

All the Other Ghosts

by

rainjoy

Kurt/Blaine || AU || NC-17

It's a big city for one more lost soul in a mask. Superhero AU.

rainjoyswriting.livejournal.com

eBook by klaineficspdfs || klaineficspdfs.livejournal.com

CONTENTS

Chapter One	- 4 -
Chapter Two	- 26 -
Chapter Three	- 50 -
Chapter Four	- 70 -
Chapter Five	- 96 -
Chapter Six	- 128 -
Chapter Seven	- 152 -
Chapter Eight	- 178 -
Chapter Nine	- 202 -
Chapter Ten	- 234 -
Interlude: Cold Water	- 263 -
Chapter Eleven	- 271 -
Chapter Twelve	- 300 -
Chapter Thirteen	- 334 -
Chapter Fourteen	- 355 -
Chapter Fifteen	- 383 -
Interlude: Christmas Yet to Come	- 410 -
Chapter Sixteen	- 417 -
Chapter Seventeen	- 439 -

Chapter Eighteen	- 466 -
Chapter Nineteen	- 494 -
Chapter Twenty	- 519 -
Chapter Twenty-One	- 540 -
Chapter Twenty-Two	- 567 -
Chapter Twenty-Three	- 593 -
Chapter Twenty-Four	- 622 -
Interlude: Ash	- 643 -
Chapter Twenty-Five	- 653 -
Chapter Twenty-Six	- 674 -
Chapter Twenty-Seven	- 698 -
Chapter Twenty-Eight	- 725 -
Chapter Twenty-Nine	- 750 -
Chapter Thirty	- 777 -

Chapter One

Reasons to move to New York city:

- 1) Your brother has a spare room going in his apartment.
- 2) It's not Ohio.
- 3) Great opportunities for career advancement for an almost-qualified physical therapist.
- 4) Exciting nightlife and social events.
- 5) At which you might meet a guy, the sparkling oasis in the endless desert of your love life.
- 6) You have a crush on New York's resident superhero.
- 7) The bagels taste *incredible*.

*

They call him 'the Ghost'. He goes with it. It's not like it doesn't fit.

The steps leading up to the grand entrance of the American Museum of Natural History are ringed in cop cars, flaring the night a patriotic blue and red. The Ghost walks through them, invisible, listens to them curse and call for back-up in their radios, and he crouches to peer into the upended cop car right outside the entrance; shattered glass but no bodies. There's one plus for the evening so far.

There's an alarm blaring in there, like that's going to help. The Ghost walks up the steps, cloak bellying out behind him, a darker grey than the pale skintight suit. He walks through the wall rather than the cracked open doors, ghosts right through and into the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Hall, where one of the doors is laying broken on the floor and that alarm is really *seriously* annoying. He can't hear anything over it and he's still invisible, so the girl with a sapphire the size of a golf ball in her hand walks *through* his shoulder from behind and he gives a little squeak - it's not that he can't feel things going through him when he's ghosting, it *feels* alright, and when it's unexpected it feels *horrible*.

She feels it too, and spins to face him, her blonde bunches bouncing. "Who's there? Santana said there weren't any ghosts. She promised there weren't any ghosts!"

"Just one," he says, fading into view for her. He doesn't stop ghosting, though, because he knows this girl, every damn week it's one thing or another, and he knows not to be off his guard when he's close to her. "Brittany, that really doesn't belong to you."

"What?"

"It doesn't belong to you! You should put it back!"

"I can't hear you!" she yells at him, then looks around, spots what looks like a fuse box on the wall and walks to it. The Ghost says, "Wai-" but she's already pulled back the fist not holding the sapphire and punched it hard into the box, putting it right through the wall. Wires snap and spark, the emergency lights die and the sound wears down an octave then wavers right out, and the silence of the museum at night makes his knees feel weak after all that noise. "That was loud," she says, and turns to him again. "Hi!" She waves.

"Hi," he says weakly. "Brittany, that doesn't belong to you, you have to put it back."

She's dressed like a cheerleader in white and pink, with a little domino mask over her eyes. Every damn week they have this, and he has work in the morning after this nonsense, god. "Santana wants it."

"I know she does but Brittany, it belongs to the *museum*."

"Santana said you'd say that."

He sighs. "Did she."

"She said I shouldn't listen to you because you get me in trouble."

"I get you in trouble? She just sent you to steal a - that's the Star of India." He stares at it for a moment, because it is so very *very* pretty, milk-blue and gleaming in the dancing light of the cop cars through the doors. "She sent you to steal the - why did she *want* it? There's a million jewellers in this city -"

Brittany twirls the end of one of her bunches around her finger. "She said it reminded her of my eyes," she says, smiling her schoolgirl smile, and the Ghost squeezes the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger.

"So she sent you to steal it. Okay. Yes. That sounds like her."

"She said where's the point in me being all super-strong and stuff if we never use it for anything."

"You could get the lids off Coke bottles for her," the Ghost says. "You don't have to steal giant sapphires for her. A nice girlfriend wouldn't ask you to do that."

Brittany's eyebrows lower. "She said I shouldn't listen to you. You're not nice. You hurt me."

"You hurt me too," he mutters, keeping his body tilted away from her even ghosted. "And you were going to really, really hurt those people, Brittany."

"You shouldn't call me Brittany." She strikes a little pose, fingers of one hand wiggling in the air. "I'm Cheer Girl!"

"That is not a very good name for a supervillain."

There's a cop making his careful way up the steps, gun in hand. The Ghost tries not to look directly at him or risk her noticing, he's behind Brittany's back and what the hell does he think he's *doing*, he thinks it's a good idea to intervene in this? "Brittany," he says slowly, "please put it back. It's in the museum so people can look at it, because lots of people want to look at it. It's not fair if it's not there for other people to look at, just you and Santana. Please put it back."

Her fingers drum off it, she squirms a little on one leg. "But," she says, looking down at it. "It was romantic."

"Britt-"

The cop's got the gun up and aimed on her. "Freeze!" he yells. "Hands where I can-"

The sapphire *just* misses him - lucky him, it would have put his brains out through the back of his head - a fraction of an inch past his face and straight through the doors into the open night and the Ghost yells,

"*Catch that!*" and tackles her as the cop fires three quick rounds right at them. He catches her and ghosts, straight through the floor, slowly through the solidity and then open air and they drop like stones. He lets her go and ghosts right through that floor as well, hears her hit something with an *ooff* in the pitch black; he doesn't even know what's down here, as he slows himself, fingers almost phased to solidity as they catch at the concrete, feet kicking the foundations he's inside so he can slow and swim back for the 'surface', for the floor of the room he dropped Brittany into.

He pulls his head and shoulders through and still can't see a thing. "Brittany?" he says. "Are you alright?"

She says in the dark, "That was mean."

"I'm sorry. He was going to shoot you."

"It wouldn't have hurt."

I know, but then you would have broken *his* spine, the idiot. "I didn't want to take that risk. Where are you?" He hauls himself back onto the solid surface of the floor, crouched on the balls of his feet, feeling in the belt for his flashlight. "Can't see a damn -"

He turns it on, and the room - some sort of lab - illuminates pale blue. And Brittany takes two running steps at him and *punches*.

He ghosts right through the floor in shock, then pulls himself up again, and she's sitting exactly where she jumped to, arms around her knees. "*That* was mean," he says tartly.

"I'm sorry," she says, watching him from over her knees. "I don't like the dark. Don't go away again. Santana said not to listen to you and I'm - it's all confusing."

"Please don't hit people. Brittany, it's really not nice and when you hit people you have a tendency to knock their head right off their body, *please* don't hit people."

"I know. Santana said-"

He needs to get Brittany on some sort of five-step programme to break up with her supervillain girlfriend who is *not* a good influence on her. Brittany could actually help people with her powers if she wasn't dragging him around on stupid wild goose chases across the city whenever Santana gets bored.

"I'll get you out of here. But if you try and hit me again I'll turn the light off and leave you down here. In the dark. With all the *other* ghosts."

Her eyes look so desperate. "Don't do that."

"Then don't try to hit me." He'd offer her a hand to help her up but he's wary of her, has been ever since the first time they met, when the Ghost didn't think the innocent girl in pink and white could be all that dangerous and she broke his wrist just by grabbing it. "If I help you out of here, I want you to promise me two things."

She hugs her knees, says, "What two things?"

"One," he says, clipping the flashlight back into his belt so it casts its beam forward, "don't try to hurt me, because that's really not fair when I'm trying to help you, is it?"

She narrows her eyes with the effort of thought. "But you were trying to stop me taking Santana the sapphire."

"You threw the sapphire away, Brittany, all I'm trying to do is help you out of the dark. Right?"

"... right ..."

"And two, don't hurt any of the police, because they're only doing their job, they're trying to keep the museum safe. Promise me those two."

"Then will you get me out of the dark?"

"I promise."

"Okay. Pinkie swear?"

His mouth twists, he could almost *laugh* in all this. "Okay."

He's tense as a violin string for her to rip his finger right out, but she doesn't. She solemnly shakes it a couple of times, then says, "Can I hold the flashlight?"

"It's okay, this won't take long. Give me your hand."

He climbs onto one of the lab benches, while she placidly holds his hand and watches him put an arm up through the ceiling, brace himself and haul himself up. She gets the idea, climbs up after him, and he hikes her through with himself - slow like moving through water through the solidity between floors - and then they're back into the entranceway, scaring the bejeezus out a cop by the entrance, there are three guns on them instantly. The Ghost holds his arms up to show he's harmless because he basically is and it's not like they could hurt him anyway; Brittany pulls at her skirt a little, and looks sulky. "They're gonna arrest me. Being arrested is boring."

"They just want to make sure you won't steal anything else, Brittany."

"Santana said it's not stealing if you really *really* want it."

"I'm sure she did."

"You know," one of the cops says, both hands on his gun, "I got orders to bring in both of you on sight."

The Ghost says, "If you can get the cuffs on me then you can take me." and says to Brittany, "Just go with them for a while, see what they have to say. Okay? You promised not to hurt any of them."

She shrugs and kicks at the floor a bit, and he sighs, turns around - the cop yells at him, "Stay right where you-" and ghosts right through the floor again, where it's quieter, and darker, and better suited for a ghost.

*

He sits on a blanket on the rooftop of Cooper's building, with a flask of coffee and a pair of binoculars next to him. He doesn't know what he's doing. He's being stupid. Like the Ghost's just going to pass by this building, maybe wave as he goes? You don't run into a superhero on top of a quiet residential block where nothing's happening, he needs to be out there somewhere where there are sirens and yelling and - well, and danger. People who need rescuing. People who need help.

He huddles his arms closer around himself, because it's cold. And at the two exaggerated knocks he looks over his shoulder, at Cooper standing next to the propped-open doorway back into the building, eyebrows raised. "We have a TV, you know."

Blaine rolls his eyes back to the skyline. "I spend enough time dealing with your face when you're *not* popping up every commercial break, Cooper."

"You love my face. Everyone loves my face. I have an inherently loveable face, Blaine!"

Blaine really should have learned by age eleven that ignoring Cooper would never get him to just leave him alone to read Harry Potter or listen to Brittany Spears. Cooper takes being ignored as a challenge. Cooper, after all, so very much *likes* being noticed.

He plunks down next to Blaine, props himself back on his hands, sighs. "New York skyline. Most exciting in the world."

"You hate it here. You like California. You only moved here for a part."

"Blaine, it is bad for my show if people think I hate New York. So I love New York. Repeat after me: Cooper loves New York. He *loves* it. It makes him *giddy*."

Blaine mutters, "You are such a dork."

"It *turns him on*."

"Cooper!"

"You're not here for the skyline either." Cooper's grinning that goddamn grin of his, *god* who invented big brothers. "You think I don't know? First thing you did in the whole apartment was put up that poster -"

"I came up here because I wanted some air." It's dark, so maybe the heat in his face won't show.

"- and put your binoculars next to the window like a little creeper -"

"I like *birds*."

"- and now you're up on the rooftop superhero-spotting." Cooper watches him sidelong. "You know he can't fly, right?"

"You don't know that. You've never even seen him."

"So he *is* why you're up here."

Okay, under any lighting in the world, *that* blush is going to show. "Shut up, Cooper."

