

Taken

by

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Klaine || AU || R

A year and three months ago, Blaine was an ordinary boy with dream, friends, and the love of his life. Then he was taken.

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Part One

They let Blaine see. He's not sure if that makes it better or worse. There's a screen at the top of his tube, flickering through images of home. Of his mom, his dad, Cooper, Kurt. He's not sure how it works, but then, he's not sure how anything works. Not really. Not since he'd been taken.

Abducted.

The word sounds so strange when he thinks it (he doesn't speak anymore, probably couldn't even if he tried), so foreign. Like something out of a nightmare. Maybe that's what this is. One elaborate nightmare. He's pretty sure he would have woken up by now, if that were true. He never does. He doesn't do anything, just waits for *them* to come.

He's not sure how long he's been gone, but it must have been awhile, judging from what he sees on the screen. The days (are there even days here, he's not really sure how it works), blend together. Sometimes it feels like forever between visits from them, from the aliens, whatever they're called. Sometimes they won't leave him alone, the whirl of his tube opening a too-frequent signal of their presence.

He has nothing else to do, so he watches. In the beginning he could see people crying, his mom collapsed on the couch, a picture of him clutched in her thin hands, police always coming and going. Sometimes he would see Kurt, curled up on his bed, calling Blaine's cell phone over and over. It would always go immediately to voicemail, Blaine had it on him when they took him, has no idea what happened to it next. Or any of his other clothes. Naked has become the norm, up here.

In the beginning, he would reach out. The tube is small, but he would squirm until his hands brushed over the images on the screen. His mother's tear stained face, his father's angry one. The blank look that's taken over Kurt. He doesn't, not anymore. It seems pointless, really. His family is moving on, slowly, his room left untouched, pictures of him displayed on the mantle place with a bouquet of flowers, like a funeral. Kurt's mounted a picture next to his bed and he touches it every night before he goes to sleep, but he's stopped crying all the time, has stopped searching for Blaine.

Blaine's happy they've moved on, in a way. He knows looking is useless. They'll never find him. He wants Kurt to move on, wants his family to be happy again. There's no hope for him, not anymore. Most of the time Blaine just closes his eyes. He wishes they would turn off the screen, it's too painful to watch, knowing he'll never see them again. But they don't, they never do.

Right now Kurt's sleeping, his New York dorm dark, curled up against his pillow, his chest rising and falling rhythmically, the stuffed dog he gave Blaine tucked under his arm. Blaine would ache, if he had anything left in him. Instead he just watches, weirdly detached, finds himself wondering if Kurt's going say yes to that boy who keeps asking him out. Blaine thinks he should, he seems nice. Kurt deserves someone nice.

The familiar whirl surrounds him, Kurt splitting in the middle as the tube opens. Blaine's learned not to struggle. Struggling only makes things worse, he figured that out early on. Spindly arms wrap around him, pulling him out of his tube. Blaine might as well be a ragdoll; he sort of feels like one, lose and boneless, whatever they've been putting in the stuff they pump in his stomach at meal times making his limbs feel like hundred pound weights.

He doesn't know what's in store for him today, he's lost count of the tests and experiments, just holds on to the hope that one day it will be over. Someday. Maybe. He knows there was a girl here before him, Sarah or Shawna or something like that. He doesn't really remember. But she's gone now, he doesn't know how, or where she went, but he remembers the look in her eyes right before she left. Broken and hopeful. He hopes someday that's him. Wherever she is, it must be better than here.

Today they strap him to a table. He doesn't remember much after that.

He's back in the tube, feeling exhausted, throbbing and aching, half lidded eyes watching his mother make dinner. Cooper must be visiting, moving in and out of the kitchen. They look sad, he notices. At one point his mom stops chopping vegetables, her head lowering and back shaking. His father comes in, finds her and pulls her into his arms. She's mouthing something that looks like *miss him* and *a year* and wow. Has it really been a year? It must be because the screen flickers over to Kurt, sitting on the edge of his bed, a photo of Blaine in his hands, his thumb stroking over the tiny print of his face before lifting it to press a light kiss to the glass. Rachel enters the room at some point, sitting next to Kurt, eyes sad as she looks at the photo.

Blaine closes his eyes, would scream if he could, more emotions rising in him than he's felt in a long time. This can't be all there is, it *can't*. He had so many plans, plans that are only half remembered now, hopes and dreams that have been sifted away with the rest of him until he's *nothing* but a doll for these *things* to play around with. He pounds the glass of the tube until his knuckles bleed, he kicks and struggles because he just *can't* do this anymore, he can't.

Until they come, the creatures, looks of disappointment on their faces and there's pain, so much pain, mind whitening out and going blank until Blaine calms down, his body stilling, head lolling to the side, chest heaving.

They leave the screen off after that. Blaine's glad.

Soon another boy comes. He's in the tube next to Blaine's. He cries a lot, but Blaine did too, in the beginning. He watches Blaine through the glass, eyes wide and desperate, like Blaine knows some secret way out, some trick to help him. Blaine wants to tell him to just give up, it's not worth it. But he doesn't. He just stares back, wonders if his eyes look as empty as he feels, before turning his attention up to the now blank white screen.

They take him and the boy watches with scared eyes, but Blaine knows he's really just glad it's not his turn, not yet. It feels like days before Blaine's brought back to the tube, the contraption they've been tweaking still wrapped around his head, covering his eyes and filling his mouth. It's not often they put him back in the tube before they're done with him, but it happens sometimes. Blaine figures he needs longer to stew, for them to get whatever results they need. He wonders if the boy is watching him now, how frightened he must be. Blaine shifts, the metal of the contraption clinking against the glass and there's a sob from somewhere to his right. He wishes the boy didn't have to see this. Seeing makes it worse.

They don't take it off, that's the worst part. The metal contraption stays on and Blaine wonders if this is what they've been working towards, if this is his ultimate purpose. It hurts, digging into his cheeks and his temples, cutting his tongue, pressing too tight against his eyes. They do something to his back, anchoring him on his side and there's so much pressure, so much pain and for the first time in a long time Blaine feels hot tears pressing behind his eyes, a lump building in his throat and he wants to fight, wants to get away, but he's pretty sure he's been drugged and strapped down and it's useless.

Time sort of blurs together after that. He stays on his side, blind to the world around him, only able to discern the sounds, mechanical whirring and clicking and tapping. Every so often something pulls at him, twists at whatever they've done to his back, adjust the cage on his head and he sort of feels like he's fading away into nothing.

His mind is disconcertingly blank, Kurt's name, his mom's face, Cooper floating around sometimes but he never gives them more than half a thought before drifting back into the black haze that is his life now. He

can hear whatever they're doing to the other boy, the whimpers every time they carry the boy past him and Blaine's almost glad he can't see, he can just stay lost in the cocoon of his empty mind.

And then one day it changes. He's jostled around, the cage on his head replaced with something smaller, something more compact, still covering his mouth and eyes but it no longer digs in painfully, the pressure in his back suddenly gone. He's being moved, wonders if he's going back to the tube, if they'll at least give him a few days before they pull him out again. But instead of the glass of the tube he's placed on a cool metal table and there's chattering all around him, a sizzling sound, like static electricity, his skin suddenly buzzing and it's building, building, building, until he arches up because he's *burning* oh god this is it, this must be the end.

And then there's nothing.

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Being home is hard for Kurt. Home reminds him of Blaine. His bed where they used to lay, curled up next to each other, tracing each other's skin with their lips. His front porch where they would kiss goodbye, the promise to see each other the next day lingering on their lips. The park where they would go on evening walks, hands tangled together, laughing as they threw crumbs for the ducks.

But he can't afford to live in New York over the summer, as much as he would like to, so he's home, training into his job at the local Starbucks (The Lima Bean is too painful, he never wants to step foot in there again). Mostly he hates the way everyone looks at him. Like they don't know how to talk to him, pity in their eyes at the boy who's boyfriend disappeared over a year ago. So he busies himself with work, picking up as many shifts as he can, staying home and helping his dad at the auto shop. It helps, or it at least gets him through the day, each day survived one less until he can get back to New York.

Rachel works the closing shift with him, having also opted to stay home in Lima for the summer. Sometimes Kurt wonders if it's possible to have a Rachel overdose, but they live close by and it saves money to carpool, so it's worth it. Plus, Rachel is one of the few people who doesn't baby him, doesn't send him sad, lingering looks or ask him how he's "holding up."

Tonight Rachel pulls into the driveway, putting her car in park as Kurt gathers his stuff. He's just about to bid her goodnight until tomorrow when Rachel squints, neck craning as she looks out the window.

“What’s that?” She asks, finger pointing towards his front lawn. “There’s something in your yard.”

“What?” Kurt asks, blinks as he looks where Rachel’s pointing. There is something, a oddly shaped lump, of what Kurt can’t tell, and he frowns, getting out the car. His steps are slow at first, then speeding as he realizes what the lump is, his heart pounding all the way up his throat and he’s running, falling to his knees in the soft grass.

The lump is a body, is Blaine, *his* Blaine, oh god oh god *oh god*. There’s shouting, loud in his ears and it takes a moment to realize it’s him, Rachel running to his side, her shriek echoing through the neighborhood. Blaine’s naked, his skin pale with a strange hue, painful looking marks all over his body, dotting down his spine and legs, up the back of his neck. There is something strapped to his face, metal covering his eyes and branching down to form a muzzle over his mouth and chin and Kurt doesn’t hesitate, his fingers frantically working to get it *off*.

The sounds of Rachel’s sobs have attracted attention, the front door opening and Burt stepping out with a gruff shout, before he’s rushing to them.

“What’s going on?”

“I don’t know,” Rachel cries and Kurt barely pays attention, all his focus on getting this thing off of Blaine. “It’s Blaine, oh my god, it’s *Blaine*.”

Burt’s shouting directions, telling Rachel to run inside and call an ambulance, his hands joining Kurt’s in trying to figure out how to remove the muzzle. He’s not sure what they did but suddenly there’s a clicking noise and the metal straps detach, falling off Blaine’s face and onto the ground.

Kurt immediately cradles Blaine’s head in his lap, Burt feeling for a pulse, resting his hand in front of Blaine’s mouth.

“He’s alive,” Burt says and Kurt’s crying, his hands running through Blaine’s hair.

“You’re alive, you’re alive,” Kurt sobs to Blaine, even though he knows that doesn’t mean he’s okay, Blaine looks anything but okay. He can see now, the same marks on his back at Blaine’s temples, the base of his jaw and he feels anger and nausea rising in him at the thought of whoever did this to his poor, sweet Blaine. Blaine’s hair is cut short, shaved in patches just behind his ears, and Kurt strokes a hand down Blaine’s face, can’t believe he’s here, so long after he ever gave up hope of finding him.

"I'm going to grab him a blanket, okay?" Burt says, standing. "You stay here with him."

Kurt nods, doesn't think he could physically be anywhere else right now. Burt disappears inside and Kurt keeps up his gentle stream of murmured words to Blaine, his hand finding Blaine's and lacing their fingers, Blaine's grip limp, his skin cold.

"I'm here, Blaine, you're here, oh my god, you're here, I missed you so much, I missed you, and I love you, I love you," Kurt rambles, hand squeezing Blaine's. Burt's back with a blanket, draping it over Blaine's body and Kurt nearly jumps when Blaine stirs. His fingers twitch in Kurt's hand, his eyes cracking barely open.

