

# **Weightless: Instinct**

**by**

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**AU || Not Rated**

*It's not always obvious just how deeply Kurt's mind has changed unless he has something to compare it to...  
or until it affects someone else.*

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## Prologue

December 3, 2011

"Get up."

As he swam out from under his deep sleep, Kurt processed Finn's words and promptly ignored them. His eyes were closed but he could feel clouds overhead. Winter was bearing down with heavy, wet snow and short days. A long series of icy rainstorms had left their home in a state of perpetual gloom, and it had become increasingly difficult to get up each morning. Carole worried about depression. He preferred the term "hibernation."

"Get *up*," Finn said more insistently. "It's eleven. You've got stuff to do." Kurt mumbled something into his pillow and pulled his blankets more securely around him. "You told me to not let you sleep in," Finn pointed out. "And I think eleven is pretty much, uh, 'in.'"

"I'll do it later," he said. He slit his eyes open when Finn made more noise, but the sight of snow mixed with rain outside his window was hypnotic. Kurt felt his eyes fall inexorably closed.

He hadn't reacted like that last winter, and he suspected one explanation above all others: safety. The previous winter had brought plenty of white, fluffy snow while that December threatened to be greyer and wetter, but the real difference was his comfort level. That year his life had been in turmoil, and his first grab at real safety had been a temporary guesthouse. Now they were in their own, permanent home. His room had plate glass windows looking west into the valley and south across the mountains. His mother's dresser was carefully positioned in a corner. The adjoining bathroom's shower was more like a tiled room, with two rainfall-style heads and a multitude of steam vents. Everything was perfect.

"Oh, come on," Finn said. "You're just *sleeping*. You can get up." After a pause he reached down and ripped the covers off Kurt, and then waited expectantly.

Kurt yawned, curled up more tightly where he lay, and spread a wing across himself to replace the lost blanket.

"...Right," Finn decided before he reached down, scooped Kurt up, and began carrying him out into the hall. "You told me to get you up," he reminded Kurt, who yawned yet again and then went slack against his

chest. Despite Carole's concern, he wasn't troubled at all by his sudden fatigue. By that point he felt that his changes had gone about as far as they ever would and he'd started to become accustomed to new impulses. During winter storms when he couldn't fly, no food grew, and he had a safe refuge, his body wanted to let the useless hours pass by in sleep.

"Was he still asleep?" Carole asked when they'd gone down two flights of stairs and Finn presented Kurt pointedly to her. "I really think something's wrong."

"Not wrong," Kurt said sleepily. Being held out like that, aware that Finn could drop him, was enough of a threat to keep him awake. "It's just bad outside, and...." His jaw cracked with its biggest yawn yet. "And it's safe in here. I told you. It's like hibernating. I mean. I assume."

Finn, grumbling, put him down on the floor. The stones were cold against Kurt's bare feet, which did help wake him. "I have been in school all week," he said through a thin smile. "And you were supposed to clean the bathrooms. And kitchen. And... well, pretty much *everything*."

"I will," Kurt said, but his gaze began to wander back toward the stairs. "I think the sun'll come out in a few days," he finally said in a bargaining tone. "I'll wake up more then. And I'll clean."

Finn actually grabbed the top of his head and forced him to look away from the stairs. As Kurt whined he said in a low voice, "Look, I've got finals coming up and Burt's working six days a week at the garage. So *you need to help*."

"I cooked," Kurt pointed out. And he had; he'd used his rare hours awake that week to keep the fridge stocked with leftovers in convenient portions.

"Okay," Finn allowed. "But you've already let the cleaning go way too long, and pretty soon Mom's going to give in and do it herself. If she *can*." Carole was nearly full term by that point. The twins were clearly heavy and her walk was beyond awkward. "So if you need coffee or whatever then I will make it, but wake up."

"No, you make terrible coffee." Kurt rubbed his eyes and tried to focus on the discomfort of the cold stones. "Okay. I'm up."

Three hours later Carole found him slumped over the side of a bathtub. "Are you sure you're all right?" she asked gently as she prodded him awake with her foot. "You fell asleep in the middle of cleaning. That's a little extreme, Kurt."

He turned on the faucet and splashed a handful of cold water into his face. "No. No, I'm fine. It's just been so wet and windy that I can't go outside, and it's so warm and safe inside. Believe me, I can tell that nothing's wrong. It's *right*, really. That's how I can trust enough to sleep."

"Oh. Well, it's good that you feel so safe," she said. "You go back upstairs and sleep for a while, and maybe you can do a little more cleaning after your nap. I appreciate what you've already done, so just help out like you can."

"Are you kidding me?" Finn asked as he gawked at the sight of Kurt walking past his door and into his room. He trailed behind him and said, "You are not going back to sleep, dude."

"It'll be sunny in a few days," Kurt said as he happily burrowed back under his heavy blankets.

"No it won't, the forecast says—" Finn cut off when Kurt looked at him pointedly, and rolled his eyes. "Fine. It'll be sunny in a few days."

"I do work a lot normally, Finn. And I will. Then. Later." Finn tried to rouse him but Kurt found the words increasingly easy to ignore, and he was soon out for another two hours. A glowering face was waiting for him when he woke. "Have you been sitting there all this time?" he asked, squinting at Finn in the lamp-lit darkness.

"Just checking, it was good timing. I finished cleaning the bathrooms, by the way."

"Oh." Kurt smiled. "Thanks."

"Not 'thanks,'" Finn seethed. "I don't know if you're faking this or not, but you don't get to just sleep all the time when I am losing my mind during senior year and our mom is about to need a trip to the hospital."

"I'm not faking," Kurt said as he sat up. "It's been... what, a solid month of bad weather?"

"You went through bad weather last winter!"

"That was just cold and snowy. This has been too wet and windy for me to be outside. It's unusual. Next winter will be different." He smiled proudly. "Hey, I can feel it out a whole year. That's the first time."

"I don't care!" Finn exclaimed. "Clean the kitchen!"

"We have to finish putting up the Christmas decorations," Kurt said as he rolled out of bed. When Finn once again told him to clean the kitchen, *now*, Kurt made a face at him and walked toward the hall. "It's really not my fault, Finn," he grumbled as he skimmed lightly down the flight of stairs. They made no sound under him, while Finn sounded like a cattle stampede. "I was telling Carole that I feel so safe here. I know nothing will happen to me, and this is apparently the result."

Finn eyed him and said nothing. His gaze sharpened when Burt, back from his Saturday work at the garage, suggested that Finn team up with Kurt to tackle the kitchen more quickly. Kurt shrugged apologetically and said he didn't have to, but there really wasn't anything to be done. He could no sooner stop responding to the natural world around their house than the three of them could stop aging, and finally feeling safe and secure had let those instincts out to play at full strength. "Just put things away in the cabinets," he told Finn. "I'll handle the actual cleaning."

"Fine," Finn grumbled. He hesitated in front of one cabinet, looked at Kurt, and then went back to work.

The next day no one woke Kurt up. He yawned, looked over to the clock, and saw that it was past noon. He felt like he could get at least four hours awake before he felt compelled to take another nap; hopefully he could put them to good use. Stretching, he climbed out of bed, picked out clothes, and ambled into the bathroom. He began brushing his teeth and habitually turned to check on how feathers were resting, even though they'd soon be under the blast of a showerhead.

He choked on his toothbrush, spit out foam onto the floor, and threw the brush against the sink. With an expression of utter horror Kurt fluffed out his wings and stared at the gaudy stripes of red, yellow, and blue scoring many of the feathers. He grabbed for one; it was dry and the color didn't come off.

Kurt's eyes narrowed as he realized which cabinet had caught Finn's attention, and he bolted for the third-story landing. "Finn!" he yelled down into the open atrium above the living room. "You are *dead*!"

"I added more to the shopping list," Finn said sweetly, only to go wide-eyed when Kurt pitched himself over the side of the railing, just barely caught himself from smashing against the floor, and leapt for Finn's throat as soon as he landed. "Stop it!" he said as he tried to disentangle Kurt.

"...What did you do to his wings, Finn?" Burt tiredly asked as he took in the sight before them.

"Food coloring," Finn giggled as he got the advantage and pinned Kurt against the wall by his wrists. "If he sleeps all the time, then he'll have to be *afraid* of me dying the feathers. So he won't feel safe enough to blow off his chores."

"I swear to God I will kick you in the balls," Kurt said as he struggled against Finn's hands, realized it was futile, and then assessed how they were standing. His threat made Finn release him in a moment, and with a triumphant crow Kurt lunged for his throat again.

That was when Carole announced that her water had broken.

Finn did poorly on his finals that semester.

## Chapter Two

April 25, 2057

"He's cute," said Jennifer as she dropped out of the sky and landed in front of Kurt. A camera was strapped securely around her neck and torso; she'd taken to documenting all the wildlife on the property. They realized they had no idea just how many wild animals were roaming around the valley as it slowly filled with Angels in need.

"I have no idea who you're talking about," Kurt said airily as he trained a clematis vine along the porch supports. All summer, anyone entering their home would do so under a brilliant arch of purple flowers.

"Um, the guy who keeps smiling at you whenever you walk by? Pretty smile, great shoulders, needs a haircut?" When he didn't rise to the bait, she fluttered on top of the porch and looked down at him. "Big golden eagle wings, nice brown eyes... stop me when it rings a bell."

"Jae and I are friends," Kurt said and carefully tucked a fragile young vine into a crevice that would support it. "Like all the newcomers try to find someone to connect to. I just happened to be his. Nothing more."

She leaned backwards over the edge of the porch. Her feet locked under a beam, and so she was able to throw her weight back quite far. Her mess of red-gold curls hung down in Kurt's face. "Liar. Have you kissed? You should kiss."

He kept working for a while without answering. Finally, he said, "He flashes back. He tries to be... blunt when people can see, like everything's behind him, but he flashes back." As if that weren't enough on its own, Kurt reluctantly added, "He asked me if I wanted to have sex. It was so casual. Like there was nothing good on television."

"It's like a habit," Jennifer said after hesitating, too. Though they'd both suffered through being sold as sexual ornaments, she'd been owned for far longer than him and had experienced early training. She knew what the newcomers were going through, although it was thankfully remote in her memories. Kurt's history had left him in a better position to manage something like the refuge, but he couldn't claim to really know what they felt. "Sex feels good, so if you feel bad, you do it. People expect you to have sex with them, so if you think someone's upset, you offer. You know it's the only thing you're good for, so if you feel



uncertain about your place in the world, you...." She finally pulled herself fully back onto the small roof and sat there with her legs folded. "It took me a long time to get over all that," she admitted.

"Yeah. And I'm not judging him for it, at all. It's what *they* did to him. And I'm not judging the people who do it here with someone they barely know; if it helps, it helps. Maybe it won't in the future and they'll stop, but...." He sighed. The vine kept falling out of its tiny crevice. "It would mean something to me, though, and we really are just friends. I'd only consider anything with someone I'm close to, but so long as he's like that, we will*only* be friends because I would feel like I was taking horrific advantage."

It wasn't that Jae was attractive; he was, incredibly so, but that wasn't remotely unique to him. He was nice, but so were many of the newcomer Angels.

There were many of those newcomers, giving Kurt the oddest feeling of being in a majority living in a three-dimensional world. Before, he'd been the oddity who kept looking to the sky; now, the rest of his family were the few who couldn't step off the earth. Men and women with the faces of boys and girls were constantly silhouetted against the clouds. He could, in theory, fall in love with any one of them. Although broad shoulders earned more of his interest, Kurt was aware of Jennifer's curves in a way no human woman would ever manage. It could be anyone.

But by pure happenstance, he'd happened to befriend this one particular man. A man who seemed completely interested when people talked to him, was astonished at how good he could feel away from big cities, and always rushed to help people with any needs he saw. Even with all he'd been through, he still held open doors. And unlike every other newcomer there, he didn't see a frazzled refuge manager when he saw Kurt: he saw a person. He didn't expect Kurt to solve a problem with his cabin or reassign roommates, he just wanted to spend time. It was nice.

Then he offered sex out of boredom, and any faint dreams were pushed years into the future. It was better to wait and do things properly. They had nothing but time ahead of them.

He realized Jennifer had been watching him as he worked. "Good," she finally said. "You don't really know *how* good it is that you want to be careful. From what I remember about the early years, it's great that he'll have someone caring about him enough not to say yes right away." Her inspection lasted a little longer, and then she hopped off the porch and asked, "But you've gotta be going a little stir-crazy by now, right?"

"You have no idea," Kurt admitted and she laughed.

"Well," she said in a way that she clearly meant to be helpful, "if you ever want to, you know, un-stir yourself, you could always come over when Finn and I—" His almost comical expression of horror interrupted her offer, but she took the wrong message from it. "Don't worry! I'm totally fine, no need to worry about taking advantage," she said brightly.

"I have to prepare for my trip," he said for an excuse and turned to leave.

"Are you sure you don't want me coming with you?" Jennifer called after him.

"No!" he said firmly, because now he had visions of her sneaking into his hotel room. She apparently pictured an open relationship with Finn, at least where he was concerned.

"Are you *sure*?" she asked more dubiously. "I've been to these sorts of parties. You haven't."

"Not for years," he pointed out. "How long was George acting like a recluse before we lost our collars, remember? Besides, you didn't know me before... well, everything. This is everything I dreamed about as a kid. Yes, it's been a very long time since then," he admitted, "but I'm sure everything will come flooding back to me. Vogue was my Bible."

Her brow creased uncertainly until he explained that it was a fashion magazine that had been around until the last twenty years. "Okay," she reluctantly agreed. "I just hope you know what you're in for. You should really ask your dad or something, so you don't have to go alone." She held up her hands in surrender when Kurt pointed out that a human his age would be seen as a grandfather, and definitely not someone who needed his daddy to hold his hand in the big dangerous world outside. "Just remember, it's okay to be scared."

He forgot her words when he was unzipping the garment bag that had been delivered several weeks prior. He'd been the same size for decades, and yet he still wanted to try the tuxedo on one more time to make sure the fit was perfect. Nimble fingers fastened the tiny, flat buttons along the shoulders. It was far more delicate tailoring work than he could have managed. A friend of a friend of a friend was a real live top designer who thought the idea of one of his tuxedos on an Angel was a delight.

"Look at that," Kurt said almost nervously as he studied himself in the mirror. There had been absolutely no need for formal wear in his life. It felt like a costume. A flattering one—with his figure and coloring, the

slim-fitting black and white was a vision—but a costume nonetheless. He nodded at that last survey in the mirror, carefully hung the tuxedo back in its garment bag, and went to the bathroom with reference pictures in hand.

There was a certain hairstyle that had been all over entertainment recently, with the sides slicked back so totally that the hair became shiny. The top was left high and natural. Kurt thought it looked ridiculous and unflattering, but it had held on long enough to become a trend rather than a simple fad. Sighing, he tried compressing the sides with his hands and made a face at the results. It looked stupid. It just did. He styled his hair as normal, putting rare care into it, and then compromised by spraying the sides a bit more and pressing against them. There was just a slight reduction in volume but he felt far more up-to-date. The dress rehearsal was done, then. It was time for the main event.

It was time to leave.

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The next day, freshly showered and with an improvised bag slung against his chest, Kurt touched lightly down at an airstrip a few dozen miles south of his home. He hadn't expected to feel that nervous. They'd made rare trips outside the valley, but they'd stayed close and he'd never gone off on his own. He'd welcomed some of the biggest names on the planet to their house, had overseen sizable charitable donations, and was viewed as an unmatched if reclusive expert to those in the know. And yet he still felt like a child leaving for his first day at college.

"We've been waiting," said Ivy McDonald, the second-highest paid actress in Hollywood. She and another top celebrity were sharing a private plane and had offered to make a detour for him.

"I'm right on time," Kurt countered. Ivy was usually mobbed by fans and paparazzi, but it was hard to be in awe of someone who he'd seen fall off a horse and into an icy stream.

"Well, we were early."

"You should have called," he said as he carefully maneuvered through the small door and looked around for the best seating option. He settled on the small couch, handed over the garment bag he'd clutched close, and then unslung his other bag.

"Sorry, this isn't really built for you," she said as the door closed behind them and she settled in to one of the oversized leather seats. "What do you do when there's not a couch to sit on?" she wondered as she watched him turn so he was parallel to its back.

Kurt hesitated. The metal frame around him felt like the collar being back on his neck. He suddenly remembered Jennifer's forgotten words: it was okay to be scared. "It hasn't been a concern, actually," he said. "This is my first time."

She looked taken aback. "This is your first time flying? I mean... obviously not in general, but this is your first time in a plane?" He flashed her a nervous smile and she tried to wave off his concern. "Don't worry. They're safe. It might go up and down a little on wind currents and turbulence, but you're probably used to that, right?"

He nodded as they began to taxi toward the single runway. "Right, sure. I'll just keep that in mind. Thanks for the offer." Before they'd suggested it, he was either going to have to get someone to drive him to Los Angeles or he'd wind up testing his flight endurance. Even this small jet could fly three times his speed; it only made sense to take them up on it.

That logic was long forgotten when they were thirty thousand feet in the air, somewhere over the Sierra Nevada.

His knees were pulled to his chest. He didn't dare move. The roaring engines outside his metal cage struck deep, irrational terror into his heart. The sky was supposed to be his, something no one could take away from him, and he was trapped. They were too high; he could feel the biting cold air and how it wouldn't fill his lungs.

It was okay to be scared. It would be over soon. Jen had done this a lot, though he had no idea how. She'd been all over the world. She was fine. It was fine. He was fine.

The jet hit an air pocket and dropped far enough that it made their drinks slosh in their glasses. Kurt put his head against his knees and tried to keep breathing.

He was exhausted when they stepped onto the runway at John Wayne. It was hard not to collapse on the stained, warm asphalt. The smells of exhaust, tar, and pollution coated him. He looked up. At home, his night sky looked like a print from NASA; there, he saw only a vague orange glow with a few brave lights fighting their way through.

"You okay?" Ivy asked with concern. He'd been rigid and silent for most of the trip, and his fear was obvious.

He began to say he was fine, but Kurt knew suddenly that there was no way he would ever voluntarily step onto an airplane again. "It's not your fault at all," he said, "but I obviously can't handle that. It just does something to my head." She still apologized; he waved it off. "I'll figure out how to get home, don't worry," he said as the limo pulled up and they climbed inside.

"Ever been to L.A. before?" Saul, the other celebrity, eventually asked as they shot down the freeway. "I know you said you'd never been on a plane, but...."

Kurt shook his head. As they headed north from Orange County he could see the towering downtown skyscrapers ahead. They were by far the largest buildings he'd ever seen and it took him a bit to regain his focus. It seemed impossible that there could actually be people behind all those glowing windows. "No."

"It's too bad you couldn't have seen it before the quake," he said. "They've done a great job rebuilding, but some of those old buildings were really gorgeous. I remember them from when I was a kid."

"I saw them on TV," Kurt said idly. He could vaguely remember the anchors talking about modern construction codes and why some parts of the city were untouched while fires raged elsewhere. They'd watched the special reports from their living room where pine trees rustled outside, and Los Angeles seemed like it belonged on a different planet. He was finally there and it still felt that way.

They nodded and allowed the city to hold his attention. He swallowed convulsively at each red light once they'd transferred to surface roads. Streetcars and buses were massive when they pulled up next to them. The stench when buses drove ahead was unbearable; cars like theirs were electric, but larger vehicles had to run on some sort of converted coal gas. It was the same thing he'd smelled at the airport and it reeked. Most people would probably think that the smell dissipated quickly, but it seemed to hang over the entire city to him.

Eventually they pulled up to a beautiful hotel in Brentwood. With a deep breath, Kurt stepped out of the limo and onto the sidewalk. He expected to draw attention but got only a few glances; his companions earned far more. It took him a moment to remember that L.A.'s Westside had been one of the most common places to see collared Angels. "I am very ready to check in," he said as he heard blaring horns and screeching tires echo against the canyon of the street.