"No, I think it's cute. My little brother has a crush on a superhero. He could like, rescue you, and sweep you up in his arms and possibly-fly away, apparently we're not sure on that one -"

"I'll hit you with the binoculars."

"- and you can be all, *Oh Ghost, thank you for saving my life* and he'll be all -" He puts on a deeper voice - "*It was my pleasure, attractive male citizen, would you like to put your tongue down my heroic throat?* and you can be all-"

"He doesn't even sound like that!"

"How the hell would you know what he sounds like?" Cooper looks aggrieved that his dramatic rendering has been cut short.

"Because there's audio clips on the internet! *I* know more about him than you do and I only just moved here!"

"You know more about him than I do because you're a giant super-creeper, squirt."

Blaine shoves Cooper's foot with his. "Just - go inside. Go away. I was having a nice *quiet* evening before you got here."

Cooper gives him another sidelong look, then says, "You don't need to get rescued, little brother." Blaine glares at him, waiting for the punch line. "You can be your own superhero, you know that?"

For half a second he doesn't even know what to say. Cooper has no idea. He can't have any idea. But . . .

He wriggles his shoulders, looks back to the skyline. Cooper's right, he's not just going to fly past even if he could do that (no record of anyone seeing him do it; he can pass through solid objects and turn invisible and somehow knock criminals out through sheer *fear*, but no record of him flying). This isn't how Blaine would run into him. Really, he knows the best shot he has of running into him.

You can be your own superhero.

Cooper says, "Move over. You're taking up all the blanket."

"Get your own blanket."

"It is my own blanket, you got it out of my apartment."

"I'll tell Mom if you don't share."

"I'll tell Mom you're creeping on innocent superheroes in skintight spandex."

"I'll tell Mom you're a *douche*."

"I'll Mom you *said* 'douche'."

"Asshole."

"Ingrate."

"Diva."

"Shrimp."

"Brat."

"Squirt. Ow! I'm telling Mom you *pinched!*"

*

She's got too many shopping bags and the little girl's throwing a tantrum, too hot and too tired on the subway, and - it happens so fast, it just happens so fast and so naturally like it was always going to happen, how the little girl gets her foot tangled in the handles of a bag and pitches forward and skins her palms and knees and tumbles right off the edge of the platform before she's even had the time to cry out.

And her mother stands up and *screams* as the entire platform freezes, and there's a train coming in brakes squealing, and a dark grey figure dives over the platform edge after her. The train passes over them both, no time to stop. Her mother crumples, hands to her mouth as the scream gurgles away.

Two people rush to the woman, the driver in the front of the stopped train has put her hands over her face. But when the doors open in the nearest carriage, there's a figure in a long dark cloak, hood up and eyes hidden, holding the little girl awkwardly to his hip. He steps off the train and the mother can't stand up, just kneels there crying while people back away and he puts the girl down in front of her, and her mother's hands go pale at the knuckles grabbing her in close.

Someone tries to pat the Ghost's shoulder but his hand goes right through. "Dude. That was -"

He touches the little girl's head and says softly, "Careful next time. Don't scare your mom." and turns away. A couple of people scramble out of his way as he walks down the platform but then he vanishes, he's just not *there*, and someone further down the platform screams all over again.

The girl in the beanie hat lowers her phone and plays the video back, and oh man that is the coolest thing that has ever ever ever ever ever ever happened.

*

Blaine's first week in New York, he settles into his brother's apartment and goes to orientation classes for his Masters, and walks and walks and walks, walks until he has blisters. The city's gorgeous in the autumn. Fuzzy blue skies and amber leaves in the parks, and that quality of sunlight on the stonework. He takes a whole bunch of photos for his blog.

A whole bunch of photos and not one of the Ghost.

The blogs are busy, there's even been a new video uploaded of him hauling a kid out from under a subway train - not close enough to see anything really, nothing any other video hasn't shown before, and whoever's next to the person filming is talking when he talks so it's not even clear what he's saying. But then he turns away, that long heavy cloak swing-coiling after him like it does, takes two steps and *vanishes*. Blaine gets chills. He watches it fifteen times in a row. It's not as good as the carjackers video or the one of him fighting that guy who got his genes spliced with some kind of dinosaur, but it's something.

One of his favourite Ghost bloggers has put up a comic strip of *Ghost on his day off*. Laundering his cape still with his mask on, reading the newspaper in the launderette. Sitting in a movie with his hood up, eating popcorn. Talking on his cell surrounded by passed-out burglars, *No I haven't met a nice girl yet Mom*. Blaine reblogs it but he does feel the little jump in his gut. It wouldn't have to be a nice *girl*. They don't know . . .

There are still some bloggers who swear he's not even a he. *Small breasts do not mean no breasts! Haven't you heard the audios?* The counter of course being, *High pitched voices do not mean no balls! Haven't you looked at his *crotch*?* He does tend to come down hard as hell on sex crimes, though Blaine likes to think that some guys are feminist enough to do that anyway. And since he does seem to spend a fair bit of time haunting gay pockets of the city and making hate crimes really not worth it for the criminals, there has been speculation enough on his sexuality. Which is probably cruel, just for giving Blaine false hope.

Because yes, it is ridiculous to have a crush on a superhero. He knows he's not alone (*dat ass* is one of the loudest tags on that up-cloak photo of him dropping through the ceiling of a bank, shot from below, braced to land on a counter, *hell* that suit is tight) but it's still really really stupid. It's stupid to hoard gifs of him to stare at. It's stupid to have an entire playlist of grainy, distorted clips of his voice recorded on random cell phones. It's stupid to feel better about the world just because he's in it. It's stupid to feel a schoolgirl flutter at the thought of him. It's stupid to look at him as a beacon of how a life should be lived.

It's *seriously* stupid to move to a whole new city just to be closer to him.

You can be your own superhero. He walks down the block with his iPod on, watching his feet *schuff* the leaves aside. You can be your own superhero.

He's always been too scared. Not scared of getting hurt so much, just scared of screwing up. Not actually helping. Making things *worse*.

He does it. Goes out every night and risks his neck to make this city just a little bit less shitty, one life at a time. He must risk the same as Blaine. Sure he's got superpowers, that doesn't make him immortal, doesn't make him a god. It's not even the powers that make him a hero, it's what he *does* with them that counts.

Blaine thinks about it, and *schuffs* the leaves as he walks. And he thinks, I'm going to need a costume.

*

Rachel knocks and tries the handle at the same time, which she always does, which is why he always locks it. "Kurt!" she sings through it. "I can't help but notice that the emergency tub of Half Baked is gone! Which means you're having an emergency and you should *talk to your roommate about it*, or else you *aren't* having an emergency and you probably shouldn't have broken into our emergency ice cream! For emergencies! *Like my deadline!*"

Kurt looks over from his computer with the spoon hanging from his mouth, and scowls, and gets up to unlock the door.

Rachel pounds at it twice again before he gets there. "My deadline! For my internship! The internship that could *make my whole career-*" She staggers a little as the door comes in the next time she shoves it, hanging off the handle, and blinks at Kurt sitting down at the computer again, clicking onto the next tab, making some notes on the paper next to him. She stands in his doorway, takes a breath, says, "So! Your emergency?"

Kurt digs some more ice cream out, puts the spoon back in his mouth, picks his cell up. He sets it to play the message on speaker phone, then scrolls down the webpage a little, and makes a note of, *Latex, seriously? How empowering is a fabric that makes you sweat like a pig and then pass out?*

"Hi, Kurt, it's me," the voice slurs from the message. "*It's Adam, you remember Adam, we dated for like three months if you rainchecking every date three times and just not turning up half the time counts as dating, well I'm in a bar and I have a hot guy's number and you know what? This is me deleting your number! This is my 'I'm deleting your number' message! Which I knew would be a message because you never pick your goddamn phone up! This is me deleting your tight-assed number 'cause this guy doesn't have a stick up his ass the size of the fucking Empire State Building and hey he actually seems interested in sleeping with me! This is me deleting your number you frigid-*"

The beep cuts him off. Kurt digs out some more ice cream, and scribbles in next to the sketch, *Leather is also an awful awful idea*. He taps the pen off the paper. *Maybe in patches*.

Rachel breathes, "Kurt I'm so sorry."

Kurt shrugs, says around the spoon, "Working."

Meekly, "What are you working on?"

He waves a bit of paper at her, clicks back to his search. She walks over and takes the paper, says, "Superheroes again."

He stabs the spoon into the ice cream. "This is the project that won me that job. This is what fashion is *supposed* to be for."

"Yes, yes, empowerment, politics, you *know* there are dangerous implications for the stuff they pull." She drops the paper onto his desk. "You work far too much. We should go out this weekend, screw Adam, we'll find you a nice -"

"I have to work this weekend. And I have yoga Sunday mornings, you know I don't do Saturday nights. And I have aikido Saturday afternoons so there's no way I'm drinking on a Friday night-"

"You don't have to work every day of the week."

"Okay, Rachel, you know the competition you have for your internship? Well now imagine *that* competition combined with an office which takes bitching to Olympic levels, and, yes, I do have to work. And anyway, this is more fun than trawling disgusting bars for disgusting guys." His eyes trail over a sketch, and he corrects the angle a cape should take over a shoulder. "Do you want the ice cream or not?"

"Prince Charming is not just going to drop into your lap, Kurt. We could get you on one of those dating sites, there must be-"

"Oh god, Rachel, what part of *no* is difficult, it's *one syllable*. What are you working on, anyway?" She's usually pretty easy to distract from complicating Kurt's life even further. "You could do something on the fallout of increasing gentrification of the inner city for the economic classes forced out." He sees it all the time, scouring vintage stores popping up where they used to sell things people actually needed to live. Not that Kurt doesn't think that retro designer labels aren't important, but there's a weird guilt in it, sometimes.

"You know what I'm working on," she says, and takes his spoon from the tub, works out a little ball of cookie dough.

"Stalking vigilantes in tights. You say *I'm* obsessed with superheroes." He rolls his eyes, skips to another tab. Skintight is a problem, not everyone has a body that looks the way it 'should' in spray-on clothing.

Control panels? Or just 'fuck you, this is what my ass looks like and if I don't have a problem with it, what's *your* problem'? Women should get to decide what makes them feel sexy, after all.

"My project is about holding supers to account, you know they never hang around to deal with the fallout of what they do, they don't answer to anyone, they're not accountable and not transparent and we don't know -"

"Yes, I'm sure they're terrible people." He takes the spoon out of her hand, scrapes around the edges of the tub for the softer ice cream. "Go get a spoon and your laptop. You better be quiet, I actually am *working*, Rachel."

She's quiet for a moment, while he scrolls through a website and thinks - like the sun beginning to peel through a cloud - weave fabric densities together, gradiate the weight to give the right hang and swing to the cape - when she puts her arms around his shoulders, hugs him from behind. "You'll find the right guy, Kurt."

The 'fuck you' break-up messages are a lot better than the disappointed ones. He looks at his keyboard, and thinks that he should probably call his dad.

*

The Ghost's costume, broken down from a gifset of zoomed-in shots people have managed to grab over the last few years:

That cloak, of course, hooded and heavy, long enough almost to sweep the ground. It keeps his eyes covered, there's hardly any photos even catching his nose - he has a cute nose - and that shot outside the burning building shows he's wearing a grey mask over his eyes under it, so he's pretty damn secretive about his identity, yeah. He has an expressive mouth, maybe it just seems it because it's the only part of his face really visible, warm-flushed lips, jaw tight with concentration in most of the shots. Well, he is 'working'.

That *bodysuit*, paler grey and god it looks like it's painted on, it's only the creases at elbow and knee (and under that glorious ass) that really show it's fabric at all. Blaine doesn't know what it's made out of. But it clings to his body - his incredible tapered body, sturdy chest and shoulders, delicate clavicle standing out

through the material, *god* his waist though and well, dat ass - like it loves it. What wouldn't do the same? There are nights Blaine would sell his soul to be that bodysuit.

Darker grey gloves, and those knee boots. Darker grey belts, one around his hips and one slung up over one shoulder, one clipped around one thigh, so many small bulky attachments. Could be anything in there. His utility belt, his superhero kit, Blaine tries to imagine what a superhero would need; he realises pretty early on that a decent costume is going to be more than a weekend's work.