"Blaine?" Kurt says and Blaine's eyes shift slowly to look up at him. Nothing flashes across his face, no recognition or emotion, he simply stares for a moment before closing them again. "Blaine, it's okay, you're okay. You're safe now okay, you're safe. I have you and I'm not letting go. You're safe."

He thinks he feels Blaine shudder slightly but then there's the sirens of an ambulance, loud and blaring and Blaine's gone still again, paramedics rushing towards them. They're asking questions Kurt doesn't know how to answer, he doesn't *know* how Blaine got here, if he's been given anything, what's wrong with him. They pull him away from Kurt onto a backboard, strapping a machine to his arm and taking vital signs before loading him onto the stretcher. Blaine looks so small and pale surrounded by everyone and everything, and Kurt can't let him be taken away, fighting against his father as they load him into the ambulance.

"Please let me go with him," he's shouting. "Please, he's my boyfriend, don't take him away from me again, *please*."

The paramedics looks generally sorry as they hook Blaine up. "I'm sorry kid, you can meet us there, okay?"

And then the doors are closing and they're gone and Kurt feels empty again.

Part Two

A year and three months ago Blaine was taken. It was early on a Saturday morning in March, the first warm weekend of the spring, and Blaine decided to go for a run. He strapped on his shoes, texted Kurt good morning with a heart, kissed his mom on the cheek and left the house. Birds were singing and the snow was mostly melted and his mom was humming as she made breakfast for when he came back.

Except he never did.

It was chaos after that. There were police and questions and tears because boys just don't disappear in the middle of a run. Not without a trace. Everyone looked, for months they looked, but there was nothing. It was like Blaine simply disappeared. In the end it was boiled down to a hate crime because it was the easiest explanation. After five months they said the chances of finding Blaine alive were less than one percent. Everyone cried and a small reception was held, just with close friends and family. To honor the life Blaine had. Kurt didn't go until the end, his eyes puffy and swollen, placed a single rose under his picture.

A year and three months ago Blaine had a life, had dreams and love and aspirations.

And then they came.

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Everything happens in a blur. There are noises and sounds and lights, his body poked and prodded and he wants to protest, wants to tell them to just *stop* for one second but he can't. He can't move or speak or *think*. He just wants to sleep, wants all the noises and lights to go away. The tube has been replaced by something soft and it's strange, he can't remember the last time he wasn't laying on cold glass or metal.

He tries to drift, tries not to think too much about what's happening, the pain and pressure all over his body. His mind goes blank when he's rolled onto his side, because thinking about nothing is better than reality and if this is happening again he doesn't want to be all here. There's pressure on his back, pain shoots through him and he can't hold it in anymore, he opens his mouth in a noiseless cry, his hands fisting at the soft bedding beneath him. There's noise around him, something is touching him, his shoulder, his hand, his face.

“Baby, my sweet baby, you’re okay, it’s okay.”

A voice breaks through the rest of the noise and it sounds like his mother but that’s impossible. Unless this is something new. Something they haven’t tried on him before. Whatever it is, he wants it to stop stop *stop* because he can’t hear his mother’s voice, not now, not knowing that he’ll never see her again.

Except now there’s a hand clutching his own and there’s so much pain and he musters his strength, and opens his eyes. Tears slip out, hot and wet and so foreign because he hasn’t cried, not in a long time. A finger brushes them away and his mother’s face is right there, right in front of him, soft words murmuring from her lip and he doesn’t understand. He doesn’t understand what is happening, what sort of trick this is, where he is.

But he’s jostled again and there’s pain, white hot, arching from his back and traveling like electric fire through his body and it’s too much, it’s too much, it’s *too much*. He squeezes back on the hand holding his and blacks out.

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It’s hours before Kurt gets to see Blaine again. He taps his toe in the waiting room, eyes staring unseeing at the double doors they aren’t allowed to cross, the doctors and nurses and families that make their way in and out. Burt holds him close, a soothing hand on his arm but he doesn’t offer false reassurances. Rachel holds his hands, her tears having finally dried and they all just... wait.

Until forever has passed and Blaine’s mother finally comes to meet them, her eyes red and swollen from crying. She looks sad, her voice wavering as she explains things to them. Blaine’s been awake but hasn’t responded to anyone. They did scans and there’s no evidence of any sort of brain damage. His mouth and throat have had some damage and he might need surgery. There’s something wrong with his back but they’ve given him pain meds until they can figure it out. There is something untraceable in his blood and they don’t know what it is.

It all sounds so horrible and Kurt can barely associate all this with the beautiful boy he knew. He barely has time to when Melissa Anderson is wrapping him in a tight hug, holding him close and crying again.

“Thank you,” she murmurs against him. “Thank you for finding him.”

Kurt would argue, he didn't really do anything, Blaine was just *there* but he doesn't have the energy, just needs to *see* him for himself, needs to see he's okay. Melissa seems to understand, leads them back to Blaine's room.

Blaine's laying on his side, blankets up to his waist and his back covered in bandages. He's hooked up to an IV and a nasal cannula runs under his nose. Kurt has to blink, discreetly pinches himself to make sure this is real, that Blaine is actually here. He's dreamed of this, so many times, finding Blaine alive (and not) and he's still not quite convinced this isn't a dream.

But then Blaine's father moves so he can sit beside Blaine, Blaine's hand cold, limp in his own but *alive*. Kurt lets his fingers trace over Blaine's pulse, feels the steady thrumming under the skin. He doesn't care who's watching, doesn't care that so many people are in the room, he leans forward and presses a kiss to Blaine's cheek, careful of the bandages.

"You're safe now," Kurt whispers in his ear and he thinks he can feel Blaine's hand move in his, but he might have imagined it. "You're safe, I promise."

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Blaine sleeps for three days. While he sleeps, he dreams. He's back on the ship, he never left, not really. He's in his tube with that horrible metal cage, but now it doesn't just cover his head, extends down his whole body, pinching and trapping and suffocating him. There are things touching him, hands all over him, and his back *aches* in a constant throb. He dreams of his mother, his father, Cooper, Kurt. Their voices are *there*, in his ear and surrounding him, clear in a way they haven't been before. He doesn't mind, not anymore. It's comforting in a way.

So he just lets himself drift.

Blaine sleeps for three days. Rachel covers Kurt's shifts, finds someone to cover the one they have together so he can stay at the hospital. Blaine's room is almost always full; Kurt, his mother and father, Cooper. Doctors and nurses and technicians. Blaine is quiet as he sleeps, unmoving, and Kurt feels worry bubbling inside of him but the doctors don't seem too worried yet. He has surgery on his throat, to repair damages. Damages from what they don't know and Kurt's not sure he wants too. The thought of what Blaine went through too terrible.

On the third day it's just Kurt and Cooper, Melissa having run home for a shower and change of clothes and John unable to avoid work any longer. On the third day, Blaine stirs.

Kurt's sitting beside the bed, the side that Blaine's rolled towards, one hand in Blaine's and the other paging through a magazine, watching Cooper pace the room. He's about to tell Cooper to calm down, take a seat before Kurt gets dizzy from watching him, when the hand in his flexes. It's small, just a tiny movement, but it's the first movement in three days. The words are forgotten before they leave Kurt's lips and he starts, gripping Blaine's hand tighter.

"Blaine?"

Cooper is immediately at Kurt's side, both of them watching as Blaine's eyes blink open.

"Blaine, sweetie?"

Hazel eyes stare up at him, blank, as if he can't quite process what's in front of him. Hands move against Kurt's, slide minutely over the blanket. Cooper pounds the call light and a nurse enters, greets Blaine with a smile, explains to him where he is. Blaine just stares at her with the same empty eyes. She takes his blood pressure, his pulse, his temperature, listens to his heart and lungs, checks over his back, tells them the doctor will be in soon. When she leaves Blaine goes back to staring at Kurt, not moving, not speaking, not doing anything but staring.

"Blaine? It's Kurt," Kurt tries, hoping to incite some sort of reaction. Blaine blinks, face staying neutral while his eyes look around the room.

"You're in the hospital," Cooper says, resting a hand on Blaine's shoulder. "You're safe, bud."

Blaine still doesn't react but his hand untangles from Kurt's, drifts up towards his neck, the bandages around it.

"You had surgery on your throat," Kurt explains softly, watches as Blaine's Adam's apple bobs up and down. Kurt grabs the cup of ice chips the nurse had left with them, scoops a few onto the spoon.

"Here," Kurt says, making sure Blaine can see the cup. "Your throat probably hurts."

Cooper slides his hands under Blaine's head when Blaine doesn't do anything, helps him raise his head so Kurt can spoon a few ice chips into his mouth. Blaine lets them melt in his mouth a minute before he swallows them.

"Do you want to sit up?" Kurt asks, eyes meeting Cooper's when Blaine doesn't respond. Cooper shrugs, biting his lip with concern and together they help Blaine up in the bed, positioning pillows so his back doesn't hit the bed. Blaine's head lolls on his shoulder until it falls back against a pillow, still watching Kurt through half lidded eyes. Kurt spoons a few more ice chips into Blaine's mouth, feels the hot press of tears behind his eyes, takes Blaine's hand again, holds it tightly.

"I missed you," he whispers, presses a kiss against the back of Blaine's hand. "I missed you so much."

Blaine just stares.

Part Three

Everything is different now.

Before it had been cold, harsh, painful. Now there is warmth, soft bedding, voices. Faces. He sees Kurt a lot, his mother. Cooper too and his father. He even thinks he saw Rachel and Kurt's father. His brain feels fuzzy, confused, like it's been stuffed full of cotton and he's not sure what's happening. He remembers the electricity, the burning table, wonders if that has something to do with it.

Soft hands are on him, moving him around. He lets them because it's not worth it to protest. He learned that the hard way. This time it's someone he doesn't recognize, his mother behind them. He's not sure how they do it, if it's a screen like the one in his tube, a mirage, a hallucination. Maybe the creatures have changed their appearance. He doesn't know, but it makes something uneasy settle in his stomach.

He remembers the first few months, how he would dream about this. About his family, Kurt, being here and holding him, talking to him, reassuring him. Now, he can't help but think this is all some elaborate trick. Some kind of test; give him everything he wants and rip it away. He'd prefer the tube and the metal cage. That at least was predictable, that was expected.

Now, his mother's face looms in his vision, Kurt is on the other side. He thinks he saw Cooper somewhere and this is all too much, he can't take it anymore. His mother's hand is on his cheek and he wants to scream because he doesn't want these *things*, whatever they are, touching him anymore. So he does. He opens his mouth and he screams and he lashes out and he just doesn't care what they do to him because anything is better than this. Anything is better than lies. He keeps screaming (the sound choked and rasping), keeps trying to get away from these *hands*, from the touches and faces and voices.

The Kurt thing tries to grab him and his whole body aches as he lashes out, his fist throbbing when he lands the punch, not Kurt stumbling back. He doesn't think, doesn't really know what he's doing, he's never tried to get away like this, just keeps thrashing, scrambling, can feel wires and tubes pulling. And then he's falling, slipping, his limbs still not quite working and he's on the floor, back slamming into a chair and electric pain radiates through his body.

He can't do anything, can only curl into a ball and wait for it to stop, can't even shrug away the hands that are on him, the shouted voices. It sears through his blood, his bones, every fiber and cell and he can't stop

the broken sob that escapes him, curls tighter into himself. Until there's a sharp prick, a soothing voice and everything slips away.

