

"Find another cause, I'm fine. But Puck -" He squirms his shoulders. "Thank you."

Puck shrugs again. Finn does that too, a form of communication so masculine that it doesn't even require words, not even a grunt. "You're my boy, he's my bro. We got to watch each other's backs, dude."

Kurt manages a dry sort of smile, and Puck grips his shoulder for a second, walks off. Kurt stands for a moment making sure that he is composed, patting his books straight in his arms, and then he heads off for his next class, head high and throat still a little hard with anger.

In French Azimio avoids his eye, and stays at the other side of the room. Azimio could win prizes for his dickery but he was Karofsky's best friend, he and Karofsky were the two people in the school most determined to make Kurt's life miserable such a little time ago, and Kurt is still trying to work out what his reticence now is based on. He thinks that mostly, Kurt just makes Azimio feel uncomfortable. Kurt is a reminder of everything that happened, what Karofsky did, everything Karofsky did, because he went too far. It's not just the secretly gay thing, he went way too far and everyone knows it, the general consensus is that it's Kurt's *fault* that he did but Azimio isn't one of those eyeing that threat at Kurt across the corridors now. Azimio just wants to forget the two of them exist, probably. Kurt's fine with it. It's better than having one more person to keep Blaine separate from.

He tugs a little at that stiff new leather band. If only he did have Blaine on a leash, if only he could hold him back from these idiots. If only he *could* unleash Blaine on them without fear of the consequences. If only they already lived in New York and the cretins were far, far away . . .

He runs his finger around the inside of the leather band, sighs, picks up his pen. Should being in love really be so *exhausting*?

*

Pre-calc he shares with Blaine and Tina, and despite how much he really hates math, it's become one of his favourite classes. While Blaine's got his post-juvie friendship with Puck and sort of gets on with Finn since they've shared a bedroom - even Kurt hasn't done that with Blaine - Kurt's trying to encourage him to be closer friends with Mike and Tina, who are much better influences, never encourage him to cut class, and only rarely get him drunk.

Blaine drunk -

On a good day, Blaine has very little in the way of inhibitions. Kurt suspects that he would always have no real filter between his brain and his mouth, but he will also never quite lose the evidence of some of the hard things he's lived through, and his lack of impulse control might be less of a problem if his impulses weren't sometimes so *volatile*. Blaine drunk moves very quickly through a list of crazy things he wants to do and when Kurt (sober) vetoes the whole lot, he settles for making out with Kurt, publicly and not at all G-rated until Kurt has to physically drag him somewhere more private (or until Finn drops a coat over them to shield them from view, or once in the back yard, until Santana turned a hose on them). At least post-orgasm he's just sort of sleepy and mellow, happy as a dog slumped on Kurt's chest, smelling like sex in a brewery and *beaming* all over his idiot beautiful face.

Right now, Kurt's idiot beautiful boyfriend is late. Kurt sets his books out and checks his hair in a pocket mirror if he's got a spare moment of pre-Blaine grooming time, while Tina says, "Do you want to hang out this weekend? If we don't make other plans we'll end up getting dim sum with Mike's mom again."

"We could go shopping."

"Should we invite Mercedes? Is it totally uncomfortable with two couples and Mercedes?"

"We could invite Rachel as well."

Tina grimaces. "Is she going to wear the sad puppy face the whole time? Because it really brings me down. And I say that as a goth, it's a *bad* kind of down."

"At least she learned the importance of staying faithful early in life," Kurt murmurs, and looks up as the door's kicked open and Blaine stalks in, tosses a note onto the blinking teacher's desk, slams his bag on the desk next to Kurt and drops into his seat. Kurt murmurs, "Are you alright?" and Blaine kicks his legs out long, folds his arms, doesn't even take his books out of his bag.

"I have detention tonight."

"Wh-" Kurt stops, squeezes his eyes closed and rubs his forehead. "Why?" he says, which is much more neutral than *What did you do?*

Blaine shrugs jaggedly, and Kurt reaches over and unzips his bag for him, picks through and takes out his textbook for him, sifts the debris at the bottom until he finds a pen. Blaine watches him, and the anger fades in his eyes until he looks more *tired* than murderous. "Three of them were following me."

Kurt checks his eyes but there's no fear there, no worry, just resignation and that lingering rage. Kurt wonders what he looks like himself after he's extricated himself from another encounter with the population of this school who want the both of them if not dead then at least chased out of their own lives. Kurt's been banged into the trunk of a car by four complete strangers, he's concussed someone because it was that or he didn't *know* what would happen to him, he's *survived*, and he's less afraid than he should be anymore of a bunch of Neanderthal teenagers. That doesn't mean that it doesn't get through his skin like it's toxic, though. He takes Blaine's hand, unfolds his fingers and fits the pen into it, and Blaine smiles, a little crookedly. Kurt says, "Just following you?"

"Actually just following me. Didn't say anything. Three silent guys following me like they're so scary, fuck, I really need to define 'scary' to these people."

Kurt doesn't look at the scar on his cheek. "And you . . . ?"

"I turned around and told them that I'm flattered but my ass already belongs to someone else so could they stop staring at it. They didn't like that much."

"No," Kurt says, putting Blaine's bag on the floor next to his chair, opening his book to the right page for him. "I don't imagine they did."

"I'm sort of glad the teacher stepped in," Blaine says, twirling the pen in his fingers. "I didn't even get to lay a punch. Look at how I'm growing as a person. I'm *glad* of that."

"I'm very proud of you," Kurt says, and Blaine looks at his eyes, and the grin comes real this time, and very wicked. Kurt shrugs a shoulder, scratches his finger under that new leather band again, says, "I have French homework, do you want me to wait in the library for you?"