But mostly it's just him. That suit offers no protection Blaine's aware of, he just stands there open and vulnerable in front of people with weapons who've already decided to do the wrong thing, and he might as well be in t-shirt and jeans. It's not armour. It doesn't shield him. Okay, so he's intangible whenever he wants to be, maybe he's not afraid of needing to be shielded; Blaine just thinks about shields a lot of the time, which makes sense.

What he concludes in the end is that he needs a costume no-one's really going to *notice* at first. Until he works out how to do this thing - he doesn't even know how he'll find trouble to help people out of, just wander the city looking for it? - he needs to be a very low key kind of hero. Not even a hero at all, not until he saves someone. So, a hoodie and jeans for now, black, and he doesn't know what to call himself so he can't even put any kind of symbol on it. Just clothes no-one would look twice at before he actually did something to *make* them look.

He'll find trouble, and the Ghost will already be there, and Blaine will do something heroic - just casually *yeah, look what I can do* - and the Ghost will say *Thank you for helping me (rescuing me*, Blaine's imagination flutters away with him sometimes) and he'll look into his eyes from under that hood, push it back so he's bared to him, lean in and -

This is not a good reason to become a superhero.

Remember helplessness, and terror, and crying *no no no*.

There are reasons.

*

Finn's shifty at the other side of the table, and okay he's as tall as a tree but in a busy New York coffee shop, even he doesn't stand out so much. "I could get in so much trouble for this," he mutters, playing a little with the bag in his lap.

Kurt takes a sip of coffee, puts his cup down. "Then don't get caught. What have you got for me?"

Finn narrows his eyes at him, and Kurt looks evenly back. "*You* could get in so much trouble. You know that Puckzilla guy broke out of jail and he's headed back here? How can you just sit there all calm like he doesn't want to pull your head off an' use it for a football?"

"Because he's not here right now, and if you guys do your job the way you didn't when it came to keeping him in prison then I'll never even see him again, will I?"

Finn's mouth twitches. "Don't hold me responsible for every cop an' prison officer in the state, Kurt."

Kurt's eyes flick away. Okay. That was cheap and it was cruel. He tilts his cup around a little, says softly, "I bought you a doughnut," as an apology.

"You can't just buy cops over with doughnuts!"

"Actually, so far it's worked quite well," Kurt says, trying for teasing, meeting his eyes again with a little smile. Finn just stares at him, then rubs his face and pulls a piece of paper out of his bag, a photocopy with a picture at the top. "Last girl who got attacked on the Upper East Side gave us this photofit." His mouth twists again, differently this time and worse. "Guy's a sick bastard."

Kurt scans the image, keeping his face steady, then holds his phone over it and photographs it. "Thanks."

Finn stuffs the paper away again quickly, picks up the last piece of his doughnut and chews it, still frowning. "That Puckzilla guy seriously wants you dead, dude."

"He can get in line behind every gangster, supervillain and deadbeat mugger in the city." Kurt says, and shrugs. "He can't even touch me, you know that."

"I know he wasn't easy to bring down last time."

"This time I know how."

Finn pats his finger on his plate a few times, gathering crumbs and not looking at Kurt's face. He says, "You call Burt recently?" and sucks the sugar from his finger, and swallows. Kurt keeps his hand around his cup, keeps his body calm in its seat.

"You know I have, Finn."

"This worries the crap out of him."

"Please don't try to make me feel guilty about this. What do you want me to do, throw the cloak in and let the city get overrun? You *know* you guys can't take down someone like - like that huge walking handbag coming back for me, you *know* I have to do this -"

"*You* know it scares the crap out of the rest of us!"

"I'm fine. Finn, they can't even *touch* me, I'm *fine*."

"You were all kinds of fine that time I had to go pick you off the floor of a sewer in the middle of the night." Finn mutters to his cup, and Kurt lets his breath out hard through his nose, glaring at him. That incident, as much as anything else, was *humiliating*, to have been so close to real danger because of the worst supervillain he's ever even heard of, seriously, *who calls themselves the Pink Dagger* - ?

"Are you fishing for gratitude or do you just not want me to call you next time? He *surprised* me."

"You know what it's like getting a weird call at midnight to come -" He looks around the room, drops his voice, "pick up a *superhero* - you have any idea what it was like trying to haul you around in that cape? - from out of some *sewer* an' take him to some random guy's house -"

"He's a doctor. He knew what he was doing."

"- an' I didn't know if you were gonna *die*, man, you were just -"

"You shouldn't have told Dad about that."

Finn's mouth stays open for a second in silence. "What the hell, *that* is not something *minor* -"

Kurt rubs an eye. "Finn, I really don't want to talk about this here."

"You don't wanna talk about it anywhere. You never want to talk about it."

"If you don't want to help me then just say it."

Finn rubs a hand over his face, says through it, "No, jeez, no. You're out there alone enough as it is, I don't want . . . that guy over in Chicago's got a sidekick now. The flying light-shooting guy? There's some girl made out of stone hanging out with him."

"What are you suggesting, I advertise on Craigslist for a sidekick? I don't need help. They would slow me down and make things more complicated and Finn, *seriously*, my roommate - your girlfriend? - is a demented journalism student whose dearest wish is to unmask me, no guy in New York is willing to put up with my antisocial hours, I have lost *count* of how many supervillains want me dead, you're under orders to arrest me on sight sitting right opposite me and my job hangs by the thread of my psychopathic supervisors' unpredictable whims, my life is complicated *enough*, do you realise that?"

Finn just rubs his eye again, and checks his watch. "I need to get to work."

Kurt puts his phone in his pocket. "Thank you. For the -" He stops. "Just thank you."

Finn gives him a weird tight not-smile, mouth just twisting at one side. "Be careful."

He makes sure he smiles back. "You too, Officer Hudson."

Finn rolls his eyes, climbs out of his seat and strolls out of the coffee shop. Kurt drums his fingers off his cup, and tries to avoid thinking about his dad. Then he drains his coffee and picks up his satchel, dropping a tip onto the table. He's going to need a hell of a lot more coffee to get through the day, does Finn realise the economic catastrophe it would cause the coffee shops of this city if Kurt wasn't out there until two in the morning every day of the week . . . ?

*

Blaine reblogs it when it turns up on the internet, three nights later. Everyone reblogs it. Like a line of candles being lit, spreading out in the dark, across the whole internet, a web of little lights across the whole world.

If you read this, please reblog. I don't know any other way to reach him.

Last night I was walking home from the subway, just two blocks not even that late, when a man pushed me into an alleyway and held a knife to my throat and squeezed my thigh so hard he broke the skin. I begged him to take my purse because I knew that wasn't what he wanted. He was so close I could smell his breath. I know what would have happened.

*But then *he* was standing there further down the alleyway like he'd always been there, and he asked so quietly for the man to put the knife down. And the man grabbed my neck and swore he'd kill me if the Ghost didn't do something, I didn't get to hear 'or else' because he just *vanished*. The man was panicking and squeezing my neck and I thought I would die, I thought I would have to die, this is where I would die, like *this*, and then I felt another hand around my wrist even though I couldn't see it and I slipped through that man's fingers. I mean *through*, just like they weren't there anymore, and the Ghost was standing between us holding me behind him. The man lunged at him with the knife. He raised a hand.*

That was all he did, he just put his hand up at the man's head, and I have never heard anyone SCREAM like that before in my life. He curled up in a ball on the ground and jerked like he was going to throw up and cried a bit and passed out. And the Ghost just stood watching him, then when he was still he tied his hands behind his back and asked if I was okay and asked if I could call the cops, because he probably shouldn't be calling them. And he smiled. You can't see much of his face but he has a really cute smile, I can confirm for all the fanghosts out there :)

He sat with me while I called my boyfriend and the police, because I was really shaken up. I was so shaken up that when my boyfriend got there I just held onto him and cried, and when I looked around he was already gone. And I didn't say thank you, I never got to say thank you.

That's why I need this reblogging, can you just keep on posting it, as far and wide as you can? Because I don't know any other way he might see it.

*I know I'm only one in dozens to you, I know you probably save people from things like that every night of the week. But every one of those people I'm sure is just as grateful as I am because I know what would have happened if you hadn't been there. You save *so* many people. And Commissioner Figgins is an idiot for wanting to arrest you, you're a *hero*.*

Thank you so much. Thank you so so much, I can't ever say how grateful I am. Thank you so so so so much. I hope you know how grateful we all are, all the time.

Please keep on haunting us for as long as you can xxx

*

Midnight on Friday night, he has a date. Only date he'll probably ever get at this rate.

He ghosts down through the outer wall of the building to land with a little thump of his boots on the thin roof of the kitchen, sloping gently into the alley at the side. He sighs, and pulls his hood back for a moment to get some air, closing his eyes, face raised to the empty sky above; he's *tired*.

Then he sits down with his boots hanging over the edge of the roof, and yawns behind a hand. The back door to the kitchen opens and a man walks out humming, with a cardboard cup of coffee and a paper bag in his hand. He looks up at the Ghost sitting on his roof and tuts, then hands up the cup and then the bag. "Long week, it looks like."

He warms his hands on the cup, bag in his lap. "Even ghosts get tired, Mr Conti."

"Could take a night off now or then."

The Ghost quirks him a weary little smile. "So could you."

"Tch, I work, I get money. Who pays you for this?"

The Ghost waggles the cup of coffee at him. "Thank you."

"Cup of coffee and a pastry. This is the reward for madness every night."

"Not *a* pastry," the Ghost says wheedlingly. "The best lobstertail in New York."

The man wipes his hands off on his apron, folds his arms. "Good night?"

He takes a sip of coffee, sighs the warmth out. "Nothing big. Same old same old."

"I watch this Puckzilla escape on the news."

"Mm."

"They say not to approach him."

"They also say to call the police if you see me," the Ghost points out, and the man below beams.

"What do I see? Nothing at all. Just a ghost." The Ghost laughs, and the man shakes his head. "Be careful. This Puckzilla, he's *big*."

He swallows more coffee, opens the bag. "Mm, I'll be fine. How's your family?"

"Good, good. Sal started college. Smart boy. Will be a lawyer."

The Ghost closes his eyes, smiles and nods, huddles behind his cup. One night two years ago Mr Conti's son got the wrong sort of attention from a gang of guys looking for trouble, and the Ghost walked him home afterwards, the boy crying with fear, holding the busted elbow the Ghost was a half second too late to save. His father burst out of the coffee shop into this back alleyway where they had a rapid, tearful conversation in Italian, and then the man hugged his son and before he could turn intangible he hugged the Ghost too, and swore he didn't care what the police said, he would *kill* the man who tried to arrest him.

Every Friday night since he's patrolled this part of town, and there's always been a cup of coffee in it for him.

Coffee here. There's a curry place in Gramercy, a Chinese takeout on the Upper West Side. Saving lives, he tells himself, burns a lot of calories, and so long as he can still fit into that suit he is not saying no to that sushi place in SoHo with a waitress he once rescued and salmon nigiri to *die* for . . .

"Sal met a boy on his course," the man below says, and the Ghost blinks down at him, as he watches his own hands tightening the cords of his apron. "Nice guy."

"Good for him," the Ghost says, and takes a bite of lobstertail.

"You find a nice guy yet?"

Around his mouthful, "Secret identity, Mr Conti." He neither confirms nor denies the guess at his sexuality, because he is aware that people have been able to 'guess' that since he was three years old.

"I only ask. I worry. Never you bring a date."

He swallows. "Not the most romantic evening, Mr Conti, chasing criminals."

"Still, it kills you to be happy? Leave the cape a night, bring a boy. Have some fun before you're old. It comes quick, you know that."

What're the odds, he wonders sometimes, of getting to get old? He smiles at him, and Mr Conti rolls his eyes and points a finger at him. "You be careful."

The Ghost lifts his cup at him. "*Grazie*, Mr Conti."

The door to the kitchens closes behind him. The Ghost sighs, lays back on the angled roof, propped up on one bent leg. No stars overhead, too much light down here, New York's blaze deafens the whole sky for light. He hums a little to himself. *Can we pretend that airplanes in the night sky are like shooting stars?*

He's probably better off without a boy. They would never put up with his crap, and in the end, it is so much better when they give up on him than when he has to tell them that he can't, without ever being able to tell them why.

