

Dismantle the Sun

by

Songbird

Angst, Hurt/Comfort || M

Blaine Anderson, and the idea that he can't save everyone. But he can try anyway.

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**A memory.*

Blaine Anderson was six years old when he was late home for dinner.

The Anderson's lived in a myriad of aching suburban streets; picket fences and popsicle sticks, and peddling faster and faster in the burning sun until he was racing home, skinned knees and panting.

He spent the eternal stretches of summer sharing dripping ice creams with Charlotte Darling down the road, licking it from each other's arms and painting their noses and cheeks white until their parent's rolled their eyes fondly, sighing and hustling them both inside to dump them in the bathtub.

When the night fell Blaine would watch Cooper catch fireflies in glass jars, dotting them around the patio and decking until his eyes blurred from staring too long and too hard, and the stars mingled among the laughter and the warm night air. He remembered piercing holes in the lids of the jars, letting them burn brighter and longer until the summer faded like cotton candy on his tongue.

The Darling's back yard fell into theirs in a wild tangle, apple trees and bracken spreading through the cracked fence to swamp the neatly pressed roses of his mother's lawn and she would smile, leaning against the creaking fence with sunglasses and a jug of iced-tea when Blaine arrived home from school to find Charlotte pressed down face-first to the earthy ground.

"I'm listening to the worms," she whispered, beckoning him closer with chubby fingers and motioning him silent, "I think they're up to something."

They stayed there until the sky leaked purple and their mother's voices were hoarse with daytime gossip.

Sometimes there would be cucumber sandwiches and lemonade on a rough tartan blanket spread over the grass, sometimes the smell of vanilla and strawberries from the kitchen while his mother baked in waves of heat and Cooper stole half-raw cookies from the tray until she swatted him around the head with her apron and turned the other way as Blaine stuck his finger into the cake-mix.

His father would get home in time for the cookies to be out of the oven, fresh and hot on the cooling rack and Blaine bouncing in his seat as he watched them.

"Not before dinner," he warned, pressing a kiss to his mother's cheek and giving Blaine a look. Blaine stifled his giggles into his palm as Cooper stuck his tongue out at the back of their father's head.

Dinnertimes were a Big Deal in the Anderson house.

"I aced a math test today."

"I won a football game today."

"I made a girl cry today."

"And what did you do, Blaine?"

Blaine looked at the vegetables on his plate, pushed feebly around the white china and hidden under his fork and shrugged.

"Charlotte and I built a fort and defended it from pirates."

His father would laugh into his glass of water and nod.

"Good. I'm glad I didn't have to come to find my family strung up by sea-faring criminals."

"They would have **killed** us Dad. *Duh.*"

To a six year old boy there's nothing quite like the swell of pride that blooms in one's chest when you father smiles at you.

It was a Tuesday when Blaine was late, checking the plastic face of his bright red watch as he ambled down the road, waving through the squinting sun at Mrs Krauss on the corner, tending to her cats and flowers like one and the same.

"Time to stop for a milkshake, Blaine?"

His mouth watered. Blaine *loved* her milkshakes, the way she served them in high glasses, thick with whipped cream like a frosted castle.

"I've got to be home," he mumbled, scuffing at the ground with his too-big sneakers, "Dinner."

She nodded, eyes crinkling and softening in that way that old people's did.

"Maybe tomorrow."

"Maybe."

Blaine's tongue was burning with the acid hiss of sour sweets bought from the shop on the corner, one pocket stuffed full with half for Charlotte, and his own dwindling supply clutched in his hand. He was playing with the hasty idea of sneaking some of hers into his own, the sun beating down on his guilty neck when there was a cry and a shout from the road ahead.

"I didn't take any, I promise," he panted as he reached where Charlotte was sitting on the ground, fingers twisting into the yellow of her dress. She blinked up at him with confused, watery eyes.

She stood and flung her arms around his neck, choking into his shirt.

"It's Augustus."

Augustus was the kitten they'd rescued from the shelter last summer, tiny and barely-there ginger with a feeble purr and two huge blue eyes. He was the parrot that sat on Blaine's shoulder as they defended the street from swashbuckling foes; the fire-breathing dragon that guarded the maps they needed to find the lost treasure; the tragic prince turned into a cat until they could find the right spell to turn him back.

"He's stuck in the tree!"

The creaking oak hung on the crux where their front lawns joined, boughs breaking heavy and ancient over the yellowing grass. Shade in the summer and icicles at Christmas and the drifting billows of wind and leaves when everything turned golden in between.

Blaine craned up onto his tiptoes, catching a glimpse of mud-browed fur through the green of the leaves. Charlotte's fingers were twisting into his shirt, over the damp-tear stains and his heart.

He'd climbed the tree before.

Don't look down don't look down.

The trunk was sweaty and sticky, bleeding bright sap onto the web of Blaine's fingers as he scrambled for a hold, feet slipping against the branches.

"Blaiiiiine!"

He ignored her, heart pounding in his ears as he fought the nauseating sway of vertigo, life swaying on the branches. The kitten cocked its head, watching him with an unblinking stare as he inched higher and higher.

"Come on August, come *on*," Blaine panted, stretching out his arm and feeling the soft wet press of the cat's nose against his fingertips, the rub of soft fur across his wrist.

He caught him by the scruff of the neck, ignoring the needle dig of claws into the skin of his hands and clutched the kitten to his chest, wobbling back down the tree one-handed, slipping the last few feet and twisting his ankle on the uneven ground.

Charlotte caught his arm as Blaine stumbled, tangling him in an awkward hug of limbs and whiskers with a squeal of delight.

"Thank you."

It was worth the twinging pain up Blaine's leg as he limped towards his front door, one glimpse cast over his shoulder as Charlotte cradled the kitten in her arms and smiled into its fur.

"Blaine!"

The door crashing shut set his heart hammering.

"We have *one* rule in this house."

"That's not true. When's the last time I was allowed a girl over?" Cooper shouted from the couch, over the buzzing noise of the television.

"*Cooper!*" His mother chastised, leaving the room and joining his father with her hands on her hips and Blaine's cheeks were burning red not with the sun or the climb but with the *disappointment*.

"But *dad!*"

"Blaine you know you can't be late home for dinner. It's family time, it always has been."

"But Charlotte –"

"*Especially* if you're with Charlotte. You see her every day, Blaine."

"And we're fine with that," his mother cut in quickly, "We love her Blaine. We're happy you're such good friends, but not when it breaks family rules."

Blaine twisted the hem of his shirt in damp fingers, angry tears springing behind his eyes because this just wasn't *fair*.

Blaine looked up at his dad's figure, tall and imposing in the narrow hallway, eyelashes clogged with tears and he sighed, dropping down into a crouch until they were eye-level. One hand rested heavy on Blaine's bony shoulder.

"Just don't let it become a habit, okay B? Now I want you to go to your room. Okay?"

Blaine sniffed hard, staring at the ground and at the shiny surface of his dad's work shoes.

"Okay."

It wasn't all bad, Blaine supposed as the clock on the wall ticked solemnly through the setting sun and he watched Charlotte chasing Augustus around her garden from his window.

At least she was happy.

When sleep began to prick at his eyelids and Blaine had discovered a handful of fool proof ways to get around his bedroom without touching the floor, his mother turned up and knocked softly before she entered with a plate of sandwiches and glass of juice. She set them down on his desk and dusted her hands down on her apron, glancing up with raised eyebrows to his frozen stance between the bookshelves,

crushed down like a worm as he wriggled between them, knocking paperbacks to the floor with gentle thumps.

"Blaine," she sighed, smiling faintly and scooping to collect the books from the carpet, "Do you remember what happened last time you –"

"I know," he muttered, stumbling down from the shelves, catching his knee against the edge with a wince, "I broke my arm."

She nodded.

"Right. Now eat your tea."

Two days later the Darling's mentioned what Charlotte had apparently been rambling colourfully about since it happened;*Blaine's death-defying act of heroic bravery*, and his mother had caught him in a gentle hug.

"That's our Blaine," she said, in an embrace of roses and vanilla and pastel-coloured warmth, "Always trying to help people."

Blaine wriggled away from her arms and turned to face her, grave seriousness falling across his young face.

"I promise never to be late home for dinner again, mom. Unless there's a kitten that needs rescuing."

And he wasn't.

****A letter.***

March 19th, 2020

Dearest Blaine,

*While I admit I initially thought the idea was a little melodramatic even by my standards and **especially** by yours, the act of sending letters to each other while you're away has finally struck me as being a romantic one – even if it is also torturously slow and time consuming.*

It's...nice.

I mean, I saw your face on Skype ten minutes ago. Ten minutes ago for me, a handful of uncountable days by the time this reaches you, and that's when it hit me. When you signed off and my eyes fell upon the paper and pen beside my computer, because who knows how many times we'll communicate before you get this? Numerous, undoubtedly. Hundreds of minutes and seconds crushed together, and even when we're not speaking I'm still there and you're still here, every tiny moment of the day.

But this is tangible proof. You're on my mind every fraction of the day and you know that, but these are words frozen in time, at least for now. This isn't a conversation that passes far too fleeting, or a text that can be lost in space and phone networks.

This is me, Kurt Hummel. And I'm here to say that I love you.

*(Don't roll your eyes at me, Blaine Anderson. I **know** you know that, I'm just saying it again)*

Now I know exactly what you're going to do. You're going to fold and unfold this letter until the creases sink as deep as the ink itself, and you're going to face the internal conflict of whether you should keep it safe and perfect, locked in a drawer to go back to every night before you sleep. Or should you carry it around, stuffed into the pocket of your uniform to brush your fingers against when you think you need the reassurance?

*(Yes, when you **think** you do. Because I **know** you, Blaine. You don't need me to tell you what to do and how to do it, as much as I enjoy bossing you around)*

I know now, why you wanted us to write letters.

Because you wanted something solid. You wanted a reminder, something to push you forwards. Something familiar; my handwriting and my voice in your head.

You wanted something to hold onto.

Well here you have it.

Yours, forever.

Kurt.

****A day.***

Blaine focused on Kurt's scarf.

It had once been his mother's, he thought. Stolen from her closet one afternoon in the autumn and thrown on haphazardly with a purple t-shirt and cut-offs because it was warm for October.

It found its way onto Kurt's bedroom floor at some point during their senior year, cast off in favour of stolen kisses and forgotten in the scramble of shirts and pants as the front door downstairs opened. It bound Kurt's wrists to the headboard during college, looping around Blaine's eyes as a tongue flicked over his nipple and down his chest. Sometimes it tied the creaky door to the study open, stopping it banging open and closed as the wind whistled through the house on stormy nights.