Blaine's face settles into some quiet emotion. "Whoever's lucky enough to be your boyfriend better be insanely grateful for it, you have got to be the best thing that ever happened to him."

Don't do that, don't. Not here. I can't sit through math class with my stomach doing loop-the-loops and my face full of blood and my throat just *full*, I can't start crying *here*. "He makes it worth my while," Kurt manages, too low and too rough, and he clears his throat. "He really does."

The smile is soft on Blaine's mouth and so bright in his eyes. Kurt looks to the side, where Tina is looking studiously at her textbook, and Blaine's foot settles alongside Kurt's under the table as he begins to flick his pen in his fingers, preparing to actually work.

*

After finishing his homework - too early, alas for the standards of high school French classes - Kurt stretches his arms up, arching his back in his seat in the library, and sighs. He props his head on a hand, looks around the room for something to amuse himself with before detention lets out, since he already knows that there are no books worth actually reading in this conservative joke of a centre of education. Lauren Zizes is working at a laptop and *Puck* of all human beings is loitering between the shelves, watching her - god alone knows what could be happening there, Puck in a library, all sense is already cancelled, so Kurt looks carefully away. Jacob Ben Israel is also whirring away at his laptop, probably inventing some rumour about Rachel he can threaten her with circulating, like the insipid little troll he is. A girl is doing homework for two Cheerios playing with their hair and talking next to her. Kurt rolls his eyes, stands up. He might as well put his things in his locker and go wait for Blaine outside detention, it's not like it could be any more dull than it is in here.

The corridors are quiet, after school, they seem bigger when they're empty of students. He remembers every evening after detention in this building, walking with his throat filling, his heart clenching down so small with fear, for the exit and the people he *knew* were waiting for him out there. The person he knew was waiting for him out there. And mostly he doesn't think about it, he's fine, no-one's ever broken him, he refuses to let them. But -

But there in the mall, staring right at him, his face all drawn and unreadable and it wasn't new fear but a simple learned response, the spike of cold adrenaline, the terror striking him still. Doesn't distance make it easier? He's only okay when he doesn't think about it, when he does he feels like he's been shrunk again, reduced by what Karofsky did to him, crumpled down so small like a paper bag. He closes his eyes for a second, walks on, long capable strides. He's fine. He's fine he's fine he's fine. His footsteps echo from the ceiling. He is fine fine fine.

To be made to feel helpless is the worst. To be made to feel that there is no choice, no decision for you to make, it's all about what is done *to* you. To be a stone for someone to kick, paper they can write on. Why can't Blaine understand that Kurt can't bear to be reminded of it, can't bear for other people to know that Karofsky turned him into an object, a *thing*, to be done to and never do, why can't he - ?

He can't resent Blaine, can't think about it, can't bear it, Blaine's the one who saved him, Blaine's the most important person in his *life*. He feels wobbly and unsettled and his eyes are too hot, he just feels too much, he always feels things too much. He puts his things in his locker, tries to cool his cheeks with his own palms, it doesn't work. There's still time before detention finishes, so he slips into a bathroom to wet his face and convince himself that he feels better. He is so *stupid* for letting this creep up on him now. It's not happening to him, it's over, he survived and got over it, why is he letting it hit him again *now*?

He dries his face, settles his hair, there's nothing he can do about his eyes looking so red. He wishes . . .

Too many things. He'll go get some fresh air, calm himself down, go wait for Blaine. Maybe he can convince Blaine to watch some sad movie with him as an excuse to cry and get cuddled for it. It would probably surprise his friends, how tender Blaine is for him in private, they would probably expect him to scoff and joke when Kurt cries at *Moulin Rouge* instead of fetching a tissue for him and kissing his forehead and stroking his broad hands down his back, but he does. He's a good person. Whispers to him, "I'm sorry it's sad." while Kurt's mouth wobbles and he blows his nose. "I'm sorry it's sad, Kurt."

It's like he's apologising for all of life, sometimes.

Kurt pushes open the exit and leans out, cool clean air, he closes his eyes for a second and sighs and looks up -

At David Karofsky in a private school uniform, walking towards him, mouth just opening.

Kurt thinks, so quiet but so crystalline clear through the rising black, I'm going to faint.

Karofsky says, "Kurt-"

It was probably evolutionarily useful, long ago, the urge not towards fight or flight but to simply stand as still as a statue and pray for danger to pass by. Against certain predators it must have worked, fooled them into oversight. It will not work against a teenage boy twice his size and Kurt grabs his breath in, he needs to *move*, he blinks, hard and fast to clear the black, and *wrenches* himself back into the building, flings himself around. Karofsky yells and Kurt *hurtles*, no thought, no grace, *run*.

He lifts a wrist to bang a fire door open, his shoes squeak off the corridor's shiny floor, he can hear the heavy footsteps following. He's more than willing to bet that he's faster than Karofsky but it's not just about being faster, zigging corners and tripping down a couple of steps, Karofsky plays football, his bulk is deceptive, he's good at quick manoeuvres. Kurt needs to be out in the open where he can *run run run* and not look back; in these tight corridors, all these locked classroom doors boxing him in, he's trapped. Run, run, run -

There's a fire exit up ahead. His palms bang the bar, his shoulder hits it with his entire crashing weight but it's like running into a tree: it's locked. The flesh of his shoulder pounds its unhappiness at him, threatens the bruise to come so hot and hard, and Kurt slams the bar a couple more time and kicks it in frantic horror, *no*. No no no no fuck this school's useless fire safety record *why is the fire exit locked - ?*