The clerks double-checked his reservation, but nodded when he explained that he was there for the benefit. Soon he'd been assigned a room, given a key, and sent off to enjoy his night of privacy. The door closed behind him and Kurt let out a sigh of relief. He hung up his tuxedo and other clothes before he let himself sit down, called home to let them know he was there safely, and then began to investigate the first place he'd stayed in other than his room for the past decades.

A bowl of almonds sat on the coffee table. Investigating the tiny jars next to it turned up honey in a half-dozen boutique flavors: natural clover grass, lavender, and so on. Kurt grinned at the unexpected thoughtfulness and explored further. The shower was nearly as big as home's, and had a drying strip built into the wall that was perfectly built for wings. It was brilliant. The adjustable bed became soft enough to let even his weight sink into it.

His delight died abruptly when Kurt realized why the hotel had so many features perfectly suited for him: it had been designed so owners could be comfortable there with their pets. He might well be the first person using that drying strip who'd reserved the room under his own name.

He snacked on the almonds, but his appetite wasn't really there. His room seemed suddenly filled with imagined torture and he could hear muffled honking from the streets below.

The room service menu was filled with pages of food he couldn't eat, with a single 'special diets' column at the end. It might appeal to a few other guests, but he didn't think it was a coincidence that every dish was sold ala carte in tiny portions. Nor did he find it surprising that the prices were astoundingly high. Anyone who could afford someone like him had the money to spare, and they'd apparently just kept that same, rarely-used menu.

Glad for the welcome gift provided to him, Kurt ate another few free almonds and then tried to relax from the traumatic flight in the oversized garden tub. Once his mind provided the term 'bird bath' he couldn't get away from it. The session ended sooner than he would have liked. He tried the steam shower next, as they praised its multitude of aromatic options in the room literature. The steam itself was pleasant

enough, but as soon as he tried any of the scents he nearly choked on how cloying and fake they were. Kurt finally gave in, showered like usual, and reached for the complimentary robe. That, he discovered, wasn't customized for him. With a groan, he walked out in his sleeping pants and was caught by the icy blast of the air conditioner.

The heart of civilization was *exhausting*.

Giving up, he climbed into bed and turned the wall monitor from personal services to television programming. The scent of the sheets wasn't bad, but it was different. They'd used the same brands for ages in their laundry. He flipped through the stations and saw the local news broadcast talking about murders and school budget negotiations.

Finally, among terrible comedies and the latest iteration of the most popular talent show, Kurt found a discussion of the next week's benefit. Nearly everyone in entertainment had their hand on some part of it, whether for homelessness, child abuse, or support for freed Angels. It was like an orgy of domestic charity issues.

"Don't you think Tuesday is a little offensive?" asked the person being interviewed. Kurt froze. Tuesday was the day dedicated to his cause. It was what he'd been asked to attend. "Everything else is still real problems. We could have turned that fundraising day over to... animal abuse, illiteracy, lots of things. And instead, a lot of stars are indulging themselves on a problem that's already been fixed. Why? Because it probably gives them an excuse to spend time with those people, now that they can't own them any more."

"Indulgent is the perfect word," agreed someone else. "The laws are fixed and they're getting their citizenship handled. Everyone rallied around 'the Angel cause' and they did what was needed. But we're still going to see concerts for... what, exactly?"

Kurt actually found himself snapping at the television, "Permanent housing, legal support, schooling, *therapy*... oh yes, everything's completely fixed. Why would I think otherwise. Are you serious?" But they clearly were, and with a hiss of irritation he changed back to that talent show and let it sing him to sleep.

## Chapter Three

When Kurt stirred the next morning, the wall monitor activated and the curtains slid slowly open. Their journey was slow enough to give his eyes time to adjust to the light. He yawned, blinked, and tried to focus. At home he normally slept like the dead, but that was in utter silence interrupted only by wind or howls. His sleep there had been punctuated by people in the hall, cars on the street, and the occasional hum of the elevators. He'd gone to bed at ten and it was nearly twelve hours after that.

He shook his head again and rose. Already he felt less of the low-level panic that had consumed him upon arrival, but he was foggy. The sounds weren't quite as loud and the smells weren't quite as nagging. He walked to the street and squinted through the bright sun; to his surprise, he couldn't make out the license plates at that distance.

Odd. Kurt popped another almond in his mouth before he remembered his plans for the day. Glancing at the clock almost made him yelp and he picked up the phone for the front desk. "Hi, I'm in room 423 and am supposed to be meeting someone?"

"Your guest has confirmed arrival in the lobby at eleven," he heard after a short pause. The security at the hotel was very tight. "May we bring you anything before that?"

"No, thank you," Kurt said and hung up. He quickly retreated to the bathroom to try and make some sense of his hair; he'd tossed and turned that night and it had paid the price. Then he checked the bag he'd packed and was similarly challenged by the clothing inside. The designer who'd given him the tuxedo had also packed more casual clothes.

"What am I supposed to do with this?" Kurt muttered as he looked at the strap attached to one shoulder and his waist, with an adjustable ring in its midsection that could be clipped somewhere. He tried to find a good placement for the clip and felt like he was wearing a seatbelt. With a sigh, he sought out any entertainment footage in the hopes that someone would be wearing a similar shirt. He was in luck; the latest heartthrob to have three or four years of glory was in an identical piece, and with careful attention Kurt duplicated his clip choice on the opposite shoulder.

Pants were easier, and he only had one pair of casual shoes with him. Kurt inspected himself in the mirror, nodded, and then began the painstaking effort of smoothing his wings to be as well-styled as his hair. He left his room ten minutes early; he didn't want to keep her waiting.



No such luck; Mercedes was there when he walked off the elevator. Her lined face, surrounded by a halo of white hair, lit up when she saw him. He grinned back and sped his pace. They embraced firmly when he reached her seat. "Gorgeous," he declared.

"Oh, you liar," she laughed. Despite the color of her hair, she was still healthy and vibrant in her sixties. "Let's go, I skipped breakfast."

With the noises on the street, they waited until they were settled at their table until they really tried to restart their conversation. Cars occasionally drove by, but they were on a quiet side road. Palms and sycamores shaded them. "It's been too long," Mercedes said.

"It's been crazy up there," he agreed. "I think this is the first morning in years I haven't gotten up to hear about some conflict that needs resolving."

"And we're on opposite sides of the country."

"And that," he allowed. He sipped his water—he could make out the chemicals added to sterilize the city's water supplies, but it wasn't as bad as he might have expected—and realized Mercedes was staring at him in quiet wonder. "Hmm?"

"You know how people will say that you look the same when they see you again after a few years? And it's a big lie, but we know what they mean: you did a good job of not getting too old in the meantime." She shook her head. "But you look *exactly* the same. I feel like I'm back in high school, and I have two grandkids going to music camp this summer!"

"You say that every time," he laughed.

"Well, it's the truth," she said with a shrug as the waiter came by and they placed their orders: her, eggs benedict, and him, a grapefruit half with strawberries. She added a mimosa to her order and then glanced at Kurt to verify that he hadn't suddenly developed an alcohol tolerance. With a no, the waiter walked off.

"I do feel like I'm drunk," Kurt said as he rubbed at his eyes. "Well, what people say it's like, anyway; I've forgotten."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, just...." He gestured out at their setting. A crowd was at the hotel café on the Saturday morning. No one was there without a reservation and they were very hard to come by. An ugly brown streak of pollution marred the sky. Planes darted through it. "When I first got here I was an absolute wreck. The plane ride, the *buses*... it was all wrong. I felt, I don't know... raw? Like anything could set me off?" Kurt shrugged. "I suppose I just needed a night to settle in. I'm not so scared now, but I'm just out of things."

She nodded, considering that. "Maybe you... hmm. Scabbed over? So whatever's bothering you wouldn't so much?"

'Scabbed over'; it wasn't a metaphor that would have come naturally to him, but he supposed it fit. "Could be," he said. The previous evening he'd had no idea how people like him had lived in owners' houses in huge cities, but that morning he could see an explanation. They'd spent the decades drugged by the world around them.

"So," Mercedes began as the waiter handed her a drink. "How's everyone?"

"Oh, good," Kurt said. "Busy. We're all off working in our own areas." He knew her true question, though; she loved all his family members by default, as they were related to him, but she cared the most about a very narrow sliver of the people in their house. "Finn's our...." Kurt considered it, laughed a bit, and finished, "Our career counselor."

"Do tell," Mercedes asked. Her eyebrows popped up.

"He talks to everyone and figures out what they like to do, what they might be good at... eventually a lot of them might leave, I think." Picturing the full spread of their land revealed a lot of room; there was more than enough to make real homes for everyone. But he had no illusions that most would want to stay. "And for those people who remember old dreams of being an artist, a doctor, we figure out which books to get for them so they can be ready to go back to school. Eventually. Others seem happy to just look after the fields and animals, and so they learn the trades."

Mercedes' eyes were soft when she asked, "Do you think they'll ever get to do it? Be doctors and artists?"

A sigh escaped him. "Artists, maybe. Jobs where you don't need a degree. Well," Kurt allowed, "I'm just picturing the next fifty years or so. Who knows how much things will change, given enough time?" He realized she was shaking her head, like she disagreed, and asked what was wrong.

"The next fifty years," Mercedes repeated in wonder. "You'll see them."

All the happiness of their meeting drained suddenly away. Kurt cast a furtive glance around the tables, and then leaned in to whisper, "You could drink some. Just a little. Please, Mercedes." Please. Take at least another few years before he had to say goodbye, he heard in his head.

"Baby," she said, squeezing his hand, "I know I don't need to tell you this, but this world is hard. I love a lot of the people in it, but this word is *hard*. And I've tried my best, I spent my time with those people, but when Jesus calls me home I'm going to be ready to go." She smiled. "I think I'll have earned that rest."

His head ducked to hide his sudden, stabbing grief until he felt her finger tilt up his chin. "Hey," Mercedes said softly. "It's still a long time yet. And it won't be sad. I want you there, and it'll be a celebration, not a bunch of people crying. You know I'll look out for you afterwards, right?"

No she wouldn't, Kurt knew: she would be gone. The time was coming when he would say goodbye to the few friends who'd known him before, and they would never come back. But what was the point in arguing? "Of course," he said. "So, ah," he forced himself to say. "What's your schedule like today?"

"Mentor session at four." That talent show was on its 'icons week,' and one of the girls had selected Mercedes in her initial interview. She wasn't a big name to the public at large, but for girls growing up listening to gospel, Mercedes was it. "Listen to her sing, give her tips, you know. And then there's a dress rehearsal on Monday morning, and then of course they sing on Monday night."

Kurt nodded vaguely. "Do you ever wish you'd gone mainstream? Like that show? I bet you could have been huge."

Mercedes laughed and shook her head. "Not a chance. Didn't look the part, and I would have aged out of it real fast anyway. Pop's not very forgiving. Besides, living in Los Angeles? It's okay to visit, but I like Nashville a lot more. It's slower, you know?"

"Yeah," Kurt said. He looked at cars rushing past and missed his forest with a wistful ache. "It's funny, to hear us talk like this. Considering what we were like as kids."

She snorted. "Kids think a lot of things and most of them don't stick. What's your schedule, then?" When he said that he was free until the first benefit dinner on Monday, her eyes lit up. "Oh, fun! So you get to see the

city? Let's do something tomorrow, okay?" She giggled; it was a strange sound coming out of a woman her age. "Disneyland, maybe."

"Somehow I doubt those rides are built for me," Kurt pointed out, and she nodded with consideration. After a few other suggestions—sightseeing, concerts, museums—he shook his head at Mercedes' question about the times when he'd be on his own. "I'm sure it *would* be neat to see the city from above, but I can't. They put those laws into place about city airspaces. So unless I want to file a flightplan with the FAA every time I take off, I'm grounded."

"Seriously?" she asked.

"I suppose it makes sense; they don't want us accidentally zipping in front of hospital helicopters," Kurt said with a shrug. Still, it was another reminder of how poorly suited he was for cities.

Mercedes accepted her breakfast as the waiter handed it over, but her lips twitched. When Kurt, curious, asked her what was so funny, she said helplessly, "Just... I thought back to when we met, and that's a pretty strange thing for him to say." When they'd met: in the time *before*.

He prodded the grapefruit half in front of him and said with good humor, "I'll take your word for it. I honestly barely remember." She said that of course he had to remember, but Kurt shook his head. Mercedes had more time in that sort of life, and bigger memories on which to anchor herself.

Eying him dubiously, Mercedes said, "Name of our choir director. Go."

"Will Schuester," Kurt said. "What, is this a pop quiz?"

"Locker combination."

"You can't be serious," Kurt said. "Who remembers a locker combination after decades?"

Mercedes rattled off three numbers and grinned. "I used the same padlock all through junior high and high school. I don't think I could forget it if I tried. What song did we sing in front of the whole school together?"

"Oh!" Kurt exclaimed, and then balled his fists in frustration and laughed when the name didn't come to him. "It was... ah... oh, I haven't heard that song in forever." He started humming scattered notes. With each

pass he could tie a few more together, and suddenly he heard the harsh tones of a marching band in his memory. His progress stopped there. "It was... I can't remember the name!" he finally admitted.

Mercedes began to haughtily reply, but paused when she seemed to realize she was in the same boat. "It was... that song!" she said accompanied by loose gestures. She also tried to fumble a few loose notes into the full number, but did no better with it than Kurt.

"That song!" he agreed. "The one with the... and the...." They eventually shook their heads, admitted defeat, and focused on eating.

She had to say goodbye eventually and leave for her session, and Kurt sent her off with a firm hug. He began walking down the sidewalk, trying to enjoy the sights around him, but became aware of the attention he was getting without two top celebrities to distract onlookers. Their stares were firmly ignored. He passed a shop, reconsidered, and backtracked. He liked the clothes in the window, they looked like he could tailor them, and it had been a *long* time since he'd gone shopping for fun. With a nod, he walked inside and watched the workers inside look unsurprisingly startled. "Just browsing," he said cheerfully. Their gazes followed him all around the store. He ignored those, too.

He tried on a few shirts as best he could—backwards, so he could at least tell if the shoulder seams landed right and how tight the arms were—and then a multitude of pants. Eventually he brought his finds up to the counter and smiled expectantly.

"Did you find everything you needed?" asked the clerk politely. He could just catch the glint of an intricate gold-ink tattoo across her cheeks. She was probably spectacular in sunlight.

"Yes, thank you," Kurt said. He waited with anticipation to be asked to place his thumb on the scanner. It was exciting to be back in the system, with his own bank account.

"And who will be paying for this?" she asked, looking past him like she expected to see someone walk in.

"I will," Kurt answered. His enthusiasm faltered a bit. She eyed him, began to say something, and then stared at his shoulder and bit her lip. It took him a painful second to realize she wasn't looking at the wings, but at the shirt ring he'd clipped there. "What?" he asked. "I have the money."

"Of course," she said, snapping back to politeness. "Certainly. I didn't mean any offense, it's just that other people who've clipped there, um, having someone else paying for them."

His fingers rested lightly on the ring against his shoulder. "Wait. It means something that I clipped it *here*?" He saw the surprise in her eyes that he didn't know, followed by the amused embarrassment that she would have to explain things. When he weakly said that he'd just followed the lead of that latest heartthrob, she nodded solemnly.

"Well, ah. He was saying—politely—that he was willing to go quite a long way to secure his next big role."

"Oh my God," Kurt muttered as he hastily unclipped and looked helplessly at his shirt for what he should do with the damn thing. He'd been walking down the streets of Los Angeles advertising that he was willing to sell himself! No wonder he'd earned all those looks. He'd probably played right into their stereotypes.

"At your waist is fairly neutral," she suggested. "Yes, like a seatbelt. Or you can clip it to itself, so it hangs sort of loose, and that's, um... kind of tough? Like you're saying you don't want to be bothered, you're above it all."

Kurt clipped the ring to its own strap and felt its weight move freely against his chest. Maybe that would keep people away. "Thanks," he muttered. "You might not believe it, but I used to be good with trends." She clearly didn't, but she was unfailingly polite as she checked him out and packed his shirts in a bag. She waited to giggle at him until he was closing the door behind him, which was thoughtful.

His phone rang before he had a chance to recover too much, and so he was flustered when he answered. "Hello?"

"Hey, sorry to interrupt you," he heard Carole say.

"No interruption," Kurt said. He was already looking forward to whatever she had to say. He could handle those problems. He fit into his home. "What's wrong?"

"Eden in cabin 17, you know her?" When he confirmed that he did, while also privately hoping that one day she would change her name away from the one her slavers had given her, Carole continued, "She swears she saw someone trespassing."

"Were they armed?" Kurt asked, frowning.

"She saw something glint in the sun, it sounds like, but she's not sure what."

He opened his mouth to reply and a horn blew away his response. With a glare for that car, Kurt tried again. "I'm on the street right now. Let me go back to my room, all right? I'll call you back and we'll work this out."

"You don't have to do that, Kurt. I don't want to ruin your trip...."

He was genuinely looking forward to the next day with Mercedes, but he was also finding that focusing on what he was skilled at would be far more enjoyable than trying to deal with modern Los Angeles. "It won't be ruined. It's late anyway, I should be headed back to the hotel."

"Kurt, it's not even one-thirty there."

"Talk to you soon, bye." Hanging up, Kurt stowed the tiny sliver of metal and then considered walking back to the hotel. Technically the no-fly laws only extended above forty feet. With a grin he launched himself, careful to stay below third-story windows, and shot back toward the hotel. He could feel pollution settling across the feathers, but it still felt good to fly.

"Hi, Mom," he said when he was safely in his room. "Okay, tell me everything she said. And since you have me on the phone, is there anything else that's come up...?"

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"You did *not* spend all yesterday in that hotel room after I left," Mercedes said mournfully on Sunday afternoon. "Tell me you didn't."

"They found tire tracks when they really went looking," Kurt mused. "A girl swears she saw a stranger on our land... it could be serious. I needed to handle it."

"Handle what?" Mercedes asked as she darted out her tongue to catch a drop of ice cream. In his increasingly numbed state, Kurt found himself able to enjoy the snowcone he'd purchased. The chemical taste of the flavoring wasn't so severe. "You're hundreds of miles away and your parents are there, what do they need you for?"

"Mom and Dad are in charge of the family," Kurt explained. The Santa Monica Pier was just visible in the distance. He didn't plan to visit, but he was enjoying the walk. He hadn't ever seen palm trees in person before that trip. "Finn's in charge of training, Grace is in charge of the kennels, Jen has wildlife cataloging... but I'm in charge of everything working like it should. Everything."

"Huh," Mercedes said. She apparently hadn't realized that he was on the very top of that increasingly large organizational pyramid. "Who's in charge of, you know... guards? Security?"

Kurt had to consider that. "There are two answers," he finally said. "The dogs handle a lot of it, so Grace. But also, the wild animals. And they don't really have a boss, of course."

"Wild animals?" Mercedes repeated dubiously.

"Oh, um, I probably said this a long time ago and you forgot. But animals like me when they come near. I guess it's the scent. Well, multiply that scent times several hundred Angels, and...." Kurt laughed a little. "Animals everywhere. We're trying to figure out how many of them are there now; they just keep coming. They don't get along together, but they're good with us."

With concern, she asked, "Aren't you worried they'll attack someone else? Your family? Those few people who stuck around the town?"

Kurt shook his head. "Spend enough time around us and the scent rubs off, it seems. They don't *like* them, but it'd take a real effort to get attacked." She still looked worried. "So long as Finn doesn't punch a bear in the nose, he should be fine."

"He's gonna die," Mercedes deadpanned. Kurt threw his head back and laughed. Even as sounds dimmed to a dull roar in his ears, he could hear that overlaid on the distant sounds of the ocean.

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It was comforting to dress in a tuxedo the next evening. Formal wear for men had changed little. Only the proportions were different, and the designer had made sure to send a modern look. With that word in mind, he tried to style his hair to match the current trends without looking ridiculous in the process.



Unfortunately those trends *were* ridiculous, and he gave up early rather than push himself. Stupid hair, idiotic clothing with embarrassing clips, pollution, noise... he wanted to go home.