And there it rested, like a rustling timeline of *them* against the bones of Kurt's throat.

His gripped their fingers tighter over his knee.

"I'm joining the Navy."

There it was.

It wasn't a "want to" or an "I've been thinking about" because they'd been through that. Kurt had fought tooth and nail through every argument, every side of the coin they could flip until his voice was hoarse from crying and Blaine was tapping against the locked bathroom door with drumming fingertips.

They'd fought for real and for hours, for the first time in months. Laying themselves bare for each other until they were stripped away to their bones.

"Just tell me why. Please Blaine, just...why?"

"It's something I need to do."

Blaine heard his derisive scoff through the door, the thud as Kurt sat down with his back pressed against the wood.

"Don't give me that crap, Blaine Anderson. You can tell your parents whatever you like. You can tell Charlotte and Cooper and *Santana* whatever you like, but not *me*."

"I..I –"

"You don't have to save everyone, Blaine."

It was barely heard through the wood, broken on a sob and it cut right to Blaine's heart as he felt his cheeks burn with embarrassment because Kurt knew. Kurt knew him better than he knew himself, he always *had*.

Blaine was silent for a moment too long, and when the door unclicked open and Kurt was there, crumpled on his knees against the shining floor Blaine was still staring at an unremarkable spot over Kurt's head.

"You *don't*," Kurt repeated, taking his hands and crushing them between his own and Blaine didn't realise he was crying until a sob raked through his chest and Kurt's fingers touched against the dampness of his cheeks, "Why do you always think you do?"

"Because *someone* has to."

They were silent for a long time, Blaine's fingers mapping the familiar comfort of Kurt's hands, tracing and touching over and over like trying to memorise a dream. Even six days later at his parent's house, as they sat on the couch like scolded children and Blaine couldn't look his mother in the eye, he didn't let go. Kurt's thumb, Kurt's fingers, the gentles creases of Kurt's palm, heart and head and lifelines against the pads of his fingers. The steady beat of his pulse under his thin wrist and Kurt was real, Kurt was here and living and Blaine could *do* this.

"Blaine –" his mother tried, her fingers wringing into the paisley printed skirt of her dress, but his father cut her off. He'd turned away, facing the wall with one hand scraping through his hair the way Blaine's did when he was agitated and his fingers twitched against Kurt's palm. Kurt raised their hands, pressing a dry kiss to the back of his fingers, letting his mouth linger there for a moment.

Blaine didn't tear his eyes away from the cookies on the silver plate in the middle of the coffee table, the matching mugs of untouched tea his mother had greeted them with at the door, the way she always did, smiling as she left pink kisses on their cheeks and hustled them inside.

"No. Blaine...this...this –"

His mother caught the edge of his sleeve, clutching at her husband's arm as one hand pressed to her mouth soundlessly. He was spluttering for words, turning to face them and Blaine's heart buckled inside his chest. His father always knew what to say, *always*.

"Kurt," he tried, gesticulating wildly and tugging the hard knot of his tie away from his throat, "Kurt, you can't tell me *you're* okay with this."

Blaine caught Kurt's face out of the corner of his eye, holding his breath until it hurt. Kurt cocked his head slightly to the side, holding his father's eyes as he dropped his chin.

"I wasn't. Not at first. But Blaine is an adult. And although we might not...fully *agree* with them, we have to respect and honour his decisions. Because we love him."

His father sighed, dropping his head. Pulling off his suit jacket and falling into the chair behind him, pushing up the sleeves of his shirt.

"Kurt...is it alright if I talk to my son. Alone?"

Kurt nodded, without a pause.

"Of course."

Blaine grappled with their fingers, clinging to Kurt's like a comfort blanket as he made to stand up.

"*Baby, no.*" he mouthed, but Kurt ignored him and dropped to press a kiss to Blaine's forehead. He let Jennifer Anderson hook her fingers into the crook of his elbow and draw him silently from the room, leaving Blaine sitting stiff on the couch and looking smaller with every moment.

Kurt leaned against the sink in the kitchen, hands curled under the rim of the counter and stared into the autumn garden. At the lifting leaves of the trees, the honey golden fall of light over the dappled grass.

"You're not as surprised as I expected."

He heard her sigh, moving around behind him. Fixing things, clinking plates and cups. Always doing something.

"I'm not," she admitted. "I always...I always *thought* that he...you know when he was six years old he rescued a kitten?"

Kurt turned to face her, lips quirking into an unexpected smile and he could *see* Blaine. Memories plastered and patchworked together from the family photo albums; a child with tangled hair and huge brown eyes, running and falling and laughing, bright and invincible among the plants of the garden.

"Augustus?"

"The very same."

"He...he never told me that."

"He did it because Charlotte was crying. Because he wanted to *help*. God, his favourite bedtime stories were always the ones with the romantic hero. Someone –"

"Someone to do the saving," Kurt murmured, his eyes pricking suddenly and he took a deep breath as he turned away from her and back to the garden.

Jennifer was at his elbow, and Kurt's eyes fell closed as she leaned soft and stable against his shoulder. She had Blaine's hair, dark and messy as Kurt rested his chin on her head, one arm locking around her waist. She heaved a deep breath.

"What are we going to do, Kurt?"

"I don't know."

****A phonecall.***

"Hey you."

"Hey baby."

"Why are we whispering?"

"Some of the guys are already asleep."

"Please. You had to listen to Plummer's phone sex the other day, I think he can handle our conversation."

"Is our conversation going to descend into phone sex?"

"Mmm, don't tempt me Anderson."

"Three weeks, you know."

"It's like you don't think I'm counting down the days on my calendar."

"God bless whoever invented Fleet Week."

"I think it was California."

"Have you been researching this stuff?"

"I've gotta give myself something to do while I sit around here like an army wife, waiting for you to come home."

"Kurt –"

"No, okay. I'm sorry. That came out harder than I meant it to. I just –"

"I know."

"But –"

"I know."

"..."

"..."

"I –"

"So wha–"

"*You go.*"

"No, you go."

"*Blaiine.*"

"Kuuuurt."

"*Oh shut up. I was just going to say that I broke our coffee machine today.*"

"Oh?"

"*Well I say I broke it. It was August's fault. He startled me.*"

"Baby, that cat is nearly two decades old, he can barely **move**."

"*His blink was intimidating.*"

"Really."

"*I wasn't expecting it.*"

"I love you."

"..."

"This is the part where you –"

"*I love you too.*"

"Well done."

"Oh shut up. You know I was thinking – and if you say dangerous then I am hanging up this phone right now."

"My lips are sealed."

"I had a song stuck in my head."

"Sing it to me?"

"Do I have to?"

"Yes. Please? For me?"

*"Ugh...okay. For you. When the rain is blowing in your face...and the whole world is on your case...I could offer you a warm embrace, to make you feel my love...stop **laughing** at me!"*

"I'm sorry! I wasn't, I promise...I just miss hearing you sing. I miss hearing **anyone** sing. We don't really...get a chance around here."

"Not even you?"

"Not even me."

"Maybe you should."

"It doesn't really work like that, Kurt."

"No. Well. I suppose it doesn't. How would I know."

"I didn't mean that –"

*"It's **fine**, Blaine. I don't know what it's like, okay? I don't and I never pretended that I do, so let's just forget it. I just...I was wondering if that song would work for the wedding? I know it's old and probably clichéd by now but...I just. I don't know, you don't have to say yes, I mean we haven't even set a date. Should we set a date, oh god neither of us even proposed I'm just. I mean we –"*

"Kurt –"

"We haven't really mentioned it since –"

"Kurt!"

"You're laughing at me again."

"Yes."

"Well don't. Unless...was that a yes to the laughing? Or a yes to the song? Or a –"

"Yes."

"Blaine!"

"Yes?"

"Stop grinning like that."

"How do you know I'm –"

"Nine years and you think I don't know exactly what you look like when you sound like that?"

"..."

"..."

"This is harder than I thought it would be."

"I know."

"Five months is a long time."

"Three weeks is longer."

"It's –"

"It'll *feel* like longer."

"I knew what you meant."

"*I know you did.*"

"God, baby you sound exhausted. What time is it there?"

"*Oh. I'm not sure. I set an alarm for your time to wake me up so I could ring.*"

"Jesus, you've got work in the morning."

"*Mmm. I just...I like hearing your voice before I fall asleep.*"

"I know. Me too. Do you need to me to stay on the line?"

"*No. But I **want** you to.*"

"And I want to. Go to sleep, Kurt."

"*I love you, Blaine.*"

"I love you."

****A day.***

"God, Kurt you're never going to believe what Charlotte just told me," Blaine shouted through the quiet house, slipping the phone back into his pocket and kicking the door shut behind him. There was no answer, the house stoic and silent.

Kurt was there, Blaine knew he was. He had the day off work and was planning to spend it spring cleaning, despite the fact that the world outside was barely just brushing through January. He'd been up earlier

than the sun, leaving Blaine a cup of coffee beside the bed and scolding him for the clothes tracked around the bedroom floor.

"If I remember, it was you last night who tore them off in such a hurry," Blaine yawned in a teasing mumble, tugging the pillow over his head. There was a pause, and then a heavy crash of weight against the back of his legs. Teeth nipping at the back of his neck as firm arms rolled him over and kissed him breathlessly into the mattress.

"Kurt?"

The car was there, and Blaine just *knew* Kurt was there somewhere.

And he was, curled on the couch in Blaine's old Dalton sweater. He wasn't the smiling, immaculate figure Blaine had kissed goodbye when he left that morning, and he was staring dumbly at something curled into his fists.

There was a torn envelope on the floor.

"Kurt..."

It all blended together eventually, the bills and bank statements and Christmas cards. Mail that came to their house *wastheirs*, regardless of the name on the front and it was just habit now, for whoever collected it in the morning to open it all as they sipped their coffee and waited for the other to wake up.

Blaine had just hoped *he* would be the one to open this.

"You leave in two weeks."

That was it, and suddenly there was a countdown.

Kurt wasn't crying, Blaine supposed he'd done enough of that. But he stood and walked towards where Blaine was frozen in the doorway, something fierce and wild in his eyes. He stopped short, dropping to his knee.

"Baby, what –"

"I want you to marry me."

His jaw was set, and Blaine knew this wasn't a spur of the moment decision even as his heart pounded in his ears, his mouth dropping open in a silent gasp. And Kurt was just looking at him, eyes wide and unblinking. Determined.

Blaine leaned down, catching Kurt's shoulder and neck and pulling him up, rubbing their noses together with a fragility that frightened even him and shook his head.

"No."

Kurt froze, his fingers clutching the sleeves of Blaine's jacket.

"No?"

"Not like this, Kurt. *Never* like this."