Because I have to go out every night in a cloak haunting the crap out of criminals. Because sometimes supervillains want me dead and you do not want to be around for that. Because I can't be what you want, whatever you want, believe me, believe me, I *know* I can't.

Because what happens if I fall in love with you, and something happens to you because of *me*? What happens if you fall in love with me and then one night I just don't come home?

What happens when I tell you everything, and then you *know* . . . ?

He finishes his coffee, rolls up the bag, drops them neatly into the trash can by the back door. Then he sets a foot into the brickwork of the building, reaches up and grips through higher bricks, begins climbing back up again. Give it another hour and then head back. See what trouble he can find. It's Friday night in New York, there's got to be something horrible happening somewhere . . .

Chapter Two

The first time Blaine goes out, shades on under his hoodie and a ski mask in his back pocket, knee and elbow pads on under his baggier-than-usual black outfit, he doesn't come across any trouble at all. He wanders the city until nearly midnight and doesn't see so much as someone flipping someone else off. When the hell did New Yorkers get so *nice*?

Cooper's just back from a performance, and Blaine shrugs and says he was getting a drink with people, then trawls the internet for Ghost-sightings for a while. Someone's put a photograph up of the corner of what *could* be a cloak slipping out of sight around a wall but Blaine's inclined to agree with the commenters, it's more likely a plastic bag.

The next day he walks around with his iPhone out, trying to work out the Ghost's geography of the city. He seems to turn up all over the island, though, Tribeca to Harlem, there's no centre to the sightings. Maybe he's wise enough not to stick to a single neighbourhood. The police still have an arrest warrant out for him - it occurs to Blaine that what he's trying to get into is illegal, which actually makes it seem even more thrilling - and Blaine knows that while he's got *fairly* strong support on the ground from New Yorkers themselves, he probably still doesn't want to stay too long in any one place.

He's walking the edge of Central Park squinting at the map on his phone when it's snatched right out of his hands by a guy careening past on a bike. Blaine's too shocked at first to do anything but give a sort of startled yelp, knocked to the side to bang into a parked car, and the guy's speeding off quick, standing up on the pedals -

He doesn't think. It's the worst thing about himself, he knows, he just doesn't *think*. He snaps a shield up in front of the handlebars and the bike flips right over, the guy yells out, Blaine's phone goes sailing and bounces off the sidewalk. Blaine's breath stops before he gasps it out and runs over, oh hell he didn't mean to break the guy's *neck* -

He's making a long groaned noise on the ground, and a jogger's pulling her headphones out, picking up Blaine's cell. She holds it out to him, just a little scratched in the corner but miraculously unhurt. "You want me to call the cops?"

"Did you see what happened?" a man in a suit says, staring at the guy dragging himself up on his arms, cursing and touching his face. "What did he hit?"

"I - don't know." Blaine says, and his face *feels* scarlet, oh god he hopes they can't guess - "Just - lost control, I guess."

"Or our friendly neighbourhood Ghost stuck his foot out," the jogger says, and grins at him. And Blaine, after a startled pause, grins back.

*

So, the shields.

They're hexagonal, he doesn't know why, translucent but tinted green. He seems to be able to throw them up pretty much anywhere, to a really wide radius - he can surround himself, boxed safely into a blocky green-tinted globe, but he can also make them pop into existence at a distance, or he can fling them like discs. He's practised with them, out in the middle of nowhere back in Ohio; they're incredibly smooth, he can skid along them like a path of ice, can even make himself a staircase to get off the ground. It's not exactly flying, but it's - it can be a pretty amazing view, even if that sometimes is distracting enough that he drops a shield and goes down with a yelp.

The thing is, to a kid from Ohio, becoming a superhero just belongs to another planet. Maybe kids who grew up in New York discover they've got some crazy power and they just know what they have to do with it, Blaine mostly wanted to just *get by*, he really didn't need the extra sense of isolation *this* gave him. Or at least until his first year of college, when reports of a new superhero in New York first appeared.

They didn't even know if he was a super, at first. For a while people genuinely believed he could be a *ghost*. Blaine got online, kept an eye on the sightings, became more than a little obsessed. Two years ago there was that firebombed building and that one photograph, iconic now like it had to be that way, like the world was waiting for that photograph to be taken, Blaine has it taped to the side of his computer monitor: the building still pouring flames in the background, a soot-smudged firefighter holding the oxygen cylinder and the Ghost, his body a little bowed, clasping the mask to his face. With the hood over the top half and the oxygen mask over the bottom half there's little of his face to be seen, it's just possible to make out that his eyes are closed, his mouth is open; that pale grey costume is blotched with smoke-stains, and there's still a small wisp of smoke coiling from a corner of his hanging cloak, where the material smouldered and crisped.

He kept going back in. He kept going back in to get people out until the building collapsed, and in the tributes people left for those who'd died, flowers stacked up on the sidewalk outside, people lit candles for the Ghost of New York as well. But three weeks later he stopped two superpowered girls from robbing a jewellery store and Blaine's sunken heart set sail again, he was alive alive alive and Commissioner Figgins put out the arrest warrant on him, as a vigilante setting a dangerous precedent. It was too late to call him a criminal, though, his 'fanghosts' loved him, New Yorkers were pleased he was back, nice to have another tourist attraction around in tough times . . .

He's a hero. He's *Blaine's* hero. He needed someone to point out the right path and he found him, and now he knows what he has to do, to make the admiration he gives him worth *his* receiving it, to make his power not a wasted gift, to *help* people. To help him. Because it's a big city and even ghosts must need a little help now and then.

And the news reports no sightings of the newly escaped Noah Puckerman in two days, but that's plenty of time for him to have reached the island by now . . .

*

"It needs to be adjustable," Kurt says, turning the design on his desk for Sophie to see. "I mean, we can make large medium and small ones but, people want to wear them on their waist or their hips, on top of bulky jeans or skintight skirts, you know? Use them how they want to use them. And they should be *comfortable*. Plus the better the fit the less problems with digging in if they get heavy. No-one wants saddlebag imprints on their hips from these things."

"You know they'll get heavy." She's making notes on her Blackberry. "You ever hefted a full handbag around all day?"

"Mm, not exactly. I can guess."

Sophie taps the dot at the end of the sentence and looks at him over her designer glasses. "You seriously want to market utility belts at women."

He shrugs, holds his hands out. "It's a vicious circle. Women's clothes don't have pockets. So women have to carry bags to put everything they need in, but *because* they always carry bags no-one bothers to add

pockets to clothes. And just sticking pockets on doesn't make the same *point*. These are strong, they're sturdy, they're difficult to *steal*, it's easy as hell to pull a bag off someone's shoulder -"

"You're speaking from experience?"

He rolls his eyes to the ceiling. "I have girl friends. These make women feel competent and prepared and *strong*. We can make elegant little ones for eveningwear. Just a couple of pockets. *Imagine* how they'd look slung around a long dress -"

"Supers are a touchy subject, politically."

"Belts weren't illegal last time I checked."

"You *know* what these are saying. 'You too can be a superhero!'"

"What's so wrong with telling women that?"

She just keeps looking at him over her glasses, then looks down at her cell again. She breathes in slowly through her nose, lets it loose. "I'm not saying we didn't know what we were getting into when we hired you."

Kurt's portfolio of designs probably did stand out. High fashion bulletproof vests, Kevlar eveningwear, fireproof gowns. At interview he perched in his seat as poised as a stubborn sort of bird and said, *Fashion is politics. What you put on your body is how you present yourself to the world and to yourself. Who doesn't want to feel safer and stronger and bolder? Everything is war paint. Every article of clothing speaks. And sometimes you need to wear something that yells 'I'm here and I'm strong'.*

She narrows her eyes at him, then closes them, shrugs. "Okay. I like them. *Don't* get too excited, remember I'm the nice one, remember you have two more dragons to get through."

He tries not to bounce in his seat. "I look forward to hearing how begrudgingly they like them too."

She snorts the laugh, says, "Hell. You're not gonna start designing masks for daywear, right?"

"Nothing you'd have to take off to walk into a bank," he says, hands raised in surrender, eyes all wide and innocent, and she does laugh out loud that time.

The door to the junior designers' office opens and June puts her head in, her mouth sort of slack. "Sophie - on the news, have you seen the news?"

"No, June, my darling, I've been *working*. I'm glad things are so very quiet on the front desk, though."

"They're evacuating the area, Sophie, they want everyone out all the way up to Central Park -"

"What?"

Kurt puts his pen down, says sounding a lot more calm than the inner thrumming of his heart, "Why?"

June swallows. "That - that lizard-monster, he's back, he's out in the street tossing cars aside, they want everyone out of his way, there are police *everywhere* -"

Kurt scrapes his chair back, heads to the window, looks down just as three cop cars zip past, silent far below. One of the other junior designers, Chandler, comes to stand next to him to look down on the street - it's the closest he's stood to Kurt since their absolute disaster of an almost-maybe-oh-no-not-after-all-then, and he whispers under his breath, "Oh my god." Kurt swallows, arms folded around himself to keep himself small. Sophie's rubbing her eyes under her glasses.

"Evacuate to *where*? It's not *here*, can't we - oh hell, get into the basement, what do you do when *Godzilla* attacks? Kurt, are you okay? Sit down, you've gone pale."

"I'm always pale," he says, turning from the window, trying not to visibly lean away from Chandler. He swallows. "I - sorry. I -" Pick a lie, any lie, you need to be out of here an hour ago already. "I was - in the area last time he - I'm sorry, I just - you don't think he'll come here, right?"

He picks the 'scared kid from Ohio' card. He's twenty-three but he knows he looks younger and he knows he looks like a well-placed flick could knock him down; there are times when he needs people to pity him too much to resent their doing it so automatically.

"Oh hell." Sophie pulls her hands back through her hair, clipped up into a bun but escaping all over, fine black strands too fond of static. "Sit down. Do you want to - head down to the subway or something, they always say it's safer underground. They probably have people directing you to safe places out there anyway." She rubs her eyes again. "June, hit the fire alarm, we need to start moving people out."

"Out *where?*"

"Anywhere! Evacuation means *out*, there'll be cops down there directing us!"

Kurt slips out while their attention's busy, only Chandler starts to say something and then stops, and since there's only one guy further up the corridor with his back to him, as soon as he's out of sight of the doorway Kurt turns invisible and ghosts between floors. Somewhere under his office he left a bag and a spare costume he hoped he'd never have to use from work. He just needs somewhere safe to change in, he can follow the cop cars to the trouble, and it gnaws in his stomach, this, again, can he deal with this again - ?

No choice. Tie off and mask on in a storage closet, and yes, he knows what it means to wear clothing as if it's a weapon in his hands. In that cloak he doesn't doubt. Life is so much simpler from behind the mask . . .

*

'Puckzilla' is at a crossroads marked by a hovering helicopter, impassable now with crashed-over cars around its edges, and it's very possible that he's even bigger than he was last time. His t-shirt's torn ragged across his shoulders - lucky his hips are narrower, the pants are still holding up - his skin tinted green, scaled across his shoulders and back down to the long lashing tail behind him as he fists his clawed hands, puts back his frilled head and *bellows*, "*C'mon out an' face me! Out in the daylight where everyone can see it, you face the Puckzilla like a man!*"

"Like the man who kicked your ass last time," he mutters, standing arms folded and invisible with the cops, shielded behind two cars barricading the road. "What the hell is the point of this?"

He scans the cops and his heart gulps its beat, because there's Finn, uniform on with a gun in his hands, and the Ghost - hates being the Ghost in front of people who know him as *Kurt*. But then there's a reporter's van nearby, there are cameras aimed on Puckzilla and there is just no way this will be as secretive as his normal nighttime activity. He needs to keep his back to the cameras and stay invisible as much as he can, and protect Finn at all costs. He tugs his hood further over his face, walks through a car and into the empty ring surrounding Puckzilla, trying to breathe evenly.

"C'mon you spineless poltergeist, c'mon out and face me! Round two, let's go! You face me man to man, we'll settle this here an' now -"

He doesn't make himself visible yet; he just walks close enough, and raises his voice. "We already settled it, Noah, we settled it by me putting you in jail. What the hell are you doing?"