That home needed funding, though. The first banquet and charity auction would start shortly, and although Monday's concert telethon was officially dedicated to some refugee groups, it would be an excellent chance to mingle.

Kurt glanced at his face, made a few loose brushes at it, and shrugged. Nothing to fix, nothing to improve. It would earn attention while he mingled as surely as the wings. "Showtime," he said to himself and headed downstairs. The concert would be at the Hollywood Bowl, but the night started right there in the hotel's conference halls.

Celebrities gave him quick, insincere kisses on the cheek when he approached. Some he actually knew and got along with, but Kurt understood why they were holding back. If anyone got too handsy with him, others would take that as an invitation to do the same. Already Kurt was forced to stick to the perimeter of the room with his back to the wall, so he wouldn't be accidentally brushed.

Considering his adventures over the weekend, for a second Kurt thought he was dreaming. Layton Reed, the heartthrob whose unfortunate clip placement he'd mimicked, entered the room and did a double-take as he passed Kurt. "Ah. Are you with someone?" he asked.

"No," Kurt said and drew himself closer to the wall.

"Oh!" Layton said. "You must be the one I heard about, who runs that shelter."

"Shelter?" Kurt repeated blankly. They began to draw a crowd, as people were apparently intrigued by Hollywood's It Boy talking to an oddly unaccompanied Angel. They probably wanted to see if the more lascivious explanations for that meeting might be true. Behind them, prizes on the tables went ignored.

"You know what you should have done," suggested someone as her eyes lit up. "You should have auctioned off a chance to come visit."

"Come visit where?" Kurt asked, perplexed.

"The shelter! *No one's* ever seen hundreds of Angels all together at once. Anywhere. It's priceless." She tittered. "Well, I guess not, since it'd be auctioned off, but it'd be a high price."

It took him a moment to realize she was seriously suggesting that he should invite someone to his home not to talk to them privately, one-on-one, but to show off psychologically damaged people like zoo animals. "It would probably set a bad precedent," he demurred when he fought down the initial, outraged response that might well get him thrown out. "Paying for access."

"Oh," she sadly agreed. "Good point. Too bad, that could have raised so much money."

"And it's a *refuge*," Kurt corrected as politely as he could. "Not a *shelter*."

Most of the crowd moved off, but Kurt realized unhappily that Layton was still staring at him. "Can I help you with something?" he asked through an increasingly strained smile. He didn't bother sucking up to the boy, as he knew the arc of his career very well: he discovered in a lucky break, launch into the media as the sexy new thing everyone loved, listen to screams of adoring fans for a few years, scramble as his foundationless career began to suddenly plummet after a stretch of stardom and expensive cars. They never saved their money. Right then he wouldn't give to the refuge, and when he'd been humbled he'd be bankrupt.

Kurt, he realized, had become very cynical about some of the world's predictability.

"Seriously," Layton asked. He put his hand against the wall and put his weight on it; it was neatly between Kurt and the door. A gleam of entitlement flashed through his eyes. "Who are you here with?"

"Myself," Kurt said tightly.

"That's funny," Layton laughed. He leaned in closer and Kurt could smell the sharp scent of his cologne. "Do you have a room in the hotel?"

"I have to go," Kurt said as he ducked in the only direction of freedom. His heart pounded. He'd thought before that the unfortunate clothing clip had signaled availability, but apparently his entire body screamed that he was just looking for a deep wallet and tempted crotch. Even in Hollywood, where he'd raised so much of their funding. This would be hard.

His phone rang again and Kurt answered it instinctively. "Hello?"

"Kurt? Look, I know your thing is tonight—"

"Dad, what is it?" Kurt asked quietly. There was something very serious in his voice.

He heard the latest news from home. His already slow body seemed to go entirely numb. "I'm on my way," Kurt said in a daze. "I'll be there soon."

"How? You said you couldn't take planes again."

"I'll just. I'll be there soon. Keep people away from it, and call the police." Kurt's voice was barely audible by the last word, so he wouldn't draw attention. He wondered if Burt had heard him over the crowd. Hopefully. He looked around, found the organizer, and explained that they'd had a sudden emergency. "Here, could you possibly read these?" he asked her as he handed over a stack of index cards. He'd been scheduled to give a short speech, only two minutes, but it was the sort of speech that could raise money.

"Is everything okay?" she asked with concern.

"It sounds like... it's an emergency," Kurt said, apologized one last time, and made a beeline for the exit. A few hungry eyes followed him; he was too flustered to care. He nearly threw his tuxedo back into its garment bag, shoved all his other clothes back into the one that clung to his chest, and left the hotel room empty behind him. "Can you ship this out of state?" he asked the front desk as he gestured to his tuxedo bag, and handed it over when they said they could. "And could you please call this number and explain that I had to leave early, and that I was pulled away?" he added as he remembered his plans to see Mercedes again during the week.

They'd barely confirmed that when Kurt thanked them, checked out and paid his balance, and ran out the door. He threw himself at the early evening sky and just remembered to stay under forty feet. With the hills to the northeast in his vision, he flew.

Eventually the houses thinned and manicured lawns became golden scrub grass. He passed over the Hollywood Sign and decided to take that as his marker: he was outside city limits, or close enough, and would stop skimming over the land. With only a quick pause to tighten the bag across his chest and set his destination in his phone, Kurt ascended into thinner, faster air and sped forward.

He was exhausted when he passed over the mountains, but the map on his phone said he was near Death Valley. He didn't want to stop there. He couldn't stop. He pushed himself onward as fast as he could fly, even as his muscles screamed at him to rest and his still-foggy mind hindered his movements. Eventually

he had to stop on a small rocky outcropping in Nevada, or he would have dropped from the sky. Kurt wiped at his forehead and realized sweat was dripping off it. He suspected he could go quite a ways when he paced himself, but he'd never before tried to fly that fast for that long.

He fumbled again near the border. It was well into night by then, with only starlight and the waning moon to guide him. Kurt slid into a narrow crevice in a deep canyon so that no one would find him as he overcame his fatigue. When he tried to lift off again his muscles wobbled and failed. He just barely caught himself from pitching off the edge to land on the canyon floor. "Come on," he pleaded with his body. It healed; it should be able to burn away weariness like it did scars. "Come on. Come...."

He jerked awake hours later and swore. There was no pain from what he'd put his muscles through; the blood did help at least that much. But he apparently couldn't push himself past his endurance limits. After another launch it was an unbroken shot to home, though he had to swing wide to avoid another city.

"I'm here," he weakly said as he landed in front of the door and fumbled for his keys. His hands didn't want to work. He was so tired. "I'm here," he said as one knee gave out from his fresh exhaustion. "I'm... I'm...." Giving up, he pulled out his phone and called Carole. She hurried when she heard "front door" and opened it for him.

"Did you *fly* here?" she demanded. "From Los Angeles? Kurt, we called the police, they're investigating."

"I can't... it's...." At her insistence he took a moment to catch his breath. "That doesn't happen. Not here. Not here," he said. It broke his heart every time his home was shown to be unsafe. "I want to see."

"Everyone else is still asleep, and it's dark. You wouldn't be able to see anything, anyway. Go to bed and we'll go in the morning."

"No. It's. I want to see," he tiredly insisted, and she gave up and grabbed the keys for one of the cars that would fit him.

When they approached their destination Carole flashed her brights a few times, presumably to let the police know the person there wanted to be seen. "We have to walk from here," she explained as she helped Kurt out. It was so hard to walk; he'd pushed himself far too much. At least the clean air was clearing his head.

"Carole, Kurt?" asked the local officer when he turned his flashlight on them. "You shouldn't be here."

"Kurt wanted to see. He flew back from this thing he was doing in Los Angeles."

"There was no need—"

Apparently catching something in his voice, Carole emphasized, "He *flew* up here. In one night, to see it for himself."

"Fine," the officer relented. "But stay outside the tape, we're still analyzing."

Kurt nodded and walked closer. The smell of gore and blood turned his stomach; even before he saw the pile of shredded meat, it was difficult not to vomit. "Did he have anything with him?" Kurt asked in a voice that sounded distant and strange to his ears.

"Yeah. Cameras, what might be sales contracts, plastic bags...." The officer sighed. "Looked like a surveillance mission, if I'm going to speculate. Those lenses he had for his camera? They could practically bore a hole through someone's bathroom wall."

"Paparazzi," Kurt said. He'd seen them outside the hotel. If they wanted a story, they got it.

"Pretty much."

"So he was going to... what, film all those Angels in recovery?" Carole asked in disbelief. "And *sell* the pictures?"

"I... look, I shouldn't guess," the officer said in a voice that sounded like he wished he hadn't gone down the path at all. But his expression said yes. Yes, this man was going to capitalize on society's denied hunger for Angels and start filming them in the nude. Their dropped feathers would be bagged and sold.

"Do we have anything to worry about?" Carole asked. Her voice remained admirably steady.

"No. Not unless we find something else. I know this is your property, but he was trespassing and you obviously had nothing to do with this."

Kurt stared blankly at the mangled corpse. He wondered how big a threat the man had been, creeping through the woods while loaded down with the gear he'd use to put little bits and pieces of Angels back up

for sale. He'd obviously come across as dangerous. Whenever an Angel was threatened and an acclimated animal was nearby, it came to help.

He hadn't been prepared for a mountain lion.

Kurt hadn't been prepared to see a man's guts strewn across his sanctuary.

## Chapter Four

Kurt was still exhausted when he got up after two hours of sleep. There was no muscle pain from his exertion but it was hard to hold up his head. He nodded when Finn asked him if he'd really flown back overnight and privately agreed that it had been a bad idea. A mug of coffee was pressed into his hand. Perfect. That'd help.

It felt strange to have the police in his home. When they visited, they usually did so over dinner, out of uniform. It had been a very long time since someone came there to deal with the law. "Preliminary analysis only shows the cougar's material in the wounds," said the officer. He'd known the family for thirty years. There was no suspicion that they'd done anything wrong. "Again, it's still early, but this has all the signs of an animal attack."

"What else do you think it'd be?" Burt asked shortly. He'd had to keep everyone he classified as 'children' away from the gore. With how fragile most Angels still were, he put nearly the entire valley's population into that category. "One of us attacking that guy? Another trespasser?"

"We'll be able to wipe out any concern over human involvement easily enough, but... here's the thing. Until they remembered to fix those laws last year, you guys weren't liable for any crime you committed," the officer said with a gesture toward Kurt. That immunity was an accidental holdover from the days when owners didn't want to be charged. They'd fixed it when an Angel broke into a house in Pittsburgh for somewhere to stay and accidentally burned the place down while trying to keep herself warm with the fireplace.

"And?" Kurt asked warily.

"Which means that no one has any idea how to investigate you. I mean, not *you*, you have your alibi in L.A. But in general. I've heard your blood disappears, right?" When Kurt nodded, he asked about other body parts and sighed at the answer: everything except feathers vanished when it was separated. "Which means that it's going to be hard to prove that one of your people *wasn't* there if someone presses matters. Normally, if there's no hair, no blood, no skin flakes, it's a done deal. But...." But if Angels left no signs, how could they prove they hadn't been there?

"Don't you need evidence?" Burt asked. "I thought people were presumed innocent."

"Look, I know these kids didn't do anything. They're more like... like butterflies than birds. I mean, a hawk'll tear a mouse apart; I drive down the road and I see your kids picking apples and braiding each other's hair."

"Violence doesn't feel right," Kurt confirmed. "I promise, it doesn't."

"And I believe you, but that might not hold up in court." He bit at his lip, and then continued uncertainly, "I know you've rescued animals. Tons of people around here know you have."

"Yes?" Kurt asked, wondering if that was wrong.

"It's against the law to train wild animals. If the guy had been targeted by some of your dogs, then okay, we'd know how to handle that. Might have to put down the ones who did it, but there are ways to deal. If you trained that mountain lion...."

Kurt waved his hands frantically in front of him. "No, no, I don't train them. At all. They just naturally want to be around me. Around us, I suppose. That's why there are so many, with so many Angels around here. And they get very mad when someone tries to hurt us."

The man shook his head ruefully. "Look. I believe you. I've seen your family stay young with my own eyes, I've seen how harmless all these kids are. Even though I didn't see anything, it feels like I could testify on the witness stand that not a soul here did anything wrong, because you just act different."

"But?" Burt anticipated.

"But you've gotta know that this would sound crazy to anyone in the big cities, right? Anyone who doesn't know you?"

"I'll walk into a zoo cage in one of those big cities," Kurt said helplessly. "Offer my hand to a lion. That should convince people, right?"

"If we have to do that, then sure, we can." He hesitated. "But here's the thing: I'm betting that at least a few journalists are going to swing by here to try to follow up on this story. Someone's going to hear. People know about you, Kurt; your name's gotten out. People know there are hundreds of Angels living here, even if most aren't going to risk all those pumped-up trespassing laws. This place is interesting."



"So what should we do?" Burt asked. "Look, I don't know what you're telling us."

"What I'm saying," he said with a pointed look toward Kurt, "is that if the story comes out that someone was trying to take advantage of the people here, the head of the refuge rescues animals, and the guy got ripped apart by a mountain lion... it's going to be a real pain in the ass for you."

Kurt rubbed tiredly at his eyes. He'd purposefully avoided human security because he thought they couldn't be trusted. He'd thought animals were so simple in comparison. "Meaning?"

"Meaning it's probably real good that you have your alibi, just to limit how much of a media circus this turns into. And meaning that you might want to find some other 'important event' you need to attend for the next week or two, until this blows over and I get any new journalists cleared out of here before they're torn apart, too." He held up his hands. "Mountain lions can kill people. It happens. This story can be as simple as some idiot wandering where he shouldn't have been. But I'm just worried that you'll make it... interesting."

Kurt sighed and looked helplessly at Burt. "I can't go back to L.A. I just can't. It's awful there for me."

"He makes a good point about you going somewhere else, though. Establishing an alibi. If it just looks like them acting on their own, then a wild animal's nothing more than that." Burt sighed. "Unless it'd look like he was trying to flee the scene?"

"He came *to* the scene the second he heard," the officer retorted, and Burt gave him that point. "And then I told him to clear out so my investigation wouldn't be hindered."

"Where am I going to go, though?" Kurt asked. To that day he had a standing invitation to visit London—Jo was writing under a different name—but he couldn't deal with planes again. "Anywhere I visited would just look so random."

"No," Burt said thoughtfully. "It doesn't have to be. Think of it this way. You were really shaken up to see the first death at your home, right? Well... it got you thinking about something. Something you've wanted to do for a while."

Kurt made an inquisitive noise at his father, who explained his idea with a smile. Of course: it was the only logical place for Kurt to want to visit on his own without some charity event pulling him there. They agreed that he would go alone, as multiple people leaving could indeed make it look like they were fleeing.

"But pace yourself this time, all right?" Burt said with concern. "Three days, three full days, and you should be able to do it fine."

They made hotel reservations that afternoon, insisted that Finn didn't need to drive him, and then Kurt slept in his own bed. He rose early the next morning, showered and shaved, and then set off east over snow-covered mountains toward Ohio.

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When he paced himself, it was an entirely different experience. Kurt actually found himself enjoying the trip. He hadn't wanted to leave, he still felt sick over the corpse, and his past week had been an absolute nightmare, but memories were flooding back to him. He remembered seeing Wyoming from the back of a long-scrapped car. He hadn't been there since that trip so many years ago. He saw freshly-tilled fields below him, cattle fields with new calves, and occasional towns where his appearance made people point up at the sky.

Eventually his phone beeped at him and he corrected his course toward a small city in western Nebraska. He felt simply tired instead of exhausted and found that the day of exercise had worked out much of his unhappiness. He was actually looking forward to the trip even if it had been forced upon him.

He landed lightly in the parking lot of a Holiday Inn and walked in through the front door. The desk clerk went pale at his appearance. "Hello," Kurt said politely, determined not to acknowledge her reaction. "I have a room reserved under Hummel?" He readied his thumb to be scanned.

"And where is he or she?" the clerk asked tightly.

"Right here," Kurt said. His small good mood withered. He was in generic clothes that day; any assumptions were being made about him, not a clip on his shoulder. "I made the reservation. I am paying for it. I am staying in there alone, I am not luring in your wholesome townfolk, I will not ruin the image of your *fine* establishment. I just want a deadbolt and a pillow."

Perhaps his mood was a little poorer than he'd judged, and perhaps that treatment in Los Angeles had hurt deeper than he'd realized. His confrontational tone clearly set her on edge and her snap judgment solidified. "I'll have to ask you to leave," she said.

Kurt laughed. There seemed to be nothing else to do. "So you're just going to ignore my reservation?"

"We didn't know what was making it."

He adjusted the bag across his chest like a shield and hissed, "'Who.' Not 'what.' You know, I've been at home too long. I'd forgotten the delightful spectrum of bigotry out there." Screw this place; he wouldn't give them his money, anyway.

"If you don't vacate the premises, we will call the police," she said. She didn't look angry or threatened; she looked superior. Like she was simply clearing out some questionable element from the property.

Kurt, shaking his head, stormed out. His hands slammed against the door. He was playing nice so he wouldn't possibly be pegged as the evil murderous lion-tamer; it wouldn't help his image if he were hauled into jail in smalltown Nebraska. "Hi, Dad," he said tiredly when he'd flown into a field that would probably give him a few minutes before notice. "Can you call ahead in the next few towns and try making more reservations? You'll need to tell them *all* about me just to be sure...."

Another hotel twenty miles away was only too happy to see him. After a flash of concern that they would try to take advantage somehow, Kurt relaxed and found himself amused at the fawning treatment. That first desk clerk had seen him as some sort of unwholesome sinner; these employees cooed over him like an exotic pet. When nothing on the menu looked good they constructed a special dish rather than letting him pick through one semi-suitable option. Still, Kurt turned the deadbolt and slid the chain rather than simply relying on the electronic lock. He didn't feel frightened, but he also knew the risks. With many in a vulnerable state and no owners to prosecute in their stead, Angels on their own were frequent victims of sexual assault. He might look like a target.

Multiple reservations were again waiting for him in Iowa. That was fortunate, as Kurt got the immediate suspicion that he was seen as a target in the first hotel and left. The next one affected an air of disinterest, like they were too refined to acknowledge that he was anything except a typical guest, and he was both relieved and amused. He used all the locks again, though.

Would they really ever be invisible, Kurt wondered as he approached Ohio. Would it be possible for them to simply be another neighbor, guest, customer? They'd always be a sliver of a minority. That coupled with their appearance might make invisibility impossible. Still, eventually the world would be populated with people who'd never seen a collared Angel. If not invisibility, they might be able to reach equality. One day.

Kurt landed in Lima. It took him by surprise. He'd been lost in thought until his phone started beeping at him and then it was suddenly time to drop out of the sky.

He'd expected to be overcome by a wave of nostalgia and memories, but instead he only looked around the small park and felt vaguely sad. The town looked old, tired, and hollow. Some towns in the Rust Belt had remade themselves into manufacturing centers for new energy sources or advanced polymers. Others were hot cultural centers; Fort Wayne was creating its own genre of music.

When he'd left Lima it had a declining population and high crime rate. It wasn't insurmountable. But it was one of the unfortunate names that never rebounded.

There was still plenty of light in the sky. Rather than face the potential of creepy hotel clerks just yet, Kurt decided to do a bit of preliminary sightseeing despite the attention it might earn. He had to take a bit to orient himself. It took checking the street sign before Kurt could verify that the empty road with occasional exposed foundations was where his home had once been. They'd probably knocked down the vacant houses to prevent squatters or vermin.

He walked down the sidewalk, thankful for the emptiness around him, until he was sure he was in the right place. A slab of cracked, barely-there concrete rose up a slight hill: it was their old driveway broken apart by winter and weeds. The basement had been filled, probably so it wouldn't turn into a breeding ground for mosquitoes when it rained.

He finally felt that ache he'd expected upon landing, even though the house was almost forgotten and he loved his new home more than anything. He'd been arranging beautiful flowers along the walls of his new house while his old home was an empty concrete pad among weeds.