"But –"

"God, I don't want our marriage to be one forced by the fact that I'm leaving. And you don't want that either."

"I do, Blaine *I do*. God, I want...I just want –"

"Kurt. I want to marry you. I've wanted to marry you every *day* for the last eight years, as sure as the sun sets every day. And I will. We will. But not because we *have* to, not because you think I need a reason to come home to you. I want *you*, not the obligation of you."

"You think marrying me would be an *obligation*?"

"No! God, no. You know I don't mean that."

"Then what, exactly, did you mean?"

Kurt was glaring at him, still clenching his fists into Blaine's shirt and eyes sparking with anger and he wouldn't let go. Blaine didn't either, hands sliding round to cup against the base of Kurt's spine even as he

felt the anger tensing in his shoulders, because even arguments like this, even when Kurt was furious with him there was nothing in this world that could make Blaine let go of him. Not now.

"I will marry you," he said, touching their foreheads together and closing his eyes, "I will. But this isn't a promise, or a last minute engagement. We're not having a shotgun wedding before I get deployed, I won't do that to us. This is just...a fact. Something to hold on to."

Two weeks, and five words.

And they hung in the air.

Blaine heard Kurt arrive home four days later from where he stood in front of the mirror, surveying his reflection.

"Kurt?"

"Mmm?"

"You always...liked my Warbler's uniform, right?"

He heard Kurt laugh and drop his bags on the couch, footsteps down the hall towards him.

"Yeah. Yeah I did."

"So how would you feel about..."

Kurt's sharp gasp cut him off and Blaine turned sheepishly, smiling as he rubbed a hand through his hair, Kurt's eyes raking slowly up his body with some sort of enlightened hunger in his gaze.

"Well *hello* Sailor,"

And then Kurt tugged him forwards, one hand in the collar at his throat and the other in his hair and kissed the laugh right out of Blaine's mouth.

Something to hold on to.

When Blaine hung the dog tags around his neck for the first time, felt the cool metal warm against his skin and Kurt brushed his fingers down the silver chain and where it rested against his collarbone, kissing the back of his neck where the clasp lay.

When Kurt ran his fingers through the shorn hair of Blaine's head, biting his lip contemplatively for a moment before linking their fingers together and pinning him against the couch.

When Blaine kissed him, too early and too soon in the airport.

Something to hold on to.

Someone.

Someone like Kurt.

***A letter.**

April 7th, 2020

Kurt,

*I don't care what you say; you have no choice in the matter. When we get married the first thing I am going to do is bring you down to let you see Japan at sunrise. There's nothing like it. Hell, we don't even have to be married I'm bringing you here anyway. And no, I promise it won't be like the Boating Fiasco of '18, I mean, I won't be the one controlling the boat this time. Who knew that was so hard, damn I feel for the guys driving this thing half the time. So no capsizing and no spending our anniversary holding your hair back while you throw up over the side and curse every movement of the water underneath us. I was **trying** to be romantic you know.*

I don't know what it is about the sea; it makes me an early riser. All those mornings you cursed me sleeping in and missing half of the day, when who knew all you had to do was stick me on a boat and I'd be up before the sun. I can see why you like the mornings now. There's something about being able to stand out here and watch the world wake up. It makes it all feel...I don't know. Worth it? Somehow.

I can guarantee you though, the moment I'm home with you I'll be back to sleeping until lunchtime.

Maybe we should pack up and move out, and live on a boat.

(Don't pull that face at me Hummel, I'm kidding.)

I'm going to say something now, now I've got a chance to speak and you can't reply. Can't cut me off and roll your eyes and tell me not to be stupid.

Life feels...longer out here. Slower. Like it's stilled, like it's waiting. It feels more fragile and honestly Kurt, I've never felt more human. And that's when it hit me. Out here, in the mornings when I come outside and watch the sun rise up over the sea and think of you.

I don't want you to wait for me. I don't want you to put your life on hold like this, I would never ask you to do that. Every second that passes here is a stoic one, and I can picture you back in New York. I can see you rushing and flying around, making music and beauty and doing everything you were ever born to do. And I don't want you to stand still like I am. Never.

I don't know where I'm going with this, but you probably do. You'll probably understand what I'm saying before I do.

Let me know.

I love you.

Blaine.

****A week.***

God, Blaine had missed the bustling churn of New York City.

The way it swarmed and swelled, crowds and families and bodies moving together and apart like the rise and break of the sea, he loved it. The way he could feel the love on his skin.

The freedom.

Blaine's phone had died as the Statue of Liberty broke over the horizon, but he still clutched it tight in his pocket, like a promise.

"I'll be there, Blaine. I'll find you."

"Will you be wearing a red hat?

*"Do I **look** like Kirsten Dunst?"*

"I don't know, baby. It's been a while since I saw you."

"Don't joke about things like that. We've got hours and I don't want punching you to be the first thing I do."

The laugh caught in Blaine's throat as he whipped through the crowds, wind in his hair and desperation rising in his chest. It had been nearly six months, and the city still smelled and moved and felt the same. Familiar, easing him into the steady ache of being home.

All except one thing.

"Come *on*, Kurt. Where are you?"

Blaine checked the useless screen of his phone as he elbowed through the crowds, the expected darkness of his screen*mocking* and stuffed it back into his pocket with a sigh.

Something rammed against his leg, small and bright turquoise like the hazy sky. Blaine dropped into a crouch, thumbing under the tiny girl's chin as she blinked at him, lashes thick with tears and rubbed red cheeks.

"What's the matter, sweetheart?"

"I," she sniffed wetly, rubbing her cuff over her nose, "I lost my *daddy*."

Blaine nodded understandingly, letting her fasten tight fingers over his, "That's easily done. Where did you last see him?"

Her eyes widened and she shook her head violently, "No. I haven't *found* him yet!"

Blaine laughed.

"Will he be dressed like me? Coming off a boat?"

"I...I think so."

"What's your name, sweetheart?"

"Violet. Violet Corelli."

Blaine smiled, wide and real and her bottom lip wobbled slightly.

"I think I know just the man. Will you come with me?"

He held out his hand, standing and stooping and she gazed at him with wide, wide eyes for a moment before taking hold of his fingers tentatively.

Blaine tugged slowly on her arm, leading them back through the winding crowds and the steps he'd just walked until the ship was visible, burning the brightest white in the sun. Violet squinted at it and up at him, shielding her damp eyes with her hand. James Corelli stood by the rail, head thrown back in the kind of laugh that Blaine could feel bubbling in his chest.

"Hey, Corelli," Blaine shouted, scooping Violet up with one arm and hoisting her against his waist as James looked over, narrowing his eyes against the light, "I think I found something that belongs to you!"

Violet squealed in his arms as her father's face broke into a laughing grin, the infectious kind that children and old couples who've seen it all seem to herald, the kind that love can cause.

"Vi!"

She scrambled from his arms, suddenly forgotten as the man who bought her home and he rubbed where her foot caught against his chest, smiling as James clutched his daughter.

God, New York never changed.

And then –

"Blaine!"

Blaine spun, because that voice, *god* he knew that voice.

A moment like the shattering of glass before it falls, the hanging drop of a cliff and the space between the thunder and the lightening, Blaine's hair caught in his eyes as he turned.

And then Kurt was there and Kurt was rushing into him, into his arms like a tornado, like wildfire. Warm and real, and there and he was kissing and kissing him like it was the only thing left to do.

And, Blaine supposed, it was.

"I was...I was just," he managed, when Kurt pulled away.

"Saving the world, one lost child at a time?"

Blaine nudged their noses together, skin on skin for the first time in eternities.

"Well, you know what I always say."

"Yeah. '*Someone's got to do it.*'"

Blaine tried, he really did.

The whole subway home, with Kurt's thumb rubbing evenly over his knuckles and their ankles hooked together under the seats, open and honest for once. Because this was New York and frankly they didn't care, and they were anyone here. They were everyone and they were themselves, lost in the bustling, beating heart of the city and the old woman sitting two seats over looked at Blaine's uniform and at Kurt's priceless vintage jacket. At the unbroken links of their fingers and the high flush of happiness on Kurt's cheeks and she smiled at them, turning to gaze out of the window with one thumb twisting the ring on her finger around and around.

And the walk through the falling darkness, the trees and Kurt's voice on the soft wind. He never stopped talking, even when he was breathless and their fingers never parted, he just dragged Blaine's arm up with every movement and gesticulation.

It was *coffee shops and god, Blaine that fucking cat and then Rachel was like oh and Finn might be dropping by and honestly work is a nightmare* and Blaine stopped listening.

He didn't need to.

Kurt's nose, the elegant swoop of his brow down to his chin. The graceful falling curve of his face and every blushing rose of skin that shone in the dying light, the way his eyelashes fanned over his cheek. The shift of his body closer to Blaine's as the wind darted past them a little colder, the brush of his hair against Blaine's chin as he tucked his head against the crook of his shoulder.

Blaine barely made it home.

Kurt stopped, fumbling for his key with cold fingers, twisting it hard in the lock and Blaine pressed up close behind him, mouth dropping against the suddenly-visible nape of his neck and Kurt shivered back against him with a soft hum.

"Blaine...*Blaine*. I..um...I made dinner."

The door swung open, but Blaine had one hand on Kurt's hip while the other stroked fingers down and slow over his neck, peppering soft, wet kisses over the bump of bone where the hair began to curl.

"That sounds *perfect*," he mumbled against the skin, breathing hot over the wet trail of his mouth and Kurt cursed something hushed into the dark hall.

He pulled away, turning to face him with eyes blown dark and wild, cheeks red and Blaine's name on his lips, and something inside Blaine *snapped*.

"Change of plan," he said, pushing hard against Kurt's chest until he stumbled backwards, moving forward over the threshold and kicking the door shut behind him with a crash.

His arms were at Kurt's waist, driving him back, holding and lifting with Kurt's back against the wall and his legs around Blaine's waist.

Kurt's hands petted at his neck for a moment, twining into the loose curls of Blaine's hair and god he looked so *young*. So pale and new with chewed, chapped lips and as young and foolish as Blaine felt most

of the time, and he'd spent six months around men, around hate and life and the sudden cage of growing up, and here was *Kurt*. Young and perfect and wholly, unabashedly *loving* him.

Looking at Blaine with a love so heavy he wondered why his knees didn't buckle under the weight of it.

Because love is to be shared, not carried on one's own.

There would be time, he reasoned, kissing messily up the curve of Kurt's cheek, his eyelids, his forehead, his hairline. Time to love and hold him, to feel and see the shape of bend of Kurt's body where the light hit it.