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No one really knows what to do. They call in a therapist but she doesn't really get anywhere, just a few blinks, a flicker of eyes. They still don't know what's wrong with his back, are no closer to figuring out what happened to him. Kurt's more careful, about touching. For nearly a week he just sits at the bed, quietly, occasionally trying to talk. The second week he holds Blaine's hand, lightly, barely grasping his fingers. Blaine still watches him, but takes no action of his own. Except for the ice chips he won't eat, won't drink and they place a feeding tube through his nose. It's eerie, to see the blank look on his face, the way he closes his eyes as if he wants to escape everything.

Kurt has to work, can't take that many days off, but comes by as often as he can. Now that Blaine's back, even like this, he can't bear to be away from him, not anymore. Not when everything is still so fragile.

Today Kurt is alone with Blaine, just sitting, telling Blaine softly about his day. Blaine watches, he usually watches, but today he shifts. It's just a roll of his shoulders, but it's something. Kurt pauses his story, Blaine shifting again, the slightest bit of a frown creasing his face.

"Are you uncomfortable?" Kurt asks, motioning to the pillows tucked at his side. The tiniest nod but Kurt's heart leaps and he's immediately up, careful to move slowly and gently, his jaw still aching from the blow earlier in the week. He spots a pillow folded awkwardly at Blaine's side, the blanket tangled up in it and he straightens it out, gently situates Blaine against the pillows, tucks the blanket in around his waist.

"Better?" Kurt can't help the hopeful sound to his voice, the fact that Blaine initiated something almost hard to grasp. There's another tiny nod, eyes flickering to Kurt's face.

"Do you need anything else?" Kurt asks, knows he's pushing his luck but he can't help it, he needs to try. He takes Blaine's hand lightly. "I'll do anything."

Blaine stares at Kurt for a moment before his lips part, his hand twitching in Kurt's. He looks almost perplexed, the slightest crease to his brow, his lips closing again and Kurt has an idea. He scrambles the room until he finds a small pad of paper and a pen, sets them carefully on the table he wheels over Blaine's bed. Blaine just looks at the paper and Kurt wonders if this was too much, if he expected too much.

But then Blaine's hands move up, grip the pen in an awkward grip, eyes flickering from Kurt to the paper as he writes in three shaky words: *is this real?*

Breath catches in Kurt's throat, his heart hammering in his throat. He looks Blaine straight in the eye, Blaine's swirling with a desperation he hasn't seen before.

"Yes, Blaine," he catches Blaine's hands in his own, holds as tight as he can, as if he can *will* Blaine here, make him understand. "This is real. This is *real*. I'm real. I promise you, I'm real and you're safe. Blaine, you're safe."

Blaine's eyes stay on Kurt's, searching, like he wants to believe but he doesn't know how. Kurt hesitates, leans forward slowly, watching for the first sign of Blaine being uncomfortable, touches his lips to a smooth forehead.

"Please."

The word hangs on the air and Kurt's not sure exactly why he said it, what he means but Blaine's eyes flutter closed, his hand giving Kurt's a small squeeze.

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Sometimes Blaine imagines he's drowning. A weight sinking to the bottom of an ocean, not struggling, not swimming, just waiting for the water to fill his lungs. He wonders what will happen when he reaches the bottom. What he'll find.

And then Kurt grabs his hand, pulls him from the deep.

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Blaine improves. Slowly. He doesn't speak, still stares at everyone with wide, empty eyes, but he pulls his blankets up around him, shifts so his back doesn't hurt, even yawns when he's tired. His mother coaxes some broth into him and he doesn't flinch when she holds his hand. Afterwards she cries, held by Cooper in the hallway. Blaine just watches.

After work one day, Kurt carries two cups into Blaine's room. The smell of coffee mixes with the sterile scent of antiseptic but Kurt's determined. He greets the nurse in the hallway, takes his seat beside Blaine's bed. Blaine watches as Kurt sets one of the cups on the small table, holds the other in his hands.

"I brought you a coffee," Kurt says, slowly, lifts the cup so Blaine can see it. "It's a medium drip, decaf. I put cinnamon in it, just like you like it."

He pauses, hesitates. "It's not the Lima Bean, I know, but we'll save that for when we can go there ourselves, right?"

Blaine blinks. Kurt bites his lip, reaches forward to open Blaine's hand, wraps it around the paper cup. Hazel eyes stare down at the cup, almost curiously, and Kurt just waits, takes a sip of his own coffee. Nonfat mochas aren't his favorite anymore, but he bought one today. It seemed right.

He's nearly done with his own coffee, silence stretching through the hospital room, ready to abandon his efforts. He tried, that's what counts, right? And then Blaine's eyebrows come slightly together, his eyes hesitant as he lifts his hands, gaze flickering to Kurt before taking a tiny sip. Kurt feels ready to explode, but he forces himself to stay calm, offers Blaine a smile. Another taste of the coffee and Blaine lowers it back to his lap, his thumb brushing the smudge where his lip had been.

"Is it okay?" Kurt asks, hoping to get some sort of response out of Blaine. What he gets, he's completely unprepared for. A voice, barely even a whisper, soft enough that Kurt almost doubts he heard it.

"They took me."

Blaine stares at the cup, wets his lips.

"They took me. Away."

A silent pause, Kurt waiting for Blaine to continue. When it's obvious he's not going to, Kurt has to clear his throat, asks. "Where? Where did they take you?"

Blaine shakes his head. "I don't know. Not here."

His voice becomes slightly stronger, still only an airy whisper, his eyes still glued to his coffee. "They did things and..."

Kurt reaches forward, rests his hand lightly on top of Blaine's, offering support. "And what?"

Eyes roam up to meet Kurt's, filled with pain.

"And it hurt. It hurt so much."

Tears well up, making Blaine's eyes shine, overflow and trace down his cheeks. Kurt takes the cup from Blaine's hands, sets it on the table before sitting gently on Blaine's bed. Blaine doesn't protest when Kurt pulls him into his arms, wraps him tight, his cheek resting against Blaine's short hair. Blaine shakes against him, his shirt growing damp with tears but Kurt just holds Blaine, holds him and promises himself he'll never let go.

"It won't hurt anymore," Kurt whispers into Blaine's ear. "I promise. They'll never hurt you again."

Part Four

Denial was a place Kurt became all too familiar with. When Blaine first disappeared he knew it was all a misunderstanding. Blaine was lost somewhere. Blaine went somewhere and his phone died. Blaine would show up with that sheepish grin he got when he knew he did something wrong and everything would be explained.

Time passed. Blaine was still gone. Denial kicked in.

As the chances of finding Blaine alive went down every week, Kurt became more and more obstinate. He refused to listen to anyone, screamed in his father's face more than once when he tried to talk to him. He refused to stop looking, refused to accept anything. Blaine wasn't gone. He *wasn't*. Burt tried to tell him he was right, Blaine would always be with him, in his heart. He would be with all of them, had left a hole in their lives he knew would never really be filled.

Two weeks before Kurt had to leave for New York, they had a reception for Blaine. To honor his memory. He refused to go, at first. Why should he when Blaine wasn't dead? He sat in his room, the silly gum wrapper ring Blaine had made him cupped in his palm. It was such a ridiculous thing, just a few gum wrappers folded into a circle with a tiny little bow on top, but it was so *Blaine*. Kurt knew he must have sat there for hours, making it perfect, fingers aching as he folded each wrapper with precision, putting his everything into it.

It was then that he realized. There would be no more gum wrapper rings. No more gifts folded out of paper, no more soft kisses over homework, no more singing stupid duets in the car together. That's when the tears started to fall. At some point Burt showed up, holding Kurt tight as he sobbed in his arms, and there was no more pretending. Not anymore. Blaine was gone. Only a few pictures and a circle of gum wrappers left in Kurt's life.

New York was better, in a way. Kurt could distance himself. He was always going to go to New York without Blaine, at least at first. He could just close his eyes and pretend Blaine was back home in Lima and it would help him sleep easier. After a few months he even started making friends, started laughing again. The cute boy in his aural class asked him on a date. He said yes, but the whole time there was an ache inside of him, a reminder that there would be more dates, more kisses, more guys, all without Blaine. Kurt hoped that wherever Blaine was, he forgives him.

The boy kissed Kurt goodbye that night and it was nice but it didn't feel *right* and Kurt told him he's sorry, he's just not ready yet. The boy gave him a sad smile but said he understands, it takes awhile to get over something like losing the one you love. They stay friends, with the promise that one day it may be more.

It gets easier and after a whole year Kurt starts to think that maybe one day, things will be okay again. Blaine will always be there, but maybe he can still be happy. Can live how Blaine wanted him to.

And then Blaine comes back. Broken.

-

Three days after Kurt brought Blaine coffee he is discharged. He hasn't talked again, but he's been more receptive, hasn't pulled away. His doctor figures a familiar environment might help his recovery along. His back still isn't healing but they teach his mother and father how to change his bandages, keep it clean while they try and figure out what's wrong.

Melissa and John are there, Cooper waiting in the parking lot with the car. Kurt has to work, but promises to come by their house as soon as he's done. Everything has been explained to Blaine, a small nod of understanding that almost makes Melissa start crying again. The nurse helps Blaine to move to the edge of the bed, his feet dangling loosely over the side while John anchors the wheelchair. Melissa grips Blaine tight as they help him to stand, the first time in over a year, though they don't know that. Blaine sags against her but she holds tight, her eyes prickling with tears as they help him with the few steps to the chair.

He'll probably need physical therapy, when he's up to it, they say. It's obvious wherever he was he wasn't allowed to walk. His legs are thin from disuse and it might take him awhile to regain his strength. But if he is willing to try, he should make a full recovery. Blaine doesn't respond to the information but Melissa nods frantically, her hands gripping Blaine's tightly and promising they'll try. He'll get better.

They get him home and Cooper carries him to his bedroom, helps him change out of the hospital issued clothes into some loose sweats. Blaine's fingers drift over his blankets, his pillow, eyes wide as he takes in his room, exactly the way he left it.

"Mom wouldn't let us move anything," Cooper explains, sitting beside Blaine on the bed, reluctant to leave him alone. "She wanted everything to be perfect for you when you came back."

Blaine's eyes flicker up to Cooper's face and Cooper offers him a small smile, hand searching out Blaine's to hold tightly. It seems to be one of the only ways to connect with Blaine, lately.

"Oh," Cooper exclaims suddenly, leaning to wrestle something out of his bag. "Kurt gave me this to give to you until he can come over."

It's a stuffed dog with too-big eyes. The one Kurt had given Blaine his senior year. "He said it's yours."

Blaine takes the dog in his free hand, his thumb stroking over the soft fur of its head, lifting it his nose and inhaling. A smile twitches at the corner of Cooper's mouth, heart growing in his chest because somehow Kurt always seems to know what his little brother needs.

And then Blaine's leaning against him, his head resting on Cooper's shoulder and Cooper almost starts with surprise. Instead he lets his arms hold Blaine close, stroking a smooth rhythm on the back of his hand. Blaine's eyes flutter closed, the stuffed dog held to his chest, his face peaceful. Cooper stays with him all afternoon.

-

Blaine's not sure if this is real. He's not sure this isn't all some elaborate experiment, some cruel game. But as he leans against his brother's warm body, the smell of Kurt in the stuffed animal he holds so close, he doesn't care.

He's happy.