He hears the running footsteps peter down to walking footsteps behind him. He turns to face him, fingers still on the door he doesn't want to stop believing in yet, he can get out, he can escape, he *can* -

Karofsky walks towards him very slowly, very cautiously, hands held up like he's trying to not to frighten a rabbit in a trap as he approaches it. If it's supposed to make Kurt calm down all it does is make him feel like he's going to be sick, Karofsky's raised hands just make him look *bigger*. And this is not happening. It is not, he refuses it, not again, never again, things are not being done *to* him -

Kurt scans the corridor in one quick sweep but there's nothing, this isn't a choir room full of instruments, this is an empty school corridor, lockers and classroom doors, Kurt's physical strength against Karofsky's means nothing without a weapon in his hand. His fingers claw into fists against the door and from somewhere inside he finds his voice, deeper than it should be, a snarl of sheer terror as he lifts a shaking warning finger, "If you touch me I will *scream* and you have no idea how far I can project-

"Not - I'm not - I'm not gonna - touch you. Jesus." Karofsky stops, not enough distance between them, the length of the corridor, the length of *Lima* isn't enough distance, and Kurt can't think over the screaming of his body to be anywhere but here. "I wanted to-

"-the police," Kurt manages, his *lips* have gone numb. "If you, I will call the police I will-

"I'm not gonna - I wanted to -" Karofsky lifts his hands higher, like a surrender, and rubs the back of his neck with one while he *stares* at Kurt, his mouth all strange and twitchy. "I wanted to - to tell you - god I'm not gonna touch you, don't look at me like - I wanted to, after yesterday, I wanted to . . ."

Kurt stares at him, every muscle in his body *hurting* with its rigidity, quivering a little like a bow drawn too taut. "Why are you here? You haven't done *enough*? Why won't you *leave me alone*-"

Karofsky looks to the side, eyes fixing on a bottom locker while his face colours, and his eyes look all strange, and Kurt just can't really process what it means to see him in a blazer and tie, it's surreal to the point that he really does feel like he's living through a nightmare. "I will. I just. I just wanted to tell you . . . I got a note." He reaches into a pocket, brings out a little square of paper. He waves it, lamely. "I was gonna stick it in your locker. I didn't think you'd be . . . here."

Kurt swallows, and watches his face, and trusts him as much as rabbit trusts a tiger.

Karofsky's fingers make awkward little patting noises on the paper as he plays with the note. He clears his throat a little, looks at Kurt's face like really he wants to look anywhere else. "I wrote it down, it was easier. I didn't know what to actually say, you know, to you. It's. I wasn't gonna do that. I know what everyone thinks, I wasn't gonna do *that*, you know that, right?"

Kurt stares at him, trying not to shake, hardly able to follow him through the shriek of adrenaline in his veins.

"I wasn't gonna - what he said, what he said I, I wasn't gonna do that, not *that*, I wasn't, Kurt, I *wasn't*."

Kurt breathes a few times, folding his arms very close around himself, staring at him with his head held high, back as straight as he can, trying to contain every too-much breath. He quickly wets his lips, swallows, finds a little shaky strength with which to say, "What are you . . . you weren't going to do what? You weren't going to do *what*? You dragged me down, I was *terrified*, you knew I - I *begged* you to get off me you fucking *asshole* don't tell me-"

"I wanted - I wanted to kiss you, okay, it wasn't *that*, I wouldn't've done that, everyone thinks I - I wouldn't, I - I wouldn't -"

"You were trying to pin my hands what the hell-"

"I wouldn't've done *that*."

"What the hell were you going to do, then?" Kurt spits back, the contempt snapping through him like electricity. "Pin me to the floor so we could have a discussion about how confusing teenage sexuality is and how potentially psychologically damaging the coming out process can get? Invite me to a queer reading and support group? Was that *Gender Trouble* in your pocket or were you just pleased to *straddle* me-?"

"I just wanted to kiss you." He's got his hands over his face, paper crumpling there, so he doesn't have to look at Kurt all wire-strung tight with *rage*. "I didn't know what I wanted, I just wanted to kiss you. I didn't, I wouldn't, I didn't . . ." His voice is getting thick. "I'm sorry, Kurt. I'm sorry, I'm sorry -"

Kurt's breath shakes loose. If there were a weapon now he would pick it up and concuss the bastard all over again, he would knock him over and just keep on hitting, how *dare* he act like this hurts *him*, how *dare* he act like he has a *right* to hurt -

Karofsky rubs at the skin of his face, and makes an ugly swallowing noise. Kurt's eyes follow the movements, and his arms loosen around himself a little with confusion, then horrible sympathy hurt, then *hatred* for Karofsky making him feel sympathetic to *him*, then more confusion and his throat tightens with more, more hurt -

"Do you actually understand what you did to me?" he says, throat a bar of pain as the words come out. "It wasn't just that, was it? You followed me around the school, you made me feel like I was never safe, you made me feel like you could do anything to me and I couldn't escape, like there was nothing I could do." Karofsky wipes his face off again, lowers his hands, looks at Kurt with bruised, damp eyes. "Do you have any idea, you made me feel like . . . you have no idea, you can't. I felt. I felt like you cancelled me out." The words *tear* coming out of his throat. "I felt like you were *always* pinning my hands, Karofsky. Once you put me on that floor it took me *weeks* to drag myself off it again. You have no idea. None."

Karofsky's silent for a second before his mouth moves; he gives a little gulp, and some sound does come, the second time. "I know. I know, I just - I was angry all the time. I was just angry just, *all* the time. 'cause - 'cause you hated me. You thought I was - ugly an' gross an' stupid and you . . . I just, I was just *angry* an' . . ."