But now there were teeth, frantic and panting against Blaine's ear and hands tearing down the front of his pants until they pooled around his ankles, kicked down by Kurt's heels. The arch of his foot hooked and moulded over Blaine's thigh as he thrust upwards, the press of his cock against the crease of Kurt's hip enough to have him grunting and dropping his face against Kurt's collarbone.

His nails were scrambling, scratching up Blaine's back as Kurt fought with his own clothes. Jacket off his shoulders and onto the floor, that would do and Blaine dragged the collar of his shirt away with his teeth, rucking the tie loose to lick up his neck and catch the gasps right out of his mouth.

"This...this wasn't how...this was supposed to go," Kurt whimpered, nails dragging right down into Blaine's boxers to rake over the warm skin beneath them, catching the head of his cock with his thumb, rubbing it slick and hot through his fist.

"Don't care," Blaine choked, breath hitching in his throat and rutting forwards desperately.

A crush of hands and feeling, sparks and sweat and fingers twisted backwards between too many layers, but Kurt was keening and arching against him, bucking frantically and clenching around Blaine's thighs, fuck *any* sort of contact, anything with them burning and moving and crashing together.

Blaine's teeth found his lips, biting and sucking them plumper and firmer.

"Come on baby, come on."

His hands palmed over rough denim, cupping and squeezing the hard outline of Kurt's cock and working the pulsing heat with his fingers as Kurt jerked into the touch, whining against Blaine's face, he eyes screwed tight against his forehead.

Every second, every decision, every spoken word between them. Six months of separation and everything, *everything*, the dance of dust in the sunbeams like tiny celestial bodies, came down to *this*.

Kurt breathing against him and the grey world burst into a million tiny spectrums of light, rainbows in flecks of sun and shattered glass.

Kurt screamed into Blaine's mouth and god how many times, how many times had they touched themselves without each other? How many nights with eyes squeezed shut and noses breathing in that fading scent on the pillow beside them, the t-shirt he always slept in until it almost, *almost* enough. Almost there. Almost now.

Somewhere through the haze of orgasm and Kurt's mouth falling open and sticky onto his throat, Blaine managed to stumble forwards. Their bodies were crushed tight and unrelenting, not letting go even for the world and he fell forwards over something, bringing them both down flat onto the dinner table.

A plate crashed to the floor and Kurt let out a huff of laughter.

"Blaine, I made *dinner*!"

Blaine laughed against his stomach, arms around Kurt's back and hoisted him up the table to nip at the wrinkled shirt over his stomach, teeth dragging down to where his pants were half-off.

"I'd rather eat you."

Kurt's hands braced against his shoulders, pulling him back, pulling him up to kiss him.

"You're ridiculous," he mumbled into Blaine's mouth, and he hummed, dragging Kurt's lip between his teeth with a grin.

"You *love* me."

"I do," Kurt twisted his fingers into the tangles of Blaine's hair, smoothing it down from his forehead and pressing the back of his fingers along his cheekbone, "*God*, I do"

If there was ever a moment Blaine could live in forever, it would be that one.

"We have a whole week, you know. I'm not going anywhere," he said later when Kurt's hand still didn't leave his, as they stumbled half-dressed towards the kitchen to feed each other the cold remains of dinner. Kurt just shrugged and didn't let him go.

"What do you want to do this week?"

Blaine looked up from Kurt's lap, where his fingers were playing with the damp tendril of hair as Kurt read the paper and Blaine experimented with drinking coffee lying down. *Real* coffee, *Kurt-made* coffee just the way Blaine liked it.

"I'm not *visiting*, Kurt. We don't have to do anything if you don't want to. We don't have to leave the house, hell we don't even have to put on clothes."

Kurt raised an eyebrow, trailing his gaze slow and deliberate down the bare stretch of Blaine's torso.

"So I see."

Blaine stuck his tongue out, wagging his eyebrows and Kurt laughed, dipping down to catch his lips in a kiss that sucked the taste of coffee right out of Blaine's mouth.

"Honestly, why do people even pay for porn these days when they can just wonder down the road and find the local gays going at it on their couch?"

"Santana?"

Blaine jerked up so quickly the coffee splashed against his chest and he hissed. Kurt stifled a laugh behind his hand, running his palm between Blaine's shoulder blades and nuzzling softly behind his ear.

"Just ignore her."

"Hell *no*, dollface. Captain Eyebrows is coming right over here to give me a giant fucking hug. And he better savour it, because it's the only one he's getting."

"Tana, how did you even get in –"

She raised her hand in an airy wave, a key dangling from between her fingers.

"You gave her a *key*?" Blaine muttered against Kurt's throat, swinging off the couch and dropping the coffee cup onto the table. Kurt shrugged, blushing slightly.

"She kept...you know. Breaking in."

Blaine laughed, bounding across the shiny floor and scooping her into his arms. Santana flung her arms wide around his neck, letting him lift and spin her until he stumbled over the too-long hems of his – Kurt's – sweatpants, and brought her down with a breathless giggle.

"I missed you too, Tana."

She wrinkled her nose, arms fixed around his biceps for a moment before they widened faintly.

"Jesus, B. What the fuck are they feeding you in this place? *Damn*, Hummel."

She threw a wink over his shoulder and Kurt looped his arm lightly around Blaine's waist, squeezing for a moment and pressing a kiss to the warm slope of his shoulder.

"I *know*."

Blaine rolled his eyes and leaned back into Kurt's embrace while Santana's eyes appraised them for a moment before she clapped her hands together.

"Right, baby gays, I'm here to house-sit. You're going out because it's sunny and you're together and you're going to enjoy it, rather than lying around and fucking each other senseless all day."

"But –" they protested as she hustled them towards the bedroom like a mother hen, ignoring their complaints, "But Tana!"

"Shh. Put some clothes on and I will hear the rush of blood to those cocks if you so much as look at each other while you do so."

"Why do we even need a house-sitter," Blaine grumbled, shaking her off him and dragging a shirt from the closet.

"It's her fancy way of saying she's going to lie around our house all day and eat our food, while being painfully smug that she's preventing sex," Kurt muttered, flopping down in front of his mirror and pushing back his hair. Blaine grinned at his refection, moving closer and slipping his hands down over Kurt's shoulders, mouthing behind his ear.

"She'd never –"

"I can hear you!"

His head fell forwards against Kurt's throat with a groan and Kurt laughed, leaning back and kissing the top of Blaine's head.

"Oh, you've been away from her too long."

Walking through New York was like walking through Blaine's memories.

It was the same ground, the same smell. The same people. The same ways walked as those when he was a child and bought here for the first time, wide eyes and smiles and clutching his parent's hands. The same corners as the ones he kissed Kurt on the first time they came together, before Kurt moved out for college and Blaine insisted on *making sure*. The same restaurant from their first date their together. The same old photobooth in the corner of the arcade and Blaine dragged Kurt in without hesitation, pulling him down across his lap until the shutter clicked five times, five moments and five fractions of love.

Kurt tucked two into his wallet, pressing a kiss to two more slipped inside the back pocket of Blaine's jeans and ran his thumb over the jagged edge of the fifth.

He didn't need to say it, and Blaine smiled and pulled him out into the sun. Towards *Ephemeral*.

The coffee shop hadn't changed at all. The same rich smell as the door creaked open and the bell jangled above it. The same pause and shriek of Lu behind the counter as she ran towards them, seizing them both in a tight hug and mouthful of blonde hair.

"You two! I should have guess, what with Fleet Week and all."

"Oh don't lie, Lu," Kurt said, smoothing down her braids as she pulled away.

"You've been counting down the days as much as we have," Blaine said, tapping her lightly on the nose and she smiled, hurrying them towards the counter and slipping back behind it into a cloud of steam.

"Don't try and ruin my aloof, bad-girl mirage with your sickening displays of domesticity," she said loudly over the hiss of machinery, spinning cups between her fingers as hot water shot out in a thick jet.

"Remind me why we haven't set her up with Tana, yet?" Kurt mumbled, watching Lu whip thick cream into a mound on top of his coffee, *"please, when's the last time I made you guys pay for drinks in here?"* and nudge them towards the table in the corner. *Their* table.

"For our own wellbeing. Just *imagine* it. "

Kurt shuddered into his cup as Lu dragged the chair from the table beside them, swung and straddled it.

"So. How's the sea, Blaine?"

"Well it's no New York City," he hooked their ankles together under the table, rubbing the side of his shoe down the shape of Kurt's calf, "It's -"

"Everything you thought it would be, and more?"

"No."

They caught up, they told stories. Blaine heard things about Kurt's life he didn't know and suddenly they were living different lives. They had different stories, different friends and much, *much* different jobs. They were *separate*. Like two tracks, running parallel and so close, god *so* close but never touching. Blaine had never felt so distanced from him, not even when he was half way around the world.

They gave her the photo as they left, and she gave them a wide smile as she pinned it to the board behind the counter.

"In case it's so long before you come back that I forget what you both look like."

Kurt's laugh was a little strained, a little bitter.

Santana left eventually, when Kurt glared at her and straddled Blaine right there on the couch in front of her, biting his way ferociously down Blaine's throat until he whimpered and caught Kurt's hips, spinning and slamming him down on his back as the door slammed in her wake.

"Yes, we *have* fucked on every surface in this house, Santana."

The days blended together.

Kurt still woke early, still made coffee in the kitchen and sang while he did it and sometimes Blaine would drag himself from the bed and drift sleepily in behind him, nuzzling his nose into the back of Kurt's hair, his arms around his waist and just breathing him. Bed-warmed and ruffled, in too-big sweatpants and a shirt that could by this point belong to either of them. He fed Blaine strawberries over his shoulder, stealing bites of them from between his lips and leaving a sticky trail of kisses down his chest.

He danced, he wiped sugar on Kurt's cheek and licked it off, he swung him onto the counter and pushed his legs apart to press between them, smothering Kurt's half-hearted protests about *breakfast* and *pancakes* and *Blaaaaine!*

They drank wine and pretended to be older than they were.

Blaine caught up on TV shows, cuddled under their old tartan blanket with the cat spread between their legs and Kurt's head on his chest even when they knew that neither of them was *really* watching.

Kurt still beat him in an arm wrestling match.

But maybe Blaine just let him.

He still dragged Blaine from the depths of their bed and into the shower to wash his hair and then go down on him in the hazy steam and bubbles until everything was a burning swirl of heat and soft, wet warmth and Blaine's head was spinning.

"Didn't you have work this week?"

Kurt looked at him over the top of the paperback he was reading, his feet resting against Blaine's lap where his fingers worked and rubbed over them. Between the toes, down the ball, under the arch until Kurt was making tiny humming noises of contentment and burying his toes into Blaine's thigh.