-

The smell of coffee still lingers on his skin when Kurt arrives at Blaine's house. Melissa pulls him into a hug, tells him that everything went well, Blaine seems to be adjusting to the move. She gives him a hot bowl of soup to try and coax into Blaine, he hadn't wanted it when she tried earlier and he really needs to eat. Kurt accepts it, says he'll try his best, makes his way up to Blaine's room.

Cooper is in there, Blaine leaning against him, Margaret Thatcher dog clutched to his lap, and the sight almost is enough to make Kurt start crying right there. But he doesn't, just greets Cooper as if it's any other day, takes his seat on the chair beside his bed. Cooper presses a kiss to the top of Blaine's head, tells Kurt that he's starving himself and offers them some privacy.

"I brought you some soup," Kurt says softly, motioning to the bowl he's set on Blaine's bedside table. "I think your mom might have a stroke if you don't eat some."

That earns him a tiny smile and Kurt crawls to occupy the space Cooper just left, holding the bowl carefully on his lap. Blaine parts his lips willingly when Kurt offers him a spoonful. A comfortable silence sits in the room as Kurt feeds Blaine his soup, helps him to drink half a cup of water when he's done.

"Thank you," Blaine whispers in the barely there voice he had used when he spoke to Kurt three days ago. Kurt tries not to act surprised, tries not to show the way his whole body feels like it might explode when Blaine speaks, just tangles their fingers.

"For what?" he asks calmly, as if this were any of the millions of conversations he's had with Blaine in the past.

"Not giving up." Blaine's looking back at his lap, at their hands joined on top of the sheet and Kurt gives them a squeeze.

"I'll never give up on you," he says, lets Blaine lean against him. "Never."

-

They build a routine. Everyone helps out so that Blaine never has to be alone, even Carole and Rachel offering to stay with him when everyone else is at work. Cooper has to go back to LA, can't ignore his job anymore but promises he'll be back as soon as he can. Blaine stays in his bed, mostly watching the others, not talking. But he smiles sometimes, eats when people bring him food, lets them know when he has to use the bathroom. His back doesn't get any better and the doctors are still baffled, run more tests to try and figure out what's wrong.

Kurt is happy for the progress, for the most part, but something gnaws at him. Besides when Kurt brought Blaine the coffee, Blaine hasn't really shown any emotions, hasn't broken down or cried or had nightmares. Shouldn't he be angry? Sad? Anything? Kurt knows something isn't right, that Blaine just *is*. It's almost like he's afraid to acknowledge what happened to him, afraid to accept he's safe. He just lives in the moment, watching everything with an eerie calm.

"Who took you?" Kurt asks one day, unable to take it anymore. It's risky, he knows, but everyone has been so careful around Blaine, treating him so delicately. Police and doctors and therapists have asked him this,

only to be answered with a blank stare, and Kurt knows he should leave it to the experts. But everything feels so stagnant, stuck in time, and Blaine's been back a month, shouldn't he be better than this? Shouldn't they be getting somewhere towards punishing those who did this to him?

Blaine looks at him, eyes wide and frighteningly empty. They're on the couch today, Kurt sick of sitting in Blaine's bed, had helped him carefully down the stairs to the living room. It's the first time Blaine's really been out of his bed in the week he's been home and Kurt hopes a change of scenery will do him good.

"Who took you?" Kurt repeats, meeting Blaine's gaze. Blaine just stares, so reminiscent of those first few days before shaking his head, looking at his knees.

"Blaine?"

Blaine's eyes flutter closed, his face exhausted.

"I can't."

"You can't tell me?" Kurt clarifies and the way Blaine's eyes squeeze shut confirms. "Why can't you tell me? No one will blame you for anything."

Kurt reaches for Blaine's hand but Blaine pulls away, his position guarded.

"Please don't," he whispers and Kurt feels his heart sinking as anger rises in him. Anger at these nameless people that Blaine is too afraid to reveal, at what they did to him. What they're still doing to him, even now that he's back.

"Okay," Kurt relents, giving Blaine his space and leaning back on the couch. "You can talk to me, whenever you're ready. I will listen to you."

-

Blaine knows that's not true. As soon as Kurt hears the truth, no matter how he tries to tell him, it will be over. He'll be locked away and no one will listen to him ever again.

So he stays silent. It's easier this way.

Part Five

He cried a lot, in the beginning. It was dark and scary and cold and Blaine was so lost. He could remember running, wiping the sweat from his forehead, and then the sensation of falling but not really. Floating is a more accurate way to describe it, he supposes. If it needs a word. Floating and then *here*, naked, locked in glass, beady eyes on him.

At first he cried because he was scared. He didn't know where he was, what was going on, if this was all a horrible dream. Then, he cried for a whole different reason.

He cried because of what they did.

It hurt, but that wasn't the only reason. Lying naked on a table, completely exposed, being poked, stretched, contorted. They tied down his arms, threaded tubes into his veins, injected him until he couldn't move, could barely think, everything happening in a hazy blur around him. He tried to tell them to stop, tried to protest but his jaw was being stretched open, something rough and snakelike pushed inside, making its way down his throat, down his esophagus, his stomach, further. He couldn't breathe but somehow he didn't need to, the only sensation that *thing* inside him, moving around. He could feel every pulse, every movement, and that's when he stopped crying. Because crying made it worse.

That was only the first.

-

The first time Blaine whimpers in his sleep, Kurt's there. He's carding his hand through hair that's starting to curl again, the shaved patches behind his ear filling in. Blaine's curled up in bed, burrowed under blankets and pillows, Margaret Thatcher dog clutched tight to his chest. Kurt can see his eyes moving rapidly under eyelids, his face scrunching as if pained, his jaw widening as if some invisible force is pulling it apart. A whimper works its way from his throat, the first time Blaine's done anything but sleep quietly.

He whimpers again, his whole body tensing, jaw working frantically. Kurt smooths a hand down his arm, trying to calm him but it only makes Blaine more tense, his body shaking with the effort.

"Blaine," Kurt tries, giving Blaine a gentle shake. "Blaine, wake up."

Blaine's eyes snap open, a deep inhale as if coming up from underwater, his eyes searching frantically around the room.

"It's okay, it's okay," Kurt tries to sooth, panicked hazel eyes meeting his. "You were dreaming, it's okay. You're home. You're safe."

And then Blaine does something Kurt doesn't expect. A hand reaches his own, clutching so tight Kurt's not sure how long he'll be able to feel his fingers, tears overflowing and spilling down cheeks as Blaine lets out a sob. Kurt reacts quickly, pulling Blaine's head onto his lap, rubbing a circle on his shoulder with his free thumb.

"It was a dream, it was just a dream," Kurt whispers, feels his pants growing wet with Blaine's tears. "I'm here, I'm here. Shhh. It was just a dream."

Blaine's head shakes on Kurt's lap.

"It was real," a choked voice says, and Kurt has to squeeze his eyes shut to control his own tears. "It was real."

Kurt holds Blaine's hand just as tight, tries to anchor him, hold him *here*.

"You're safe now," he reminds Blaine, wishes there was some way he could make this all better. "It will never happen again. I promise."

He sings, softly, *Blackbird* because he wants something to be familiar for Blaine. Something with good memories, to push out the bad. Ragged breathing slowly calms, tears slowly coming to a stop. Kurt keeps stroking a hand over Blaine's hair, a thumb over the back of his hand. He can feel the scrape of Blaine's eyelashes when he blinks, knows he probably won't be able to fall back asleep.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Kurt asks softly, no judgment in his voice for either answer. Blaine's still a moment, his breath warming Kurt's leg.

"I want to forget," he whispers. "I just want to forget."

Kurt sucks in a breath, leans down to press a gentle kiss just above Blaine's ear.

"I don't think you can forget," he says, keeping his voice as soft as he can. "But I can help you move on."

Blaine's silent, his grip still tight on Kurt's hand.

"I know you'll be happy again. I promise."

-

Steam curls up from the bathtub, the scent of vanilla and lavender filling the air as Kurt adds a liberal amount of bubble bath. Blaine likes the bubbles, Kurt thinks. He's only helped with his bath one other time, but Blaine had stared at the bubbles like he'd never seen it before, his fingers making circles through the foam.

"Is the water okay?" Kurt asks, helping Blaine to lower himself into the tub. Blaine nods, letting out a nearly contented sigh as he sinks into the warm water.

"Good," Kurt says, wetting a washcloth and gently starting to scrub it over Blaine's shoulders. He hums quietly pouring water over Blaine's head, squeezing shampoo into his hair. Blaine actually helps scrub it in this time, wiping his eyes with the back of his hands to clear them of soap.

Kurt works his way gently from Blaine's shoulders, careful of his back. He took off the bandages for the bath, Blaine's parents having given him a rundown of what to do. The circular motions of Kurt's hands slow, eyes grazing over the damp skin before him. The purple marks down Blaine's spine are just as stark as the night he appeared on Kurt's lawn, looking tortured and harsh. The skin around it is red and raw looking, Blaine sucking in a sharp breath when the washcloth gets to close.

"Sorry," Kurt murmurs, but he can't pull his eyes away. His fingers skim over the reddened skin, barely touching but he can feel the heat radiating out. The skin looks thin, the veins branching purple away from the vertebrae.

"It was an experiment," Blaine says and for the first time he speaks in more than a whisper, voice rough. "I... I don't know what for but..."

He trails off for a moment, Kurt following the purple marks up Blaine's spine, stopping on the small one behind his jaw.

"I think I failed it." Blaine shifts uncomfortably, head turning towards Kurt. "I think that's why they let me go."

Kurt lets this new information sink in for a minute. There's something warm on his cheek, Blaine's hand lifting from the soapy water and Kurt realizes he's started crying.

"It's okay," Blaine says, his hand resting on Kurt's jaw for a moment, like Kurt's the one that needs comforting. "It's okay."

"I hate that this happened to you," Kurt manages, resting his forehead on Blaine's damp shoulder. "I want you to be okay."

Something soft presses into his hair and Kurt looks up, realizes Blaine just kissed him.

"I'll try," Blaine says, voice back to the regular whisper. "I think... I think I'm still figuring out you're real." Blaine's hand finds Kurt, slippery with soap. "That I'm back."

Kurt holds Blaine's hand tight, leans across the bubbles to touch a kiss to the very edge of Blaine's mouth.

"I will do whatever it takes to help convince you."

A smile twitches at the corner of Blaine's lips and that's that.

-

The middle of the night, Blaine lies awake. His mother's stopped sleeping in the room with him, Kurt's home tonight, has to work early the next day. The house is quiet, only the ticking of his alarm clock cutting through the silence. He breaths slowly, eyes blinking up at his ceiling, can barely make out the fan, the glow in the dark stars that have long since died out.

Stars.

He's moving before he really realizes what he's doing, pulling back his cover, bare feet touching the wood floor. It's a warm night in July and his mom has been having him wear shorts and a t-shirt to bed, but he shivers anyways. Hands grab onto his bedside table, a chair and he pushes himself to his feet, wavering slightly. His legs are still weak, his balance off, his back aching with every step but he slowly makes his

way. A toe catches on the stairs and he slips down the last two steps, but he doesn't stop. He needs to see the stars.

A warm wind wraps around him when he steps out onto the back porch. A splinter snags the bottom of his foot but he doesn't notice, just keeps walking, strength growing with every step. Grass is damp with rain that must have fallen earlier, and he stands in the middle of the yard, inhales as deep as he can. He raises his face to the sky, eyes wide as he takes in the silver dots of the stars, the nearly full moon, sparkling in the dark of the night.