Kurt says, quiet and cold, "And you took it out on me."

He closes his eyes, his mouth turns. He croaks, "I'm sorry, Kurt. I only . . . I was just, I was angry all the time and - I hated myself." He swallows. "*All* the time. 'specially when I was . . . when I knew what I was doing to you." He opens his eyes, and swallows again, and waves the note a little lamely. "I dunno if you even want this. S'tupid anyway, I never say things right. Just, I wasn't gonna do that to you. I wasn't. I'm sorry about what I did do. I . . . that's it, I guess. Sorry," small and young, and Kurt stares at him and could *scream*.

How *dare* you come back here to say *sorry*. How dare you act like this is something in the category of things that can be apologised for, it isn't, you have no idea, *this can't be forgiven*. What you did to me, what you did to my life, because you were scared of what other people would think you made me -

Dave, Karofsky, breathes big awkward breaths, audible and shaky. Kurt glares into the corner of the corridor, hunching himself tight, thinks, No, fuck you, no, you have no idea, *leave me alone*, I don't care, I don't, I *don't*.

He does. He always does. He can't ever help it, he is very, very good at reading other people's pain, the subtleties of it, it's what makes him so good at really knowing how to *hurt* people when he wants to. And there's Dave now, suffering, and Kurt can't owe him forgiveness, no-one can ask him to forgive this, but as soon as he recognises the pain it's like a switch flicks and it's not even about trying to forgive him, he just . . . there are things he could say, maybe should say. There are ways he could twist the knife in, make Dave understand how much Kurt *suffered* over this, make him feel it worse. But he can't. He's not capable of it,

the words don't rise in his mind. Faced with someone who needs forgiveness all Kurt feels is a *want* to forgive them, so hard to ignore. It would be an active effort to hurt Karofsky now, and Kurt doesn't have the strength for it.

He's always too weak, in all the stupidest ways.

His shoulders fall from their tight lines, and he rubs his own arms uneasily. "What did you tell your friends at the mall?"

Dave looks at his eyes, looks to the side, shrugs. "Said it wasn't like that. I said we'd . . . just, you know, it wasn't like that. They didn't know, 'til then." Quietly, "About me. But they don't really care or anything. They're not acting like . . . like there's something wrong with me."

Kurt measures his own breaths, slow and even. He says, "It makes a difference. Having friends who don't care. It *really* makes a difference."

Dave looks at him, uncertain, trying to understand, and Kurt tries but he can't make himself smile yet, his mouth just can't do it. "I don't hate you, Dave. Just . . . just have a life, have a good one if you can. But I do need you to stay away from me." He swallows, and it hurts. "I'm not okay with what you did, I don't know - when I will be. It doesn't mean I hate you, I just need time to make myself okay, and you can't stay here, you know you can't, if Blaine . . . he'll just go insane, it's not safe for you to be here."

"Yeah." His mouth twitches, not a smile. "Sorry. Thank you for . . ."

Kurt nods, and swallows again. "Just - try to be happier, and not hurt people. If that's the best we can do I think it's enough. It's hard enough just doing that."

Dave nods, and when his mouth twitches this time, it might be the beginning of a smile. "Um, do you - will you take this?" He offers the note, shoulders hunching. "To - read later, or even not read, you can toss it if you, just, um."

Kurt's shoulders slump the last drop, and he finally manages that thin, short smile. "I'll read it later." He walks over, makes his body not cringe inside the radius of Dave's reach, and gently takes the little folded paper from his hand. "Thank you."

Dave stares down at him and this close Kurt can hear his breaths harsher, see older traces of hurt on his face. "I wasn't gonna," he says, very quietly. "I wasn't, not that. I know what I did was bad enough, but I wouldn't do that. I wouldn't."

It brings up the sting of tears again, and Kurt has to suck a shaky breath in. "I know. I know that, Dave."

He opens his bag, slips the note in and looks for tissues, blinking quickly to try to contain the idiot urge to cry, *why* he has to cry so damn easily all the -

His phone's glowing with a new missed call, still on silent from his time in the library, and Kurt thinks, *Blaine*. even as he hears the call of his name from around the corner. Dave's back goes instantly rigid and Kurt looks up horrified as Blaine rounds the corner, cell in one hand, anxious and angry and what time is it, how long has he been looking for Kurt - ?

Blaine's eyes snap onto him, Kurt red-eyed and horrified next to Dave, standing there big and awkward as a bear, all tense and wary as Blaine takes them in, silent for two long seconds, not even questioning it. Then he pockets his phone and scans the corridor, like he's looking for something.

Blaine isn't Kurt. Kurt sees a corridor; Blaine sees potential weapons. He walks over and jerks the fire extinguisher off the wall and the blood leaves Kurt's face, he can tell the weight of it just by how Blaine's holding it, he'll break Dave's *neck* -

He scrambles to get between Blaine and Dave. "Blaine he just came to talk, he's *leaving*, will you-"

Blaine whispers, and the fact that he doesn't shout makes the fear turn *sickly*, "I fucking told you that if you ever came near him again I would kill you."

Dave backs off, hands raised helplessly again. Kurt doesn't know what to *do*, chokes at him, "Blaine they will put you in *jail* you can't-"

"Get out of the way."

"Blaine you'll kill him!"

"He deserves it!" Blaine screams at him, and Kurt has never been scared of Blaine before, not like *this*.
"The shit he said about you, the world's *better* without him in it, *get out of the way*."