"I took it off. Silly."

Rachel and Finn came flitting by one afternoon, with cakes and hugs and hours of inconsequential chatter that buzzed around the glazed heat of the summer room, and when Santana turned up a few hours later, swinging into the room in leather and brandishing a bottle of vodka the laughter just got louder.

And they sat, with Kurt sideways across Blaine's lap and his legs thrown over the arm of the chair. The cat warm against his side and Kurt's fingers scraping gently over the skin of his lower back, something rhythmic and soothing, his fingers pressing at Blaine's jaw to turn his face down and kiss him softly.

And no one mentioned that the next day was the end of the week.

Blaine didn't leave until the early evening and he woke early, despite the late night and the quick, vodka-fuelled fuck where Kurt bit so hard on his shoulder he bled. He stood at the window and watched the sun rise over New York, relishing the coffee on his tongue until he heard Kurt stir next door.

Kurt was cocooned in sheets, wisps of hair poking free as he slept the wrong way around with his feet on the pillow and Blaine laughed as he closed the door behind him, setting the mug down on the table.

"Morning."

Kurt made a muffled noise, cracking a yawn and two arms stretching out from under the blankets. He kicked them off with a grunt, spreading long and gloriously naked out on the bed, blinking drowsily up at Blaine.

"Why are you all the way over *there*?" he mumbled, hands grasping towards where Blaine stood and he padded across the carpet, dropping to his knees at the edge of the bed and let Kurt's fingers hook into his hair with a satisfied hum.

Blaine nuzzled at the gentle flow of Kurt's hair under his lips, his hairline and forehead and the swoop of his nose. His lips and the comforting shape of his mouth and even upside-down Blaine knew it, the shape and the taste and the wet slide of Kurt's tongue against his own. The hinted dimple of Kurt's chin, the hollow between his collarbones the perfect size for Blaine's lips.

Kurt's breath was against his ribs, heavy. It made Blaine pause.

Kurt sat up, curling his legs to the side and pulling Blaine's shoulders forwards, and he climbed onto the mattress to crawl forwards and meet Kurt's mouth. Slow and languid and not rushed this time, not now.

His hands smoothed down, over the dips and ridges of Kurt's ribs. Up and under across the braille bumps of his spine, drumming his fingers down them in some illegible morse coded thrum.

Kurt moved against his mouth, dipping backwards against the mattress with nothing but the pull of his lips to draw Blaine with him and every breath from between his lips was caught with Blaine's own until they were just there, just breathing each other.

Blaine sat back on his heels, touching Kurt's knees apart until he was slotted between his spread legs. His fingers played with the warm skin in the nook behind his knee, sliding down the shape of his calves and around the arch of his foot, raising it to his lips and brushing his mouth against the knuckle of Kurt's ankle. His nose skimmed back down his leg, kissing under his knee, down the soft skin of his inner thigh and the way it trembled under Blaine's breath.

He pressed his mouth to the crease of Kurt's thigh, the base of his half-hard cock and the trail of hair up his stomach.

Kurt's hands grappled with his shoulders, tugging him upwards with a sudden whine of desperation. His cheek was wet against Blaine's.

He arched upwards when Blaine's fingers, slippery with lube, pushed deep inside him, freezing for a moment as he clutched Blaine's back with a hushed grunt.

"I'm sorry baby, I'm sorry," Blaine whispered, his voice hushed as he thumbed one finger down his cheek, "Are you –"

"I'm just..." Kurt said, his voice cracking slightly as he shifted under him, pushing his hips back against Blaine's fingers, "I'm just sore. From last night."

"Do you want me to –"

"No. Never."

Blaine nodded, dropping down to kiss him and working his fingers slower. Dragging them out long and gentle, rubbing down the crease of Kurt's ass back up to thumb over where he was sensitive and Kurt hissed slightly, stiffening for a second before he relaxed back against Blaine's fingers.

"Okay?"

"Okay."

"Okay," Blaine said, pushing deeper, twisting and crooking them, "Okay."

He was thorough. More than usual, taking longer than he ever had before. Watching the light dawn over Kurt's face, the way his head dropped back against the golden rays when Blaine's fingers pressed against his most tender spots. The way he breathed long and slow, slipping his hands down through Blaine's hair to rest against the nape of his neck.

"*Blaine*," Kurt murmured eventually, kissing just under his jaw with a low breath, bucking his hips upwards with straining need. Blaine nodded, moving back and rolling Kurt onto his side, wrenching the sweatpants off his legs and dropping them onto the floor.

Laying flat against the bed, his chest against Kurt's back and pressing his forehead between his shoulder blades, one hand tracing down the curve of his side to hook under his thigh and hold it up. Shifting forwards until the head of his cock brushed against Kurt's skin and he made a small noise, rocking back against it. Pushing, slow, breathing against Kurt's spine, laying his cheek flat where he could feel the beating of Kurt's heart, tilting forwards, pressing as deep within him as he could in fragile, tiny movements and a million stilted breaths.

And then there was no space between them, nothing, not any more. Blaine's chest, his every breath his beating heart, every inch pressed against the slope and curve of Kurt's back, his mouth moving over the jut of his shoulder, up his neck. Fingers squeezing tight into his thigh, nails digging half-moon crescents into the soft skin as he moved, rocking his hips in gentle rolling thrusts.

Kurt's hand was twisted into the sheets, one curling into Blaine's hair and holding him still and close, and he was tight and clenching and *perfect* around him. Tiny huffing breaths panting from his chest with every steady movement, and it was slow it was building and torturous and like lying in the sun on a summer day and feeling it lick over every pore of your skin.

Kurt tingled at the base of his spine, shivering up Blaine's back and burning under his nails. He was in his mouth and hair, like every nerve pressed to an open flame and the moment of hesitation before the sparks kick in.

Kurt whispered his name, just his name. Over and over, linking his fingers tighter into Blaine's hair, tugging his face closer. Murmuring into his hair in a broken sob.

Blaine groaned in sudden desperation, a sudden unexpected flare of panic and god he needed to see him, he needed him, he needed him so badly and so much and every tiny second he could muster. He flipped Kurt sideways, pressing him back against the sheets and fitting between his legs, nudging Kurt's thighs flat open against the bed and pushing back inside him, bracing his hands either side of Kurt's head as he hovered over him.

Kurt moaned, keening and arching upwards into him, dragging Blaine's head down to kiss him until they were breathless. Blaine's dog tags hung between them, dancing against Kurt's breastbone and his arms buckled, forearms caging around Kurt's face, fingers fumbling through his hair and kissing him over and over, a press of mouths with every thrust and every slap and slide of skin in the quiet room.

God, Blaine could feel the building pressure that curled right down to his toes, raking goosebumps across his scalp and down his back and he didn't want it. Even as he gasped and shuddered and moved faster, muffling frantic noises into Kurt's mouth he didn't want this to end.

But it had to, because everything did.

Blaine didn't realise he was crying until a tear hit Kurt's cheek, sliding down the curve of his face and following the still-damp tracks of Kurt's own.

Kurt shook his head hard, crashing their mouths together and licking across Blaine's lips, chest hitching against Blaine's with barely contained sobs that broke through Blaine's own and he was crowding Kurt deeper into the mattress, every breath of space between them was a universe too far and *he couldn't, he didn't, no, he needed, he wanted, god Kurt, fuck*.

Kurt's thighs clamped around his waist, heels dug into his clenching muscles and holding Blaine abruptly still with a jerking cry.

It was too much, too insatiable and blinding and the rubbed plush of Kurt's lips, the red of his cheeks, the burning heat around him, the pants of breath that fell wet against Blaine's shoulder and the swooping, shaking, fluttering that swirled deep within his stomach.

Blaine fell to the side, mind spinning somewhere in the wake of his orgasm and Kurt curled into his shoulder. His arms were heavy and tired, falling over Kurt's shoulder and tugging him in close, and letting him cry openly into Blaine's chest until they drifted into a foggy sleep.

"I don't...I don't want you to go," Kurt choked, somewhere around lunchtime when the haze had lifted and they were still curled together, sticky limbs twined tighter than a Celtic knot over the bedsheets. And something inside Blaine shattered.

"I don't," Kurt had never pleaded with him before.

"Blaine, I need you," even when he left the first time.

"Blaine, god don't leave me again," even when everything was new and scary and they didn't know what to expect.

"Blaine, please!"

He was clawing at his chest, beating his fists hard against it with every racking sob that shook through his body and Blaine couldn't do anything. He just clutched him tighter, crying into his hair and whispering over and over *I know, Kurt I know*.

Kurt wore the yellow scarf again, loose around his throat and catching on the breeze as he leaned against the rail with the ghost of Blaine's kiss touching over his lips. Blaine had tugged at the fraying ends fondly, stroking his knuckle down the beating pulse of Kurt's neck as their foreheads rested together, hands clasped and pressed between their hearts.

"I'll be back before you know it."

Kurt managed a smile.

"Home in time for dinner?"

"Always."

****An email***

September 1st, 2020

Hey little bro,

I'm just gonna cut right to the chase here, because I'm already halfway through my lunch hour but this is important, and I could have done this over the phone but honestly I wanted to get it all out without you cutting me off.

I asked Charlotte to marry me.

(Yes your Charlotte, yes Charlotte Darling, no of course I'm not taking her fucking last name you dork, etc etc)

I haven't told mom and dad yet though, so don't mention it. I just...I wanted you to be the first to know. Oh and Kurt, because he helped me plan the engagement. But I figured that seeing as you're basically an extension of each other that you wouldn't mind if he knew a bit before you did.

Oh, and she said yes. Obviously.

Kurt's already going crazy with plans, I think he's enjoying this more than I am. You should be lucky you're not here to see it, you know what he's like.

And another thing, I want you to be my best man.

The wedding is in March, and I don't care if you have to leave the frontline of war to be here, you are dropping whatever weapon you're holding and coming home for my wedding, have you got that? Because there is no one I would rather have up there next to me than my younger brother.

I'm proud of you, you know that right? We all are.

Cooper.

****A day.***

"Smoke?"

He turns him down, like he does every day but Blaine likes that Turner still offers. Maybe it's just his British politeness. Or maybe he just knows that one day Blaine might change his mind. Because everyone did.

He enjoys the smell though, it's familiar now. The way the smoke rises over the glint and wash of the sea, the slapping against the smooth side of the ship as the sun comes up.

"It's rough out here this morning. Hasn't been this bad for a while."

A grey sky too calm, grey waters too harsh. The mirror of air between them, a ship and a hundred bodies and the grey cage of nature.

Blaine made a humming noise of agreement. He liked the sea when it was wild, untameable like a caged beast, sending a thrill of humanity through him. Vulnerability.