His head snaps around but he can't see the Ghost, who just folds his arms and waits. "-hell are you, sneakin' around like a coward, you don't dare *face* me -"

"Okay," the Ghost says evenly. "How about *you* stop being a giant monster lizard and I'll stop being a ghost, and then we can make this more even. Settle it over Mario Kart or something."

"C'mon an' *fight* me, Casper."

The Ghost just watches him. "Noah, you know how this ends. You know that being absurdly strong is no good against me. Why are you doing this, what are you going to *achieve*?"

Puck's sort of guessed where the Ghost is now by his voice, so as his eyes settle around him, the Ghost circles him a little, and turns intangible for good measure, just the soles of his boots on the road to hold him up. "You know where you *put* me, man? You know what it's like in there?"

"You robbed a bank, what did you think would happen if you got caught, that people would be *disappointed* in you and ask you to do better next time?"

"People *laughed*!" he roars, spinning to follow the Ghost's moving voice. "At *me*! Getting knocked down by some puny punk in a hallowe'en costume! Well y'know what, this time it's different, this time I spent all that time behind bars thinkin' how you bring down someone too gutless to stand there an' get punched -"

"Yes, clearly I am really so very cowardly when I don't just stand there and let the genetically modified monster punch me in the face."

Puckzilla's muscles flex in his shoulders, his frill falls and raises again, and he reaches into the pocket of his jeans, pulls out a book of matches. "What'd you think all those totalled cars were for?"

"What are you-"

He lights a match, and sets fire to the box. And then he tosses it - a bright arc in the sky - at a crumpled car belly-up across two lanes, resting in a little puddle of gasoline. It goes up with the *softest* noise, like a

flumping duvet of flame. The Ghost goes stiff because he has *reasons* not to like fire, but Puckzilla's got another box of matches, and he's turning for another smashed car.

Puckerman has halfway thought this through, because even intangible the Ghost feels heat and needs to breathe, that fire is still dangerous to him. But he can ghost straight *down* and it's other people who're in danger if this whole area goes up, and *Finn* is behind those cop cars.

He runs at him, springs, his swiping hand ghosts the matches through Puckzilla's hand and he roars, grabbing after the Ghost's cloak as he drops into sight and drops right through the surface of the road. He leaves the matches down there, turns and kicks and hauls himself through the solid surface, coming up with a gasp - no air inside solid objects - behind Puckzilla, who's already got another car alight, boxing off two sides of the road now. The Ghost braces his weight on his hands and rolls out of the range of Puck's whipping tail, legs cartwheeling, back onto the road's surface. "You are going to kill people!"

"People who stuck me in jail, like they care about me, they put me in chains like an *animal*-"

"Maybe they wouldn't do that if you didn't do *this* when you're *not* chained up!"

"No-one cares about me! No-one cares about the Puckzilla!"

"You might garner more sympathy by not referring to yourself in the third person," the Ghost says, and Puckzilla *roars*, and punches his hand into the surface of the road. The Ghost blinks, backs away as he wrenches his hand free pulling wiring out with it, stretching and snapping it, peeling it out of the surface of the road like a varicose vein.

"What are you -?"

He punches down again, and this time the thick cable he drags out spits and *bangs* and crawls with electricity, and his hand shakes a little but he gives no indication of feeling it. "Here you go, spooky. The Puckasaurus Rex feels no pain. How about you come over here an' feel what it's *like*."

He's frozen. Puckzilla's as strong as a number of oxes and really not much brighter, but bright enough to know that strength means nothing if you can't connect with the person you're trying to punch - the ghost you're trying to punch. But there are a few things the Ghost is horribly, horribly vulnerable to, and he knows it. One is air, he still needs to breathe, and getting trapped in something solid, or inhaling too much

of something like the Pink Dagger's poison gas, could still kill him. Another is fire, in too high temperatures - or too low - if he lost consciousness he'd be done for. And the third -

He got tasered, once. Rescued a woman from a mugging and wild with fear she had no intention of waiting to find out *why* he'd rescued her; he woke up to a couple of bystanders debating what the hell to do with him, can you call an ambulance for a superhero? with his head resting on a girl's rolled-up jacket. She was kind, helped him up while his legs barely worked and he was *embarrassed* as much as still hopelessly weak.

Even ghosting, electricity will hurt him. And he has no way of bringing Puckzilla down without being in close range, he needs to *touch* him to haunt him, nothing physical hurts him but if the Ghost can get a hand to his head then he can press all the terror in the world into him and that, *that* will knock him out -

If he can get past that sparking line of electricity in his hand.

He licks his lips, tries to think what to do.

And then he becomes aware of shouting to the side, glances over at the cops just as a voice he knows yells, "*No you can't-!*" and they open fire. He instinctively puts an arm over his face even though, ghosting, the best the bullets do is buzz through him; he hears them thump off Puckzilla's hide without even drawing blood, and then someone is yelling at 'Officer Hudson', and one of the burning cars explodes.

His ears ring. He's face down on the road, pressing himself up on his arms, intangible so a burning tyre bounces right through him and away and he sucks his breath in at the heat of it. Puckzilla's caught half of one of the seats, its stuffing burning such bright orange, lobbing it at the kneeling Ghost with a triumphant snarl.

It hits something green in the air in front of the Ghost's face and bounces back. He stares, heart throbbing in his ears, at the clear green hexagon just *there* in the air before it vanishes, and then he sees the figure in black making its way towards them, across the empty road. It's a kid. It has to be a kid because it's too damn short for a man and what the *hell* -

"Fuckin' interlopers, get back in the bleachers." Puckzilla mutters, and spins so tight his tail lashes out like a whip. The Ghost springs forward but he'd never be quick enough, he would never have got there in time, and he doesn't even need to because that tail strikes off more of those green hexagons, tessellating neatly

together like a honeycomb shield at the side of the boy in black. Puckzilla staggers at the force of his own strike bouncing off the shield, hands fisting, growling now as he faces this new player. And all the Ghost can think is, *What the hell is he* doing?

Puckzilla's tail snaps behind him, his frill raises and flattens dangerously. "This is between me an' the spook, kid, go find somewhere less annoying to be emo."

He's got his hood up and some kind of ski mask on under it. Amateur hero, the Ghost thinks, groaning softly out loud. At least he actually has some kind of powers but oh god he is going to get himself killed, and *more* people if this can't be contained. But Puckzilla has his back to him now, and maybe this is all he needed . . .

The kid says, sounding cheerful if just a little shaky, "Excuse me but you are about four times his size, I'm just trying to even the odds out a little, otherwise it just looks like bullying."

"Bullying," Puckzilla snorts. "If you mean stronger guys pounding weaker guys, that's how the world *works*."

"I mean not picking on someone who weighs about as much as your leg. Though, uh, not picking on anyone at all would be really nice."

The Ghost walks towards Puckzilla, quite slowly. He dropped that electricity cable when the gunshots were fired, and it's laying between the two of them; he tries to give it a wide berth, fades out of sight again, watches carefully as the human lizard and the kid in black talk.

"Nice'." Puckzilla says, sounding as impressed as he might be at gum on the sidewalk.

The kid in black shrugs. "What's wrong with being nice?"

"Nice." His voice is more of a snarl now, as the Ghost pauses a leap away from him, considering his moment. "Nice like gettin' experimented on by whackos in white coats until they do *this* to you? Nice like not bein' able to find a job or a place or a girl who doesn't freak out, *nice* like bein' treated like a monster before you ever even did anything *wrong* -"

He feels a low inner twinge; fighting a monster is one thing. Fighting a victim? Okay he's a victim who's intent on taking his victimhood out on other people, but - what is the Ghost *for* if not standing up for victims . . . ?

The kid in black doesn't know what to say either, just stands there with his mouth a little open and hands in loose fists at his sides, maybe becoming aware that even beyond the obvious he is in over his head with this. And the Ghost swallows, he doesn't have a lot of time for intricate ethical reflection, lives are at stake and another one of those cars could go at any given moment. He can find a way to *talk* to Puckzilla some other time; right now he just needs everyone to be safe.

He fades back into view behind Puck's shoulder, slipping his hands out from inside his cloak, preparing to jump. And the kid's eyes flick immediately to him.

Idiot.

Puckzilla turns with a roar, the Ghost instinctively leaps *back* instead of forwards and Puck's long tail slashes through his hastily ghosting body. The kid yelps out and runs forward and Puck - just keeps spinning, the Ghost can only yell, "No-!" but his tail's already whipped the kid in the side, smacking him sideways with a skid-stumble-*thunk* into the side of a car. No time: the Ghost leaps.

He lands on Puckzilla's broad back, grabs his shoulder and kicks himself right over his head as his claws grab after him; looking upside-down into his face the Ghost whispers, "I'm sorry," and ghosts a hand right through his head.

He did this to himself, once. He needed to know what it is that he does to people, what damage he might be doing. He locked his bedroom door and sat on the edge of the bed and drew his breath in, and he haunted himself. Ghosted his hand through his own head, *haunted* himself.

He woke up on his bedroom floor, cold.

It's fear. It's *fear* like a physical force, cold and crippling, fear so the heart stops and breath stops and brain stops, terror so strong the mind and body cut out, fear beyond death and pain, nothing but fear. The purity of it can't be coped with: most people black out within a couple of seconds. Some of them don't even make a sound.

Most of them do.

He's still falling as Puckerman *screams*, face-down to the road. He ghosts right through it, kicks and turns himself, thrusts himself back into the light; Puckerman is staggering sideways, hands clutching at his face, his chest, and then he sags to his knees - skin turning a warmer tanned shade, body becoming smaller, tail shrinking in - and collapses on his side. He looks just like a guy, then, just some guy with a mohawk instead of a frill, helpless on the floor with his eyes closed and mouth open.

The kid in black is on his knees next to the car, holding himself up by the door. The Ghost runs over, crouches next to him - "Can you stand up? Are you okay to stand up?"

"Whuh. I." He squints up at the Ghost and says, "Oh god it's really you."

He knows the cops will be coming for them, he knows Finn can't risk himself in slowing them down. "Can you *walk*. This is important."

"Yeah. I'm fine. Yeah." He stands up far too quickly and staggers, and the Ghost grabs his arm, stands with him.

"Hold onto me and hold your breath."

"What?"

One of the cops shouts, "Stay right where you are, hands where we can see them!"

The Ghost snaps at him, "*Hold your breath.*" and ghosts straight down, pulling the boy with him. He starts a yelp but thankfully does catch a breath in and hold it before they're underground, cool dark silent, and the Ghost slips them lower, lets them fall that sleep-slow falling through solidity, you're never too long underground in New York without hitting a pocket of - a basement, a subway tunnel, a sewer even, *something* -

His searching hand finds open space underneath them and he slips his head through, emptiness, can't see a thing until he fumbles his flashlight free; *disused* subway platform, even better. He tugs at the boy's hand, twists himself feet down and ghosts them through. They drop *so* much faster, the boy manages to get his yelp out before the Ghost lets them drop just into the platform's surface, then hauls them back again onto solid ground. He holds him by the shoulders because he's shaking, clipping the flashlight one-handed back into his belt to illuminate the graffiti on the tiles and cast their shadows huge on the ceiling. "I am going to take you to a doctor. But first of all tell me what the *hell* you think you were doing."

The boy coughs and says, "Helping."

The rage in him is like a fist inside his chest, he can hardly *breathe* around it. He grabs the ski mask at the forehead and rips it off - the boy yells, "Hey-!" and the Ghost tosses it to the side, snaps at him, "You will get yourself *killed*, do you have any *idea* -"

He's about his age, older than he'd expected, and sturdier-built than he'd expected under those baggy clothes. He's blinking at him - brown eyes, wide and childlike, cute nose, frankly ridiculous eyebrows, one of them a little clotted with blood from the cut on his head where he must have met that car head-on. The Ghost repeats, slower, harder, "You will get yourself killed. I do not want to see you in a mask out there again. I'm taking you to a doctor and then I'm taking you home and you never so much as -"

"I want to *help*, I have this -" He waves a hand and little green hexagons flare into life in the air around his gesture and vanish again. "- can't I *help*?"

"By headbutting cars? How much do you think you *helped*?"

"I stopped that chair hitting you!"

"It wouldn't have hit me! I'm the *Ghost*!" He's all but screaming at him now. "This is not a game! It is not fun! If you want to be a hero then volunteer at a homeless shelter, *don't put a mask on!*"

"Wh- you do it! Why can't I?"