Kurt abruptly found that he couldn't take it any more and set back into the sky. His phone told him that William McKinley was in a direction that sounded wrong, but it had been so long that he could have forgotten. The school it sent him to wasn't his. They'd apparently torn it down and rebuilt in a new location. He couldn't remember where the old one was; probably under a grocery store by then, anyway.

Even though he knew he might be setting himself up for another heartbreak, Kurt looked up the one location that had truly been driving him to visit that town. After all, he'd made a promise. He touched down in the cemetery and his gut clenched at the sight. Some of the headstones were chipped. A few were tipped over. A handful were even marked with graffiti. He steeled himself for what he might see and began hunting down his mother's grave.

The cemetery was maintained: the grass was mowed, weeds were pulled. They just didn't seem to have enough help to tackle problems immediately after they happened. If someone damaged a gravestone, it might stay there for a few days before it was found. Kurt was mollified somewhat by seeing the neat grass, but he was still nervous until he knew that his mother's name wasn't covered in spray paint.

It was perfect. Time had worn down the letters only a bit. She was still a beloved mother and her grave was flawlessly kept. "Hi, Mom," Kurt said after a moment of looking at it. "I promised I'd come back, right?"

He hesitated over saying 'Mom.' Another woman had been given that name for decades. This felt strange. He still loved her, but... it just felt strange. She was like a faded picture in a locket.

His hands brushed against his neck. "No collar, see? The laws changed. We're all free. It's not fixed. There are still a lot of problems. But I'm helping a lot of people, and I really think I'm making a difference." He began to feel more than a little ridiculous. He talked to animals, sure, but they at least twitched their ears and moved their heads. "Um. I'm not seeing anyone. Yet. There might be someone, maybe, but I'm taking things slow." *Because he's still damaged from his decades of sexual enslavement. Just what you pictured for a son-in-law, right?*

He hesitated. What was he supposed to say? What were the points he needed to check off for this return? He'd shown her that the collar was off, but he knew he wasn't really showing his *mother*. He was making his peace with her memory and the difference between what she'd expected his life would be and what it became. But... he'd had a long time to come to terms with all of that. After so long, actually making the visit seemed a little redundant.

"It's really pretty there," Kurt finally said as he looked around the cemetery. It was *fine*, but he'd gotten used to interesting horizon lines of mountains and forests. "You'd like it, I think." The words made him hesitate. Graves could be moved, right? Maybe he could give his mother—his birth mother—a resting place by him, that overlooked something beautiful instead of another row of tombstones. He shook it off; he'd consider that later. It couldn't be done right away.

"I'm glad your stone is in good shape," he finally said as he dusted a few of the letters with his fingers. "I saw that some of them weren't. That's lucky, I suppose."

"Not lucky."

Kurt's heart lodged somewhere in his throat. He'd let himself go off-guard. Someone had managed to get right behind him and he hadn't even noticed. He was almost in the air before he processed that, under the gruffness added by years, he recognized the voice. With a few quick breaths to calm himself, Kurt turned and faced the familiar brown eyes in an unfamiliarly grizzled face. "Hi, Puck."

The man laughed. He gave the impression of having almost forgotten how to do so. "Do you know how long it's been since someone called me that?"

"Probably since the last time we talked?" Kurt suggested. It had been a while; maybe twenty years. He knew Finn had kept in better touch.

"Probably. It's been Noah pretty much since the academy." Despite that, Kurt still thought of him as Puck. Puck cleared his throat and nodded at the grave. "I, uh, kept an eye on that for you."

*Right*, because he was on the force. He was in plainclothes at the moment, but was probably carrying a badge in his pocket. "Thank you," Kurt said sincerely. "It means a lot to know someone was looking out for her."

Puck was entirely bald. He'd kept that look ever since leaving the Army. It made him look younger, oddly; only his eyebrows were there to be grey, and his face carried age well. "No problem." He shrugged. "Finn called, told me you were coming. And after I heard in my car to keep watch on someone in the air, well... figured you might make a stop here."

Kurt smirked. "Were they expecting me to cause trouble?"

"Expecting other people to make trouble for you, maybe," Puck said. Sadly, Kurt couldn't argue with that. "Hey, where are you staying?"

"Depends," Kurt shrugged. "I've had to see what sort of vibe I get from places before I check in. Some of them weren't... they weren't for me."

"Yeah, I was a little worried when I heard you were hotel-hopping over here. Some people are dicks. I, uh, have a guest room. You don't have to, but I have a guest room."

Surprised, Kurt didn't know at first how to respond. This was someone he hadn't talked to in a very long time. Sadly, he had to judge whether he thought Puck was trustworthy. All signs pointed to yes: he'd known him long ago and they'd left on good terms. He was still in contact with Finn, who trusted him. And he was a senior member of the Lima Police Department. "Sure," Kurt finally said. "That would be great, thank you."

Puck gestured toward one edge of the cemetery. "My car's that way." He hesitated immediately after he'd said it. "But you wouldn't fit," he theorized. "Unless you really squeezed."

"Put on your lights," Kurt said with a grin. "Make it easy to see, and I'll follow from above."

Chuckling, Puck agreed and they set off walking again. Kurt looked over his shoulder at the grave, but it felt all right to leave. He'd already halfway committed himself to bringing her with him as soon as he could. Though he could see asphalt in the distance, Puck took a swerve down one row that left Kurt confused; they were suddenly heading deeper into the cemetery rather than toward the parking lot. "Where are we... oh," he said as Puck's reason became obvious.

"Since we were here, I thought we could swing by," Puck explained. He shoved his hands into his pockets. "Had you heard? I don't think I remembered to tell Finn."

"No," Kurt said as he looked at the headstone. William Schuester had been married when he died, going by the words there. It was nice that he'd found someone. He wondered if it was Ms. Pillsbury. "No, I didn't know." He'd died the year before.

"It was natural," Puck said after an impromptu moment of silence. "I saw him around town now and then, since we both stayed. He was doing okay. Stuck with teaching. He retired, did some volunteer stuff, and then, you know... got sick, couldn't fight it off. I didn't hear the specifics. That's just what I picked up at the funeral."

"Oh," Kurt said. Complex emotions flooded him. If not for that man and the choir he'd started, his life would have been very different. And yet... he'd known him for only a year and a half decades earlier. His existence and importance was lodged firmly in Kurt's memories, but he couldn't remember what Mr. Schue looked like. "Did, um, Coach Sylvester...?"

"Dunno," Puck admitted. "She moved away after a while; I think she got a new job somewhere. And didn't keep in touch, obviously."

Kurt nodded silently. He'd have to look her up. Now that old memories were being jogged, his curiosity was piqued. "Well, thank you again for the offer. I've been having to steel myself for walking into each hotel, not knowing what kind of people I'd meet." Puck held out his hand; after a moment Kurt realized what he was doing and removed the bag strapped around him. Not that it was heavy—it couldn't be, to let him fly with it—but some men Puck's age would have shown what weight it did have. Not Puck; he was still clearly active and healthy, if not the strapping figure he'd once been.

They again walked toward the car and Kurt tried to make conversation. "Will I be surprising anyone there? I can't imagine you came here planning to do this...."

Puck shook his head, gestured to one car as they approached, and led him to it. "None of the kids are visiting." He saw the question in Kurt's eyes. "She died three years ago."

Ashamed that he hadn't known Puck's wife had passed, Kurt felt his face flush hot. It was only natural; after two failed marriages when he was younger, Puck stayed single for a while and then fell in love and married a woman fifteen years his senior. They'd thought it hilarious that, after all those years, he'd gone back to a 'cougar.' They teased him about it, but he didn't take too many insults. The two were in love and that was that.

The word suddenly reminded Kurt not of outdated slang, but of the mountain lion attack. He thought of security issues, of wondering how they were supposed to manage the refuge if people did know about it and found it 'interesting,' and of his concern that only animals could be trusted. And then he looked at Puck: a man with respectable service in Army followed by a long, proud career patrolling a town that many of their other friends had left.

"What?" Puck snorted when he saw Kurt staring. "Yeah, I know I'm still a catch. Too bad you look like some... infant." He grinned.

"I want to talk to you about something," Kurt said slowly. "When we get to your place. Lead on, I'll follow."



## Chapter Five

Puck's house had the feeling of being locked in time. That was a strange thing for him of all people to think, Kurt admitted as he touched down next to Puck's car, waved cheerfully at the gawking neighbors, and followed him inside. Still, it was true. The color scheme, the decorations, the appliances were all at least fifteen years out of date.

Kurt *was* his home, or at least he sometimes felt like that, and he'd put effort into making it a pleasant place to live. That had involved more than one major remodeling job over the years. He had the feeling that Puck's departed wife had chosen this look, never bothered to change anything as her health declined, and now Puck couldn't see any reason to spend money or effort on updating anything that wasn't actually broken. Still, it was cozy enough even if it gave the impression of bearing the open wound of her loss. "Thanks again," he said as he looked around for the spare room. Puck directed him down the hall and Kurt put his bag away. "It's hard to be around strangers."

"Probably safer if you steer clear," Puck agreed. He sounded like someone who'd seen the unfortunate fallout of situations that hadn't been 'safe.' "Hey, you want a beer?"

"Can't," Kurt said. "Water or juice, if you have it."

"Can't?" Puck repeated with a grin as he passed over a glass of water. "No one would buy it from looking at you, but I know you're legal."

"I can't or I'll throw up all over your lovely home," Kurt said dryly, and Puck relented. "So... how have you been?"

"Good," Puck said as he led Kurt to the living room and they settled onto the well-worn furniture. "My knee's been bothering me, but it does okay during the summer. Fires up in cold weather, though. I'm worried they'll stick me behind a desk for good after another attack and not let me come back out."

"You don't want to take it easier?" Kurt wondered. "You have to be getting close to retirement." God, he *was*. A man his age was staring down the barrel of retirement, while Kurt was unchanged and had no idea how long he might live. Mercedes had white hair. Rachel was wrinkled. Puck was as bald as a cue ball. It all seemed impossible.

"Retirement," Puck sneered as he took a drink. "Man, I hate that word."

"You're not looking forward to more free time?" Kurt gently asked. He remembered the years when he had free time. He'd wasted it then, and now that the refuge was so demanding he missed it.

Puck shrugged and gestured around his house. "Why, so I can spend it with no one?" He rubbed at his face and grumbled, "My kids visit. They're good kids, all of them. But everyone left Lima. Them, my friends, half the people in the town."

"I saw some other towns in the area," Kurt agreed. "They were doing better. New construction, new... everything. Lima just looks tired."

"Findlay's got a quarter million people in it," Puck said, referring to a town a half-hour to the east. Kurt instantly said he was kidding—when he'd left, it was smaller than Lima—and Puck shook his head. "This company came up with this new kind of fertilizer. Really boring, but they hired ten people, then a couple hundred, they spent money around town, more companies came in for other stuff..." He shrugged fatalistically. "They've got processing plants that the farmers use after harvests. A company makes windmills for electricity. Lots of stuff's going on. Nothing ever got traction here in Lima, though. Stuff opened and then it closed. It's just easier to move away, even if you're only driving up the road."

Kurt tilted his head in curiosity. "You didn't, though. The Army gave you medals. You probably could have gone to work for any police force you wanted, but you came back here."

It took a few sips of beer before Puck responded, "I didn't want to run out on someplace that needed me."

"That's nice," Kurt said softly. He heard an awful lot of subtext behind the words, but no matter what had driven Puck to feel that way, it really was an honorable sentiment. For all the mistakes he'd made along the way, Puck's life had clearly shaped a good man. "It can be overwhelming feeling that you're needed that much, but at the same time, it's good to have something that you care about."

Dark eyes searched him before Puck asked, "So, how's your place?"

"Good." Kurt had no sooner said the word than he backtracked. "Busy. I had to go to L.A. for this charity benefit last week, and it was the first time I'd left the valley in years. It was the first time I'd gone off entirely on my own *ever*, as pathetic as that sounds." He saw Puck's smirk. "Feel free to disagree with me on that description."

"Hey," Puck said with a shrug. "No harm in sticking around home. You're just some infant, after all." He dodged the throw pillow Kurt lobbed at him; his reflexes were still good. "So why'd you head out here if you've never gone off on your own before?" He saw Kurt's reluctance to tell the whole sordid tale and added, "The truth. All of it. That timing sounds weird and I want to know why."

"I just needed to get away for a week or so, to give the investigation time to play out." He'd said the magic words; Puck's interest was clearly piqued. "A man trespassed on our land and got ripped apart by a mountain lion. Well, that's what it looked like, and they just had to make sure that's what really happened."

"And you had to leave because...?"

"The animals there like me." Kurt shrugged. "I've played with them. The police know I don't actually train them, but they thought it would be better if there were absolutely no chance I could 'direct' any future attacks in the meantime. And so here I am in Ohio. It's weird."

To his surprise, Puck kept picking at that thread. No, Kurt realized: he shouldn't be surprised. This was not the Noah Puckerman he'd known very long ago, and only seen since then through occasional visits or conversations on a monitor. This was a man who'd served his country and hometown, kept plugging away at family until he got it right, and took all of that very seriously. He sounded like he was writing down a police report when he asked, "You're worried about 'future attacks?'"

"The man was paparazzi, we think. He wanted to get pictures of Angels around there, collect feathers... anything that could go up for sale." Kurt sighed. "Which means we're on the radar of *those* types. We were worried that more might come by if they heard that one of their own vanished on our land." He didn't like to think about how others might come by even without that story. If there were buyers for what one man could collect, others would try to meet that demand.

Puck stayed silent, but his quirked silver eyebrow demanded more of an answer: was it really that dangerous? Were they really that vulnerable?

Kurt shook his head ruefully. "I hated Los Angeles. Absolutely hated it. It felt like oil was clinging to my skin with each step I took outside. It was so... fake. Buildings with no space between them, pollution everywhere, trees in little cages. It was their territory, not mine." He rolled his neck from side to side. It was funny how he thought in terms of 'territories.' No wonder the animals liked him. "Of course, the reverse is also true: they came to my territory and they had no idea how to deal with what they found. Yes,

if we get more trespassers, they'll probably wind up dead. There's this bear family I've been befriending for thirty years, now. The cubs grow up knowing me. Anyone they don't trust, well... you know the term 'mama bear.' I'm rambling."

"And saying some pretty crazy stuff," Puck pointed out. "You actually play with bears?"

"Elk and wolves, too. Birds, sometimes. Raccoons are more trouble than they're worth."

"What about that mountain lion that ate that guy?" Puck asked.

Kurt instantly shook his head. They liked him as all of the animals did, but they didn't like being *around* him. "No. They're very grouchy."

Although he accepted the answer, Puck tilted his head and said, "Again, you realize you sound totally crazy."

Kurt considered that and smiled. "I guess so. This past couple of weeks has been enlightening as to how much of a bubble I've been living in for a very, very long time." It felt like the right time to approach the issue, and so he carefully began, "And that can be good. Living in a bubble can be good. All the people I'm helping are so fragile and broken that they really need that safe space."

"Is it bad?" Puck asked with a frown.

"Yes," Kurt answered. He knew Puck didn't simply mean 'bad' like other people might use the word. Of course it was *bad*, but it went far past that. Puck had seen some of the worst behavior humanity had to offer over the course of his lifetime. He knew what bad could really mean. "Some hadn't worn clothes in years. Nudity laws didn't apply to them, you know. The owners could take them out anywhere. So if they wanted to show off *what* they had, and they lived somewhere warm...." He rubbed tiredly at his neck. "Well, it does get cold where we live. I had to teach people about clothes."

Not all of the Angels were so horrifically broken. A few like Jennifer had been secretly purchased for rescue and now stayed there by choice. They were the luckiest. A sizeable minority had been viewed not as objects, but like some entertaining courtesans in Versailles. Though lesser than their wealthy 'betters' and expected to be friendly and compliant slaves in exchange for a pampered life, they were educated. They expressed opinions and argued theories. Their social-driven knowledge might not be immediately useful but they retained senses of self.

And then there were the others: children who'd been stolen from their parents at twelve years old, broken in training, and who'd forgotten what it was like to wear clothes. "Some of them might need more help than I can give," he finally continued. "Even though I'm just about the best person to offer it. It's really hard."

"I don't know how you do it," Puck said. "I've seen some horrible stuff, but most of my time's spent on... people setting off illegal fireworks, you know? It must kill you, doing it day in and day out."

"I have to do it, so I do." Kurt plucked at a loose thread on the chair's arm. "Um. I wanted to talk to you about something. Something specific."

"Okay," Puck said warily.

"We have trained dogs that we use for security, since I didn't think I could trust people. And now there are all those wild animals, we've been relying more and more on them... and I've seen where that got us." Kurt felt the low pinch of nervousness again. He desperately hoped that the press wouldn't try to invade their home. He didn't think he could take it, let alone all those vulnerable Angels. "Well, we need people at this point. People who can hear and understand orders, tell us what monitoring equipment to buy and who'll know how to use it...."

"Yeah, sounds like you need to upgrade," Puck agreed. "Why've you waited?"

"Because we could never be sure that someone would want access to our land and people's homes for the right reasons," Kurt said. "And we don't know how to research potential security personnel and check them out. We'd have no clue. So if we were going to set up a team, we'd need someone in charge. Someone that we could trust. Someone that... has police experience? And maybe some time in the military?" His hopeful smile made him look about twelve years old; he knew that even without a mirror.

Puck's smile had dropped away as he spoke, but then it returned along with disbelieving laughter. "What?"

"Just a month or two," Kurt immediately said. "I'm not asking you to move there. It's just that you'd be perfect."

"You're making me regret offering you a place to stay."

"Please just think about it," Kurt said. He knew it was asking a lot. He'd literally dropped out of the sky on the man, and now he was asking him to pick up his entire life and relocate it for a month of work on a project he'd never before considered. "I can't trust anyone, Puck. Noah."

Puck snorted at the use of his first name.

Kurt ignored that. "I honestly can't, even to be around me. And I'd fight back. Every time I fell asleep in a hotel on the way here, I wondered if I'd wake up to find someone on top of me. Even with no immediate threat I still had to worry. I always have to worry. All of us do."

Puck shook his head. "I have a job here."

"And how much vacation time do you have built up?" Kurt's expression and voice softened. "Please think about it. You might be the only person on the planet who can do this, and we really need you."

"Lima needs me." Puck looked at the framed photos that presumably held his children. "And there are lots of other people who can run security checks and teach a team how to use radios, come on."

"I'm sure," Kurt allowed. "But I can't trust them not to rape me." He said the word levelly and Puck flinched as Kurt knew he would. "Let's not dance around the issue. We both know what the world thinks I'm for, whether or not the collars are gone."

Shifting uncomfortably in his chair, Puck finally said, "Yeah, okay, I've got it."

"Just think about it," Kurt implored him. "We can talk about something else, but just think about it."

The opportunity was taken gladly. Puck changed to a soccer match and Kurt watched without comment. He knew about planting seeds: it took time to see results. If he harped on matters, Puck would either come along for a few days to shut him up or would close off entirely. Instead, his protector's mind would turn over the worst possible fates for Kurt and see every single one play out.

Eventually Puck said it was time for him to turn in. Kurt was tired after his long treks from California and to Ohio, but the time zone change left him not quite ready to do the same. He glanced at a clock on the wall and saw that it was early. Even with their schedule set by the sun, his family pushed into later hours. Of course, they had the vigor of youth. Puck didn't.

"Kurt?" Puck asked as he walked down the hall. He'd had to push himself out of his chair with a groan. "Do you ever look at the worst ones and think, 'that could have been me?'"

Kurt hesitated. Yes indeed, those images had been turning over in Puck's mind. "Every time. See you tomorrow, Puck."

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It was a weekend but Puck said he needed to go into work; he had cases open. Kurt was left alone to explore the town, compare it to others in the area, and realize just how quickly his nostalgia could be satisfied. He returned to Puck's sooner rather than later and found himself picking up a phone to call the number Puck had left. "Hey, since you'd have access to the laws... what does it take to move a grave?"

"For your mom's?"