"Still don't understand why you're up so early every day, Anderson," he grunts through the exhale. Blaine shrugs, giving him a slight smile.

"I don't either."

"Missing someone."

"Who isn't?"

He leaned forwards, arms on the rail. The wind whipped lightly through his hair, rougher than normal and his body rolled with the hard slap of waves against the dipping body.

"My boyfriend gets up early. I know the time zones are different but...it's like, I know exactly what he'd be doing. If we were running on the same time, I mean, and I'd be sleeping through it and complaining but I figure I'm missing enough out here. I don't want to miss his day too."

He's rambling, barely thinking the words as they leave his mouth before he realises that they're true.

Turner makes a noise of agreement behind him.

"My wife's the same. The sleeping in thing. Although I doubt that she'd be up any earlier because she knew I was."

Blaine laughed and ducked his head with a blush, Turner stubbing the cigarette out onto the wet floor, stumbling with a hard jolt of water and smearing the ash in a dull smudge.

"Come on. Breakfast."

Blaine nodded, letting Turner go ahead and dropping back down the stairs and to his bed. To the wrinkled covers that Kurt would frown at him for, the corner that belonged to him and the messy strew of clothes. He was early, he made it slowly as they guys around him woke and mirrored his movements, grumbling about the rough water and filtering out as he folded down the neat square of covers. Found where Kurt's letter lay tucked into his top drawer and kissed it, slipping it into his breast pocket.

A groan sounded from behind him and Blaine turned, fingers patting absently over the creased square against his heart.

"Corelli?"

"Anderson?"

"Man, you look like *shit*. What's wrong?"

Corelli rolled to face him, ashen white and sickly with sweat, hunched and curled into the foetal position.

"I don't...I don't," he gasped, eyes bloodshot and blinking hard, "Anderson there's...there's four of you."

"Jesus," Blaine leaned down, pressing the back of his hand against the slick damp of Corelli's forehead, "You're burning up."

"I can't," he groaned, rolling into the covers, "I don't..."

"Here," Blaine stepped away, raking through the drawer beside his bed until he found the half-filled bottle, "Kurt always swears by it. It'll knock you right out, and tomorrow you'll wake up feeling as good as new."

Corelli blinked at him, and Blaine wondered if he'd even heard. But he accepted the capful of sticky red liquid, Blaine's hand on the back of his neck as he propped him up before letting him flop back against the colours with a rough breath.

"I'll tell them...I'll say you're sick," Blaine said, and he mumbled a nod into the pillow, consciousness already fading as Blaine pulled the door locked with a click and followed the last trail of footsteps down to breakfast.

His watch ticked past seven thirty, every morning, every day.

Blaine pulled up a seat next to Turner, poking his fork through the same food they always ate, the same flavours that eventually all faded into one on his tongue and it was necessary rather than enjoyable. Just another thing, another day, another routine.

Their own little capsule of time, floating and drifting and just another day.

A jerk, the tables shifting along the floor and a scatter of laughter as the boys lifted their trays, letting the chairs and tables bump their legs with the roll of the sea.

"Food comes first!" someone shouted, more laughter in response and suddenly the day was different.

An alarm, a screech and a haze of red light glaring over the room and the smiles frozen on the faces of a hundred men.

"What –"

"Evacuation warning," Turner said, jumping to his feet and catching Blaine's upper arm and dragging him up through the abrupt rise of bodies around them.

"But –"

"Anderson we've got to go."

They were soldiers, but Blaine could see the masked faces around him as they filed, faster than needed, towards the doors and if that wasn't fear glinting in the eyes of grown men then he didn't know what was.

Another jolt, a scream of metal barely hidden under the blaring alarm. A handful of sideways glances, eyes quickly looking away and to the floor.

Don't question it, just keep moving. Ignore the sweaty palms and beating hearts ignore them.

The air tasted salty on Blaine's tongue, the sting of unexpected rain lashing across his face as he turned between the jostling bodies.

*Evacuation protocol, mechanical failure, please that's just what they say when they don't know what's wrong, I'm sure this fucking weather doesn't help, technical faults my ass, how do they **not** know what's wrong, oh shut up just keep moving unless you want to stay on the ship while it goes down, it's not going down it's not going anywhere, are you sure about that?*

"Fuck, they're actually getting us off the ship," Turner shouted through the squinting rain, the sudden roar of a storm whipped up to fast and frantic. Blaine followed his line of sight towards the rows of lifeboats, the rush and scramble of matching men swarming towards them.

"Jesus, something must be really wrong."

They shared a look, a reflected fear.

The floor swayed beneath them.

They moved closer to the boats.

There was something missing, something Blaine couldn't catch. An unnameable enigma, something wrong with the world around him.

What was it what was it what was it.

A man.

A man curled up in bed, out cold because of that stupid medicine Blaine had given him. A man who was so sick he'd barely be able to walk even if he did wake to hear the alarm.

Corelli.

A man with a child and a wife.

No.

Blaine turned, the world rocking in slow motion. The boats, the rail, ten feet from his hands and the alarm still shrieking through his brain.

"Anderson?"

"Corelli's still back there. No one knows he's...Turner I've got, I've got to –"

"Oh *no* you don't!"

Arms locking around his and he was pulled back, suddenly fighting, suddenly restrained.

"Let me go, look he's gonna –"

"Anderson if you go back in there you might never come out!"

"If I don't go back in there he *won't* come out!"

"Turner, get *off* me."

"You're not going back in there Anderson. That's an *order*."

Blaine froze.

It was unthinkable. How could he stay out here when there was a man, a colleague, a *friend* still inside? A *human*.

"Blaine *you* can't save him, that's not your job."

Blaine let out a desperate noise, fighting harder and catching Turner off guard, wrenching free of his grip and running, running across the sliding floor and the words he shouted back lost somewhere on the high wind.

"*Yes it is.*"

Downstairs was like a maze, cramped. The ceiling too close and walls too tight and Blaine slammed between surfaces with rampant desperation, pulling himself around corners with a heavy swing, the betrayal of a wet floor and gravity, the magnitude of body weight as he struggled against the sway.

"Corelli!"

He was too far away but he still shouted, praying the man was awake. Praying he wasn't even *there*, that he was out and free and breathing the air and rain through sick lungs and streaming eyes.

Of course, that would be too easy.

The door to the bedrooms was hanging open, crashing and bouncing on its hinges with every hard movement, and Blaine stumbled through it, over the threshold.

Corelli was rolling in his bunk, seemingly restless but still asleep and Blaine fell to the floor by his side. Slaps across his cheeks and neck, shaking his shoulders, everything you're taught not to do.

"Corelli, come on man. James! Wake up! We've got...we've got to..."

He made a noise, a muffled groan, rolling his face into Blaine's hand.

"James? Are you with me? Shit, we need to –"

He dragged his shoulders up, a dead weight a leaden one, looping an arm around his own neck and hauled the man from his bed, tripping across the slippery floor.

"Come...come on," Blaine panted, to himself or to James he wasn't sure. *Come on, just a bit further come on.*

Corelli's feet scuffed the ground, lagging with every step, bringing them back a little slower. The soles of Blaine's shoes splashed through the water, lapping up to his laces.

"Anderson?"

"Oh...look who's...awake," Blaine stuttered, through the pain in his chest the ache in his legs, the weight on one side, the slip and drag of their feet through the water and the tilted floor.

"What are you..."

"James, you need to try and walk."

Corelli yawned into his shoulder, his eyes glazed and hazy, blurring as he stared somewhere over Blaine's shoulder.

"Wha –"

A crash, a screeching clang of metal and the world tipped violently. Blaine stumbled half to his knees in the water with a thud, a scratch of pain and throbbing arms that held up Corelli's body.

"Come on James, you need to do this for me. You need to try and walk."

"I...I –"

"I've got you, okay?"

Like a child with fumbling steps, wrenching breaths that pounded against Blaine's arm, they made their shaky way and fuck, Blaine couldn't even hear voices any more. Nothing but the scream of the ship, the alarm and the way it echoed through the metal body.

"Nearly there –"

One step, two more, one step backwards, three 'til the door, you can do it we can get there.

"Nearly –"

His fingers were fumbling, shaking and useless against Corelli's sleeve, grasping for something, anything. Some kind of purchase as the world slanted and dropped, the door too high above them as the floor rose in a wet slide.

"We can –"

The handle was there.

*Reach Blaine, stretch **come on.***

"I can't –"

You have to.

He was numb, he was flying. His head was light too much and not enough, his arms didn't belong to him anymore.

The handle, pressed down and yanked open, the flood of water that caught against his face and neck, down his throat.

"James, *come on.*"

He pushed him forwards, hooking the man's hands around the doorframe, clasping his own over the top. Baby steps.

"Blaine."

His voice was weak and cracked and the door slammed against Blaine's fingers, his feet sliding down the floor as the world tilted to a dangerous angle.

"Blaine!"

Fingers scrabbling over his own, he had to let go he couldn't his arms couldn't move, locked in panicked paralysis and god he was scared, he was so *fucking* scared. A sob ripped from Blaine's lips.

"I don't want to die."

James was looking at him, barely conscious, barely there. His eyes swam and he pawed at Blaine's fingers with hardly enough strength to stand.

He could feel everything breaking.

The door swung on its hinges, cutting deep into his knuckles as it crashed closed, smacking back open.

Blaine's hand fumbled at his own neck, blind through his blurred eyes that streamed with sea water and his necklace tangled in his fingers as he threw it towards Corelli.

"Tell...tell Kurt –"

Corelli was shaking his head, Blaine's name hanging from his hand, a feverish shout rising from his throat.

"No, no, no, come on Blaine, come on!"

He *couldn't*.

When did living become such deliriously hard work?

Ten fingers and his entire life hanging in them.

"Blaine, *please!*"

Seven, and suddenly his life was a countdown.

"God, someone. *Anyone*, Blaine, fuck *no*."

Two.

A gasp, a cry and a tear down a cheek like a goodbye. Nauseating vertigo, sickening terror like the kind of childhood nightmares.

And then nothing but silence.

Not even a heartbeat.

****A memory (or five)***

Kurt's mouth is, was, warm and wet and sucking against his throat as they stumble, stumbled through the door. Up the stairs before the door, down the hall the creaking floor. Kurt giggles, soft and high against his mouth, lucid and drunk because they're young and Blaine's thrilling and damp and exhilarated, high on dancing and life and Kurt, Kurt, Kurt and Kurt's panting against his lips as his fingers tug and tumble with the hem of Blaine's shirt as they fell through the door and Blaine drops his key.