His skin takes on a silvery glow from the moonlight, everything around him looking almost surreal and he feels light, like he is *everything*. His arms raise, spread wide, and his skin feels too small, too containing and he just wants to *burst*, to fly and to fall.

So he does.

-

Kurt wakes up to his phone ringing. It's barely six a.m., an hour before his alarm will go off for work and he fumbles to answer it, brain still fuzzy with sleep.

"Kurt?" It's Blaine's mother and suddenly Kurt's awake, heart beginning to pound in his chest. "Um, is Blaine with you?"

And everything shatters.

-

He calls into work. He has no other option. Blaine is missing.

Again.

Everything seems to go by in a haze as he drives out to the Anderson's. The cops have already been called, Melissa is being held by John, inconsolable. Kurt barely throws his car into park when he's running, demanding information. There's nothing. Melissa woke up this morning and Blaine's covers were thrown back, the back door unlocked, and he was gone. Just like that.

They're going to look around the area first, figure if he was taken again he might still be close, if he had wandered off on his own he couldn't have gone far. It feels unreal, Kurt's worst nightmare, and he's too numbed to even begin to cry.

All morning they look, neighbors questioned for suspicious activity. There's a forest behind the Anderson's house, on the edge of town, and they find a snagged lock of curly brown hair on a branch. Finn and Burt come to help look, Burt's hand a reassuring weight on Kurt's shoulder.

"We'll find him," Finn says but Kurt's not listening to Finn.

"Shh," Kurt shushes, holding up his hand. The wind rustles the leaves in the trees, the sound of twigs snapping under feet, birds chirping in from above. And another sound, muffled and strained.

Without a second thought Kurt sets off in that direction, following the sound, Finn close behind him. There's a path through the forest, narrow and worn, people cutting through from one side to the other. Kurt's feet pound the packed dirt as he breaks into a jog, the sound clearer now. It sounds like someone crying.

The path jogs to the left and then Kurt sees him. Blaine, standing in the forest, hands reaching out from tree to tree as if to steady himself. Kurt's aware of Blaine's name leaving his lips, of running as fast as his legs will take him, of a body in his arms, collapsing to the ground.

"Blaine, Blaine, oh god, Blaine," Kurt can't stop repeating, the tears that had been building all morning finally overflowing and he holds Blaine as close as he can, his hand running over curly hair, clutching Blaine's shoulder, solid and real. Blaine's breathing hard against him, dead weight in Kurt's arms, head falling to Kurt's shoulder.

"Dude," a voice comes and it's Finn, Kurt had forgotten he was with him. "He's bleeding."

Finn's right, the back of Blaine's shirt damp and red, and Kurt's cradling Blaine as he raises the fabric.

"I'm sorry." A muffled voice against his shoulder.

"Shh, it's okay," Kurt comforts, trying to keep the panic from his voice when he takes in Blaine's back.

“Shit,” Finn exclaims, crouching down behind. The purple marks look like they’ve been scratched off, long lines of red down his spine, out across his back.

“I couldn’t stop,” Blaine mutters into Kurt’s shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Kurt repeats, looking up at Finn with desperation, so at a loss for what to do now. Finn looks just as lost as he does, hands hovering over Blaine.

“I just needed it to...” Blaine’s muffled words fade away as he goes limp in Kurt’s arms.

Part Six

It's quiet again. Hazy. Muffled. He likes it. It's comfortable.

He can hear people calling his name but he ignores them. It's nicer like this. Like he's underwater, everything slow and muted. Until a buzzing grows in his ears, a clicking, louder and louder until he's sure he's *back*. He's back in the tube, his back aching and skin itching, the cold glass under him, metal digging into his jaw. He's back and he wants to scream because he can't do this again, he can't he can't he *can't*.

And then hands are on him, stroking his face, ruffling his hair and his eyes crack open. The buzzing fades and his mother is there, her cheeks wet with tears and it's okay, he's okay. He thinks.

"Hey sweetheart." His mother's voice is soft, comforting and he lets his eyes flutter shut again. Her hand strokes down his cheek, avoids the tender spot right behind his jaw, reaches to grab his hand. Blaine shifts, squeezes back against her fingers slightly, grounds himself.

"How are you feeling, sweetie?" Melissa asks after a short moment and Blaine can't find the energy to open his eyes again.

"Tired," he responds and it's true. His limbs feel weighted, his skin stretched, his bones ache in a way he imagines no amount of sleep could help. He longs for the hazy feeling of before, the fog that had been so comforting.

"You can sleep. I'll be here."

And so he does.

-

Blaine's hand goes limp in hers but she doesn't let go. She doesn't drink the coffee John had brought her, long cold, doesn't do anything but watch and listen and feel. Blaine's face is relaxed now, his lips slightly parted with sleep, newly grown curls a dark frame against the stark white pillows. There's the steady beeping of the heart monitor, the soft breaths, the rustle of sheets when he shifts. Blaine's hand is cold, his skin dry but she can feel the steady thrumming of his pulse in his wrist. It's almost enough.

She's aware of Kurt entering the room, having been questioned by the police, only now allowed to see Blaine. He sits in the seat John had formerly been occupying, hands hovering like he needs to connect with Blaine, he just doesn't know how.

"How..." Kurt starts, falters. "How is he?"

Her eyes flicker to Kurt's face, to eyes filled with fear and worry, a mirror image of her own.

"They found blood under his fingernails," she says slowly, feels the familiar hot press of tears behind her eyes. "He did this himself."

Blaine, her baby, her little boy, who had endured far too many hardships already, had nearly skinned his own spine last night. There was no evidence to suggest it was anyone but himself.

"He might need a skin graft. Um, they want to do a psychiatric evaluation to see if he's okay to be home again. He..."

Her voice cracks here and she can't continue. Not anymore.

"He'll make it," Kurt says, grasping her free hand with his own. "I know he will. He's strong."

Melissa nods, tries to smile but it falls short.

"I thought we'd lost him. I can't... I can't lose him, not again."

Kurt squeezes her hand.

"I can't either."

-

Square one. That's what it feels like. Blaine doesn't talk besides a few whispered words, doesn't move, doesn't eat, just watches. It's different this time, though. His eyes are pained, tired, not the distant look of before. His skin is pale, dry enough that Kurt brings lotion from home to massage into his hands. They've stopped asking him about what happened, that night in the woods. Blaine won't talk about it, won't offer any explanation other than *I needed to make it stop*.

Now, Blaine blinks sleepily through the pain meds, his hand drifting on the blanket to find Kurt's. Kurt tangles their fingers, meets Blaine's gaze with what he hopes is a comforting smile.

"Hey."

Blaine blinks, his fingers giving a small twitch. Their clasped hands feel strange to Kurt. Different somehow, in a way Kurt can't quite explain. Maybe it's from too long without, that somehow he forget the feeling of Blaine's hands in his. Kurt runs his thumb over Blaine's knuckles, frowning at how red they are. The skin looks thin, tiny branching red veins visible, his fingers too long, the delicate bones of his wrist too prominent.

Blaine's eyes follow Kurt's, down to his hand.

"Will you stay with me?" The question is barely a whisper, tentative and slow. Kurt nearly startles, surprised that Blaine had spoken at all.

"Of course, I'll always stay with you," Kurt answers, despite the pit growing in his stomach. He's been crossing off days on his calendar, days until he has to go back to New York. He wanted to take a year off, stay in Lima with Blaine, but his father had sat him down and reasoned things that Kurt knew, deep down. Blaine wouldn't want him to put off his dream and his career. And when Blaine gets better (Kurt refuses to use the word *if*) he can join him and maybe their New York dream can come true, after all.

"Thank you."

Kurt presses a light kiss to Blaine's frail hand. Blaine's lips twitch into a small smile, for the first time in a week and Kurt can't help but smile back.

"Can..." Blaine starts, shifts slightly to make himself more comfortable. "Can I have some soup?"

"Oh!" Kurt starts, sitting straighter and smiling wider. "Of course, hold on, I'll..." He fumbles for the phone and Blaine watches, a noise that almost resembles a chuckle leaving his lips.

Kurt helps Blaine with the soup, heart swelling with each bite Blaine takes, each murmured word he says, each smile he manages when Kurt laughs.

"You're going to be okay," Kurt says when Blaine finishes the bowl, patting the napkin over his lips. "I know you will."

Hazel eyes grow sad again, but he nods and is silent.

-

Blaine's discharged with bandages on a back that still refuses to heal, instructions to watch him carefully and report anything strange. It's a warm July afternoon and Blaine asks to sit outside when they get home. Melissa hurries to line the porch swing with pillows, John and Kurt helping Blaine to walk through the house. Melissa is wary about leaving Blaine outside but Kurt promises he'll sit with him the whole time, won't ever let him out of his sight.

They lean against each other, Blaine tucked under Kurt's arm, his eyes fluttering closed as a warm wind blows over them. Kurt hums softly, strokes a hand down Blaine's arm and they sit, listening to the leaves rustling, the chirping of birds in the distance. Blaine scratches absently at his wrist, shifting until his head is resting in Kurt's lap.

"Tell me about New York," Blaine says when the sun starts to dip behind the horizon, sending long fingers of pink across the sky.

"Well," Kurt starts, lets his fingers tangle in Blaine's curls, his thumb stroking a light circle at the top of his neck. "Rachel and I found a tiny little apartment a few blocks from campus. It's a little rundown, but I think you would like it. The walls are pretty soundproof so you could sing in the shower as loud as you want."

Kurt pauses, a quick glance down showing that Blaine's closed his eyes, his face a picture of calm.

"There's a coffee shop on the way to school that makes the most amazing hazelnut lattes. I think they've replaced mochas as my favorite now. There's a corner booth that's secluded from the rest and I like to sit there and do homework and think about things. I'll take you there sometime, when you're feeling better."

Blaine hums softly and Kurt leans forward to press a kiss into his hair.

"And the city... Blaine, the city is so *alive*. It's everything we thought it would be. There's always people and cars, but there's also music and lights and things to do at any moment. It's perfect, Blaine. Almost."

A pause, the shadows around them growing long with the evening.

“I wish I could see it”

“You will,” Kurt says, a little too forcefully. “You will.”

Blaine doesn’t respond and Kurt ignores the weight in his heart.

-

That night Kurt sleeps in Blaine’s bed, his parents long passed the point of caring. It’s comforting to have someone with Blaine, anyway. Blaine’s facing away from him, curled up in the only way that seems to be comfortable for his back, Kurt stroking his fingers through the hair at the top of Blaine’s neck.

“What are you thinking about?” Kurt asks, voice quiet, not really expecting an answer. Blaine’s silent a moment and if Kurt closes his eyes he can pretend this is like *before*, when they would lay in Blaine’s bed for hours and just talk about their thoughts. About anything.

“Did you go out with that boy?”

The question startles Kurt, his hand stilling in Blaine’s hair.

“What boy?”

“The one from your aural class.” Blaine’s voice is light, like he’s on the verge of sleep, his breathing slow and deep. A stark contrast from Kurt, his heart pounding like gunshots in his chest.

“N-no, we’re just friends,” Kurt answers, racking his brain for when he told Blaine about this.

“Oh,” Blaine breaths and Kurt can feel him settling further into the mattress. “He seemed nice. I think you should.”