His breath snorts out of him, he doesn't have the *energy* for it. "Fine. Get yourself killed. Just try to do it during the daytime and not on my watch." He unclips the flashlight, takes the boy's wrist - he tries to pull it back but the Ghost just grabs it tighter. "I am *taking you to a doctor*, you're probably concussed. Come on. We'll hit a working station sooner or later."

"I'm fine! I don't -"

The Ghost turns them for the platform and the guy's arm suddenly goes slack under his grip; he turns as quickly as he can, catches his shoulders as he pants at the platform, saying quietly with each too-much breath, "Okay, okay, I'm okay-"

"You're concussed. Breathe. I know a doctor."

"Can't we - hospital?"

"You just put a mask on, showed off your powers and picked a fight with a supervillain. You walk into a hospital, you might as well wave a flag that says *arrest me*. Come on. We'll go slow. I know a doctor, it's okay."

The guy's still for a moment, breathing at the floor, head down. Then he swallows, and nods, and lifts his head slow and struggling. "Okay."

The Ghost helps him down onto the tracks. "Don't worry about any trains. Just hold onto me, I'll ghost us through."

"This is."

"Mm?"

"Not what I -"

". . . what?"

"Imagined. Not what I imagined."

What did he think superheroing involved, tickertape parades? He just holds his wrist and keeps walking down the track, and says because it's probably a good idea to keep him talking, "What did you imagine?"

"Don't know. Not this. It smells of pee down here."

The laugh comes out of him too sharp, he stifles it too late. When he glances back, the guy's grinning, and it's hard to make his own mouth lie flat. "What's your name?"

"I hadn't picked one yet."

"What? Your real name."

"Should I be telling you that? Like, secret identities and everything?"

"You are not becoming a superhero, you do not need a secret identity. And I need something to call you, you at least know what to *call* me."

"Um. I -" He rubs his forehead, squinting his eyes closed. "Your number one fan? Did I just say that out loud?"

The Ghost rolls his eyes, keeps walking. "I am not calling you that."

"I." Their footsteps echo off the walls, too loud here in the dark. "I really . . . I really admire you, you know that? I read about everything you do, I -"

"You don't read about *everything* I do."

"Everything anyone knows about. I follow all the blogs, I just - you know, when you're just some nobody from Ohio with this freakish *thing* you can do, and you see someone doing something as amazing as what you do? It just - it makes it feel like - like I understand what I'm *for*, now, you know?"

He wants to say, Where in Ohio? but unlike his new friend Concussed McRamblyson, the Ghost actually does understand how to work a secret identity. "That's what you do? Make little - shield-things?"

"Yeah. Like, I can do other things with them. I kind of think I shouldn't right now, I don't feel." He rubs one eye. "Well."

"Just keep putting one foot in front of the other."

Silence for a few steps, and just before the Ghost tries to prompt him back into speech so he can tell how far gone he is, the guy says, "I really can't believe it's you."

He just holds his wrist, keeps walking. The guy pulls at his arm, loosens his grip to take his gloved hand instead, and the Ghost would object but - but. He doesn't know. He's not right in the head and he's apparently an enormous super-groupie. It's somewhere between weird and cute, and it's not like it's going to kill him to hold the guy's hand.

It's been a while since anyone wanted to hold his hand. He tries not to think about that while his face heats under the mask.

"You smell good," the groupie says. "They never say that on the blogs."

Oh god, he could laugh again. "Don't make me leave you down here."

"Oh my god, does that like, compromise your identity? Now I've smelled you?"

"I smell like sweat and subway."

"Hey," the guy says, pulling his hand. "I could blackmail you. You have to teach me superheroing or else I'll tell the whole internet what you smell like."

"No, please, that will entirely collapse my secret identity," he says in a monotone. Then, "What *do* I smell like?"

The guy sniffs at his shoulder, and the Ghost tries not to jump. "Laundry and shampoo and . . . good sweat, the kind makes you hungry."

Don't say anything, just keep walking.

Groupie pulls at his hand again. "Will you teach me how to be a superhero?"

"No. There's a light ahead, be quiet, I can make us invisible but people will notice disembodied voices climbing onto a platform."

"Are we going to take the subway to this doctor?"

"You can tell them to add it to the charge sheet. Vigilanteism *and* skipping subway fares."

"Oh my god, you are *such* a supervillain."

He really wants to laugh, again, squeezes the guy's hand instead. "Shut *up*."

*

He hauls groupie up the fire escape to the second floor, which is not fun, then knocks on the window there. It's getting dark by now, late afternoon in autumn, and there's light behind the blinds. After a moment

they peel aside, and then the girl inside *grins* and unlatches the security bars so he can swing them out. "Mike! We have a visitor! God, what happened? Who's he?"

"A groupie with a bashed head." He helps him climb over the window ledge into Tina's arms, where he staggers and folds, and sits there on her bedroom floor looking dazed. The bedroom door opens and Mike stares in at them, then hurries over and crouches in front of groupie, who props himself on a hand and holds the other to his forehead, and says, "Ow."

"Okay, watch my finger." Mike says, immediately holding him by the arm and holding a finger up in front of his crossing eyes. "What's your name?"

The Ghost flips open the wallet he just ghosted from the guy's back pocket. "His name's Blaine. You seriously put on a mask and then took ID out with you?"

"How did y-" Blaine swings his head to look at the Ghost and then groans, grits his teeth, turns it slowly back to Mike who says, "Okay Blaine, easy, come sit down and I'll clean that cut. What happened to him?"

"He got between me and a dinosaur." The Ghost sits on the window ledge, dropping Blaine's wallet onto the bed where Mike gets him sitting, then heads out for his medical kit. Tina stares at him, then back at the Ghost.

"That's the guy? I watched on the news, that's the guy with the shield-things?"

Blaine says plaintively, "You are a walking spoiler for my secret identity."

"You don't have a secret identity, you are not a superhero!"

"Only because you won't help," Blaine says, like the Ghost is being *so* unreasonable in trying to save his admittedly quite admirable ass. "I'm *learning*, I can get better -"

Mike's back in the room with a small briefcase, snapping it open on the bed. "Tina, can you get me some hot water?"

"I'm on it," she says, immediately out of the door. They make a great team, Tina the artist and Mike the junior doctor, and an adorable couple, and mostly the Ghost manages to feel fond rather than jealous. Honestly, *mostly*, he does.

Blaine winces his eyes open, says, "Is this going to hurt?"

The Ghost swings his boots a little. "I would like to nominate a further reason why you would make a terrible superhero."

"What, it *stings*, no-one likes it!"

"It'll only hurt a little bit," Mike promises, as Tina walks back in with a bowl of steaming water, putting it on top of the book on the bedside table. Mike wets some cotton wool and then pours some antiseptic on it. "Hold still . . ."

Blaine hardens his jaw and makes no sound as Mike cleans the cut, apparently determined to prove that he can *too* be a superhero. And the Ghost presses his mouth closed not to laugh and keeps his eyes on one of Tina's prints on the wall, a tangle of graffiti in shades of dark grey with the white shape of a hooded cloak just right of the middle of it, like the outline of a ghost; that white cloak stands out like an angel in an annunciation. He sees them all over the city. They look like distorted up-ended goldfish, but he appreciates the gesture.

"Are you okay?" Tina says, and touches his arm. "He didn't hurt you?"

He twitches a smile at her. "I'm fine."

Eyes screwed up and jaw held tight, Blaine says, "So how do *you* guys know him?"

"He saved my life once," Tina says, standing up and hooking her long black hair over her shoulders again. "I was getting a photograph - that one, actually -" Pointing at another print of a wall of graffiti, black corrugated iron covered in a cacophony of tags, with one white hooded cloak in the bottom corner of it like the artist's initials - "when some guys who were drunk or high or just crazy shoved me into the wall and . . . he walked me home, he's a gentleman like that," and she grins at him and the Ghost holds one arm to himself and drops a half-bow from his seat on the windowsill - "and Mike said if he ever needed help we'd be here for him."

"Someone's going to have to sit with him all night," Mike says, because Mike is sensitive to his secrecy and doesn't want any details about what the Ghost might have needed them *for* coming out in this conversation, dropping the used cotton wool in the trash can under Tina's desk. "He can sleep on our couch."

"No, no no, I have to get home, my brother - he'll go nuts if I don't come home, you have no idea, I can't -"

"This is what I mean," the Ghost says patiently, "when I tell you that you have not thought this superhero thing through."

"He'll call our mom. I can't stay out all night." He screws his eyes closed again. "*God* this is embarrassing, I don't think I have ever been so humiliated in my *life*, and I once serenaded a guy in the GAP."

"If concussion leads to you vomiting personal information to anyone who will listen, again, please rethink the superheroing." The Ghost sighs, and stands up. "I'll take him home, I'll sit with him. All night?"

"Wake him up every half hour. Call me if you're not sure about him."

Blaine says, "Wait, what's happening now?"

"Now you're giving me your address. Do you have enough in there for a cab?" He points at Blaine's wallet on the bed. "I am really too tired to run you home invisible on the subways."

"You're coming *home* with me?"

"Consider your secret identity well and truly blown. It's okay, I'm good at keeping secrets." He smiles, and Blaine looks up at him, looking wary and young and - okay, there is no harm in admitting that he's good looking. He has no love life to speak of, he can hardly be *blamed* for noticing that this guy is unfairly handsome for an idiot. "If you actually want to be a superhero then you really need to understand how much of it involves walking people home, sitting with crying drunks while their friends come to find them, sitting with people on bad trips until the ambulance comes for them, sitting with scared shop assistants surrounded by busted glass until the cops come. There is a very surprising amount of *sitting*."

Blaine says, like he is struggling so hard to understand this, "You're going to sit with me?"

He narrows his eyes at him, not sure quite how much of a supergroupie fantasy he's walking into here. "Anything weird and I haunt you, cuff you and leave you. Understand?"

He holds his hands up, innocent and blinking and increasingly *delighted*, and really, *really*, he needs to stop making him want to laugh . . .

*

It's a nicer apartment building than the one he shares with Rachel. He stands invisible at Blaine's shoulder in the elevator, murmurs, "Fancy." and Blaine squirms an awkward shrug.

"It's my brother's. He's an actor."

He almost asks if he would know him from anything, but everything risks skating too close to who he really is. He bites his tongue, and watches the numbers creep up.

Walking down the corridor Blaine says, "Are you still there?"

"Right here." He touches Blaine's arm and feels his muscles tighten and drop again, and he pulls his hand back. "Don't talk to me until we're inside."

Blaine nods, finds a door and goes through his keys, unlocks it. It's dark inside, his brother must be out. Blaine's standing there holding the door open long after the Ghost's walked inside. "Are you still there?"

From behind his shoulder he says, "Close the damn door, Blaine."

Blaine jumps, snaps the light on, stares wildly around him for a second and then closes the door. "Okay, I can see why criminals are *terrified* of you."

"Yes, I'm just that scary." He fades back into view, and looks over the open-plan kitchen-lounge, pale carpets, dark wood and black panelling, the wide-windowed view of the skyline. He has to turn his head back to look at Blaine, the hood cuts out most of his peripheral vision - he's intangible as often as not in costume, so he's okay with risking the edges of his sight to keep his face more hidden - and Blaine is just watching him, mouth just a little open, with tape over the cut on his forehead and the bruise now growing all the way down to his eye, he'll have a hell of a shiner from it. He looks away, because Blaine's attention is just too much. "Do you want to sleep now?"

"I - dunno. Yeah, I'm pretty - tired."

"Which is your bedroom? Get - get changed or, just let me know when you're - ready."

He doesn't know why he's embarrassed. He's done enough things *like* this before, he's even had to ghost out of the arms of a rescued guy a little overwilling to show his appreciation more than once (a couple of women too, adding an extra layer of embarrassment), but something about this boy makes him so aware of himself under the suit, like he's more on view than he possibly can be. But Blaine just nods, and pulls a hand through his hair, and looks tired. "There's soda and stuff in the fridge, help yourself." he says, and drags his feet off to one of the doors at the side, turning the light on as he goes in.