Kurt confirmed that and frowned at what Puck told him: yes, they could move it. It would take some paperwork in both states, but he could pull all of the sheets for him. But if Kurt were picturing some sturdy wooden casket being lifted cleanly from the ground, he needed to update his plans. Caskets collapsed and rotted away. There would be dirt, bones, and nothing else.

The dispassionate description made Kurt flinch. "Really?"

"I've seen more than one grave turned over for evidence," Puck said, and Kurt accepted the statement unhappily. It sounded like Puck felt guilty over his words, like he wanted to make it up to Kurt. "Hey, want me to swing by somewhere for dinner? I don't mind. It's good to not have dinner for one. Again." His enthusiasm diminished somewhat at Kurt's answer of 'stop by the produce section in the grocery store,' but he said he'd be home soon. He didn't say whether he'd asked his boss about time off. Wait for the seed to grow, Kurt reminded himself. Wait for it.

"So, what'd you do today?" Puck asked when he got home. He seemed disbelieving that Kurt really only wanted the orange he snagged from the shopping bag.

"Sightseeing," Kurt said as he peeled his dinner. "I think your neighbors are going to gossip about me, by the way."

"Eh, let 'em," Puck said as he threw some horrible concoction into a pan to fry. Kurt frowned at it; that couldn't be good for his arteries. "I've given them plenty to gossip about."

They chatted about their lives over dinner. When asked about whether he was finally going to settle down, Kurt hesitated before saying there wasn't anyone just yet. It was true, even if he could see that changing.

Eventually they migrated back to the television. There were no games on, and so entertainment television was a compromise between them. "Pretty boys," Puck sneered. Grizzled, elderly, and solid: he was the antithesis of the term. "I don't understand my granddaughters liking these guys. They might as well put up posters of other girls on their walls, you know?" He admitted that if they actually wanted to do that it would be fine, but if they liked boys, why not go for *boys*?

Kurt was initially amused by Puck's clarification, but then he got a sick feeling as the entertainment news covered the hot young things of the moment. It wasn't a good idea, but he found himself saying, "And they definitely shouldn't idolize *that* one." Layton Reed smiled smoothly at the camera. His face was as perfect as a human's could be, although Kurt noticed a miniscule asymmetry in his nose and a few rough spots where his razor had tugged at his skin.

"Oh? I haven't kept up on crappy teen movies," Puck replied with a grin.

"I met him when I was in Los Angeles," Kurt said grimly. "He's not a nice person."

"All actors are jerks, right? Well, that's what you hear, anyway." Puck shrugged. "I'm sure there are some nice ones, but not the kind who walk *thosered* carpets." His smile dimmed as he took in Kurt's discomfort. "What happened?"

It sounded embarrassing when he thought back on it. Nothing had happened; he hadn't been pinned to the wall, he hadn't been threatened. He was probably more upset about how mimicking the man's sartorial choices had lead to that unfortunate decision to clip the ring to his shoulder. "I... it was nothing."

"What happened?" Puck repeated with the voice of someone used to drawing out information.



"He assumed I'd sleep with him." Kurt shrugged loosely. "Kind of boxed me in against the wall and didn't want to take no for an answer. Nothing actually happened, I was able to just walk away."

"Why'd he go after you?" Puck asked, frowning. "Did you flirt with him, or...?"

The question hurt. He felt like he was accused of doing something wrong, like he'd *deserved* it. "He saw me," Kurt said thickly. "That was all it took. The same as how a hotel refused my reservation when they saw me, because they thought I had to be there to meet someone by the hour. But no, you're probably right, I probably led him on and got his hopes up."

"Sorry," Puck said, and he did look genuinely remorseful. "Sorry. Of course you didn't do... it's just easier to think people aren't that stupid, you know?" A short, humorless laugh racked him. "Of course, I know how bad people can be. How stupid. And they don't need 'excuses.' Yeah, man, I'm sorry."

"Thanks," Kurt said and accepted the apology.

They watched promotions for the upcoming summer movie season in silence for a while. Puck was the one to finally speak up. "Have you been safe at home?"

"Mostly. There was this kidnapping thing once, I had to kill myself to get them to leave." He saw Puck's face pale. "It's a bargaining chip on my table and I used it when I had to. It still hurt, though," he added darkly. Kurt took two fingers and tapped them lightly on his chest, above his heart. "Knife," he explained. "We left it in until they were gone, so I wouldn't wake up."

"Fuck," Puck murmured.

"I can deal with all of this. I don't know if the others like me can," Kurt said. He suspected that seed was well planted in Puck's mind. It was time to give it water and sunlight, and to see if it was growing.

"You shouldn't have to 'deal with' killing yourself," Puck said. He sat there for a while and finally continued, "I went in to work so I could close out some cases."

Kurt tried to fight back a smile.

"My life was fine until you popped up," Puck grumbled. "It was *fine*. But yeah, whatever. I have vacation time. You need me, and I'm not going to punk out on someone who needs me. And I got the paperwork for

your mom's grave. Whatever, I'll just need to take my truck by the garage to make sure it'll be fine for the trip. I'm not going to fly out there. I hate flying. Seats are uncomfortable."

The smile broke free, and now Kurt didn't try to hide it. "Really?"

"Really," Puck said. "Neighbors'll watch the place until I get home. The guys at work said it'd be 'good for me' to have a big project to focus on." He shook his head and sighed. "You knew exactly what you were doing, didn't you? When you came here."

"It sort of struck me out of the blue," Kurt said. "But when I realized how perfect you'd be, I... went for it, yeah."

"You fine with leaving day after tomorrow?" Puck asked.

"Sure, they just said to leave for a week. Or I could just look at the truck tonight and see if it needs any repairs," Kurt said with a shrug. He saw Puck's dubious expression. "I might not have driven anything in decades, but we have plenty of vehicles around that place that need work."

Puck's continuing complaints rumbled around him like a distant thunderstorm, but he fought back a smile of his own as he put up that show. "Whatever. Go check it out. I can carry your stuff in the truck; I assume you won't want to ride in it."

The truck was solid; it only needed its fluids changed. Kurt couldn't do that without a lift to give him underside access, and so he sent Puck off for a quick service job first thing the next morning. Puck was on the road right after that visit and Kurt was in the sky. Lima vanished behind him almost without notice, and then Ohio. It didn't hurt at all. There was nothing for him there, and although he knew there was a tremendous amount of work waiting for him at home, he felt like he might actually be able to handle it.

They agreed at the first hotel that Puck would check in and only then go retrieve Kurt from where he'd descended to wait by the truck. The clerks started with surprise when the two of them entered the lobby, and then gave Puck a dark look that suggested they didn't appreciate what he would clearly be doing in their fine establishment. Impishly, Kurt grabbed his arm, stroked it, and then laid his head against Puck's shoulder as the elevator doors closed on them.

"Get off me," Puck laughed as he shoved him free.

"Oh, they were making assumptions anyway," Kurt said. "Why not let them upgrade to total certainty?"

Puck smirked and shook his head. "My life was normal before you decided to come visit." The door opened and deposited them on their floor. He hesitated before he stepped out, and Kurt flashed back to that normal life that Puck had left: a lonely house, a dead wife, retirement pending, and beloved children who scheduled occasional visits. Puck shook himself out of it, checked for the room number, and then threw a smile toward Kurt. "Thanks."

## Chapter Six

"What's it like?" Puck asked as he peered at the sight through their Iowa hotel window and then closed the blinds. They were splitting the drive up across four days, rather than the three Kurt had managed on his own. Kurt hadn't said a word when Puck announced that pace.

"Hmm?" Kurt asked. A grocery store strawberry went ignored in his hand. Delaying his meal was easy enough; it was sour and watery compared to the ones he picked at home.

"Being like... you know." Puck sat down at the small hotel table and picked at the fast food dinner he'd brought up to their room. "You."

"What's it like to be you?" Kurt countered. It wasn't as if he stepped in and out of human experience to gain perspective for comparison. His life was his life. When Puck frowned and began to argue, Kurt said, "Do you know how long it's been since I felt anything else? It's a little hard to describe how you *exist*."

The argument failed to impress Puck. "Okay, sure. I get that. But a long time ago you used to be like me, and I've never been like you. There's gotta be something you can talk about. Something that you know is different."

Surely Puck didn't want to know about the minutia: dietary restrictions, weight. After some silent consideration Kurt finally answered, "Light. Like a seed on the wind, going wherever it goes."

"Poetic," Puck said dryly.

Kurt shot him a dark look. "You asked." The vaguely apologetic gesture he got in return was enough, and Kurt returned to the odd task of trying to describe the way he lived and felt. "When the weather is good, I'm energetic and I want to be outside in the world. When it's bad, I can barely move. Days—years—passed by if I didn't have tasks that needed doing. I'd flit around and do whatever came to mind. I just...." He trailed off uncomfortably. Summing it up like this was putting his life into unpleasant perspective; was he really so shallow? "Until I had people's lives in my hands, my entire goal in life was to make my family happy and the world... pretty." Flowers. Animals. Food, holidays, doting on siblings as they grew. Kurt's expression dropped further with each new gentle memory he unearthed. "This is so stupid. I sound five years old."

"It doesn't sound stupid," Puck said.

"Oh, come on," Kurt said. It was a good thing he had all those order forms to fill, victims to comfort, and bills to pay. Now he had no choice but to spend his hours on worthwhile tasks. In earlier years he'd spent too long being useless and he realized that he owed his family for putting up with him.

"It doesn't," Puck repeated. "It sounds..." His fingers roamed over his meal and kept picking up and abandoning items. "It sounds innocent, I guess."

The word felt like an insult and Kurt's embarrassment deepened. "Great. So I really do sound five years old."

"Look, it's not a bad word. The worst crimes that got called in... they're ones that took some kid's innocence before they should have lost it, you know? And I tried to protect my sister from the world as long as I could." Puck laughed shortly. "Because the world can pretty much be full of shit."

"You're talking about kids," Kurt pointed out. "And making my point for me in the process." Any childhood innocence had long since been beaten out of him in moments of incredible suffering. If he sounded 'innocent' now, it was a regression.

The wrinkles on Puck's forehead deepened when his face furrowed in exasperation. "Will you knock it the hell off with the pity party? I... argh. Okay. I remember Finn told me that he works with your guys and helps them figure out what they want to do with their lives. Do you have a lot of Angels wanting to be... slumlords? Cage fighters? Muggers, drug dealers, stop me when I'm right?"

"Don't be stupid. No one wants to be any of those things," Kurt said with some annoyance. "Except for cage fighters, for some strange reason. I don't know why you would *want* to hurt other people to make a living."

"Yeah," Puck said, and Kurt was surprised to realize that he was smiling almost fondly. "I bet you don't. Okay. Thanks. I think I get the picture."

"We're not done," Kurt said. His cheeks were burning hot and he still felt like a kindergartener. "You still sound like you think I'm a baby, and we're not stopping at that point." If Puck thought he was no better than some child, then he might let himself believe it, too. He wouldn't let that happen.

"Well, good to see you've got some fire in you. I'm guessing most of the people you rescued aren't like that?"

The topic change annoyed him, but he answered. "No," Kurt said. He could keep arguing over how Puck saw him, but it was more important to fill him in on the people whose lives he'd be protecting. "No, they're quiet. Scared. Broken. Healing, but still...."

"Huh," Puck said and finally ate some of his French fries. When he swallowed he said, "Yeah, I guess it's a good thing I'm coming out there. You get to my age, you see the things I have... when you see someone innocent, you know they need as much protection as you can give. It's really not a bad word," he added when Kurt tried to argue one last time. "It might not work for everyone, but it's great where you can find it."

Kurt's only response was a short, sharp exhalation. It was all too easy to remember the terror he'd felt on something as harmless as a plane ride; that was *exactly* how a child would react, or an animal. Had he traded some of his higher mental functions for an indefinite lifespan? It made him feel unpleasantly like the descriptions that had been flung around during his decades in a collar: a pleasant decoration and nothing more.

"Weren't you just in Los Angeles, schmoozing with celebrities even though you hated the city?" Puck asked. He chewed as he talked. "Didn't you work with the cops at your place? Aren't you dealing with the paperwork for moving your mom, even though it's not like you pictured?"

"Yeah," Kurt said.

"You're different, okay, I got it. And no matter how much you hate to hear me say it, it sounds like 'innocent' came along as part of the changes. That doesn't mean you're not able to handle everything you're doing, though. Right?" Puck shrugged and gestured toward the muted television, where the newscasters were debating whether India and China's *détente* would fail and they would again threaten open war. "And it seems like we could use some people who just want to make things...." He let out a short, deep laugh. "Pretty."

"I guess," Kurt allowed. Long ago his life had centered on music and fashion, and they were about beauty. He hadn't felt wrong then. But for so many years he'd been pretending that he was enormously capable and mature inside his tiny comfort zone. It took a terrifying, humiliating trip to a big city and a painful

reminder of how much time had passed since his old life to make him question the years in-between. He just felt so off-balance.

"Seriously," Puck said as he finished shoving food into his mouth and announced that he was taking a shower. "What's the real problem? You're twitchy. Or maybe you're just like that now. I hope not."

He *had* to be ready to go to Los Angeles or New York when he needed to meet with people. If another body were found on their land, he'd have to go see it even though the scent of blood had left him shaken. He would stand up to paparazzi, work until his vision blurred to secure funding, and be the responsible one and turn down a possible relationship until it was the right time for both of them. "I have a standing offer to go to London," Kurt said. "And there are people who might help there. But I can't... I can't fly there. I just can't." Because he reacted like a child or animal on planes.

"Yeah, doubt you could make it across the Atlantic in one go," Puck agreed as he tugged off his shirt. Silver hair dusted his chest. "You'd go all Titanic and plunge in halfway there. You should probably take a plane."

"That's what I meant," Kurt mumbled unhappily. "I can't ride in planes."

"Why?" Puck wondered.

"They feel wrong. I...." He shut down, looked away, and didn't finish.

"They scare you," Puck deduced. "I got used to reading between the lines," he said when Kurt looked at him for an explanation of how he'd known that. "Especially when it was someone not wanting to admit what had them spooked. Okay, so you can't ride planes. Makes sense, I guess. So if you have another big benefit that needs an appearance, send someone from your family."

"It has to be me," Kurt said instantly.

"Why?"

"I'm... well, I'm in charge. And look at these," he added and gestured toward his shoulders. "It has to be me."

"Well, if you *can't*, then someone else has gotta." Puck saw Kurt about to protest. "Shut up. Just... shut up. You dragged me out here because you unclenched just enough to trust someone you've known for years,

and it took a murder investigation to do it. If that's your hurdle for turning over responsibility, then shit, you pretty much have to use your family because you don't really have any other options."

Kurt nodded and didn't respond.

"Why are you so tense about trying to manage everything?" Puck wondered as he finally proceeded into the bathroom and closed the door behind him. He didn't seem to want an answer; the shower turned on.

So instead, Kurt answered himself. Because he had some inkling of how those people felt, and his family didn't. He was the best suited person in the world to help them. And if he failed them, there was nowhere to go but down.

But if he got a call tomorrow to get on a London plane to receive a check for a full year's operations, he wouldn't be able to face that ride. Puck was right. He'd have to send someone in his place. After Puck left after his month or two in the valley, he'd have to trust some new human head of security. Kurt couldn't do everything, and they had to start figuring out how to interact with the world again.

He laid on one of the beds and rested his chin on his arms. The shower nearly drowned out the sound of the television when he took it off mute. Kurt flipped through channels and started with surprise when he landed on the charity telethon, now on its last day. Had it really been such a short time?

"Go get 'em," he said fondly as Mercedes sang one of her trademark numbers. He hoped she wasn't too upset that he'd left. Perhaps he should call and explain that he was currently in a hotel room in Iowa with Noah Puckerman. The surprise would probably convince her. It would be the strangest lie ever.

When Puck came out, clean and shiny-headed, Kurt sat up and reversed the program. "Look," he said excitedly and pointed to the screen.

Puck clearly had no idea who he was looking at until her name appeared along the bottom of the picture. "You're kidding me," he laughed as he realized the woman being celebrated on national television was a girl he'd known very long ago. "When did this happen?"

"All her life," Kurt replied dryly. "I take it you two didn't keep up?"

"Not so much."



"And you're not a big follower of gospel music?"

Puck smirked. He didn't even need to say the words 'temple' or 'kosher.' "Not so much. And don't tell me that you are."

"Well," Kurt said. "I'm a fan of *hers*." He watched the performance again with a proud smile on his face. "She's really happy, if you were wondering. With her life, her kids, home... everything. It sounds like she really has everything all figured out."

"Good to hear some people do," Puck said without any bitterness. He sounded tired, though. It had been a long day. "I'm gonna turn in, okay? Put in headphones if you're going to listen."

Kurt nodded and decided to go to sleep when Puck did. The exertion of travel was draining, and it was good to drift off before Puck's snoring became too loud.

The night's conversation turned over in his head as he clicked off the lamp. Innocence, and that not being a bad thing. Ceding control when he had to. Protecting people who needed it. Dealing with the outside world. And hopefully, figuring everything out like his friend on TV.

He was almost under when the first sharp, loud snort tore out of Puck's nose. Kurt sighed, put the headphones on, and tuned them to the television. The latest electronic symphony hits guided him toward sleep. He didn't know any of the songs, just like he hadn't known how to fasten that shirt in Los Angeles. Perhaps, Kurt thought as he finally slipped away, he should rediscover some old pleasures and leave living inside the bubble for the people who really needed it.

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"Follow me," Kurt said into his phone as he saw Puck's vehicle rumble past Lake Cascade. "It can be hard to find the right roads when you get close."

He descended until he felt like he was nearly skimming the grass and water below him. There was still a good distance, but for thousands of miles he'd been thousands of feet up. The air felt thick as he moved against it. He looked over, saw Puck acknowledge him with a thumbs-up, and began his guidance. It was

difficult to fly as slowly as Puck's car; he had to dart up and dive, or circle to the side and around. The people in the towns they passed ignored him as he passed over their roofs. They were used to the sight.

They crested a small hill, driving past a sign that prominently stated *PRIVATE PROPERTY AHEAD—STAY ON HIGHWAY*. This was when Puck really needed to pay attention, and Kurt dipped in front of him a few times until Puck, annoyed, gestured him onward. A few rumbling minutes later and Kurt showed him the right turn-off, and then decided to fly ahead to alert people as to who was coming.

"Hey," Carole said warmly as she saw him descend and pulled him in for a hug. "Glad you made it home safely."

He hugged back, felt a momentary flash of peculiar guilt for wanting to move his birth mother's grave, and said, "Puck will be here soon. Is there a room ready? They're long drives and he's pretty tired at the end." Even if Puck didn't like to admit that, Kurt added to himself.

"I've made one up," Carole said. "Noah Puckerman," she laughed to herself as she adjusted the bucket at her hip. It was filled with carrots and spinach packets for planting. "I barely remember that boy. I know Finn's mentioned what he's been doing with himself, but it's still odd."

"Not a boy any more," Kurt corrected as he heard the crunching of gravel in the distance. "Um, quick words before he's here. Make sure aspirin is in the bathroom for him. He's mentioned a bad knee when it's cold, but maybe the long drives will make it flare up. His wife died a few years back, avoid mentioning her. Kids don't visit as often as he'd like, so avoid mentioning them, too. And he wants to get back to his cases in Lima, so don't talk about the town so we're not reminding him of it."

Carole listened patiently and then said with a tolerant smile, "Don't mention his family, job, or home. Got it."

"He's here to do a job for us," Kurt pointed out as Puck pulled to a stop and his door opened. "You can talk about that. Puck!" he said cheerfully as he turned to greet him. He could hear a door opening behind him and another shouted greeting; Finn was there.

"Hey," Puck said as he stepped free and tugged out his and Kurt's bags. He was an instant center of attention from the people working in the distance, Angels and human siblings alike. They seldom saw

wrinkles or bald heads. Puck noticed Finn and grinned and nodded at him, and then turned and clearly tried to figure out the identity of the young woman who didn't look a day over twenty.

"Hi, Puck," Carole said. Her grin was just barely kept in check.

"Hey," he said uncertainly. His gaze flicked to Kurt for guidance; Kurt offered none.