“Blaine,” Kurt scoots until he can peer over Blaine’s shoulder. Blaine’s face is relaxed, his eyes closed, and if Kurt didn’t know better he’d think he was already asleep. “Blaine, how do you know about him? I haven’t... I haven’t even told Rachel.”

“They let me watch,” Blaine says, as if the answer was the most obvious thing. “I could see everything.”

Nothing makes sense anymore and Kurt knows, he’s *sure* he didn’t tell anyone about the boy he’d gone on a date with. It hadn’t worked out and he’d forgotten about it quickly, too focused on remembering Blaine to allow for any sort of relationship.

“How, Blaine? I don’t understand.”

There’s no answer, sleep having won out and Kurt settles back down, uneasy. *Everything* about this is so strange, from Blaine’s back that won’t heal to the small red veins branching under his skin to the knowledge he shouldn’t have. Blaine’s back but he’s not really *back* and it seems like there are more questions now than when he was gone.

A deep breath to clear his mind and Kurt leans in to press a kiss to the back of Blaine’s neck, wanting to think about nothing except Blaine’s warm body beside him until the morning, and pauses. Blaine’s t-shirt has shifted slightly and Kurt traces a finger over his birthmark, a slightly darker smudge of skin that Kurt had become very familiar with his senior year. It’s not very noticeable, at the top of his shoulder just to the right of his neck. Kurt knows, has traced it in his dreams, with his tongue, pressed not-so-gentle kisses onto it.

And so he blinks, a frown creasing his forehead as he pulls back the neck of Blaine’s shirt. Because the birthmark is there, exactly the same as Kurt remembers it. Except now it’s on the left.

Part Seven

The next day, Kurt wakes up with a pit in his stomach and an itch under his skin. Blaine acts as he has been, quiet and reserved, simply shrugging when Kurt brings back up their conversation from the night before, points out his birthmark.

“It’s just so strange Blaine,” Kurt says and Blaine looks at him with tired eyes.

“What isn’t strange anymore?” he asks before going back to staring at his knees. He has a point; nothing since the day he disappeared has made any sense. But it doesn’t help the weight growing inside Kurt, the fear that something might still be wrong. So when Blaine falls asleep later that afternoon he pulls out his laptop, opens Google to do some research of his own.

Blaine’s mom brings him some coffee, with cream and a little bit of sugar, just the way he likes it. Kurt thanks her and she leans over him to give Blaine a kiss on the forehead, strokes her fingers gently down his cheek. She frowns when her fingers linger near the purple mark behind his jaw, the tiny branching red veins snaking away from it.

“His birthmark is on the wrong side,” Kurt says and she looks at him, eyes sad.

“I know,” she nods, glances at his computer with a knowing look. “I hope you can find something.”

And she leaves, with a promise to refill Kurt’s coffee later.

Kurt spends the afternoon researching, frustration slowly growing in him as link after link proves useless and after two hours he’s learned more about spider veins and melanoma than he ever wanted to know. He’s about ready to give up, feeling slightly embarrassed that he thought he might find an answer on the internet in the first place, when he takes a chance and searches for *mirror image birthmarks*.

The first few links yield nothing and Blaine’s started to let out those little groans he does right before he wakes up, so Kurt clicks one last link. The page is nothing exciting, just a plain background with black writing, looks like someone’s personal blog. Eyes scan over words, not really paying attention, his hand gently stroking through Blaine’s hair to calm him.

Sorry it's been awhile since I've been on. Josh, my brother, was found a month ago. If you've been a constant reader, you'll know he disappeared over a year ago, without a trace. My neighbor, a very good friend, found him at the end of her driveway, naked except for a metal gag.

Kurt blinks, untangles his hand from Blaine's hair and leans closer to the computer as he reads, his heart jumping into his throat.

... Josh's back had suffered extensive trauma and the doctor's aren't sure if he'll ever be able to walk again. He woke up after several days in the hospital and refuses to talk or eat. He wouldn't look any of us in the face. He seemed calm but his nights were full of tears...

... He's started speaking again, but only to my daughter. The doctors guess it's because she's non-threatening, has a very gentle demeanor. He won't tell her who took him, but keeps referring to 'experiments' and 'tests.' It's all very strange and disconcerting...

... The marks on his back have begun to change, his skin keeps peeling and he refuses to go to the hospital. I don't know how much more time I can take off work to stay home with him...

... Still hasn't made any improvement with his walking but he hasn't really tried. He keeps muttering goodbyes and I don't know what to do. He seems to be getting weaker no matter what we do...

All the moisture leaves Kurt's mouth as he skips ahead to the next entry. It's shorter than the rest, no other thoughts or details from the day, just a few sentences.

When Josh was barely 12 he got into a fight with some other boys. They slammed him into a bike rack and he got badly cut on his left arm. It left a very distinctive scar that he was always self conscious about. I would tease him when we were children, because it sort of looked like an anvil. I don't know how I didn't notice this before, because it seems so apparent right now. But his scar is no longer on his left arm, it's on his right.

Kurt stares at the words, his blood charging through him with every heartbeat. He scrolls frantically down the page, trying to find an explanation, anything. There are only three more entries, one announcing Josh's sudden death, another talking about the funeral, coping, and the last a vague statement about having found a possible explanation.

And that's all.

"No!" Kurt says aloud, refreshing the screen as if that will suddenly load a missed post. There's still nothing and Kurt's pretty sure he actually growls in frustration because he's so *close* to finding something. So close to an answer. Blaine stirs beside him as he clicks the *About my blog* link at the top, is directed to a page with a smiling picture of a man, middle aged with sandy blond hair and a charming smile. There's a little bio about him, why he started the blog, what he does, the standard. His name is Andrew Adams, Kurt learns, his email printed at the bottom of the page.

Kurt feels a small spark of hope flare in him, is about to plug this information into another Google search when Blaine blinks blearily up at him.

"Hey there, sleepy head," Kurt greets him, leans down to press a kiss to his forehead. Blaine offers him a small smile, scratches at his wrist.

"Don't do that," Kurt says, hand reaching down to still Blaine's. The skin at his wrist has gotten red, so dry it's almost scaly no matter how much lotion Kurt puts on it.

"Sorry," Blaine mumbles and Kurt sets his computer aside for a moment to help Blaine into a sitting position.

"It's alright," Kurt says, grabbing the lotion from the bedside table to massage into Blaine's hands. "You slept for a long time, how do you feel?"

Blaine shrugs, stares at their joined hands.

"Tired," he answers quietly. "I'm always tired."

"I know," Kurt says, feels the familiar twinge of worry. "Would you like some coffee? Your mom just refilled it."

Blaine accepts the cup, the ceramic still warm, takes a small sip, his lips twitching into a tiny smile at the taste.

"We'll go to the Lima Bean soon," Kurt promises. "When you're less tired."

"I'd like that," Blaine murmurs, takes another sip.

Blaine's mom shows up shortly after, helps him to get out of bed and to the bathroom. Kurt watches him leave the room, tries to ignore the way his clothes seem to not fit right anymore, the way his bones seem too big for his skin, the small red veins that branch out, have started making their way up his cheeks, across his temples.

He lets his eyes fall shut for a moment, takes a calming breath, and goes back to searching. It takes a few minutes but eventually he's able to find a phone number that goes along with Andrew Adams, from a facebook page with not enough privacy settings. His hands shake as he pulls out his phone, dials the number and makes his way to the back porch before calling.

"Hello?" A woman answers after a few rings, voice frazzled.

"Um, hi, is Andrew Adams available?" Kurt asks, soundly decidedly awkward. There's a pause on the other end.

"Who is this?"

"My name is Kurt Hummel."

"Why are you calling?"

"Um... I found a blog, I wanted to ask some questions about it?"

Another pause, the sound of a door closing.

"Who was it?"

"I'm sorry?" Kurt asks, confused.

"Who was it?" The girl asks again. "Who was taken?"

Kurt blinks, surprised.

"Um... my boyfriend. My boyfriend was taken."

"Mhmm." The girls sighs.

"Look, can I just speak with Mr. Adams?"

"No you can't. He's gone."

"Oh, um, is there a time I could call back?"

"Kurt, right? I'm Lily Adams. Andrew Adams is my father. He disappeared a few months ago."

Kurt opens his mouth, closes it. His fingers tighten around the phone, heart pounding in his chest.

"W-what happened?"

"The same thing that happened to my uncle, and your boyfriend. They just disappear, without a trace. Has your boyfriend been found?"

Kurt nods before realizing she can't see him, clears his throat.

"Yeah. Just over a month ago. I, um, I found your father's blog and I was hoping I could find some answers about... about what's happening to him."

Lily makes a noise that sounds sympathetic.

"When my uncle died, my father went a bit crazy. He started researching and taking long trips to meet people with similar stories. There are quite a few out there, but they're hard to track down. He started getting into all these weird theories about the most *ridiculous* things."

"What theories?" Kurt asks, voice quiet, sounding as nervous as he feels.

"Just your typical theories about government conspiracy and terrorism. At the end he was convinced that my uncle and those other people had been abducted by aliens. He was desperate for answers and would believe anything."

There's a long pause, Kurt trying to absorb everything Lily was telling him.

"Kurt, there's no conspiracy and no aliens. Whoever took my father and your boyfriend are just psycho freaks that get kicks out of torturing people. That's all. Just enjoy your time with your boyfriend, okay?"

"Did..." Kurt takes a deep breath. "Did your father find out what was wrong with your uncle? It's just... Blaine, my boyfriend, he's not getting any better and I'm... I'm *scared* for him. I just need to know if there's something I can do."

His voice wavers at the end, tears welling in his eyes and he gives an embarrassing sniff.

"I don't have any answers for you Kurt, I'm sorry. I really wish I did. Everyone that my father found, all the people that were taken... well... they all died."

All Kurt manages is a quiet *oh*, another sniff and he scrubs at his eyes.

"I'm so sorry, Kurt. I wish I could help you. I really hope your boyfriend is different."

She disconnects after a quiet goodbye and Kurt stares at the phone in his hands. He's not sure how much time goes by, but it must be awhile because the sun is low in the sky when the back door opens, someone stepping lightly onto the porch to join him. There's a gentle hand on his shoulder, a soft voice.

"Did you find anything?"

Kurt turns towards Blaine's mother, the phone slipping from his fingers without a second thought as he lets himself fall into her arms, his whole body shaking and he finally lets the tears fall.

Melissa holds him the whole time but he still feels like he's lost something.

-

In bed that night, Kurt holds Blaine as close as he can. His arm snakes across Blaine's back, careful of the bandages, the other laced through Blaine's fingers, Blaine's cheek pressed against Kurt's chest, his head tucked under Kurt's chin. Kurt feels the steady beat of his heart, the tickling of each breath on his skin.

"She was wrong," he whispers into Blaine's hair. "She was wrong. You're going to be okay."

He presses a kiss into Blaine's curls, closes his eyes.

"You have to be."

Kurt falls asleep and the red veins creep further across Blaine's face.

Part Eight

His skin *burns*. It burns and itches and confines. The feeling is everywhere and he wants it off off *off*. Fingers pull and tear and scratch but nothing helps. It grows and grows, arching from his spine across his ribs, through his shoulders and down his arms. His skin is red with it, so thin at the wrist he thinks he can just...

It doesn't take much, just a few scrapes with his nails and the skin comes loose over the jutting bone. He peels it back, pulling up his arm, a long strip but the itching doesn't stop, grows down to his fingers and up over his face. So he keeps scratching and pulling and peeling, scratching, pulling, peeling, *scratchingpullingpeeling...*

Blaine

Hands are on him and the touch is fire, shoots through him and he curls into a ball, tries to keep himself from exploding.