For a moment, he just stands there holding his arms to himself, feeling very self-conscious. Then he walks to the closed door, taps on it and says through it, "If I make coffee do you want one?"

Blaine makes a negative noise through the door, muffled; he must have that hoodie up over his head. He tries very hard not to think about that, goes and pokes at the sleek black coffee machine for a while, finds the sugar in the fourth cupboard. They have three different kinds of breakfast cereal. Strange little intimacies, being in someone else's kitchen.

The door opens again. "You can come in," Blaine says, looking even younger in t-shirt and pyjama pants, bare feet on the floor. "Or are you gonna wait out here all night? I don't know how this . . ."

"I'll sit with you. Not to be the angel of doom or anything but you could still throw up and choke yourself, the night is young." He walks to him and Blaine looks sleepily up at his face - he tucks his chin in a little under the hood in the hope that the shadow will fall further over him - and then Blaine takes the cup off him, which he's too surprised to stop him doing. He takes a sip, then smiles.

"Sugar and cream." He hands it back. "I promise not to tell anyone how you take your coffee."

"You are such a little stalker," the Ghost mutters, following him into his bedroom. Which.

Is a bit.

Blaine stands there in the middle of the floor, then says, "It has only just occurred to me exactly how creepy this might seem to you."

There's a black and white poster over the bed of *him* leaping from the edge of a building, cloak blooming darkly, suit pale in the light; all around the desk, taped to the walls, are photographs and photographs clipped from magazines and newspapers, his own pixelated half-hidden face two dozen times, columns of

news stories, blaring headlines, *GHOST PREVENTS BANK HEIST, SAVED BY A GHOST, 68% OF NEW YORKERS SAY GHOST IS GREAT* -

At any second you want, he tells himself, you can ghost right through the floor and never return to this demented nest of fanatical groupiedom ever, ever again.

He says again, as calmly as he can, "You are such a little stalker." and walks to the desk chair, rolls it over to the bed. "Get in. Please just go to sleep, it's already been a *long* day."

Blaine climbs into the bed, slots his legs in under the covers. "Do you have a day job? Can you manage a day job and still be up all night saving lives?"

"Secret identity," he says, and closes his eyes, drinks his coffee.

"I wouldn't tell anyone. You can trust me."

"No I can't. I met you four hours ago. I don't know the first thing about you."

"You know a *lot* more about me than I know about you." Blaine shrugs, swallows. "You know more about me than anyone does. I haven't told anybody about the shields. Not even - no-one."

He opens his eyes, watches him from over his cup. "Why?"

Blaine flicks his eyes away. "You know. *You* know. Don't you? When you first find out it's - Jesus, weren't you *scared*? It's like your body doesn't belong to you anymore, you don't know who you *are* anymore, not now you can do this . . ."

He keeps his eyes calmly on his, and takes a sip of coffee, and says nothing. Blaine licks his lips.

"I've never met anyone else who can . . . I wish you would just believe that you can trust me. Why would I want to hurt you? I'm -"

"Don't say you're my biggest fan again. Please. I've seen the pictures, I believe you. Just lay down and go to sleep."

Blaine wriggles down onto his side, but he doesn't close his eyes. "How did you find out what you could do?"

"Secret identity, Blaine."

"That's not fair."

"Such is life."

"You sound better than you do in the audios online," he murmurs, eyes drooping now. "Your voice. S' nice."

He just sighs, and drinks more coffee. Coffee, he decides, is the only really good thing in his life right now. If it wasn't for coffee he would have nothing left to live for. Well, no. His dad. And really good cheesecake. But mostly just coffee . . .

Blaine seems to be quiet, for now, so the Ghost checks his cell - he has one for each costume, set up so Finn can track their location, just in case - and lays it on his thigh to keep an eye on the time (every half hour, this is going to be a long night). His eyes trace over the room, he didn't even know half these photos existed, he googles himself as often as he dares because he needs to know what's out there, he needs to control his exposure, but -

Well, as much as anything else, between infuriating articles labelling him a dangerous criminal and the goddamn *fanfiction*, he really just doesn't want to know.

Taped to the side of the computer monitor is the photograph he couldn't avoid, on the front cover of every newspaper and magazine, when he was still bandaged and rasping and *aching* from it. That burning building, that firefighter who caught him as he staggered out maybe the sixth or seventh time, while the others carted to an ambulance the man he'd just ghosted through after himself and the firefighter didn't even ask him if he needed it, just held his shoulder and held the mask up to his face. And he sucked it down, clamped a hand greedily over the mask, clinically clean air, it made him *dizzy*.

Then the firefighter said, *Fuck, kid, how old are you?* and he said, *I don't know how many more are in there.* and turned around, his cloak intangible through the man's grabbing fingers, and ran back for the building.

"I read about that," Blaine's voice slurs softly from the bed, low at the edge of sleep. "Bravest thing I ever heard anyone do. They said you went back in thirteen times."

He remembers the screaming and the agony of heat and the choking solidity of the air, heat-blind, smoke-blind, fumbling for another living body through broken, burning timber. He remembers the floor collapsing under him, desperate hands slipping through his as he fell, he remembers *yelling* to someone that everything was okay and ghosting through metal so hot it *seared* him, and he remembers only the sound of the ceiling coming down. He remembers waking up in a sub-basement, cheek to cold concrete, wet from the hose-water running through, not understanding why no-one had come to help him before he realised that no-one ever does come to rescue the hero. That's what 'hero' means.

He says, because it's the darkest thought to come back to him on all the darkest nights, "There were a lot more than thirteen people in that building."

Blaine doesn't say anything. The Ghost doesn't look back to him to see if he's still awake. He swallows, and looks away from that photograph, and this is as close to a quiet night in as he's ever likely to get . . .

Chapter Three

It becomes part of the dream, surreal repetition of his shoulder touched and a soft voice in the dim light of the lamp, "Are you alright? Tell me your name. Now tell me my name."

"You won't tell me it, you jerk." Blaine mumbles into his pillow, and the Ghost's tired laughter is as pretty as wind chimes.

That's something no-one's ever blogged about. He's just so *lovely*, line of his jaw in the shadow of the hood, shape of his nose under the mask. Do they call him the Ghost because his skin is so pale it looks almost translucent? Maybe Blaine dreams it, but at some point his alarm beeps again and his hood is back, he lifts his head from sleep in the chair and his opening eyes are dark blue-green in the mask, the framing lashes so perfect, his hair is a lamp-touched brown and his throat flexes white and shadowed. "Are you alright? Tell me your name."

Roughly from his pillow, "You're the one who stole my wallet, don't you know it?"

He grins, an open, tired, warm grin, and drags a hand back over his mask, up into his hair, and his other hand raises to cover a yawn before his head sinks to his chest again.

And then Cooper's singing loudly in the lounge, and it's morning, and there's not even a coffee cup to show for Blaine's guest, not even a mark on his chair. Blaine's guest. Blaine's ghost.

*

Rachel taps at his bedroom door just as he's knotting his tie, staring at himself almost grey in the mirror and he looks like he's going to throw up or pass out, superheroing is *awful* for your skin. He looks over his shoulder as she opens the door and says, "I didn't hear you come in last night." Her eyes narrow. "Were you out all night?"

He rolls his eyes back to the mirror. "Shouldn't you be in class?"

"I stayed up too late worrying about my roommate not answering his phone and then overslept while he snuck back in." she snaps back. "Oh my god you *were* out all night." He straightens his waistcoat, and yes the clothes are immaculate but hell he looks *exhausted*. "Was it a guy?"

"Rachel."

"I'm your best friend! We're meant to gossip about this kind of stuff!" She throws herself onto the bed, bounces a little with her hands clasped on her lap. "It was a guy, you can't hide it from me, I'm an investigative reporter."

"You're an interfering gossip-hound, which is different."

"What's his name?"

"Rachel, I have to go to work."

"Do you *know* his name? You don't look good. Are you *hungover*?"

He rubs an eye. "Not enough sleep. I'm fine."

". . . Kurt, I know that call from Adam might have upset you but -"

"I'm going to work." He snags a jacket from a hook on the back of the door. "Some of us aren't still students and we can't still loll around wasting a morning like this."

"I wrote a whole assignment on that craziness with Puckzilla and the Ghost while I was waiting for you last night, my work is going *fine*, thank you very much. Do you know how much damage they caused? Supers never even *think* about the cost to ordinary human beings going about their innocent-"

"Have a nice day, Rachel!" he yells from the front door, and slams it behind himself.

*

Blaine spends most of the morning sitting in front of his computer, staring dazed at the evidence of yesterday. It happened. He knows it happened. His face hurts like a bitch and Cooper asked him who the *hell* hit him like that ("Guy on a bike knocked me over," he muttered, cheeks burning), so yes, Blaine knows it happened. But -

Jerky video footage from the news, god, the Ghost looks so *tiny* facing Puckzilla. The camera swings to him, *him*, 'mystery super' the reporter calls him, he just looks like a shapeless guy in black from this distance.

And then he gets to see himself getting whumped into the side of a car, which is not remotely embarrassing as all hell, and -

It's already been gif'd to hell all over the internet, including the various angles photographed from office windows all around the site. The Ghost twisting himself over Puckzilla's head, supporting himself from just one hand on his shoulder, cloak whirling, legs snapped out wide. *Dat ass*, scream the tags, and Blaine thinks, if he'd mistimed any of that by half a second they'd have been picking bits of him off the road.

And it's so certain inside him, he doesn't even try to shake it, he knows he couldn't. It's so certain. He can't do it alone. He can't just be out there on his own risking his neck every night, it's not *fair*, him on his own and who ever helps *him*? Is it just that no-one else is *capable* of helping him? Supers are a vanishingly small proportion of the population. Is Blaine really just going to keep hiding and wishing him well, and not doing everything he could do to help?

The Ghost doesn't want his help, says he doesn't want his help, but he doesn't *know*, he doesn't know he can trust Blaine, he doesn't know what Blaine can do, could do, if he just - *tried* -

Hundreds of reblogs on, *Reblog if you've ever been rescued by the Ghost. Let Figgins know what an assbutt he's being. We love you, spooky <3*

Blaine would love to reblog it, his fingers itch, but what if he did? What if people asked him how, what happened? Secret identities, he realises, *suck*, you never get any of the fun stuff, not even the little things -

He reblogs a gif one of his favourite bloggers has made, the Ghost facing Puckzilla shot from an overhead, to-one-side angle, his body alert and tense and *small* next to that huge lizard-man, frill raised, clawed hands held out and making him look even bigger. In just small text in the bottom corner it says, *Hero*.

Blaine knows what he has to do. For one thing, a hell of a lot more work . . .

*

Rachel and Finn are making out on the couch when he opens the apartment door, groans, kicks it closed again behind himself and slumps past them for his bedroom. Finn at least has the decency to look embarrassed; Rachel snaps at him, "Why are you back early?"

"Not feeling great," he mutters, because germophobic Sophie sent him off with alarmed eyes and her hands already on the bottle of alcohol gel in her purse, when he said he might be coming down with something.

"And whose fault is that?" she yells after him, but he just slams his bedroom door on them.

Then he passes out fully-clothed on his bed for an hour.

He wakes up to a darkening sky and he can tell that someone's in the shower because the pipes are singing; rubbing his hair and tugging his shirt smooth he drags his feet back to the doorway and looks out at Finn, who turns the sound down on the football game on the TV and says, "Dude, what happened to you last night?"

Kurt glances at Rachel's bedroom door and Finn says, "She's getting ready to go out, you know girls, she'll take forever. What *happened*?"

She takes *just* a little longer than Kurt to get ready, actually. Kurt attributes those extra twenty minutes mostly to make-up, he's glad to not have that to worry about on top of everything else. "I had to drag that wannabe-super to a doctor, it took a while. Do you know where they're keeping Puckerman right now?"

"What?" Kurt sits next to him, because he's too damn tired to *stand* right now. Finn stares at him with his startled puppy face. "Why?"

"Because I need to talk to him, unless you want to keep repeating that farce every time he escapes."

"You want to *talk* to the monster who wants you -"

"Finn. Please. You know that if you don't tell me then I can just ghost into a police station and find out for myself."

Finn rubs his forehead with his eyes squinted shut, like Kurt is giving him a headache. "You called Burt yet?"

"Jesus, Finn, you're not my mom."