"Well, I'll let you boys all catch up," Carole said, and her voice snapped into distinct 'mom mode' as she did. "I need to get these planted, and then Burt and I need to go do some fence checks."

Puck gawked at her as she walked off and the pieces snapped into place. "What... that's...." When Carole waved to a man who looked her same age, with broad shoulders and a full head of dark hair, Puck's eyes looked ready to pop out of their head. He gaped at Kurt.

"You've talked to Finn," Kurt pointed out. He had to know staying young was an option.

"I have grandkids her age," Puck said weakly, and then turned slowly to take in the family members still staring at him with mild curiosity. His expression revealed one response above all others: this place was weird.

That was apparently enough time to settle in, Finn had decided; he closed the distance between the two of them, gave a quick nod to Kurt, and turned his attention to Puck. "Hey!" Finn said with a smile that threatened to crack his face in half. He pulled Puck in for a hug, thumped him firmly on his back, and inspected his old friend when he pulled away. "You look good."

"Don't give me that," Puck laughed. "I look like shit. Look at these," he added and held up his hands. The skin fell in valleys between his bones, and age spots marked the backs.

Finn seemed uncertain as to how to respond, and smiled again and shrugged. "Well, anyway, thanks for coming. Kurt called to let us know what he'd asked you, and I think you'll really be able to help. We've got no clue how to handle this kind of stuff."

"You've got quite an operation going here," Puck agreed. His voice grew distant. When Kurt turned to him he saw that Puck's attention had wandered, and he tried to see the world through his fresh eyes.

Angels flew overhead like great birds. The sprawling house behind them stood guard over a valley dotted with orchards and open fields of wildflowers. Summer heat had yet to kick in, and so everything was still green before it faded to golden brown. In the distance a town was just visible; it had withered from even the small size it had started at when they'd moved there. Except for the highway, all the roads had been replaced with gravel when they needed repair. It was remote, quiet, and beautiful.

Kurt's fond smile died abruptly when he heard Puck's take on things. "This is going to be a bitch to secure. How long's the valley?"

"Um, well, it's sort of shaped like a teardrop, so there's more at the southern end than northern, but—" He cut off at Puck's annoyed look and refocused on only the length. "About six miles?"

"And what do you own?"

Finn cut in. "Everything except the town over there," he said as he pointed toward it. "And the highway and its shoulder are state land."

"Is there a hotel in town?" Puck seemed pleased when they shook their heads. "Good. One big Trojan horse out of the way, at least. But that town's bad news. Anyone who wants to come by here has an excuse, and the people there would take bribes to put up someone in a spare bedroom." He saw them ready to protest. "Someone would take bribes. Someone is always ready to take bribes. But at least it'll put some people off if they can't just make a reservation at a hotel." He started muttering to himself. "Okay. I want a list of everyone you're responsible for and where they're living. Are you on good terms with the force here?"

"Yes, we get along great," Kurt said when he realized Puck meant 'police.'

"Good," Puck said thoughtfully. "I'll go introduce myself and explain what I'm doing. Don't want to step on any toes, that'll just make things harder. But I'll want to check out your place first, talk with people." He rolled his neck back and forth. "It's been a long trip. Do you mind if I turn in?" It was light out, but he was still on Eastern time.

"I saw which room Mom put together," Finn said and led Puck there. Puck made appreciative noises at their house. He'd been there long ago but it had grown remarkably in the years between. His bedroom was comfortable and more than a little luxurious; it had hosted celebrities visiting the refuge before they wrote

their donation checks. After a quick survey of the place he thanked them, said he'd talk to them tomorrow, and turned in.

Kurt snapped instantly into focus when the door clicked shut. "I called a couple of days ago and you haven't gotten in touch with me since then. I assume everything with the investigation went fine?"

"They found cat spit in the cuts, or... or whatever they looked for," Finn confirmed. "They tracked the blood and found a den." He nodded when Kurt, cringing, asked if they'd killed the mountain lion. "Yeah. They said it was the best way to avoid any more attention, if the 'man eater' had been taken care of. They said it's standard if the species isn't endangered."

Such an unfortunate loss of life, Kurt thought morosely; the animal hadn't done anything outside its nature. He should feel bad for the man as well, but he'd been trying to put Angels—even indirectly—back up for sale. His sympathy was limited. Maybe that was wrong. "Are there any more photographers?"

"Not that we've seen." With that short report done, Finn relaxed and asked, "So how was the trip?"

"Not good," Kurt admitted. "The town was... it just made me sad. The house and school were gone. I saw Mr. Schuester's grave."

Finn had been nodding along sympathetically, but he started with surprise at the last note. That morphed quickly into melancholy. Like Kurt, Finn hadn't kept up with the man, but they both knew he'd done something very important for their lives. "Oh. Yeah. I guess... it's about that time."

"Yeah," Kurt said and looked at the door between them and Puck. "And Dad probably told you about the trouble I ran into with the hotels on the way there." He glanced at Finn when he didn't get an answer and saw only confusion. "Some wouldn't let me stay there, because of what I am."

"That's not fair," Finn said, sounding genuinely pained and offended.

Kurt shrugged. "This was a roundabout way of saying that I'm glad to be home." It was clearly where he was supposed to be. It would just be a matter of treating it like a functioning place in the world, now, rather than an isolated kingdom in some fantasy tale. "How's everyone?"

Running through their siblings' names confirmed that everyone was fine, albeit focused on the tasks they'd managed during Kurt's absence. Kurt resisted the urge to press the heels of his hands against his eyes. For

most people, going to one of Los Angeles' finest hotels would be a vacation. Visiting an old hometown would be a pleasant diversion. But he couldn't relax. Puck wouldn't be there that long, and he had to be ready to wring him dry while he was. "Any news that isn't... checklist oriented?" Kurt finally asked, cutting into the middle of the report.

"Um." Finn grinned awkwardly, which made Kurt instantly suspicious. "Well, I know you asked me if I could find Jae a hobby he could focus on. We had some spare paint sets. He's giving them a try."

"Good," Kurt said. Angels' altered eyesight had proven an unexpected boon to even amateur works; painting how they saw the world had already resulted in a couple of sales to interested collectors. It was the first real career path they'd seen for Angels outside of simply tending to their food and shelter in the valley. "Good, he needs something to do. Something to express himself with. Why are you smiling?"

"I think I'm gonna do it."

The muscles in Kurt's back were beginning to ache. The muscle strain would heal, but he'd have to suffer through some discomfort before it did. "Finn, I'm really tired. Can you just tell me?"

Finn rocked on the balls of his feet. His grin was blinding. "I'm gonna propose."

"It's about time," Kurt said sincerely. Legacy laws meant that Angels still couldn't get officially married—humans could only marry another consenting human—but that was headed for a fix. They could do pledges without paperwork in the meantime, anyway. "Congratulations. We're building you a new house."

Finn started. "Uh, do we really have time for that? Right now, anyway?"

"No. Not in the least. But you are just down the hall."

Catching on, Finn chuckled and promised he'd look into soundproofing.

"Great," Kurt said and yawned. Maybe someday he'd need his own house. Maybe someday he'd be concerned about disturbing the neighbors. Maybe someday he'd take a real vacation. But until that day, he would watch over his vulnerable charges, run the refuge, and deal with the worst of the world outside. He would not be a kindergartener afraid of things, even if he recognized his limitations.

Puck's words came back to him and Kurt hesitated before he headed upstairs to the comfort of his bed. "Finn? If the next charity benefit were in, say, London... would you mind going? To represent us?"

"Sure," Finn said. "Sounds fun. I get to go to London?"

"Someday, maybe," Kurt said. "Okay, thanks. That's helpful to know." He saw Finn's confusion and explained, "I'm trying to strike a balance between doing nothing and doing everything."

Finn's confusion was undiminished. "Uh, good?"

"Hopefully," Kurt said and slung his bag over his shoulder. "I know it's early, but I'm going to turn in. I want to be up when Puck is tomorrow, so I don't waste his time."

"Got it." After a quick runthrough of all the tasks Kurt normally did in the evenings, Finn asked, "Want me to wake you up for people's reports? I know Cole was working with the bees today, and Rose was working on fences—" He cut off abruptly when Kurt laid his hand on Finn's arm.

"I'm going to sleep," Kurt said with a mingled sense of relief and fear at letting even that much control slip out of his hands. "And they can report to you. Or Mom or Dad. And if there's a problem, you can decide how to handle it."

"Really?" Finn said in undisguised surprise.

He had to figure out how to deal with a security system that would alert them to any paparazzi hungry for the story of their existence. That would be Kurt's life for at least a month. He had to turn over some other responsibilities. There was no choice. "Really."

"Will do, then," Finn said. "Uh, want me to go tell anyone you're back?" His eyebrows raised suggestively. "Jae? Because we are all beyond ready for something to happen? I could go tell him to visit you in your room, not to pimp you out or anything."

Kurt smiled evenly. His responsibilities there were one thing he refused to shirk, even a little. "I think it's good if he paints for now, and we don't see each other quite as much. He'll figure himself out while I figure out Puck's plan. It'll all be for the best. Congratulations on the proposal. I'm sure she'll say yes."

The same overwhelming tiredness he'd felt coming up from Los Angeles was starting to pull at him, so Kurt excused himself and hurried to his bed. He was living in the extremes, he thought as he collapsed onto the bed without bothering to change his clothes: worried about high-level responsibilities and functioning on pure instinct. Going for decades as a useless bit of fluff, and then working his fingers to the bone. Somewhere in the middle, he thought as sleep overtook him. He needed to find somewhere in the middle.

By that time next week, he'd know that was a goal much easier said than done.



## **Chapter Seven**

"Well," Puck decided as he looked out at the landscape before him, "this place is so wholesome that it pisses me off."

"Excuse me?" Kurt asked.

It was near the end of Puck's first full day there. He'd spent most of the time walking the area and occasionally introducing himself to the Angels at their cabins. Most of the Hudsons had yet to meet him; he said they were lower priority than the Angels being comfortable with him, and so he hadn't lingered around the house. The guest wing was quite private as well, due to how it was designed to keep celebrities happy.

Kurt had tagged along. He smiled brightly when Puck turned a corner and a new landscape presented itself down the hillside, and rattled off all relevant information when they approached a new house. All day he'd felt like a proud parent showing off a favored child. And then Puck said that. "Weren't you all for 'innocence?'"

"I am," Puck agreed. "In theory." He grinned at Kurt. "I'm not saying it's a bad place, I'm just saying that I would lose my mind doing what they're doing." He gestured to the nearest cabin, where an Angel was looking out at the hillsides and duplicating the sight in her sketchpad with agile brown fingers. She had yet to choose a new name and so was still Salome. "I don't know, I just want to be useful. And I'm definitely not innocent."

"You can say that again," Kurt agreed wryly. "And art therapy is proving very useful to *them*. There are an awful lot of broken people here, Puck. Some, you can see it right on the surface. Some others..." He sighed. "You hope for more than they have inside them right now."

Puck nodded slowly. "What's his name?"

For a moment Kurt thought about protesting Puck's assumption, then admitted, "Jae. He's pretty sure that's his real name, so... so that's something."

"Man," Puck said and shook his head. He pulled out the food he'd brought for a snack and made a face when he unwrapped it; it too was 'wholesome.' "I've nearly lived my whole life and you're still waiting for yours to really start. That's gotta piss *you* off."

"Not really," Kurt said, although he didn't totally believe it. "I've done a lot professionally that I'm very proud of." With a grudging nod, Puck allowed him that. "Besides, I'm so close to my family. I couldn't have done it otherwise. Are... are you happy with your life? Honest question. I don't know. It's been a long time since we've talked, and I don't want to assume based on a week's exposure."

"I've figured out how to be a good guy, I think," Puck finally said. "I've done stuff that helped a lot of people. I just wish it hadn't taken me so long to stop screwing up with the rest of my life."

There was more raw honesty in his tone than Kurt expected. He had the sudden clear image of a man looking at a life behind him and wondering how it had slipped through his fingers, and why the few bright points darted free of his hands like fireflies. His wife died, his children moved away, and his job would soon strand him behind a desk. Kurt, at least, had his whole future ahead of him once his personal life stopped treading water. As near as anyone could tell, he would always have his whole future ahead of him.

"I tried to get Mercedes and Rachel to take a few years off," Kurt said after an awkward pause. "I was already thinking about saying goodbye to them and it was just too awful. They both said no. They wouldn't do it at all."

"Sounds like they have good lives," Puck said with a tinge of regret.

"Yeah," Kurt said. His throat felt suddenly thick as he thought back to his breakfast with Mercedes, and how few of those might be in the future. "Yeah. I think they've spent their time well."

For a while they were silent as Puck ate his meal. Kurt popped a few walnuts into his mouth and tried to stretch that out to match. "Come on," Puck finally said. "I've got the lay of the land. Let's head back in, I'm tired. We'll do more tomorrow."

Puck talked more to Angels the next day. It was instructive watching him work. Though he was bluntly professional during most of the day, he was careful and restrained whenever talking to someone still clearly vulnerable. At the end of it all he asked if he could meet Jae, but Kurt demurred. "I'm staying clear while he... while he relaxes," Kurt said. "What else do you want to do?"

"How messed up is he?" Puck asked, refusing to be put off.

"More than he seems," Kurt said. "But a lot less than almost everyone else." He managed a wan smile.

The lines on Puck's face deepened as he frowned, nodded, and looked around. "Show me where they found the guy." Though it stirred unpleasant memories, Kurt led him to the 'crime scene.' For a long while Puck simply stared at it, like he was flipping through records in his head, and then he began to pace the area around them. "Hey, can you go look up from the air?"

"Sure. What am I searching for?" Puck began to rattle off enough items that Kurt actually forced him to start over and jotted down a list as he went. He ascended and looked at the ground below him: yes, there was a faint trail. There were overhangs. There were broad, thorn-free bushes. And about a quarter-mile away there was one of the small roads they used to check the property. Kurt landed and gave his report, and Puck grimaced. "What?"

"Those overhangs could hide a tent. Damn. I hate the woods. I'm used to Lima or open desert. Someone wouldn't even need to stay in town; they could hang out here, hide in those bushes, and surprise someone who wandered out too far."

"And then what?" Kurt wondered. "I think he just got sent here for pictures. Maybe feathers." Puck looked faintly sick and Kurt instantly felt the same when he realized that Puck was worried about a lot more than typical paparazzi behavior. "They wouldn't actually take someone, do you think? The laws are so strict."

"You're looking at a long stretch of jail time if you force kids to have sex," Puck said simply. "Give people enough money, it still happens. And this place is one of the biggest grab bags in the world for it." He turned thoughtfully toward where the cabins began, beyond the trees. "But you're right. Most people would probably just come for pictures, and we still want to stop that. Do you think your guys would know when they're being watched?"

"No," Kurt admitted. "For most of their lives they've been told that they're supposed to stand there and be looked at. It wouldn't prompt any sense of danger."

"Hmm," Puck said and stared at the trees for a good while longer. For all his earlier protests, he genuinely seemed to be enjoying analyzing the challenges before him. "I'm gonna have to stay for two months, can see that already."

Kurt beamed. Puck told him to stop it.

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Even if he'd committed to staying longer, Puck still took meals in his room and kept to himself. It was like he was making a conscious effort to stay distant from the people around him. The message was clear: this was temporary. The only other person he really talked to was Finn, and then Kurt took over again the next morning.

It was Puck's last intended day of simply exploring their land and identifying the most prominent threats. On the next he would introduce himself to the people in town and begin making connections there. He seemed to have relaxed a little; on that day, he'd brought a beer with him for his lunch. "How many refuges are there?"

Kurt hesitated before asking, "Do you mean in the US, or anywhere, or...?"

"North America," Puck shrugged.

He knew them all, of course; anyone who was interested in Angel rights and had the wherewithal to really do something had been in contact with Kurt Hummel. "Here, of course," he started, ticking off locations on his fingers. "We're the largest by far, because we're the most trustworthy."

"Why's that?" Puck asked.

Kurt hooked a thumb over his shoulder, where white feathers stood. Every other refuge that he knew of had only human management. He was sure they were good, kind people, but his appearance was the best reference anyone could give. "They're trying to get one off the ground—no pun intended—near Taos. A

dozen or so live in a place in Arkansas, in the Ozarks; one on the Yucatan is half that. It barely earns the name. They might have to relocate the one in Quebec; they put it too far north, there's not a good growing season. The one in Vermont is doing very well. Probably the biggest refuge besides ours is near San Francisco—"

"Someone put one close to a big city?" Puck asked with a frown.

"Mexico, not California," Kurt clarified. "And I think that's it. Like I said, we're easily the biggest."

"And how many Angels are here?"

"Three hundred and fourteen as of the last count," Kurt replied confidently. "Well, sixteen if you include me and Jen, which I don't, really."

"Why not?"

Puck's tone was sharply professional. It put Kurt on edge; he'd expected a casual conversation and he instead felt like he was being questioned by... well, the police. "They're in recovery, but we aren't."

"So when the people off in those cabins," Puck began with a loose gesture toward the hillside, "are all happy and healthy, they're going to look different? Gonna... what, lose the wings and eyes and faces?"

"What's your point?" Kurt asked. This was tiring. "No, of course they'll look the same. Of course they'll still be Angels," he allowed when he saw the point to which Puck was building. "So we have three hundred and sixteen."

"What do you do for defense?" Puck asked as he swigged his beer. The sour smell of it wrinkled Kurt's nose. Puck stood out there like a beacon, with his elderly face and the security equipment he wore on his belt. Consuming alcohol in public was just another of those distinctions. But then, Kurt had the feeling that Puck hadn't really fit into Lima, either. He loved it and bled for it, but it didn't love him back.

"Nothing?" Kurt said uncertainly. "I've sadly run into trouble, but I can say that is *is* rare. And of course we had that problem, but up until now we've had the animals—"

Looking beyond unimpressed, Puck interrupted him. "And there's a problem I see. You're not thinking about life past this place. Which is fine for the people who are going to stay in your little Garden of Eden

setup like you want to, sure. You brought me in to make things safe here and I'll do that. But for anyone who's planning on a more exciting life than picking apples, they can't rely on having a really angry mountain lion looking over their shoulder."

Kurt began to protest over his dismissive characterization of the lifestyle in the valley, but Puck continued. "And say people do stick to the laws. They may be on your side now, but you guys are trying to be just *normal*. Which means that eventually, it won't be any worse to attack one of you than it would be to go after me. That's what I'm worried about, if you guys are just hanging around here to pick flowers and weave baskets and shit. I just hope those other places you mentioned do better at teaching people how to handle themselves outside."

"I thought you were fine with people being innocent," Kurt said. It stung to hear that Puck thought he wasn't doing a good job of taking care of people, even in one aspect.

"I do. I want to protect them. But you still teach kids how to deal with strangers when they drive up in a strange van."

That made Kurt pause, consider the possibility, and frown. He so desperately wanted to be treated as normal, but he'd forgotten what it felt like to not be shielded by a whole different set of laws. "When I have to, I run, generally," he finally said. He pointed toward the sky to clarify just what he meant.

Puck nodded, but clearly wanted more context. "Have you needed to do that a lot?"

"Sightseers," he explained. "We'd drive east to the lake to watch fireworks, that sort of thing. People would try to come near me if I wandered away at all. I'd stand up to leave, they'd stay where they were, but eventually they'd press their luck." Kurt shrugged. He'd never waited to see how innocent their intentions might be. It wasn't worth the risk.

"I'm going to teach you to fight," Puck decided. "Running's fine, but it shouldn't be your only option. The more I talk to people, the more worried I get. I don't want to... corrupt people, whatever, but there's gotta be a balance. You can be innocent without being helpless."

"I don't want to fight," Kurt said with a frown. Maybe he had felt helpless during his trip to Los Angeles and his treatment in tiny hotels, but he still didn't want to *fight*.

"Too bad," Puck said flippantly and, with a look around the bustling area in front of them, set off into the woods. Kurt glowered after him but followed; there was no way that Puck had the smell on him, yet, and so he was at risk from any animal he encountered. "You're going to learn to fight whether you want to or not," Puck informed him when he stopped in a clearing and turned.