"I want you to fuck me," and Blaine would only be so happy to oblige as he forced Kurt back against the wall with a kiss that bruised with his fingers under his shirt and the dorms are tiny and cramped, too hot too claustrophobic but he told Nick he'd be coming back he told him about Kurt he told him it's fine keep kissing him, keep breathing and touching.

But why was there a thud in the bathroom

He ripped away against Kurt's moan, letting his mouth press down Blaine's throat the words are tilted and raw and slurred.

*"Nick! I to-uh, **Kurt**, fuck I told you to leave!"*

No answer, no silence.

"Nick?"

"Nick, man. Get out of the fucking bathroom."

Kurt against his back giggling whispering kissing.

The door swung open.

"Nick?"

God so much and Kurt's gasping scream into his ear the sudden stillness the dread pounding in his throat.

"Fuck!"

The floor swaying up to meet him as Blaine drops to his knees, the floor is hard and the room is cold and Kurt's not saying anything.

"Nick, fuck. Nick, open your eyes."

He could have been there minutes or hours since they left or since they got back and it's too warm to tell, his body still beating against the floor.

"Kurt, call a fucking ambulance!"

*Kurt's already on the phone, in the hall his voice high and shrill with his face pressed against the wall and there's tears on his cheeks and he didn't even **know** Nick not really.*

There's nothing like a deadened weight in drunk arms but Blaine heaves Nick up, pressed his face against the toilet with fingers down his throat until the gag reflex kicks in past the unconsciousness. His hand shakes against Nick back down to the empty pill bottle on the floor, and back up.

He's breathing against Blaine's hand, just, heart beating against his chest.

The scream of sirens.

Hands pulling him away from the body, bright lights and florescence that burns and Kurt cradling his head in his arms as they crumple to the floor and suddenly the world is painful and stark and god knows why you would want to live in it.

"You can't save everyone Blaine, you can't."

"I can try."

Like kittens in trees, it just takes someone willing to climb.

Like being eight years old and giving up his seat on the subway for the heavily pregnant woman and the way his mother looks at him as he stands instead.

*Like meeting a beautiful boy over coffee in a crowded school one day, any day. Any day like any other and sometimes all you need to do is **look**. To watch him sit, proud and unbroken even as he cries and to know that sometimes people don't need saving. Sometimes they just need someone to tell them how to save themselves.*

Seeing him burning grace and sunshine by the rail in the distance growing further away but not smaller never smaller not Kurt. If Blaine ever needed someone to save him, it would be Kurt.

Like a fairytale like a happy ever after.

It needs a hero maybe this time it wasn't Blaine.

One week in the life of them together the life that could have been, the lifetime they never had. One week too many kisses not enough, there would never be enough. The girl with the braids in the coffee shop and the old best friend and the fact that they never met. A wedding, two weddings that would never happen.

Blaine first saw the beach with his eyes shut.

His toes dug into the sharp sand tiny tiny flecks of glass and it burned under the sun it crushed and shifted like a moving body it weighed down inside his shoes and shirt and hair until he was carrying it all day and finding it under his nails and smelling it with every breath.

"Come on Blainers, you're never going to enjoy it with your eyes shut."

"I'll just enjoy it in a different way."

The sea rose and fell and there were armies and soldiers rising and breaking like spears and horses in the white foam that stretched on and on around the curve of the earth what a concept to try and understand as a child.

A Blaine with sunburned skin and lips sticky with sweets watched it, felt it.

Until a laughing Cooper caught his waist and ran with him in and it felt like flying they were birds until the water hit.

*"This is the part where you **swim!**"*

Swim Blaine swim breathe breathe breathe and repeat.

You can't touch the bottom you don't know what way is up there's too much water to float humans are 78% water and there's no air in your lungs. You know the sea can't go on forever.

It hurts its hard it's like love and like burning like being bought back to life like the pressure of the world on your shoulders like being a child like being desperate like being peaceful like loving and hurting and dying.

You find your way out eventually and Cooper's laughing until he isn't and he pushes back the salt-crusted hair from your cheeks and says he's sorry he'll warn you next time god Blaine please don't tell the parents I didn't mean it I'll teach you how to swim better back home okay? Your hand is clutched around a seashell and it's purple and pink like a sunset swirl against your palm.

There's sand under your cheek and you want to lie there forever with the sea dipping at your toes and the sun in your hair and your face against the scratch of ground and there's life and laughing around you no one notices a child on the beach.

You breathe.

****A phone call.***

*"You've reached the voicemail of Blaine soon to be Hummel-Anderson. If that's Kurt then baby I love you, stop panicking. If it's anyone else then seriously, why on earth are you calling **me**? Go out and **do** something!"*

this line has been disconnected

"You've reached the voicemail of Blaine soon to be Hummel-Anderson. If that's Kurt then baby I love you, stop panicking. If it's anyone else then seriously, why on earth are you calling **me**? Go out and **do** something!"

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"You've reached the voicemail of Blaine soon to be Hummel-Anderson. If that's Kurt then baby I love you, stop panicking –"

this line has been disconnected

"You've reached the voicemail of Blaine soon to be Hummel-Anderson –"

this line has been disconnected

****A letter (delivered back to sender, unopened)***

October 15th, 2020

I debated a million times over, a million pieces of screwed up paper and deleted words, how I should start this letter. You know me, I never did do preamble and if this was a conversation or a phone call I would probably just shout your name and be done with it.

But it's not.

Jesus Christ, Blaine, I have never wished more that it could be.

Damn I promised myself I wouldn't cry.

I found your boy curled up in the bathroom, I think he'd tried to shower but had only made it half way across the room before he lost it completely. He's asleep now, but he still won't let go of your letter.

*Do you remember that day, god it was years ago. Lifetimes. You and Hummel sang to me, some perky upbeat song that was so **you**, and you were trying to cheer me up, to make a change. You were trying to help.*

Because that's all you ever did.

God, I mocked you then and I never said I was sorry. I never thought I would have to.

Because you did that over and over, the helping, the cheering up, the smiling, and I always wondered why but I think I know now. You did it because no one else would, but because someone had to. You took it upon yourself to become like Atlas, to hold the weight of the world's happiness upon your shoulders and you never ever let it get you down.

*God, the worst part was that you didn't even realise. You didn't do it for admiration or validation. You didn't even do it for **yourself**. You did it for the world, for the smile of every old woman you helped across the road and every waitress you tipped in a restaurant, every pregnant lady you gave up your seat for on the Subway. You were breaking the world down and rebuilding it one good deed at a time.*

A veritable knight in a bowtie and boat shoes.

If only there was someone around to do the same for you when you most needed it.

I wonder if you know how loved you are. You know Hummel still sets a place for you at the dinner table every night? It was disconcerting, really. Like having your ghost there while we were trying to eat Chinese and cry over whatever soppy musical Berry picked out for us to watch every Friday.

He thinks you're dead.

*They all do, in fact. Berry and Finn, Charlotte and Cooper, fuck there were even emails from Sam and Quinn and Noah, **all** of New Directions heard. Even Schuester. Even **Sue**.*

But I don't, and I'm only going to say this once.

*I won't let you be dead, I **won't**.*

Because that isn't how this is supposed to go. You were supposed to come home, to sweep Hummel into your arms like some new-age Disney movie and ride off into the sunset, and I'm not going to let you ruin that.

I don't believe you're dead because the world doesn't feel any different to me. The sun still rose this morning, as bright as ever and I know that wouldn't happen if you were no longer here.

God Blaine, why did you have to go and be so damn heroic?

They said you refused to leave, that you went back to help a guy and didn't make it to the lifeboats. "Lost at sea." Like something out of the fucking Little Mermaid. There was no coffin at your funeral, and there's nothing buried in that patch of ground where we marked your name.

Kurt doesn't visit it.

*He says it doesn't feel like you, because you're not there. And somehow that doesn't make it real for me. You're not there, you're not here. You're **lost**, like they said.*

*I'm still waiting, you know, for you to turn up at your stupid yellow front door, dripping wet like some sort of rescued prince and kiss Hummel senseless, a long-overdue happy ending. Because you deserve it, fuck you **both** fucking deserve it.*

I'm worse than angry at you, I'm fucking furious.

*And if you don't come home, I will **never** forgive you.*

*I...god **Blaine**, I just please. Just...please.*

Santana.

****A month.***

Drowning is a messy way to die. A slow one.

All it needs is a drop of water, just one to catch in your throat as your head breaks through the desperate waves, lungs screaming.

You cough, you splutter and suddenly the air on your cheeks isn't reaching your lungs and there's nothing in your mind except blind panic and the frantic rise of terror.

Humans are born to fight it, and you do too. Arms clawing at the surface, at the air, at your own skin. Eyes streaming with salt and tears and it hurts, it hurts *so much*.

Blaine Anderson knows this.

The heavy drag of water in his clothes, weighing him down god so heavy. Such fruitless struggles as he fought with nothing, thrashing and inconsequential in the vastness of the water.

Just one body, and a world so much bigger than he was.

"You can't save everyone, Blaine!"

People talk about drowning like it would be peaceful. And it should be, romantic; the soft ebb of water around the skin of a pirate or prince, something comforting and strange.

But in truth it burns more than fire, a tattoo of a thousand needles scraping across Blaine's throat with every last desperate breath. A reflex he couldn't stop, every gulp of water betraying him for just one more.

There might have been flesh wounds, blood and bruising but so *insignificant* as his body flamed inside out.

"You can't save everyone, why do you always think you can?"

Blaine tried, god he tried like he always did. He wasn't the fighter that Kurt was, the resilient bitch like Santana. Trying was all he could do, and if it didn't work the first time then you tried again tomorrow and prayed that it would go better the second time around.

Blaine Anderson couldn't save everyone.

One last swipe at the water, mocking, dancing. Fingers in sand, the dragging of a heavy body weighed down with salt and sand and sea.

But he could save himself.

Breathe Blaine, just breathe.

Fingertips feel like water when that's all you can remember how to feel.

Something dragging, those weren't waves those were hands, stable and sure and insistent.

Salt gets everywhere, a thick coating down the inside of a throat. Under nails, in the corners of eyes, crusting between eyelashes for weeks. It feels like gravel, like screaming, like glass.

Blaine opens his eyes, sees white, blinding white.

He screams.

It's like the jolt of a restarting heart, or maybe that's what it actually is. The rush of blood through veins that burns with electricity, the unwanted unneeded spark of life. Why should living hurt more than dying? A body arches like a bridge; fingers clutch sheets something constant, something reassuring and unmoving. Something to hold on to.