Blaine

He's melting, his blood pounding through him, his tongue dry and useless, and someone threw rock salt back in his eyes and he screams and screams and screams...

"Blaine!"

Eyes snap open, a gasping breath filling his lungs and he's rolling, barely makes it to the side of the bed when he's retching, coughing, gagging. Steady hands are on his shoulder, anchoring him as he heaves. He feels like he's losing everything, energy and strength and life and he's back under.

-

Kurt holds Blaine's head in his lap, strokes a hand through his short hair. John is getting the car ready, Melissa cleaning up where Blaine had gotten sick. Kurt's hand grazes over Blaine's forehead, pushing curls aside and worry builds in him at the heat radiating from his skin.

The clock says it's shortly after midnight, Kurt's thoughts still fuzzy at the edges. He'd woken abruptly to Blaine struggling against him, crying out and scratching at his own skin, his eyes rolled back in his head. It had taken a few panicked shouts to get Blaine to wake up and when he had, he'd immediately been sick and passed out.

Kurt's shouts had caused Blaine's parents to come running in; his mom had called the hospital while wrapping bleeding arms, his dad had insisted on driving them there whatever the doctor said. And now Kurt sits, tries to calm his pounding heart. Blaine shifts, a soft moan escaping his lips.

"You're okay," Kurt soothes, even though he knows that's not true, Blaine is anything but okay, runs his fingers down Blaine's cheek. "I've got you."

Long eyelashes flutter, head turning to look up at Kurt and Kurt feels his breath catch in his throat. The tiny veins have made their way across his cheeks, his temples, gathering near his eyes. Eyes that are normally a warm hazel, now a cold, milky blue.

He blinks and Kurt tries to find his voice.

"Blaine..." he manages before the words catch in his throat, Blaine's hand searching out his own, holding tight.

"I think..." Blaine says, voice rough and he breaks eye contact, turns his face into Kurt's leg. "I think I didn't fail it. The experiment. I think it never ended."

Kurt doesn't know what to say, except that he's starting to actually believe Blaine, so he stays quiet.

-

The doctors are baffled, Blaine's mother nearly hysterical. They can't explain anything, which doesn't surprise Kurt. They never can. His numbers are everywhere, his oxygen low, his back still not healing. Kurt holds his hand as they stitch up his scratches, try and start an IV, made difficult by the tiny branching veins, secure an oxygen mask to his face. He avoids Blaine's pale blue eyes, can't stand the fear that accompanies the sight of them. They give Blaine medication for nausea that makes him sleepy and they spend the rest of the night that way, Blaine dozing and Kurt wide awake.

With the morning comes more tests, more blood draws, more bewilderment. The dread in Kurt grows, as his eyes graze over Blaine's sleeping face, almost unrecognizable from the boy he'd first fallen in love with, the words of Lily Adams echoing through his head.

"Are you scared?" A soft, labored voice draws Kurt's attention. Blaine is looking at him, his expression neutral.

"Scared of what?" Kurt asks, forcing himself to look in Blaine's eyes.

"Scared of me."

Kurt reaches for Blaine's hand, hold tightly.

"No, of course not."

Cold blue eyes search his face.

"I'm scared of what's happening to you," Kurt whispers honestly. Blaine lets his eyes slide shut, his face tired.

"I don't... I don't even really feel like *me* anymore."

"You are," Kurt says quickly, moving closer. "You are because I still love you."

Blaine's fingers tighten their grip on Kurt's, his eyes peeking back open and despite everything, despite the veins and bony cheeks and milky eyes, it's still just *Blaine*, lost and hurting.

"You haven't kissed me," Blaine says, voice barely a whisper. "Not since I came back."

And Kurt knows Blaine's right. He's kissed Blaine's cheek, his forehead, the back of his neck, but never on the lips. He doesn't know if he's scared, for him or for Blaine, if he hasn't because Blaine hasn't really been *Blaine*. It wasn't a conscious choice, it just never seemed right and now, with Blaine looking so small and destroyed in his too-big hospital gown, Kurt regrets every minute he wasted.

"I'm sorry," he whispers, lifting his free hand to stroke down Blaine's cheek. It catches on the plastic of the nasal cannula, Blaine's skin feeling thin and warm under his fingers. He leans forward, hand sliding to cup

Blaine's cheek, lips pressing against Blaine's. The kiss is soft, just skin on skin, but Blaine inhales sharply, his eyes fluttering closed and Kurt hadn't realized quite how much he's missed Blaine's lips until now.

Kurt presses forward, deepening the kiss slightly, and he's pretty sure Blaine's stopped breathing, his hand flexing and tightening on Kurt's. They stay like this for a few moments, the place between a chaste kiss and a passionate kiss, until Kurt breaks away, stays inches from Blaine's face and smiles. Blaine leans forward, brushes their noses together in an Eskimo kiss.

"Thank you," Blaine says quietly, breath tickling Kurt's skin.

"I wish I could kiss everything better," Kurt murmurs, stroking his thumb along Blaine's jaw.

"You just did," Blaine replies, and Kurt feels something tight inside him, restricting his lungs and pressing on his heart.

It feels like a goodbye.

-

The doctors want Blaine to stay. His lungs aren't quite working right, his metabolism practically nonexistent, his arms still scratched open, his back red and tortured. Blaine knows they think this would be best for him, that he could get the care he needs, can see the hope in his mother's eyes, his father's thin lips, Kurt's gentle touch. But he knows. It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter if he's *here*, in the hospital, or home in his own bed. It doesn't matter because this is beyond all of that; this is something that can't be fixed.

So he tells them he doesn't care, he wants to leave. He *needs* to leave. He can feel the pull, the aching inside him. When he closes his eyes he can see it, the stars. The night sky, wide and dark above him, holding so much more than anyone would ever know. His doctor argues with him, tells him that leaving would be against his medical advice and his mother pleads, tells Blaine to stay and get better. But he can't, doesn't understand why they don't see. He *can't*.

He's eighteen and they can't keep him there, ignores his mother's tears as he signs discharge papers. He agrees to an oxygen tank, to come in for checkups and emergencies (even though he won't, he already knows this). And then he's going home, feels like he can finally breathe again, his head resting on Kurt's shoulder the whole drive. There's a loud beeping in his ears and he flinches, Kurt's hand tightening on his.

The beeping turns to clicking and he can smell it, the too crisp, too clean smell of the tube. Everything is muffled and he squeezes his eyes shut, surrounded by the beeping, the clicking, the smell, the cold glass underneath him.

And then a voice breaks through it all, Kurt's hand on his cheek and concerned gaze on his face.

"You with us?"

"Yeah, sorry," Blaine responds, voice tired. "Just a memory."

He almost believes it himself. Almost.

-

Later, Blaine falls asleep on the couch. Kurt's home because he has to work early in the morning, Cooper's flight coming in the day after next. Melissa busies herself with dishes, folding laundry and sweeping the entryway. She can hear the soft whir of Blaine's oxygen tank, his too rapid exhales.

The broom slips down the wall from where she leaves it, sitting quietly on the couch beside Blaine. He shifts slightly, a small moan escaping his lips and she smiles, pulls his head up to rest on her lap. The nasal cannula moves when he nuzzles his face against her and she readjusts it, making sure it's perfectly in place. It's the only thing she can do, making sure everything is perfect for Blaine.

"Hey, sweetheart," she whispers, quiet enough to not wake Blaine. "I know..." her voice cracks and she feels the hot press of tears behind her eyes, clears her throat and tries again.

"I know you're tired, I'm tired too and you've been through so much more than any of us." A pause, fingers stroking along his bandage wrapped arms. "I can see the way you've been watching us lately, like you're trying to find the best time to say goodbye. I... I know you've been fighting, you've been fighting so hard Blaine, for so long. You're so brave, sweetheart. So brave."

She hesitates, closes her eyes against prickling tears. "I want what's best for you. You're my little boy and I will always love you. *Always*. And as much as I want you to stay with me forever, you need to do what's best for you, okay? Whatever makes it stop hurting, okay sweetheart?"

There's a noise, quiet footsteps and John is sitting beside her, brushing a curl from Blaine's forehead. She doesn't say anything, no words are needed, the solid weight of her husband beside her is enough and she leans into his shoulder and cries.

-

They spend the day outside in the sun. Kurt lays out blankets, fills a picnic basket with food and drinks, gathers as many pillows as he can find. Blaine actually smiles when Kurt helps him outside, situates the tank on a pillow, Blaine leaning against him.

"This is nice," Blaine sighs, closing his eyes and tilting his face towards the sun. Kurt chastises him, gently applying sunscreen to his paper pale face. Near lunch time Blaine's dad brings them ice cream, ruffles his hair and comments on the weather. Blaine squeezes his hand and tells him thank you and Kurt can't help but notice the shift in Blaine's behavior. The way he seems happier, brighter, despite how much worse he looks, and it should make Kurt feel better but it doesn't.

They eat their ice cream and watch the birds in the nearby woods, the bunnies that venture into the yard. Some ice cream smudges on Blaine's chin and Kurt smiles, swipes it up with his thumb. Eyes slide shut and in the sunlight Blaine's skin looks almost transparent, a ghost of himself. But his face is so honest, the way he parts his lips so hopeful and Kurt doesn't think, just presses his lips to Blaine's. Blaine lifts a shaky hand to Kurt's shoulder, grips tight and sinks back onto the pillows. Kurt follows him down, propping himself up on his arms so he can lean over Blaine, kisses him deeper.

He can tell Blaine's tired, lets Kurt do most of the work, but he doesn't pull away, his hand sliding to the back of Kurt's neck, fingers curling into Kurt's hair. Kurt moans and sucks Blaine's lower lip into his mouth, wonders why he hasn't been kissing Blaine every day since he's been back.

"I love you so much," Kurt breathes, opening his eyes to take in his boyfriend. Dark lashes sweep his cheeks, lips pink and wet, curls framing his face. In this moment he only sees the beautiful boy he fell in love with, the boy who means everything to him. Blaine's eyes stay closed, face relaxed and Kurt kisses down his cheeks, back to his lips. They stay like this for awhile, kissing slowly in the sun, the occasional breathy moan escaping Blaine.

"Thank you, for this experience," Blaine whispers after they break apart, nuzzling against Kurt's shoulder. Kurt thinks the words are odd but he doesn't say anything, just kisses into Blaine's curls, pulls him up until

his chest is flush with Blaine's back, Blaine's head resting against Kurt's shoulder. Kurt snakes his arms around Blaine's waist, anchoring him.

The sun is starting to get low in the sky, long shadows draping over them when Blaine speaks.

"Kurt," he starts, voice serious and Kurt already knows he won't like where this is going. "I want you to promise me something."

"What is that?" Kurt asks, lips brushing the hair just behind Blaine's ear.

"Promise me that... if something happens to me, that you'll go out with that boy from your class. He'll be good to you, I know it."

A painful lump forms in Kurt's throat and he swallows around it. "Blaine... don't talk like that."

"Please, just promise me."

"I can't," Kurt's voice catches and all he can hear is the hum of the oxygen tank, Blaine's rapid breathing.

"When you think of the future, what do you see?"

Kurt closes his eyes, lets the setting sun wash over him as he thinks.