"It's not that I just don't *want* to fight, it's that it feels *wrong*." Annoyed when Puck told him to explain himself, Kurt rolled his eyes. "I don't know, why does it feel better when I'm up a flight of stairs? How can I sense a storm rolling in? It just happens."

"Weird," Puck allowed, and put up his fists. He cleared his throat expectantly but lowered his hands when Kurt only eyed him. "Let's just see if you can throw a decent punch, to start," he said. One hand went back up, open. "Hit my palm."

Going through with things seemed to be the fastest way to get out of that moment, and so Kurt, sighing, balled a fist and impacted Puck's hand as hard as he could. That hand didn't even move and Puck's eyebrows began to creep up his forehead. "Were you kidding with that?"

"No," Kurt mumbled.

"Didn't you build houses?" Puck chortled. "How? Did you rent a crane to lift a single two-by-four?"

"It's not just about strength, it's about the momentum suddenly stopping. And momentum depends on both velocity and mass," Kurt said snippily back. He'd read through many topics over the years, including a variety of scientific fields. "You're stronger and I can't throw a punch any *faster* than you can, so I'm not going to be able to throw one that impacts anywhere near as hard."

"You're not tiny," Puck allowed. "You've got arms, you should be able to—"

"It's all for show, I weigh forty-five pounds." When Puck stared at him and then laughed at what he clearly thought was a joke, Kurt continued, "Pick me up."

"...Huh," Puck said when he'd wrapped his hands around Kurt's waist, began to lift what he clearly expected to only be an inch or two, and found that he could easily raise him much more than that. He held Kurt above him like some parody of a pairs figure skating routine. "Is this new?"

"Only if by 'new' you mean 'decades old.'" When a return to earth didn't seem imminent, Kurt fluttered up and out of Puck's hands and then touched lightly back down. "It helps with agility in the air, endurance, speed, that sort of thing. But I am clearly not destined to throw a punch, like you would know if you'd *listened* to me when I said—"

"If the changes help with speed, then you can be built for this. We can get you to move your arm faster. Even if it's not a strong punch, you can catch someone by surprise." Seeing Kurt's flat expression, Puck glowered back. "You asked me to come here. There are a lot of people here who should learn how to take care of themselves, as soon as they're strong enough to do it. Now, you don't have to be my guinea pig, but unless you want me figuring out my training routine on someone who's still going through flashbacks...."

"Fine," Kurt said. "Fine. What next?"

Puck's initial plan went poorly. He tried to get Kurt to settle into a rhythm of striking his upheld palms, but the more Kurt focused, the worse he performed. Soon they were both short-tempered, irritated, and snapping at each other. "How do you fly?" Puck finally demanded. "Do you think about it this damn much?"

"Of course not, I just *do* it," Kurt said. "That's natural for me. This is not."

"Okay," Puck said. He took several deep, calming breaths. "We'll try something different, so I can see how you react on instinct. I'm going to hide and I'll surprise you."

"But you just *told* me, so I'll know you're coming," Kurt pointed out.

Considering that, Puck slowly nodded. "No, don't worry. I've got a plan. Start walking further into the woods, okay? Just let your attention wander. So long as you stay on the ground, I can keep up."

With a dubious look, Kurt complied. He started walking up a hillside through the trees. It was steep; he wound up aiming toward a scattering of rocks. Their flat surfaces were like a natural staircase. He could make out a small ravine in the distance, and thick clusters of blackberry and huckleberry bushes blocked his gaze in some directions. It became like a game of Hide and Seek. Puck had vanished from view very quickly; where could he be?

Kurt might look decades younger and more fit, but the ease with which Puck had hidden was a reminder of all the skills his life had given him. He'd gone on three combat tours before his honorable discharge from the Army; all their friends fretted until he was back home, and then worried again until his next return.



Though he'd never been injured himself, he'd seen live fire and had dragged a friend to safety. With that medal the police academy was glad to have him in their ranks, and soon he patrolled domestic streets instead of foreign.

Right now he was probably stalking Kurt like an enemy soldier, or an armed and dangerous criminal. Kurt grinned a little at the absurdity as he hopped up a particularly steep incline and then kept climbing his staircase. Life coursed through him, not death. Sometimes that knowledge made him feel powerful. That day, with Puck stalking him, it made him feel about as dangerous as a newborn kitten.

Eventually Kurt became bored and wondered if he'd inadvertently lost Puck. The man was old, after all, and despite trying to stay to the ground Kurt had helped himself up the hillside with his wings on occasion. He might have cheated and left him behind. Kurt frowned with concern as the words gained more meaning: Puck was *old*. He'd complained about his knee. What if he'd collapsed from the exertion of trying to keep up? Should he twist their game around and go hunting for Puck, just to make sure he was all right? Yes, Kurt decided as fear bloomed. He would turn around and—

*"On the ground!"* shouted a harsh voice in Kurt's ear. A gun's safety clicked off an inch from his ear.

Kurt's wing snapped out like a cobra striking even before fear entered his conscious awareness. The incredibly strong muscles were already retracting by the time he realized what he'd done. "Oh... oh God," he whispered as he turned around and saw Puck on the ground. He was clutching his throat. It was hard to see under those hands, but Kurt could tell that his windpipe was crushed nearly flat.

"No," he whispered as he threw himself to Puck's side. "No, no, no no no no *no!*" he pleaded as he saw that he might have just killed Noah Puckerman. The horribly strangled noises falling from the man's mouth turned Kurt's stomach. "Hold on, hold on," Kurt said as he fumbled at his belt for one of his ever-present knives. It wasn't there. Paralyzed momentarily with shock, he realized the hiccup in his schedule had ruined his habits, including sticking his knife in his belt.

How the hell was he supposed to save Puck's life without his knife? Hot tears filled his eyes as he listened to Puck die. His boots slid against the ground and spittle flecked his lips. His gun lay abandoned where it had fallen. His *gun*.

Kurt's eyes opened wide and he reached frantically for the weapon. Before he'd let himself think about what he was about to do, his right hand wrapped around the handle, his finger slipped against the trigger,

and his left hand exploded into roadkill. Though he screamed, he worked. First he slid the mangled, bleeding stump against the outside of Puck's throat. He had to pull Puck's hands away to get access. Puck, clearly lost to the fear of approaching death, fought him like a terrified animal.

He didn't judge him. He'd been there. With the strength of adrenaline he used his good hand to force open Puck's jaw, held it in that gasping 'O', and shoved his stump against the hole and bled into it like a faucet.

He could actually see Puck's crushed throat inflate like a balloon. The angry red line where his wing had struck faded, and Puck's gasps became deep, effective breaths.

When it became clear that Puck would be okay, Kurt sank against the ground and felt his head swim. It was only then that he took a good look at the shattered mess he'd made of his hand. After a wave of disbelief over blowing himself apart at point-blank range, the pain hit him full-force and he screamed again. His teeth clenched as he tried to contain himself. He panted through them as his hand repaired itself in waves of golden glows.

Puck was sitting up when Kurt finally looked away from his restored hand. He'd kept flexing it, irrationally worried over its condition, and was so focused on its healing that he'd forgotten what he'd see when he turned. "Oh," Kurt said in a tiny voice as he looked at Puck.

Clear eyes in a young, strong face stared back at him. "I feel weird," Puck managed. He swallowed and reached up to touch his throat. He looked like he was on the edge of a breakdown and was just barely holding it in check; again, Kurt had sympathy. "What happened? Did you hit me on the head? Did you knock me out?" That would make sense. Everything he'd felt, everything *impossible* he'd just felt, could be a dream.

"Sort of," Kurt ventured. He bit at his lip. It had been a very long time since he'd forced blood on anyone. "Look at your hand."

Frowning, Puck brought it in front of his face. It took him a second to process what he was seeing, and then he kept flipping his hand back and forth to stare at the smooth palm and the back unmarked with age spots. His knuckles weren't as prominent and muscle, rather than raw tendons, seemed to fill the skin. "What did you do?" Puck asked warily, though he sounded like he knew the answer.

"You were dying," Kurt began.

"Because... wait, you *hit me in the throat!*" Puck said, and launched himself at Kurt.

"You drew a gun on me!" Kurt protested as Puck grabbed him by the shirt collar and slammed him against the nearest tree. He winced at the way it impacted his wings.

"This is what you do to people?" Puck asked. "*This* is how you keep them young? You've got some freaky vampire Amish commune going on?"

"I just saved your life, in case you didn't notice," Kurt said, as his wings really did hurt and he felt increasingly annoyed as his terror ebbed. "And I blew my hand apart to do it! You could at least pretend to be grateful!"

"Wait, you used my gun? Why?" Puck asked as he glanced at where the firearm had been thrown to the ground.

"Because I needed blood quickly!" Kurt said, as the answer should be obvious. "And I didn't have a knife!"

"So use a rock! It's not my fault you blew your hand off!"

"Well excuse me, Noah Puckerman, for going for the sure-fire solution to keep you alive! Do you want me to crush your windpipe again? Because this time I can just leave you there," Kurt snapped with more annoyance than he'd expected. His fear and guilt were knotted together and kept warping into new emotions as they tried to break free.

Puck's brow knitted with uncertainty.

"I'm sorry," Kurt said more gently after they'd stared at each other and their adrenaline faded. "It was pure reaction, attacking you like that. I couldn't have stopped it, and if I'd known I would have told you not to try. But I didn't mean for it to end like this."

"How old am I?" Puck finally asked.

"The minimum's about twenty. And... and you took an awful lot of blood," Kurt added. "So I'm guessing... the minimum."

"I'm twenty?" Puck repeated in disbelief. "Two zero? Like I was in two thousand and... and whatever?"

"Or close to it," Kurt said.

"What am I supposed to do with this?" Puck finally asked him. "What am I supposed to tell people?" He let Kurt go when he genuinely tried to answer the question, and sighed and rubbed a hand over his head. He looked surprised to feel short, velvety hair growing in over a skull that had long since gone naturally bald. "I can't go back," he realized with slow-building horror. "I can't go home." All those changes were in his voice: his career was over, the home he'd built with his wife.

"Puck...."

"Just...." Puck trailed off, held up his hands, and walked away. Kurt was left watching him vanish into the forest. The wind picked up and ruffled his wings slightly; he ignored the sensation.

He either acted on pure instinct or denied his desires in order to sit in an office all day. He either worked in that office or blew it completely off in order to tag along with their visitor. And after friends turned down a few years' worth of his blood, he accidentally showered someone with decades of the stuff.

Balance. It was yet to be found.

## Chapter Eight

Eventually Kurt gave in and began the work of tracking down Puck. He couldn't let the man wander alone. He was still new. It wasn't safe for him to wander through the woods.

It was a task easier said than done. Kurt, although he felt at home in his forest, quickly realized that he was ill trained for finding someone who didn't want to be found. He was used to wandering aimlessly and enjoying what he stumbled across, not pursuing someone like a hunter.

In the end he found the bear, not Puck. She was sniffing him curiously, with no malice that he could see, but Puck was still frozen and terrified. He seemed on the verge of playing dead. Yet he also seemed afraid that if he did fall completely over, she'd take the opportunity to pounce on him when he had no chance of running away. This was clearly someone used to threats only from people.

"Hey, girl," Kurt called softly. Her massive head raised and she almost seemed to smile at him. She was one of the cubs he'd rescued and raised at the house into adolescence, and was far too friendly around humans because of it. That was the sort of thing he couldn't do any more, Kurt realized. Not after the mountain lion attack. "Hey, come over here. Leave Puck alone."

She ambled toward him and Puck shuddered with relief. Her heavy, coarse fur threaded through Kurt's fingers as he scratched the ruff around her shoulders. "She wasn't going to hurt you," he said in that same gentle voice. The animals had no idea what he was saying; they just responded to the tone. "She wouldn't. Because you... now you smell like me."

Puck looked hollowly back at Kurt. Despite the youthfulness of his face, his cheeks still looked sunken and his eyes were shaded. He'd just had his life ripped away from him, after all.

"She was just saying hello," Kurt finished awkwardly as he realized what had really happened. Beyond having his life shredded, Puck was going to have to stay here. He'd probably have to pretend to be another blood relative, at least for a while. She'd been greeting the latest addition to her home.

"How could you do this to me?" Puck asked as he watched Kurt scratch the bear's fur. "You... no one knows this happens. No one knows this is how you stay young." He swallowed hard.

"I didn't..."

"I know. You just reacted, I shouldn't have pulled a gun. I'm pissed and you're convenient, okay?"

"Fair enough," Kurt said quietly. The bear's rough tongue laved his palm. No, he couldn't rescue any more like her. Certainly not to the extent that he would bring them to the house.

Puck kept shaking his head. "Shit. If you thought you had people coming in to try to take *feathers*...."

"What?" Kurt asked.

"You're the fountain of freaking youth, in case you didn't notice. Every single person here isn't just worth the prices you got before in collars, you're *repriceless*."

"Oh. It doesn't work like that," Kurt said. "I only heal people when I want to. Heal other people, anyway; it's automatic on myself." Puck looked annoyed and Kurt admitted, "But outsiders wouldn't know that. They'd kidnap Angels and bleed them dry, trying. You're right."

"You are in so far over your head," Puck said. "Everyone is." Though he directed the words at everyone he'd seen, he seemed to mean himself most of all.

"You can stay here," Kurt finally said. "I know it's not by choice and I know it's not what you want, but...."

"I have a life there, Hudson!"

"Hummel," Kurt corrected. "I changed it back when the collar came off. I guess you just got used to thinking of us all together as—"

"Shut up!"

Kurt did.

"I have a life," Puck repeated and began to pace around the clearing. The bear looked up, made a curious noise, and Puck adjusted his trajectory to avoid her. "I have medals on my wall. Framed pictures of my family. I'm *someone*, not this fucked-up kid who had to get the shit kicked out of him to turn into someone worth caring about!"

"You were worth caring about," Kurt said in surprise. "God, Puck. How many years has it been, and I still remember that you were going to try to break me out and bring me home. I can barely remember some people's faces and I still remember that."

"My name isn't Puck!" he snapped. "Puck is that kid. Noah came back from service, okay? They didn't ask 'Puck' to say his vows. Or give him a plaque, or anything that matters."

"All right," Kurt carefully said. "But I've been calling you Puck all this time, Noah. I've been thinking of you with the name. And I asked *Puck* to come here because I trusted *Puck* to keep a lot of very fragile people safe. It wasn't an insult."

When Puck didn't say anything, Kurt risked a step toward him even though the bear followed. "You said you just had one more bad winter with your knee before you were off the streets and behind a desk." Puck flinched, but Kurt continued gently and implacably. "I know you said the city needed you, but... how much longer would you be able to give anything to it?"

Puck walked away from him, but only to lean against the trunk of a tree. He slumped miserably.

"You could give so much here," Kurt added, though he knew he might be pushing too hard.

Sure enough, that seemed to put some fire back into Puck's eyes. "And so I'm just supposed to give up on my family?"

"No," Kurt said. "They can come visit, although I certainly hope you'll tell them to bite their tongues about, well, everything. You've said they're good people, I'm sure they'll know how important that is. So they can come *visit*... like they've been doing at your home," he said delicately.

Puck glared at him, but it soon faded. He looked suddenly lost. "How did I get here? I tried to fix things when I screwed up, I worked hard, and things still got fucked up. It took me a long damn time to work things out and by the time I did, everyone else in my department was half my age. Why don't... why doesn't..." His hand, balled into a fist, slammed hard against the tree trunk. "Why is Mercedes so perfect that she didn't even want an extra year? What'd she do right?"

"I don't know," Kurt said with complete honesty. "It took me a very long time to stop wasting myself. And now I can barely handle everything that's going on. I don't know, P... Noah. I don't know how she managed everything right from the start." He took another step closer. Puck watched the bear warily as she ambled

along with Kurt, but stayed where he was. "I suppose, if you want to look at things this way... you can give it another try. You're the man you want to be, now. You can do everything right."

For the first time, Puck didn't snap at him or glare. His gaze focused somewhere a mile away and stayed there for a long while.

"You can help somewhere that needs you," Kurt eventually added. "Everyone here, all those *innocent* people you met, will have you to thank for keeping them safe. And you will never, ever wind up behind a desk if that's not somewhere you want to be."

"You know," Puck said after a long while of studying the sky, and then studying Kurt. "It'd only be fair if I got to hit you, too. That really fucking hurt."

Kurt tilted his chin up and exposed his neck to the man. "Go for it. It's been a very long time since I choked to death. I can handle it."

The words jolted Puck. He mouthed 'to death' and looked shaken. "Put your head down," he finally sighed. "Goddammit. You'd better find me my own place, I'm not staying in that guest room forever. I'm drawing up a budget and you're getting me the money. When I hire security people, I'll let you meet them but you'd better trust my judgment. Make that bear go away. And stop smiling, you look like an idiot."

"Sorry," Kurt said and bit his lip hard enough to hurt. He still wanted to smile. "Puck, I... sorry. Force of habit."

"Whatever," Puck grumbled. "Puck's fine. That moron can have a second chance to grow up right from day one, I guess."

"Okay, then... Puck," Kurt said smoothly. "I suppose we'd better head back. And oh, we left your gun on the ground back there. I suppose we were a little distracted."

Puck frowned at the realization, and then hurried off toward the abandoned weapon. He didn't even blink as he passed the bear. He would be perfect for this, Kurt thought. No matter how it had happened, Puck would be perfect. He caught up just as the gun was scooped off the ground and holstered. With a glance over his shoulder, Puck walked up to a tree, faced it, and fumbled with his jeans.

"What are you... oh," Kurt said, and tried not to blush.



"We're pretty far up and it's already a lucky thing that I didn't piss myself," Puck explained as he relieved himself against the tree. "I'm not gonna walk back feeling ready to explode. This day is bad enough. And I...." He trailed off, stared at himself, and then turned to face Kurt in outrage.

Though he squeaked in surprise and covered his eyes against what Puck surely wasn't meaning to reveal, Kurt reluctantly lowered his hand when he heard his name. "Um. Puck. You might want to zip up?"

"What did you do? I'm in a fucking turtleneck!"

"Oh," Kurt said as he realized—still embarrassed—that Puck was gesturing to his genitals. A couple of the Angels there had been raised in the Jewish faith and felt uneasy about no longer being circumcised, even though they knew they couldn't possibly uphold it. One of his brothers had researched the matter for them, and it was that information that he told Puck. "It's strictly *required* inside Orthodox communities, but some number of Reform... you didn't really want an answer, did you?"

"No," Puck said, "I pretty much just wanted to yell at you. Oh, damn," he groaned and rubbed a hand over his face. "Now I know that every guy here is uncut. Why do I know this? I shouldn't know this."

Kurt hid his smile. "I know it's hard with the change in yours, but try to think of anything besides... bodies."

"That'd be great," Puck grumbled. "It's just that my brain is... dammit." He shifted uncomfortably. "I'm in my sixties and all of a sudden all I can think about is that I want to put my dick in everything. Holy crap, is this hitting hard. Was I seriously this horny all the time?" He saw Kurt grinning and scowled at him. "It's not funny, I can't even think straight!"

"You were this horny and more, if vague memory serves," Kurt almost giggled. "Don't worry, you'll adjust. I'm sorry, I shouldn't laugh." And he shouldn't. He'd just taken a man's life off on a sharp detour without asking. But that man, after their heartfelt talk, had just shown him his penis like evidence in a crime and then complained about feeling like a hormone-drenched teenager. It was a little too much absurdity to swallow at once. "Will you please put yourself away?"

Grumbling, Puck did. "Dammit," he said, though it had the air of putting on a show. "Tell the bear to go away. Get all the animals to stay clear. No more animals."

"There are elk and birds and whatnot, Puck," Kurt said dryly. "All right, I understand if we need to strike that balance with not getting too close to the large, dangerous carnivores. But I like being around them and I'm not going to chase everything off."

As if he needed to prove himself in some way when Kurt countered him, Puck snapped, "All your Angels should keep a trained dog with them until they can defend themselves. I've had a canine partner, it worked well. You should do it. We're doing it."