There's no time to think if this is stupid, no time to consider pain and consequences. Kurt says over his shoulder, "Run. *Don't* come back." and then just launches himself at Blaine. He sees the surprise in Blaine's eyes, the last thing he'd expected, which gives Kurt the exact half second he needs to just *throw* himself at him. He's seen it happen on the football field but they're not wearing padding and this isn't happening on grass; Blaine's foot squeaks as it slips up and they go down, Kurt on top, his knee hits the floor so hard he sees stars and his chin hits Blaine's chest, clacking his teeth; the fire extinguisher hits the floor with an *absurdly* loud noise, bounces and then rolls away, an ominous heavy rumbling before it hits a wall.

Blaine tries to yank himself out from underneath Kurt and Kurt grabs his upper arms, screams because Dave's still standing there like an idiot, "*Run!*" and Blaine wrenches and twists like a pinned wolf, and Kurt hears Dave's shoes scrabble and flee. If he can just hold Blaine long enough, just get Dave out of this corridor, enough of a head start -

It's not that Blaine is stronger than Kurt, or much heavier than Kurt, or even more determined in this moment than Kurt is. It's just that Blaine's body knows how to fight and Kurt's never done this, hasn't got a clue, none of his instincts are for attack. His breath yelps out as he's slammed to the side, ribs bruising off his own bag, his flung hand strikes hard off a locker and then he's on his back with his wrists pinned down with all Blaine's weight and his teeth are bared and his eyes are *wild* -

The hand around his right wrist is biting that stiff leather band into his skin. He blinks against the tears, hot with pain and *fear*, and Blaine's breath falls loose as he stares at him, and his palm shifts against the sharp edges of leather that must be cutting his hand too. His hands loosen, pull back. He sits up, stares down at Kurt breathing hard, and Kurt's hands shake as he puts them over his mouth, reaches up and tries to wipe his eyes before the tears come loose. One escapes, and he turns his head so Blaine won't see it as it tickles its way towards his ear. He can't hear Dave's running feet anymore, all he can hear is Blaine breathing, too hot too fast.

He wipes the side of his face with a palm, and his breathing is trembling his ribs. Blaine reaches down, touches his wrists, whispers, ". . . Kurt." His fingers curl, so so gently, around the tender skin, and his thumb strokes so tentatively there. "I would never hurt you, I would never, never -"

Kurt blinks and blinks, and nods for him. Blaine shuffles back, pulls Kurt with him so he can sit up with Blaine off his waist, and Blaine wraps his arms around him with their legs tangled and the shock is beginning to wear off, the pain is beginning to glow out through his skin now in so many places as Blaine hugs him in so close and whispers horrified, "I would never hurt you, I would never, never hurt you -"

He can't even think, after all this. He lets Blaine's fingers cup his head, press him to his chest, just slumps and waits to feel like he can function again, while Blaine whispers against his hair, "I'm sorry sorry sorry Kurt I love you -"

I know you do, Kurt thinks, squeezing his shaking hands in Blaine's t-shirt. I know that. If you'd put my skull in with that fire extinguisher I'd still know that.

"I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry," Blaine whispers, and the kiss on top of his head has never before felt like desperation.

Part II

They have to spend some time just sitting in Blaine's car, because neither of them are in any fit state to drive. Blaine's already asked Kurt, urgent and *scared*, what Dave did to him; Kurt said quietly, "He came to say sorry." and saw no comprehension on Blaine's face. He doesn't know what Dave said, months ago now, to make Blaine snap, to make Blaine capable of forgetting everything in the world but needing to attack him. He doesn't think he wants to. He doesn't think Dave meant it anyway, he was just looking for something to hurt Kurt's boyfriend with, to hurt Kurt by proxy with, because Kurt chose someone who wasn't him and Dave couldn't touch him anymore with Blaine around. He can't touch him now, for better or worse. Kurt can't ever let those two cross paths again. Thank god for New York. Thank god for escape plans . . .

He swallows again, and lifts a hand to his forehead, and it seems to be steady. He touches Blaine's leg. "Switch. I'll drive."

Blaine licks his lips, looks at him. His eyes look dark and young and too big in his face, blanched in a sickly way. Kurt finds half a smile for him, and opens his door to get into the driver's seat.

Blaine's parents aren't home, they're still both away more often than not. They walk upstairs together, Blaine's hand twitchy on his, and with the bedroom door closed behind them Kurt puts his bag down and Blaine paces the room like a trapped cat, too much energy not quite contained, something frantic inside him that needs to out. Kurt walks to him, touches his shoulder and says, "Blaine-?" and Blaine grabs for that leather bracelet, raw against his bruised skin, trying to squeeze too many fingers into it.

"We should go to New York."

Kurt stares at him. "We *are* going to New York."

"No. Now. Grab some stuff and go. No-one has to know, it's fine, we can - I've got a savings account, we can find work and make -"

Now Kurt can't *stop* staring at him. "Blaine, I can't - my *dad* -"

Blaine's fingers are too tight in that band. He licks his lips, searches Kurt's eyes which must look just *baffled*. "We could get married. In New York. We could forge the consent documents, I checked the laws online-"

"Blaine, what the - what is *wrong* with you?"

"What am I supposed to do?" Blaine barks at him. He lets go of his wrist and strides off pulling at his hair, then seems to change his mind too quickly and grabs for Kurt's hand again, in both of his. "I've been thinking about that tattoo. I'm going to get one. Your name. On me. I want it."

"Blaine what are you -?" Kurt touches his face, stares into his eyes, runs his thumb over his cheek. "What's wrong?"

"This!" Blaine yells. "*Me!* What do you *think* is wrong, it's always me!"

"- no it's not."