When time is measured by the healing knit of bones and skin, it's slow. Meticulous, steady and repetitive. Blaine counted the seconds with taps of his fingers across the bed as soon as his hands would move. When they were in the thousands he tried his toes. Millions meant feet, ankles, rolling and knocking them softly against the plastic bedframe. Hours, days, weeks, the stoic resignation of a brain reduced to tiny movements. There was no who, no what or why. Just the drip of sand through the hourglass, one grain at a time.

Slow panic set in when Blaine realised he wasn't breathing, the kind of dull muted monotony that comes from painkillers deadening your senses. Something intrusive filling his throat, the rise and fall of his chest.

His eyes watered, fingers grasped at the bed and a noise broke from the hoarseness of his salt-filled throat. Hands on his chest, raking, pulling, *can't breathe can't breathe*, and then suddenly he could. And he did. Coughing, choking, the ache of new-born lungs, the throb of unused muscle. Eyes streaming, heart pulsing through his body with every beat and every twang that spiked through him. The pain of your body, dragging itself back from the depths, denial, anger, hatred, *why why why* should he do this.

Kurt.

There was a crack in the ceiling, something jagged like a mocking smile. Like a joker or a clown, like a higher being smiling or laughing at him, Blaine didn't know.

He wondered if he was the punch line.

Faces filtered through his vision, one then two then countless more. Needles and hands, the repetitive beeping of the machine at his side. Lights in his eyes.

An eternity later, he spoke.

The woman hanging over him, faded pastel coloured scrubs while she poked and prodded at his side, she stilled as his mouth cracked open.

"K -"

She shouted something over him, someone rushed in from outside. More faces, more voices, they blurred together a kaleidoscope of confusion in a language he didn't understand.

"Ku -"

He couldn't do it.

It was there, the tip of his tongue the precipice of his mind and Blaine wanted to reach out and seize it like smoke, like a dream, like water through his fingertips but he couldn't. He was pulled back, weighed down by gravity and a force he didn't understand.

The way an addict reaches for his needles, his cigarettes or coffee, something craving and insatiable. Just a word, just one.

"Ku - Kur -"

A word, a name, and a lifetime of promises that never were.

"Kurt."

A love.

****An email (received to Blaine Anderson's inbox, unread)***

November 20th, 2020

I got out of bed today.

I made it all the way downstairs, to the coffee machine and was watching the sun rise over the garden when I remembered.

Until then, it was just another day. Another morning in our house without you. Until suddenly it wasn't, and it never would be again.

I went out, I went to the park. I saw the leaves fall from the trees and saw your eyes. I smelled your shampoo on a girl in the grocery store, I walked past the shop I bought your sweater from last Christmas.

*Everything was the **same**, Blaine. And I don't understand.*

How can it be?

How can the world carry on, fleeting and unremarkable? How can so many people go on living their lives when you can't?

I don't know why I'm writing this. I wish you could tell me.

You always knew me better than myself.

I know what Santana did, although I don't know what she wrote and she never said. But when your letter came back undelivered, covered with all those stamps from all those places. All those creases from so many hands passing it backwards and forwards, god Blaine the look on her face. For the first time she looked as bad as I felt.

I couldn't do that.

So I'm emailing you.

Sometimes I think of the internet kind of like the universe. Maybe this will find you out there somewhere, floating between the stars.

Dad asked me if I was going to be okay today, when he saw me standing and dressed for the first time since the funeral. I think he regretted it immediately.

I don't think I'm ever going to be okay again, Blaine.

*I went to see Lu. I didn't even have to say anything and god, she knew straight away. Because I've never been to that coffee shop alone, she's never known us as a singular. And I saw our table at the back and realised that it wasn't **ours** anymore.*

I wish I could be angry with you. Right now I just don't know what to think.

You promised me, Blaine. You promised you would come home to me.

But I can't hate you for going back to save someone, can I? You saved a man, a father. You saved a little girl from losing her dad, a woman from losing her husband. You saved a family and gave them happiness and god, who would I be to refute you for that?

Is it selfish to wish for my own happiness over theirs?

I know you wouldn't want me to put my life on hold, to stop everything completely because you're not coming home. I know exactly what you would say. In fact you've already said it, so many months ago in that letter. You realised and you knew, and you told me without saying the words. You didn't want me to stop my life if you never came back to me. You told me not to.

I just wish you told me how.

***A day.**

Blaine wondered, often and far too much, if his life was an interlude. A break, just a blip between the scenes of the world. An intermission.

This would be his denouement.

He stared at a calendar for nearly an hour, like when you wake up after too-long a sleep and nothing quite makes sense. The clocks seem to mock you, run backwards or stop and suddenly time isn't what it was when you first drifted off.

How long had he been gone?

How many months, how many days of aching and longing?

How much time spent in a rundown Japanese hospital, stiches and painkillers while his body relearned everything it once knew about living?

The problem with being dragged back from the brink of death was remembering that the rest of the world didn't stop, no matter how slow your crawl of life was.

Blaine didn't want to go back to the world, to be thrown back into the raucous cacophony of a living he'd forgotten how to do.

How was he supposed to?

He knew it was customary for mourners to suffer through the five stages of grief, he wondered how many had grieved over him. He wondered if it was normal to grieve for your own life, even as you lived it, however insubstantial it might be.

When he was discharged, Blaine was nothing more than a nameless blip on the system. Weeks unconscious with no name. No identity aside from what he could patch together and tell them, no medical records, no family, no proof of living. Hospital issued clothes and a medical bracelet still loose around his too-thin wrist.

Nothing but his own mind. Every memory and everything he held dear, wrapped inside his brain and stuck back together with staples and scar tissue.

How was everything supposed to go back to the way it was?

He'd fought, too long and hard. They'd sedated him, drowned his system in anxiety medication, strapped him down across the bed and called in a therapist.

No name, no background, nothing to say except one name to scream.

The doctors called him "Kurt" for far too long, before he could correct them.

New York City.

It still hadn't changed and Blaine stood in the crowds, weeks later. Turning and following the crowds. He still knew it like the back of his hand, could walk it with his eyes shut if only he could tell his feet to move.

This was *his* city, his beating heart. The place that held the one person he truly loved, so why couldn't Blaine find it within him to walk?

He felt lost.

Like he'd been running blind, in vicious circles in the dark.

There was the sign, the corner and the street that would take him to the building with the yellow front door, and Blaine froze as he looked down it. His hands grasped the metal pole of the sign as the world swam in his vision.

He panicked.

Breathe, breathe, breathe.

Clutching the metal, something sturdy, forehead against it, palms sweaty down the smooth surface god it was too hot, his collar sticking to the back of his neck. So many people, so many lives and Blaine could barely manage to live his own.

Something crashed against his back, a body with a careless "sorry" thrown over one shoulder that Blaine barely noticed.

Until she froze.

Turned, the phone in her hand cracking to the ground.

"Blaine?"

A tentative step forward, like approaching a timid animal, her eyes too wide and disbelieving. He blinked.

"San...Santana?"

A precipice.

And then she was in his arms like a fighting whirl. Hands slapped across his chest and she was crying, shouting something intelligible in mangled Spanish, swearing and cursing him and kissing his cheek as she flung her arms around his neck, heaving and sobbing against his chest.

For what felt like hours, on an inconsequential corner of New York City.

And he held her until she stopped crying, trying to soothe the raw ache in his heart.

She pulled away, thumbing under the dark shadows of his eyes, the sharp line of his cheekbones and jaw, the raised scarring slice that vanished down his collarbone and under his shirt.

"I knew it," she whispered, over and over, "I knew you were alive. I just knew."

Santana pulled them down, to sit on the grimy curb with their feet in the road and she didn't seem to be able to stop touching him. Her fingers playing with his sleeve, running across his shoulder.

"I couldn't get home, San."

She nodded slowly.

"You gave your tags to that guy. The one you saved."

Blaine's face lit up, a childish gleam in his eyes.

"James made it?"

"Of course he made it. He turned up a week after we got the news with your dog tags. Kurt still wears them."

His heart stuttered slightly, painful in his chest.

"Kurt."

"Don't tell me you've forgotten about him, because half-alive or not Anderson I will fucking punch you."

"Of course I haven't, *Santana!*"

She gave him a half shrug and an almost smile.

"How...how is he?"

She picked at her nails, staring at the scuffed dirt of the ground.

"He's...he's not good, Blaine. But...but you're here now," she seemed confused, frowning as she surveyed him, "Fuck, you're alive. You can just –"

"Turn up at his house, open the door and shout *hi honey, I'm home?*"

"What –"

"I don't know. I don't know what to do. I'm so...I'm so lost, San. I don't..."

She touched his shoulder gently, brushing her thumb up over the wetness of his cheek.

"You need to go home."

"I am –"

"New York is where you live, Blaine. *Kurt* is your home."

She pressed a kiss to his forehead, pulling him weakly to his feet.

"The only one who can make this better is you right now, Blaine."

I know.

I'm just scared.

What if he doesn't want me anymore.

What if he's moved on.

What if.

What if.

Her hand was insistent in his, tugging and guiding him and Blaine stumbled like he couldn't see. Tripping over every ridge of ground and loose paving slab, steering lucidly around couples and crowds, he was hazy and drunk and too light.

He needed something solid.

Something –

Kurt.

The door was still yellow. Like the sun and the scarf, and like the hair of Violet Corelli.

Santana smiled at him.

Blaine's heart beat on.

His fingers pressed the bell, letting the ring echo through the house for a second too long before he managed to drag it away. Every movement, every physical exertion hurt.

Silence.

Footsteps.

The door opened, Kurt's hand hooking around and tugging the light into the dark corridor. One hand clasped around a mug of tea that shattered to the ground, pressed against his mouth as he backed away.

No.

"No, no, no."

Kurt.

"No, please."

Please.

Hands pressed against his back, propelling him forwards and into the warmth, into the *vanilla and coffee and cats and Kurt*smell of home. The creak of the floorboard under his foot.

Kurt was against the wall, fingers against his mouth and one hand against the wall, his head shaking so hard and so violent and his body *buckled*, like a punch to his heart and Blaine felt it shudder right through him as Kurt fell to his knees.

"Blaine?"

He was running, crashing to the floor beside him and seizing Kurt's body. Holding him for the first time in this lifetime.

"Hey, baby."

Kurt's eyes were huge, stretched wide and unblinking as though he was frightened Blaine would disappear. His fingers clutched Blaine's sleeve.

"You're –"

Say it, please say it.

"You're –"

Say it so I can feel it.

"You're *alive*."

He barely made it through the word, cracking on the syllable and shuddering in Blaine's arms. Real and warm, trembling against him.

"You came home. You came home to me."

Blaine's lips found Kurt's forehead, his tears in his hair and skin under his mouth. Tangible. Alive.

"I promised I'd be home in time for dinner."