"Oh!" Kurt said brightly. It was like the sun clearing on a cloudy day. "What a great idea! I can't believe we never thought of that before, assigning them one-on-one instead of just having patrolling packs. It's so obvious! Animals naturally protect us, and the police said that they know how to deal with dogs."

"And that won't be everything," Puck said as he began stomping down the hillside. "I'm still going to put together a training program. They're going to learn how to use those wings on purpose. They hit like fucking freight trains," he added more quietly, probably not intending Kurt to hear. Speaking up again, he mused, "If you can fly quickly, maybe you can make diving attacks... you'd need to practice with targets on the ground, though, and not pulling up in time would be pretty messy. There are lakes everywhere, though. Yeah, yeah, that'd work."

The sense of purpose was giving the man more energy and speed with each step. Kurt had the good sense to stay quiet and let him enjoy his moment, to have the feeling that the future might hold more than the past.

They came out of the woods and into the gravel-covered clearing that served as a courtyard between kennels, sheds, and the main house, and Finn did a double-take as he passed. "Oh, come on," he sighed as he took in Puck's young face, but he rounded on Kurt to show his annoyance. "You couldn't have taken off, like, five years to start? This is kinda noticeable."

"It was an accident," Kurt said.

"Hey!" Puck said as he peered inside his shirt. "All my tattoos are gone!"

Rose, one of their sisters, noticed the appearance of their visitor as she passed with a basket in hand. She'd only seen Puck from a distance before, and she frowned when she realized that it was him standing there. "Kurt!" she said, almost pouting. "What did you do?"

"It was an accident!" Kurt protested.

"You had tattoos?" she asked wistfully. "Did you have scars?"

Puck checked. "Uh, yeah. I *did*."

"Old people are so interesting," Rose said with a sigh as she walked off.

"Seriously," Puck repeated as he saw more distant faces begin to look at him with interest. But already he seemed to be studying a home, not some vacation spot. "This place is weird."

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Two weeks later, Puck had settled in. He'd put off calling his job to say that his vacation would be permanent, and hadn't yet talked to his children. But the first steps had been made. He'd called movers and given a friend permission to let them into the house. Many of his things could be left there, but pictures, awards, and his wife's ashes... they would all make the trip.

"Do you miss her?" Kurt asked as Puck called a dog over and made notes on how quickly it responded.

"Sometimes," Puck said. "I mean, I'll always love her, you know? But you hit a point where you can look back and think of the good stuff instead of how much everything hurts." It was the voice of a man who was really going to give this new life a real chance, Kurt thought.

"I know," Kurt said with a smile. They were both going to acknowledge their pasts but move forward as best they could. "I put in the paperwork to have the grave moved. It's not cheap, but I'll...." He sighed. "I'll go to more benefits to raise more money, if I have to." He'd hate it, but it wasn't fair to expect someone else in his family to try to earn money simply so he could move a grave that had settled for decades.

Puck eyed him flatly. "Dude. Give up some slack. You said you'd let other people go to cities."

"I know, but—"

"You said you would listen to me," Puck said with a smirk.

"On security issues."

"You're the head of this organization and you're trying to send yourself into environments which compromise your judgment," Puck said in a clipped, military-esque tone. "As head of security, I strongly recommend sending a subordinate better suited for these tasks."

"It is so weird," Kurt said after eying him, "to hear those words coming out of that face. And fine, it's not like I don't have things to do here."

"Yeah, there's another thing," Puck said as he started to walk toward a narrow trail that had been worn into the hillside over decades. "You're having me doing this so I won't be stuck behind a desk, and now you're back to doing the same thing. And frankly, it looks a lot stupider to have a giant pair of wings in an office than some old guy with a bad knee."

"Meaning?" Kurt asked as he wondered why he was following Puck, if he insisted on criticizing him so much.

"Meaning that as the new guy, I have the best perspective on everything. And I'm telling you to have some fun." He moved to sling his arm across Kurt's shoulders, but Kurt skittered away and Puck rolled his eyes. "Yeah, yeah, I was clearly going to feel you up."

"Force of habit," Kurt muttered. "The touching list is *very* short."

Puck considered him for a second more, seemed ready to say something, then cleared his throat. "So, as the person in charge of maintaining order around here, I am making two recommendations." It was still so odd to hear that language coming out of his mouth, but suddenly much easier to picture him in his long-abandoned soldier's uniform. "One, you set hours for yourself and then get outside the house and do something relaxing. A hobby, whatever. You've got people painting, right?"

"I am not going to paint," Kurt laughed, but trailed off and considered that. "I... well. Before I started all this, I thought that perhaps I could do some good with writing. So I could be heard anywhere without being seen. And I always kind of wanted to try it, but...."

"There you go!" Puck said, though he didn't really seem to care so long as Kurt picked something.

"And I do have a friend in London who might have some tips on it," Kurt added to himself impishly. Exchanging words would be a much easier and much more fantastic trip than trying to send himself across the Atlantic. "Okay. Point two?"

"Go check on your guy, because getting your wings felt up can seriously not be enough to keep you going."

"Oh god," Kurt mumbled, blushing. "Puck—"

"You're the guy who's twenty forever," Puck said, folding his arms. "And believe me, I've remembered what that feels like." He paused, narrowed his eyes at Kurt, and then seemed to consider him very thoughtfully. "It *hasn't* been enough, has it?"

He was *not* about to talk about his past—or the contents of a certain drawer—with Noah Puckerman, no matter what the man's new job title was. "I'll go talk to Jae!" Kurt said loudly. "Would you like to meet him? Right now? To stop this conversation?"

Grinning, Puck allowed himself to be led down the right chain of trails to a cabin identical to any other. Occasionally Puck saw something that caught his attention and he made notes on what had become an ever-present tablet, but he mostly seemed interested in forcing this meeting. Kurt held back a sigh; by that point, was there anyone not interested in his love life? Or the potential for one, at least. "Jae," he called out when he approached the cabin, and heard a voice from the far side that overlooked the valley floor below.

Rounding the house revealed Jae sitting on a stump with pastels in hand. A landscape, inexpert but already better than his first attempts, rested on his knees. "This is Noah Puckerman," Kurt said. "Puck. He's doing some security work for us and wanted to meet you."

Jae's brow dipped. "I already met him."

"I stopped by all the places, remember?" Puck said. His smile for Kurt grew. "I wanted to meet him *with* you."

"Fine," Kurt muttered. Someone was clearly enjoying himself until he began working on his own personal life again, after it had stalled for years after his wife's death. "Just—"

"Do you like him?" Puck asked.

If Jae were taken aback by the question, he didn't show it. His voice was as rich and level as ever when he said, "Yes. I like Kurt very much."

"Good, good," Puck said. It was hard for Kurt not to cover his face with his hands. "So, you'd be up for building a house and raising... I don't know, kittens until the end of time." At Kurt's baleful look, Puck amended, "Okay, until whenever adoption laws change. Then it can be kids. Unless you really like kittens."

"Please stop," Kurt said.

Puck didn't. "Jae, what do you like most about Kurt?"

Most people would have found it odd to be grilled by a relative stranger, but Jae was used to doing what was asked of him. More than that, he was so bluntly honest that it seemed to be a true character trait, and perhaps he would have answered like this even without the training. "He was very kind to me when I came here."

"I tried to be friendly," Kurt said weakly. "Puck, can we—" But he only got Puck's upraised hand for a response, and he resigned himself to whatever was coming next. He felt as out of control as he had in Los Angeles, but it was with safe people this time. It was at home. That, at least, he could manage.

"I meant what do you *like* about him," Puck said, gesturing toward Kurt grandly. "You know. What do you stare at?" For a demonstration, he brought that raised hand down in a smooth arc and groped Kurt's ass with it.

"Take that away," Kurt said levelly, "or we'll see if these things can break off an arm." If only Puck weren't in that group most affected by Angelic appearances.

"He's right," Jae said after a moment of consideration in which Puck did move his hand. "Your backside."

"Oh my god," Kurt half-whimpered, half-laughed at the sky.

"Kurt, now the polite thing to do is tell him what is hot about him." Puck cleared his throat. It was the tone of a grandfather who'd broken up fights in a sandbox. "You're being rude. Tell him."

"Shoulders," Kurt mumbled.

"There! You think each other are hot, you want to build a house and raise cats or kids or whatever, and you'll do it when you're good and ready. My work here is done. I'm gonna go grab a beer." Sure enough, he did promptly head back up the trail and leave the two Angels staring at each other: Kurt awkwardly, Jae without any concern.

"I'm sorry about that," Kurt finally said.

"Sorry for what?"

"Just... he came in here with the pushing, and the assumptions, and he forced you to commit to something that I certainly won't hold you to, and just...." Kurt laughed weakly and adjusted a lock of hair that simply refused to stay in place. "Sorry. There doesn't have to be anything."

"Oh." A flash of something moved through Jae's dark eyes, but he was like a still pool where ripples faded quickly. "I would have liked that."

"Oh," Kurt repeated.

"You pushed me away," Jae finally said. "This makes sense. You don't want—"

"No, no! I just." Kurt sighed. "You offered to have sex with me." When Jae looked uncertain, as if he'd done something so wrong that it had driven Kurt away from what had been a very comfortable dynamic, Kurt knelt by him and explained, "That's something that really matters to me. I have to trust the person *completely*, we have to understand each other... it's a big deal. It's not just about what feels good."

Jae stayed silent, but now Kurt could recognize the expression in his eyes: he simply couldn't comprehend what Kurt was saying.

"I'd be making a commitment, and we weren't to that stage yet." Kurt risked seeking out his hand and squeezing it. "And I hope that you'll be able to feel that way, too, but if you can't... I don't think what happened to you should define you forever, if you don't want it to. You don't have to feel exactly like me. But I just want us to be in a place where it's just us, *only* us, and there are real feelings behind everything. And that, I think, we can definitely reach if we don't rush things. Okay?"

"Okay," Jae said. A hint of a smile curled his lips. "You talk a lot."

"Well, you hardly talk, so it all balances out," Kurt said with some relief and leaned forward to brush their lips together. It was a light kiss, with no real passion behind it yet, but it was comfortable. It had been so natural that it hadn't even crossed Kurt's mind that it was their first kiss until it happened. They'd been close, their faces near, and they hadn't yet done that one act. Now, it had just seemed like the thing to do. He bit his lower lip and grinned. "Was that okay?"

"Yes," Jae said. "I liked it very much."

"Well, okay, then," Kurt said as he stood and brushed off his knees. It would be too easy to keep going, and he wanted to take things in steps when they were ready. He'd spent his "childhood" in this place at one extreme, and then had lurched so far into adulthood that he lost sight of many of the things that mattered to him. If he really was heading toward a happy medium that would last for a long, long while, then he wanted to build a solid foundation. "Your picture looks very nice. You should keep working on it; keep it up, and eventually you'll be making things you could sell. It sounds like artwork by Angels is very popular, actually. Me, I'm going to try writing again. I always wanted to, and Jo keeps trying to work with me more than we have been, and I'm talking a lot again, aren't I?"

"It's okay. You have a nice voice," Jae said with a smile, but his eyes roamed down Kurt's body and he was reminded of what answer Jae had given when pressed on the matter. His entire body seemed to flush warm with embarrassment.

"I'm going to go, now," Kurt said. "I'm, um. Going to go. Away."

"Okay," Jae said, and he actually seemed amused that he could so easily fluster Kurt. To be fair, Kurt thought as he wiggled his fingers in farewell and then launched into the sky rather than bothering with the trails, he hadn't had that much practice with this sort of thing. And, aside from a time in his life that he tried to ignore, it had started from a very different dynamic entirely. It only made sense that Jae could fluster him.

When he caught up with Puck back in the main clearing, he was in an enthusiastic discussion with Finn. Kurt could see Jennifer flying off in the distance and realized they'd talked. Puck was probably expressing his approval, and sure enough when he touched down next to them, Puck did seem amazed at the red-haired beauty that Finn had landed. With a sudden, impish determination to break Puck's brain after that little stunt in the woods, Kurt said to Finn, "The best thing about you two getting married is that she'll finally stop trying to pull me in for a threesome. I hope."



Sure enough, Puck choked on his beer.

"Oh god," Finn laughed, pained. "Was she still on that?"

"She had plans. Plans with wings. And you lifting, and... and there were plans."

At first Puck simply seemed startled, but then he looked between the two with an oddly appraising gaze. It was much the same considering look as he'd used near Jae's cabin. He seemed ready to say something before movement overhead caught his attention. Puck's smile grew wide and appreciative as he watched the flight of an Angel in great, looping arcs.

Beginning to comment on the agility displayed, Finn caught something more base in his stare and shoved Puck's shoulder. "No."

"What 'no?'" Puck said with mock innocence.

"*You* are not going after the Angels here," Kurt said. Looking offended, Puck began to say that he'd been married to his wife for *twenty years*. Kurt interrupted him. "Yes, and now you have a teenager's libido again, and God knows what trouble that caused everyone in years past." When he saw that Puck seemed genuinely offended over that character assessment, he softened his words. "All right, I'm sure you're not a risk to them. In general. Of course I trust you with everyone; it's why you came here in the first place. And I'm sure you were a very good husband. But he's a dove."

"...Come again?" Puck said when he seemed genuinely confused over that description.

Finn gestured at the air. "Dove wings. People match, you know, the bird stereotypes. So I don't know that guy off the top of my head, but he's probably really nice and sweet. Maybe a pushover. It's not that we don't trust you, just... just not with a dove." After seeming to consider his words, Finn carefully added, "And he's a... he."

"And?" Puck said. "You and you are *totally* different," he said with gestures toward Finn and Kurt.

"He's a person," Finn instantly said.

With an odd look, Puck replied, "Uh, obviously? But, you know: yes," he said with a gesture toward Kurt, who looked highly unimpressed. Turning to Finn, Puck said definitively, "No."

"I don't know which of us should feel more offended, really," Kurt said to Finn, who nodded.

"You brought me to a place filled with the hottest people in the world, turned back my clock, and you think I'm not going to look?" Puck snorted. "Look, you brought me here for security, and I'm damn good at it. I'll keep them safe. But you turned me back to twenty, and so whatever: by this point I remember feeling like this and I *like* it."

"Why exactly is he this young, again?" Finn dryly asked.

Grumbling, Kurt replied, "It was an accident."

"Good job."

"And I'm not saying I'd *go after* an Angel," Puck said. "We talked about this. They're innocent, that's how I see them. They're under my protection. I'm just looking." That seemed to reassure them that he would never really approach Angels on any level beyond aesthetic appreciation, but then he continued, "Of course, for someone who's not me, given enough time, enough trust... stuff'd happen."

Kurt didn't like where the conversation was going, not after the looks Puck had been giving him. He had a horrible suspicion of what this policeman was retrieving from every expression as evidence. "No, it does not. I should get to work. I should do my work for the day, and then I can do that writing we talked about!"

It was like Puck was determined to settle in, and he did that by being wildly inappropriate. "Admit it! Come on. Ignore all those innocent Angels who got rescued a few years ago and just stick to two people who know each other. You, me, stranded on a deserted island... stuff'd happen. I'm not judging."

"If we found ourselves on a deserted island," Kurt said flatly, "I would leave to find help. I can fly."

Puck made a face at him. "It's an expression." But then a slow, knowing smile built. "Come on. Admit it."

"Admit what?" Finn asked in confusion.

"Finn had girlfriends, Puck," Kurt hissed. "A lot of girlfriends."

"That he kept dumping," Puck agreed with mock sadness. "Because he always came back home."

"Stop it."

That smirk on the man's face was far too confident. "You're telling me that you went, what... forty years in a place where you only saw parents, blood relatives, and *one other person*? When you've each thought that other person's hot? When he's one of the few people you can trust in the whole wide world?" His expression slid into a parody of concern. "Unless you had some serious medical issues that left you *unable to perform*—"

"Oh my God, shut up," Kurt hissed. His face burned hot.

"Come on, admit it," Puck nearly giggled.

With one look between Puck's leering expression and Kurt's blazing hot cheeks, Finn seemed to catch up in one pale, panicked moment. "And then I was gone for years," Finn added on to Kurt's mention of the girlfriends, like the years surrounding that time never existed. Rather than blushing, he was deathly pale.

"Bet that left you frustrated," Puck said with an elbow into Kurt's ribs. Kurt batted him away. His amusement only intensified as they both ordered him to be quiet. "I'm not judging! I'd judge you more if you could just slap on a chastity belt for a few decades. I'm pretty sure if you don't use it, it falls off." He looked between them and his grin somehow widened. "You don't have to say anything. Silence means yes. Yes means yes. And with that face, Hudson, no means yes."

When Finn grabbed him by the collar and hauled him close, Puck finally lost control and giggles poured free. "Do not say a word," Finn ordered him through clenched teeth. "I'm not saying yes. But you'd better not even *try* to tell *our parents* that you think—"

"Don't get descriptive, Finn," Kurt groaned as he rubbed his aching temples. "Just... let's pretend this conversation never happened."

"So that's a yes," Puck said innocently. He smiled and actually batted his eyes when they glared at him, but then his attention moved somewhere well beyond their conversation. "Who's that?" he asked. His voice had the same tone it held when he watched that dove boy above their heads.

In unison, Finn and Kurt turned and took in the sight there from Puck's perspective. A young-looking woman with long, dark hair in a ponytail was grooming a dog pack. She'd just returned from a few weeks spent visiting the state capital, catching up with various lawyers, and filing paperwork renewals. She wore

a simple outfit of jeans and a cotton shirt over her athletic build, and her brown eyes sparkled in the sun. Responding before he fully processed the moment, Kurt said, "That's Ann, our sis... ter... no, Puck."

Puck grinned.

"No!" they both said.

"She's a grown-ass woman," Puck pointed out. "What, is she like... thirty?"

"Closer to forty, but that is *not* the point," Kurt said. "She could be your daughter."

"Aren't you twenty years older than your guy?" Puck asked Kurt, and smirked when Kurt started mumbling excuses as to why that was different. "And show her a little sympathy, guys. She's been stuck around here and *she* doesn't have a conveniently unrelated stepbrother around."

"I have a fiancée!" Finn nearly bellowed, like that proved that whatever suspicions Puck held for the past were automatically incorrect.

"Congratulations," Puck said and shoved his overshirt at him. A tank top was revealed when he did; it was just barely too small on his renewed frame. Muscles stretched it.

Both men glowered when the newcomer walked toward their sister, but they knew better than to protest loud enough for her to hear. They were in a strange sort of limbo where they felt more like parents than older siblings but didn't get that respect in return. Their brothers and sisters were all parts of matched sets, shared the same parents, and had grown up on that land. The two of them were the odd ones out, and just like each set of twins had a special relationship, so did they.

That did little for making their siblings listen to them, though.

"He *was* married to the same woman for twenty years," Kurt said when they'd watched an introduction that was far too friendly and charismatic. "He's a very different person than he was when he last had that face. He's hard-working and trustworthy and very skilled and...." And would take some time to reach a healthy balance with his changes. Kurt had needed a long time to come to a happy medium with his role in the world. Puck should at least be allowed a few weeks to deal with forty years' worth of hormones. Right?

"Puck is hitting on our little sister."

Wincing, Kurt eventually continued, "Well... she's not necessarily going to say yes to anything."

Finn stared flatly at the sight before them. "She's pointing at the road. Now she's taking him for a drive. Alone."

"He's handling security," Kurt argued. His voice sounded weaker with each word. "He needs to see the valley. More than he has, I mean."

"Noah Puckerman is going to try to have sex with our sister." Finn glared at Kurt. "I hope you're happy."

Kurt opened his mouth, but closed it silently. He had a comfortable home surrounded by beloved family that he trusted completely. He was going to find balance in his life and return to the things that gave him joy, in the hopes of being as content and satisfied as Mercedes or Rachel. An accident had worked out for the best when it could have been a tragedy. There would be challenges in years to come, but now they were planning for them instead of blindly hoping for the best. He even had hopes for a real future with someone.

Yes.

He was happy.