Blaine grabs at his own hair again, turns away, his breath huffing loose hard. "It's always me. I always fuck up, you *know* that. And-" He rubs his knuckles into his eyes, chokes. "You have no idea, all I think about - I can't wait to get the hell out of here with you and never look back but when we get out of this cowshit town, Kurt, there'll - there'll be all these other guys who aren't *me* and they couldn't love you more but fuck knows they could love you *better* than I do and what, do I just let you go off with them? Because I should if I really love you but I can't and I'm selfish and I *need* you and I don't want us to go because you'll find someone *better*-"

"Jesus Blaine what the hell," Kurt whispers.

"- and all I do is *fuck up* and I shouldn't be near you but god I'll die, Kurt, I'm not - I'm serious, I won't last without you, I'll - just - I'll go to pieces, I'll break myself-"

"Blaine -" Kurt catches him, has to physically turn him in his arms to find his face, to say to him so confused, "Blaine, I'm not going anywhere, you know I'm not, we're - we'll be together, we always will be-"

Blaine takes his hand, and stretches his arm out, and pulls the sleeve of his jacket up. Kurt flicks his eyes over the ugly ring of bruising and says, "I was the one who jumped on you, Blaine."

"What if I'd hurt you? What if I'd really *hurt* you, would we still be having this conversation? I wasn't thinking, I could've split your head open banging you over like that, I could've-"

"I don't care. I did it because I love you and I don't want you going to jail and getting wrecked because of *me*. I could have hurt you too, do you even realise that? Shoving you over like that. I didn't know what else to do, I couldn't cope if you got in trouble any more than you could, Blaine, all I would be able to think about . . ."

"You don't understand what it's like," Blaine says so shakily, his fingers stroking so gently around the bruises on Kurt's wrist, "being me with you, you just don't even see it. You just don't see what you are and what the whole rest of the world outside this shithole will know the second they look at you, and you don't see *me* -"

"I see you." Kurt says, quiet and sure. "I know you."

"No. If you knew me then you wouldn't *like* me. Every time I fuck up, Christ, how long does it take for you to buy a clue?"

"Like I'm the dumb one in this relationship when you're coming out with this crap? God's sake, Blaine -" Kurt reaches for his face, runs a hand around his cheek, already feels the day's stubble's graze underneath his thumb. "I never thought I would feel like this for anybody. Do you know that? I just didn't think I could bring myself to do it, I didn't think I could trust anyone enough to just . . . I loved the idea of love but the reality of it scared the hell out of me. And then there was you, and - what do you think, we'll get to New York and I'll *leave* you? I'll just dump you for the first available guy or - don't you even believe me when I tell you I love you?"

Blaine stares at him, too much in his eyes, tense and sparky staring at Kurt. "I do," he says, roughly. "Kurt I do, you're the . . . I do."

"But you don't. If you don't think I mean it - you can't if you think -"

Blaine says quietly, "If I really loved you I would give you to someone better."

Something in Kurt *snaps*. "If I didn't love you I would *slap* you for that. I am not *yours to give*, I am *mine* to give and you've got me whether you like it or not you *cretin*. You do *not* get to make these decisions for me, god I could-"

Blaine's gaze keeps dropping from his eyes to his mouth. "You're really sexy when you're angry."

Kurt makes a little screaming noise, his hand grabs into Blaine's hair and the kiss is all teeth and tongue, Blaine's hand gripping his wrist, one on his face as they slip into something less of an active battle, though there's still plenty of aggression behind it, heated and hard. Kurt breaks his mouth back, hisses over Blaine's, "You haven't got a clue you fucking *idiot*. Do you think I could have done this for anyone else? Do you think I could have ever wanted *this* with anyone else?"

They kiss, and again, and Kurt uses his height advantage to press Blaine's head back, so there's the bared side of his neck now for Kurt to drag his teeth down. Blaine twists a hand into Kurt's hair, growls, "There would've been better guys. Guys who made it like you wanted it, guys who took the time and lit candles and made you feel -"

"Made me feel what?" Kurt huffs at the pulse in his neck. "Fuck all that. I wanted you. You have no *idea*. That bed and you, it's all I wanted, the smell of you, you have no *idea*."

He begins working Blaine's belt open, tilts his forehead down on Blaine's chest to watch his hands work. "You don't even know. You think I could do better? You could have fucked me in my car that first night, do you realise that? If you'd said the right things I would have just crumbled, I was so stupid and naïve and lonely, you *know* that. But you didn't because - because you're not that guy -"

"I've been that guy," Blaine says, and Kurt yanks his jeans and underwear down at once, lets himself to his knees.

"No, you haven't. You might have wanted to be but you never were. You care too much. You're too good." He slides his hand under Blaine's balls, enclosing them in fingers and palm, breathes in and he can almost *feel* his pupils dilating. "You have no idea. Do you think I could have done this for anyone else? The idea of sex *horrified* me, I swear to you, you have no idea, I thought I *never would*. And then there's you, the smell of you -" He kisses, sweet and tender, the underside of Blaine's dick, the things you do for love, it just undoes what you thought your boundaries were. "Do you honestly think there's another human being on the planet I would *want* to get on my knees for?"

Blaine's fingers stroke into his hair, and he whispers sounding sort of awed and rough with arousal, "No."

Kurt presses his tongue under the head, and closes his mouth around it.