"I see you and our tiny New York apartment. I see you going to school out there, coming to bed late and letting me be the little spoon. I see us getting jobs, my future in musical theater, yours in whatever you decide. I see us getting a cat and some day getting married, if you want to. I see *us*, Blaine. I've always seen *us*."

Blaine hums, his fingers tangling with Kurt's.

"I don't see anything."

-

Melissa lets them sleep outside that night. It's warm and Kurt promises to stay with him all night, Blaine gazing up at the stars with wonderment. They cuddle under blankets, Margaret Thatcher dog between

them, Kurt's arms on Blaine's waist, Blaine stroking Kurt's arm. Blaine gazes at Kurt for a long time, his skin glowing in the moonlight, the smile that pulls at his lips as he dreams.

It hadn't taken long for Kurt to fall asleep, the warm air and closeness of Blaine lulling him into comfortable dreams. Blaine can't help but smile back, despite everything. The buzzing in his ears is back and this time he knows it's not going away. Just like the tightness in his lungs, the way every breath seems to fall short, the world blurring around the edges. Just like the weight that's pulling on his limbs, the way he suddenly weighs a million pounds and his skin is itchy and too small.

He strokes his thumb down Kurt's cheek, Kurt smiling and murmuring something unintelligible in his sleep. Blaine slips the nasal cannula from his nose, turns off the oxygen tank. He pushes it off their makeshift bed until it's buried in grass. Kurt shifts when Blaine stands, settles back down when Blaine pulls the blankets back up around his shoulders. His steps are quiet as he makes his way into the house, careful and calculated. His father is asleep on the couch and he pauses, rests a gentle hand on his father's shoulder, feels the broad and solid shoulder.

The third step creaks as he tiptoes up the stairs and he can feel all the breath leaving his body but he keeps going, silently opens the door to his parents room. His mother is asleep on the giant bed, Blaine's school picture on the bed stand beside her.

"Thank you," is all he whispers, because he can't call her mom, not now. He leans down to press a kiss to her forehead, lets his fingers drift over the soft down of her comforter. She sighs in her sleep, and Blaine draws away, stops to let his fingers touch the cold glass over a picture of Cooper, wishes he could have seen him again.

And then he's gone, making his way back out of the house, the grass damp under his feet. He gazes up into the endless sky above him, the dark blue dotted with silver stars and suddenly everything is clear.

"I understand," he whispers and his voice is sad because he doesn't want this to end, but it's not his to have. He knows that now.

Kurt hums when he crawls back under the covers, strength seeping from his body, his breaths short and fast, his skin cold. He finds Kurt's hand, tangles their fingers, tears pricking his eyes for the first time when Kurt squeezes back.

"I will always love you," he breathes, voice shaking, eyes memorizing every line, every curve of Kurt's face.
"Thank you for loving me."

Blaine closes his eyes for the last time, a tear slipping down his cheek and a smile pulling at his lips, the pillow soft under him.

And then Blaine Anderson takes his last breath and everything is silent.

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-

Specimen twenty-seven watches as a boy with curly hair and pale eyes grows still, hand still tangled with the boy's beside him. He watches through tears, the tube too constricting to wipe them away. It was bound to happen, he knows. No copy has made it beyond a few months, in Earth's unpredictable environment. This one made it the longest, and by the excited clicking around him, knows this is a good thing. At least, for them.

Blaine closes his wet eyes, eyelashes clumping, doesn't have it in him to watch anymore. It had to happen, the copy had understood, but that doesn't make it any easier. Doesn't make him wish that maybe the experiment *had* worked, that Kurt, his family, could have finally been happy again. Could have kept what they found, instead of losing what they never really had.

But a hope rises in Blaine, even as cold metal bites into his wrists, under his jaw, even as the boy in the tube beside him screams and cries. A hope that maybe now, maybe *finally*, they can move on. That Kurt can go back to New York, find someone full of life and love and music, that his mother and father can have closure, can visit Cooper, can dote upon Cooper's kids and take vacations whenever they want, wherever they want.

The world will go on, he knows, and grief will fade, and Blaine will be up here, watching it all happen. But it's okay, now.

It's okay.

There's a click and a whir and the tube opens and this time, Blaine smiles.

end

Epilogue

A boy wakes slowly, eyes blurry and weighted, head pounding, limbs made of lead. He groans and rolls over and sleeps.

-

The whole family is here. Kurt smiles at Finn's jokes, kisses Carole on the cheek, lets Burt wrap him in a hug and tell him how proud he is. Cooper and Mrs. Anderson show up, and when Kurt puts on his cap and walks across the stage he imagines there's a smiling boy with hazel eyes and curly hair between them.

-

Time passes, the boy slipping in and out, confused and tired. The ground is soft under him, grass or leaves or moss. He doesn't know. He sleeps and dreams of blue eyes.

-

Boxes are packed, labeled and stacked in a neat pile. Kurt takes a step back and smiles. He's ready to say goodbye to his stuffy apartment with mold on the bathroom ceiling and the faucet then never really worked. He's ready to move on from the place that always seemed a little too empty.

-

He wakes and he walks, pulls himself to his feet because he has somewhere to go, somewhere he needs to be, somewhere he can't make out in the fuzz of his thoughts but he knows, he knows he needs to be there.

-

Kurt breaks up with Austin. There's no real reason, no one thing that tips him over the edge. It's just time, Kurt figures. They'd been together for a year and that ache in his heart when he wakes up, when he smells coffee or catches snowflakes on his eyelashes lingers. He tells Austin goodbye and places the old school picture of Blaine back on his nightstand.

-

He walks until he can't walk anymore. And then he walks some more.

-

The internship comes with a whirlwind of activity, of colors and fabrics and too much coffee. But he loves it. He's so busy he can barely breathe, his thumb full of needle sticks, but it's everything he's ever dreamed of.

-

A boy finds what he's looking for.

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The rough stem of the sunflower scratches at Kurt's palm, the first leaves of fall crunching under his feet. He's only been back here twice, to the cemetery. The first year he had brought roses, red and yellow, and he had known it would have made him laugh, eyes crinkling at the corners. The second year he brought daisies, purple like the one Blaine had picked when they were in high school, had tucked behind Kurt's ear with a kiss. He thinks Blaine would like the sunflower. It's a vibrant yellow and so huge with life, a little flame a happiness in the cold of the cemetery.

He tucks it against the cold gray stone, can feel the soft grass cushioning him as he kneels. His fingers trace the letters carved into the stone, smooth and elegant. *Blaine Anderson*.

"Hi," his voice comes out as a whisper and his hand falls back into his lap. "I'm sorry I'm late, I... I've been so busy."

He pauses, draws in a shaky breath.

"I graduated, Blaine. I did everything you said I could do. It was... *amazing*. I wish you could have been there. I've been working at an internship now and it's been busy but I actually get to help design things and I really love it."

The wind picks up, leaves rustling in the trees above him, a few drifting down to the grass.

“Rachel actually got a role on Broadway. It’s small but she’s already made me go see it five times and she really is perfect. Dad’s been doing good and Finn’s thinking about going back to school and I...”

He trails off, the words stuck in his throat.

“I know it’s been three years but I still miss you so much. Every single day I miss you and I just wonder...”

His voice is choked, a hot tear slipping down his cheek.

“I love you so much.”

He leans forward, lips pressing soft against the cold stone and he then he stands, doesn’t bother to wipe his cheeks as he turns to walk away. When he reaches the car, he turns back, a last, lingering glance.

The sunflower is gone, a shape disappearing into the trees.

“Hey!” Kurt shouts, the word echoing through the cemetery. He’s not sure why, he should just get in the car and head home, but his feet are already moving, walking briskly across the cemetery, tears of frustration and anger pricking his eyes. He can see the shape just inside the trees, hidden in the shadows of the forest, not moving.

“You give that back,” Kurt commands as he gets closer, blood racing hot through him. “I don’t know what kind of sick pleasure you get stealing things from graves but that’s...”

His voice trails off as the figure takes a step forward, slow and hesitant, almost nervous, the sunflower clutched tightly in this hand. His mouth goes dry and the air is sucked out of his lungs, his heart pounding in his chest and he blinks. Once, twice. Wonders when exactly he started dreaming. The shape – the boy, with curly hair and warm hazel eyes steps forward again, holds the sunflower out like an offering, an apology falling from his lips in a voice that haunts Kurt’s dreams, that he never imagined he would hear again.

He glances from the sunflower up to his face, and nothing makes sense anymore, everything feels turned upside and inside out and his knees feel weak, his heart beating too fast, his lungs burning with each breath.

“Blaine?”

A pause, a hesitant smile.

“Hi,” he says, voice soft, nervous.

Kurt takes a step back, thoughts racing. *Not possible not possible not possible not possible not*

“Kurt?”

God, his voice. Kurt wants to close his eyes and just listen, wants to tell him to keep talking and never stop, he’s missed his voice so much. Blaine’s voice. Blaine, who’s standing right in front of him.

Not possible.

“Who are you?” Kurt’s words come out soft and shaking and his whole body feels light and heavy, torn between floating away and collapsing to the ground under him. Blaine – *not Blaine*, curls his fingers around the stem of the sunflower, lifts it to his chest.

“Blaine, I’m Blaine.”

“No. Don’t lie to me. Not about this,” Kurt’s voice is harsh, cold, but he doesn’t care. It’s too much, this is too much and if it’s a dream he doesn’t need his heart to break all over again. “You died! You were... I woke up and you weren’t breathing and you were dead, you were *dead*, Blaine. I saw you, I was there, I was...”

The words are spilling out, tripping off his tongue and into the air thick between them, and Kurt’s not sure when he started crying but the tears are falling now, sliding hot down his cheeks and he takes a step back and just crumples, knees giving out, hands shaking.

Blaine *it can’t be Blaine it’s not Blaine he’s not here he’s dead* is there, a light hand on his shoulder and Kurt can’t help it, his fingers find Blaine’s shirt, the fabric stretching, gathering in his palm as he makes a fist, pulling Blaine closer.

“You’re not real, you can’t be real,” Kurt whispers and he closes his eyes because he doesn’t want this moment to end, he doesn’t want to wake up, doesn’t want the solid weight against him, the steady beating of his heart to be gone. “I’m dreaming, this is all a dream.”

Blaine's hands slide over his shoulders, wrapping around him and pulling him closer. Blaine's too skinny and he doesn't smell like the Blaine he remembers but his skin is warm, his hands stroking that pattern that Kurt can still feel in his sleep, familiar lips pressing against his forehead.

"You're not dreaming," he says, voice soft and more timid than Kurt remembers but maybe that's okay, dreams don't have to be perfect. "I'm here."

Kurt shakes his head against Blaine's shoulder, his hand gripping tighter, the other reaching around Blaine's waist, clutching him as tight as he can because maybe he can make this dream go on a little longer, maybe somehow he can pull Blaine out of it and make him real.

"You died," Kurt says into Blaine's shoulder, wonders how it's possible for a dream to feel so real. "You were dead. I saw you."

He can feel Blaine shaking his head and a sob bubbles in his throat, muffled by Blaine's shirt.

"That wasn't me." There's a hand under his chin, a thumb stroking his cheek and gently lifting until Kurt's facing him, his face so close, so *real*. Blaine touches his lips to Kurt's, a light kiss, soft and everything that's Kurt's missed and his mind is spinning, trying to catch up with everything that's just happened.

"I'm real, Kurt. I'm here, and I'm never leaving you again, I promise."