They were slow to come to blowjobs, like this at least. Kurt had felt like he *ought* to, Blaine went at them with such enthusiasm, but Blaine just hadn't let him, had physically stopped him, picking him up and rolling him over to rut at him instead like maybe he could tell that Kurt was motivated by ought and not want. Until the afternoon Kurt was kneeling over his waist and sucking his nipple with Blaine's sweaty fingers in his hair and just, it wasn't *enough*, not anymore, and he could feel Blaine's dick wet against the inside of his thigh -

So Kurt's had less practise than Blaine, but he approaches the blowjob as an artist: it's all about the feeling you put into it. The feeling Kurt puts into it is primarily *want, need* even, he smells Blaine and he's just hungry, he *wants* to do this to him. Feel him vulnerable in his mouth and make him feel good and safe and taken care of and always loved, always. He whispers and caresses and hums to him, when Kurt kisses him here Blaine *whimpers*. And when he needs it, Kurt offers him lips and pressing tongue and that rhythm he needs, and all he can think is, You have no idea. How have you never worked out that this is just another way to try to make you feel it? Why can't you *tell* that every part of this is *I love you*?

Kurt wraps an arm around his hips and presses his other palm firm to his pelvis to hold him steady when he comes, so Blaine can't jerk and buck too far down his throat. He swallows, and again, and blinks the sweat out of his eyes, wiping his mouth, he should have at least taken his jacket off before this. But Blaine's coming down to his knees, sliding his hands over Kurt's shoulders and drawing his jacket down his arms as he kisses him, deep and determined, and Kurt's mouth is overraw and buzzing for him.

Blaine breathes over his mouth, hands undoing the button on his pants, "If this breaks I'll kill myself."

"Don't you fucking *dare* ever do that I would *kill* you-"

Blaine rumbles the laugh into his mouth as he kisses him, and his hands spread around Kurt's waist, begin wrenching Kurt's probably too tight pants down. "I'm getting that tattoo."

"Like hell you are."

"I am. Four letters." His fingers run over the very base of Kurt's spine, *startlingly* too much for such a small touch, his entire body rolls up on a moan. "Right here. You can pick the font."

"Blaine-"

"I want you on the bed."

Kurt kisses him again, palm against the beating side of his throat, fingers closing in his hair.

"Jesus," Blaine whispers as he undresses him, finding new, unexpected bruises. His knee has come up dark purple, one hip's marked where it hit the floor, one side of his chest checkerboarded, his wrists and even the back of one hand from where it struck the locker show the marks. Kurt runs a hand up Blaine's arm, turns his elbow to check the graze on it, lets his fingertips run down his shoulder blades underneath his t-shirt before he pulls it off to check his wince. "We look terrible," he confirms.

"You look beautiful. Fuck, you have no idea." Blaine puts a hand on his naked hip, stares down at Kurt's erection. "You don't have a clue, I know you don't, my mouth goes *dry*. We look like - we look like we've been in a fight."

"We have," Kurt points out, trying to keep his breathing steady, staring at Blaine staring at his dick.

Blaine says, eyes not raised yet, "Get on the bed."

Blaine lays next to him, warm naked skin, lays a leg over his and kisses him, and kisses him. His hand runs down Kurt's side, *fuck* he feels like he could come without any traditional erogenous zone coming into it sometimes, curves back over his ass - his fingers a whisper of a suggestion - and then back around to the front, to settle around him where Kurt feels as hot and aching as if there's the finest membrane of skin between Blaine and his pounding, desperate blood. His breath comes out against the corner of Blaine's mouth where Blaine leaves a trail of little kisses, each one gone before Kurt's lips can respond, and he whispers, "I'm sorry, I'm *sorry* I'm such a fuck up, I won't hurt you again, I won't-"

"I'm not hurt," Kurt breathes back, as Blaine's hand begins to move and Kurt grips convulsively at his arms. "Hah - I'm not." He swallows. "I'm exactly where I want to be. Don't want anything else. Just you you you -"

Blaine hides his face in Kurt's throat and works him with a hand, and Kurt can feel Blaine's every breath too much, too hot on his shoulder, and his dick against Kurt's thigh. He swallows, curls his fingers in Blaine's hair. "Are you hard again?"

Blaine's breath bursts loose, and he nods. Kurt slumps his head back on the pillow, tugs gently at his hair. "Do you have a condom?"

Blaine - laughs, such a happy noise against Kurt's shoulder, which he kisses. "You always say that. You never say *will you fuck me*, you always ask if I've got a condom, when do I ever not have condoms?"

Kurt growls. Blaine lifts his head, lifts his hand to run his thumb over Kurt's mouth. "You have no idea. I think it's adorable. I think you're adorable. And Kurt -?"

Kurt kisses him back, loosely entwining his arms around his neck, and makes a small questioning noise. Blaine breaks the kiss, and promises solemnly, "I swear to you, I will always, always have condoms."

He fucks him slow and steady with Kurt's ankles over his shoulders, like there's no urgency, like they have all the time in the world. Kurt grips the sheets, clenching tight enough that if the Andersons had cheaper linen he'd tear it, and watches his face, and thinks, You have no idea. Six billion people on this planet, you are the only one who will ever be this to me. There will never be anyone else. Don't be stupid. I don't care if you fuck up, we both fuck up, just don't be *stupid*.

Blaine's thighs shuffle closer, bumping his legs higher, and Kurt slips into an easier arch and lets his head fall back, lets his breath whisper loose as the climax rises.

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Blaine sighs into his hair, one arm draped over his side, fingertips lazily skimming that naked skin on his lower back. He's tracing letters there; Kurt lets him. He could sleep, warm and contained like this, and he lifts his cheek from Blaine's chest mostly so he won't, trying to blink some coherency back into a very foggy mind. "You actually just asked me to marry you, did you even notice that?"

"Yeah," Blaine says, and his thumb rubs over Kurt's skin like an eraser, like Kurt's body is an etch-a-sketch, so he can start writing again. "I meant it too."

"Blaine, we're *seventeen*."

"I know what I want." he says, calm and sure. "I know what I need."

Kurt puts a hand on his chest, tips his head to the side against his own bent arm. "Yes," he says, watching Blaine's face. "If you did mean it. Yes, you know I will. Just - not right now, my dad would - I actually literally don't know what he would do. I *cannot* see your parents liking it. How about we get through college, and we have some vague idea of what our lives are going to look like, and then I can plan the wedding appropriately. How about then?" He smiles, and it broadens. "Will you still want me by then?"

"Mm, by then we'll be what, twenty-four, twenty-five? No, you'll be far too old and decrepit for me by then, I'll need to go looking for fresher meat. *Ow* that was a *you know that was a-*"

"Things you don't joke about," Kurt snarls at him, slamming the pillow back onto the mattress from beating Blaine about the head with it, while Blaine lays there trying to shield his face with his arms. "*That.*"

Blaine laughs, puts an arm around Kurt's shoulders again and murmurs, "Come here."

He is very lucky, given that he is so very stupid, to be so very beautiful. Kurt accepts the kiss, and the next one, and passes his hand down Blaine's perfect side, running that leather band along Blaine's skin as he goes. "So this thing is probably the strangest promise ring anyone's ever been given," he says, and Blaine stretches, yawns, settles back into the mattress resting his cheek on his own folded arms.

"I bet real leather fetishists come up with stranger ones. Do you want one, a real one? One that at least I paid for?"

"It's alright," Kurt murmurs, fingers slipping on his lovely skin, around to his back, the shallow curve of it, the strength of his spine under the skin. "I like it."

His fingers, shyly, dip to touch, to feel the little patch of skin there just above his tailbone. Blaine mumbles into his forearm, "K U R . . ."

Kurt says, "You're not really getting a tattoo."

"I fail to see how you could stop me."

"You can't get a *tattoo*. It won't ever come off, Blaine."

"That's the idea. What, you're okay with the idea of planning our wedding, you freak out when I get your name written on me? They're really the same thing anyway."

"No they're -" Kurt scowls, doesn't know how to explain the difference to a boy who does still occasionally set fire to things just because he's bored, he thinks Kurt doesn't know but Kurt can *smell* it on him. He runs his fingers over the skin again. "Why? You know I don't need it. I do know that you love me. I know it, Blaine."

"It's for me more than you. I want to feel owned." Blaine shrugs. "I know what I was like when we first met, and all along you've worn the collar when I'm the one who really needed it. So. I just want to know it's there, I'm yours, even when you're not in the room with me."

Kurt's cheeks have got dizzyingly hot far too quickly. He licks his lips, lets his fingertips trace the skin; *Kurt*, he thinks, little hot thrill in his stomach, if he's getting an offer to choose the typeface then he does need to take Blaine up on it, he's the one who's going to have to look at the damn thing for the rest of his life . . .

He thinks about the size of the rest of his life, the rest of their lives. He thinks about his own skin, naked on his lower back. He thinks about Blaine's fear that Kurt doesn't mean this, won't want this, that Kurt will find someone else - when oh god he knows, he must know, doesn't he know? Kurt would kneel down and *beg* for him, all of Kurt's pride means nothing against how much he needs Blaine. He closes his eyes, and traces with his fingertips, *Blai* . . .

"We should both get them."

Blaine blinks, lifts his head from his arms. "What?"

"Both of us. Even though your name is longer and it will *hurt* you asshole."

"You're not - you're not serious."

"I fail to see, Blaine Anderson, how you could stop me getting one."

"You get a tattoo. You."

"What exactly is so bizarre about me getting a tattoo?"

"Well, I've pretty much been on the universe's tattoo waiting list since I was like, thirteen, and everyone knows it. You're - you know. *Sensible*."

"Do you think so? When it comes to you, do you really think so?" Kurt watches his eyes, as Blaine watches his. "I would die for you. If I need to get it permanently etched into my skin before you believe it, god, it's a small price to pay."

"You don't have to do that. You don't have to do that for me-"

"It's not for you, not really, not all of it." Kurt lays down on his side again, runs his fingers over Blaine's cheek. "Don't you like the idea? Your name on my body? No-one else would ever be able to touch me without knowing I was yours." His eyes follow his face, the barely-there twitching of Blaine's mouth and his eyes and his lowering eyebrows, and Kurt knows him too well, Kurt knows how to get desire to darken his eyes with a single sentence if he wants to. "Not that anyone else ever would see it. It would only and always be there for you."

Blaine's silent for a moment, breathing long and slow, staring at Kurt. Then he says like he's thought long and hard about it, "Fuck."

The smile grows warm, and Kurt's thumb strokes his cheek. "I know."

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In his bedroom that night, stomach steeped in really, really not wanting to - he just doesn't want to touch it, he wants to put everything to do with it in a box in the back of his brain and never never go near it again - he reads Dave's note. He doesn't know how he could feel like he owes Dave anything, when Dave's the one who did everything to *him*, but being a human being gives you responsibilities you never asked for and don't get a choice in. Life isn't there to be easy. It's there to be lived, and fucked up as little as you can manage. So he reads it, and sits for some time feeling quiet, and lonely, and incredibly young, faced with a life that sometimes no-one has a choice in.

Then he puts it in the very back of a drawer, and opens his laptop. Blaine has sent him an email saying, *Or this maybe?* with a JPG attached of a tattoo on someone's bicep, a skull wearing a top hat with roses coming out of it, and a snake in its teeth.

Kurt emails back, *I am pre-emptively divorcing you.*

Then he folds his arms around himself and tilts himself left and right on his desk chair, and smiles at his inbox as the reply arrives.