"Yeah, well, I'm not your dad either and I think *he* wants to hear from you, that thing was all over the TV, you know that?"

"Don't remind me."

"Call Burt."

"Tell me where Puckerman is."

Glaring silence for a second, then Finn says, "Trade." and holds his hand out. Kurt sighs the laughter, takes it, and they shake once. "There's a station Lower East Side with holding cells for supers in the basement. They shouldn't've moved him yet."

"I'll call Dad before I go. Have you - spoken to him?"

"Not, uh, since. I thought you probably should first."

"You'd think he'd be proud to see his son on TV," Kurt mutters, and hauls himself from his seat again.

"You're going now?"

"I'm going to call Dad. Have fun with Rachel, whatever you're doing tonight."

"She wanted me to have a guy-talk with you," Finn says, and Kurt looks back from opening his bedroom door. Finn shrugs, one of his gawky tight-shouldered shrugs. "I told her guys don't do that."

"A talk about what?" he says coolly.

"About." He shrugs again, and folds his arms. "One night stands, and, uh, she was really noisy about, uh. Condoms."

Kurt says, "Oh, Jesus." and closes the door behind himself.

He opens it again to say, "Thank you, Finn." and closes it again, and locks it this time.

The phone doesn't ring for long before his dad picks it up. *"Kurt. You okay to talk?"*

"Are you?" He rubs the back of his hair, squinting into the mirror, despairing - those shadows under his eyes are *embedded*, they're going nowhere.

"Yeah, just got in from the garage. You okay?"

"I'm fine, Dad, are you?"

"After yesterday?"

"Dad."

"They turned the TV on in the garage, Kurt, you know what it's like to watch that an' not be able to freak the hell out about -"

"Dad . . ."

"- your kid in all that craziness? Act like it's just - just entertainment like the other guys do -?"

"Dad, I'm sorry, I can't stop people carrying cameras around -"

"You think it's the camera angle of this that freaks me out?"

"A more flattering angle would be preferable?" Kurt says, but the stony silence on the line means that probably wasn't a joke. "Sorry. Dad, that was relatively *minor*, I wasn't in any danger -"

"Every goddamn night, Kurt."

"I'm fine, you know I'm always -"

"An' then you don't even call last night, where the hell were you after that? What else happened?"

"Nothing, Dad, seriously, *nothing*, you would have approved of my night after that, I was sitting with - some guy, that amateur super in black who got his head smacked, I had to keep an eye on him. It was quiet. No-one tried to kill me. I just couldn't call, I'm sorry."

His dad says, *"Every goddamn night, Kurt."*

He sits on his bed, rubs his eyes. "I know, Dad." The light in the sky's falling, it's almost time to head out. "I know." He really should turn the bedroom light on. "I'm sorry."

*

It *aches* not to blog about it.

Not to say, He's snippier than you'd think, maybe that's to be expected, but he's more patient than you'd think too. Not to say, I don't think he even sees himself as a hero, I don't think he's *proud* of what he does, I think all he sees is what he's still *not* doing. Not to say, He looks so fragile, and so human, and so strong.

Not to say, With half his face hidden he's still the most beautiful man I've ever seen, and if he actually took the mask off I might forget how to breathe.

Because he's met him, seen him sleep, held his *hand* and he can't breathe a word online, not without blowing his own latent secret identity, not without potentially complicating the Ghost's. And he needs this guy to *trust* him, he knows he's going to need his help if he's going to do this, so he can't throw away everything just to brag about it online, *I met him! I know how he takes his coffee! I know how he breathes when he sleeps!*

Plus it really doesn't help make Blaine look like anything less of a super-creeper . . .

*

Invisible and intangible he slips through the station, looking for doors marked private, looking for stairs headed down. All he leaves behind himself is a lingering scent of coffee.

The 'holding cells for supers' he needs to check out anyway, to see if they've begun to think how they would contain *him*. There's no manacle he couldn't slip, no bar could keep him in, and he doesn't know if they've thought holding him through (electrified walls, he thinks gloomily, and hopes that they haven't made that connection). But when he walks down that strip-lit underground corridor of cells, all he sees inside them are oversized manacles; enough to hold Puckerman or Brittany, hopefully, but nothing that could keep him in.

His shivery breath comes a little stronger. Good. He hates being penned in. The idea of not being able to escape - no.

He ignores his own settling breath and paces the corridor, silent as, well. He's looking for an occupied cell. He finds it in the very end one, the Ghost looks through the smoked-glass peephole and then ghosts through, and fades back into view. Puckerman, human and smaller than that creature he becomes, is slumped on the bench against the back wall, legs kicked out, arms in enormous chains, looking dull and tired before he looks up at the Ghost. Something flickers up behind his eyes before he says, "What the hell're you doing here?", outwardly still though his eyes are dark and intent.

"I came to talk. Coffee?" He wiggles one of the cups at him, and Puckerman looks confused, then shrugs and lifts a manacled hand.

"This your idea of a date? 'cause I'm not interested in your spooky dick, thanks."

He tosses Puckerman the paper bag, sits with his back to the door, says, "Neither am I interested in your scaly hide, thank you though for assuming. I came to talk. There wasn't much opportunity for it out there."

Puckerman opens the bag, then without thanks or ceremony starts eating the muffin inside. "Yeah? What the hell are we supposed to talk about?"

He swallows some coffee, licks his lips. "Someone did this to you. *Made* you a super, you weren't born like this."

Puckerman's eyes flit to his, hold, then down to the muffin again and he shrugs, and speaks through his mouthful. "Yeah. So what?"

"So you're not the villain, here, Noah. You're a symptom, someone *did* this to you. I can help. Who did it?"

Puckerman finishes the muffin - it was bigger than the Ghost's fist - and sighs, balls the bag and tosses it to bounce off - the wall *behind* the Ghost's head. He sighs, like he knew the Ghost would do that. "Food in here's worse'n being hungry."

"Noah."

"You think I'm just gonna talk? What'll you do if I don't, man? Fuck me in the head again?"

The Ghost watches his eyes, then says, "No. If you don't talk then I'll go away. But I don't want you coming back to this city and screwing the place up every time you get bored, someone will get *killed*."

"Can't kill a ghost," Noah says, and cracks a grin at him that he doesn't return. Noah's brows lower. "You can't even hit people. Looks like a girl could knock you down an' you take *me* out, you know what that looks like?"

"Like attacking New York is not worth the grief." he says, hard. "I want to *help*. Do you understand that? I want to bring down whatever asshole turned you into a super-monster and stop them doing it to anyone else. And you could help people too, haven't you ever even considered that? You have all that strength and what do you use it for, petty theft and picking fights? Maybe you didn't ask for it -"

"Why the hell should I help anyone? No-one ever helped *me*."

"- *maybe you didn't ask for it* but none of us ask for - talents. You just use them as best you can."

"So how'd you get yours? Who turned you into a freak?"

Don't even think about it. Do not even let it into your eyes that you're capable of thinking about it. "Tell me who did this to you."

Puckerman rests his head back against the wall, so he's looking along his own nose at the Ghost, then shrugs. "Don't even know his name. Some guy in a lab coat. I was strapped down most the time, I dunno what he even did to me."

"Do you know why?"

Puckerman looks up at the ceiling, eyes hooded, for a long time. Finally, slowly, he shrugs. "He said I was no good 'cause I only Puck out when I'm angry."

"Only when you're angry?"

His eyes stay on the ceiling. Then he says, "Why should I trust some prissy dude in spandex with a super-stick shoved up his ass?"

"Because I'm nominally one of the good guys, and because I can make the guy who did this to you feel really, *really* bad about it. *You* know that."

Puckerman doesn't look away from the ceiling.

Then he says, "Or when I'm. Sad. Lonely. Scared. S'just - feelings." He shrugs, works his jaws. "Feelings turn me into a huge fuckin' dinosaur-monster, it's pretty hardcore when you think about it."

"You could use all those feelings to make the world a better place." He sips some more coffee. "Once you've been a victim of what someone else did to you, don't you want to stop it happening to other people?"

Puckerman's eyes slide off the ceiling and back to him, through the shadow of his hood. "That why you do it?"

He should've gone onto the stage, his breathing doesn't even shift. "Secret identity, Puckerman."

"What d'you get out of this hero bullshit? Like people bein' grateful covers expenses?"

"I get a warm glow of satisfaction that the world is a marginally better place," the Ghost says, "and occasionally, yes, someone will remember to say 'thank you'. I'm not saying that doing the right thing leads to personal gain, it's just the *right thing*."

"Well you can keep it, I want cash."

He sighs, and drinks his coffee. "Will you come back again? If they let you out?"

Puckerman's silent for a moment, chugs some coffee, is silent for a moment. Then he says, "I owe you an ass-whuppin'. But . . . that thing, man, can't do it again, that - hell is it you *do* to people?"

The shadow of the hood will hide most of it, if any of it does get into his eyes. He thinks he knows where that kind of concentrated crippling *terror* comes from, where he finds it from inside himself to put it into other people. "Ghosts haunt people."

Puckerman chews his lip, drinks his coffee, plays a little with the cup between his hands. "You could've brought booze."

"What do you remember about the person who turned you? Where were they based?"

"It was a guy. I dunno, I don't remember, I was pretty *messed up* at the time. I don't wanna talk about it."

"I can stop it happening to other people."

"Why'd I care about them?"

He sighs again, angrily this time, and says, "Fine. I'll find him. Just stay the hell out of my city unless you're on its side next time."

Puckerman gives him a level glare, says, "I ever do work out a way to bring you down, I am comin' back an' *pounding* you, you know that?"

The Ghost just looks into his eyes. "You really want to risk being haunted again?"

His face is stiff. But then -

A door opens down the corridor, and the Ghost stands up, cloak falling around himself. "*Think* about it," he says, meaning everything, and fades himself invisible. He steps to the side as the door to Puckerman's cell opens, and - a woman with short blonde hair steps in. She's not a cop, judging by the shades hiding her eyes, her sharp cut suit - the taser at her side.

The Ghost steps back a little through the wall, eyes on that gun; he is *not* getting tasered down here, he'd never make it out without being unmasked . . .

The woman glances at the coffee cup in Puckerman's hands and says, "I take it you've already had a visitor."

Puckerman raises his cup at her like a toast. "I'm just that much in demand. What do you want? Busy night I'm having here, an' the Puckasaurus Rex needs his beauty sleep."

"Regrettably the night isn't long enough to help you out in that respect, reptile. I represent an organisation with an interest in you. And in any listening ghosts who might still be in the room, Casper, you can either show yourself or I can find a way to make you show yourself." She lifts the taser, adjusts some setting on it and - he can't. He can't risk it. As much as he wants to know why the hell anyone would be 'interested' in Puckerman, if they knock him out down here - if they get his mask off him -

He slips back through the wall, turns and hauls himself for the ceiling, for escape, for safety. He makes it back to street level without so much as spilling his coffee, and breathes in the cold full air of the New York night.

Could patrol. Could get an early night, he's still got work tomorrow.

The city thrums, a ceaseless pulse, the constant hum of happening happening happening - always something happening. Always. Only place where nothing ever happens in *this* city is his bed.

He patrols.

*

There is already Puckzilla/Ghost fanfic up. Fangirls move *so* quickly, Blaine can't keep up. If women did rule the world then men would be irrevocably left behind in a matter of days.

Some of the fanart is gorgeous, actually. One girl's done a piece in oil pastels, Puckzilla livid angry greens, the Ghost barely there, suggestions of shades of grey, cloak flaring overhead. He reblogs the fanart.

But what kind of person writes NC-17 Puckzilla/Ghost non-con? What kind of person - it never used to *bother* him, the fanfic, but the Ghost is a real person and someone is writing graphic - about - what if he found it? Don't they ever think that, *what if he found it*, how it would make him feel? Blaine doesn't know how it would make *him* feel if it was about him. Or - he does, guts dropping, bile rising. Yes. He does.

He sits with his hand on the mouse, playing the scroll wheel up and down with one finger. He's a real person. He only *seems* unreal, someone they can use, a character to be appropriated. But he's a real person, he - buys groceries and brushes his teeth and yawns when he's not ready to be awake. He loses his temper and tucks his head in when he's uncertain and laughs without meaning to (at things Blaine said, he remembers with a small warming of his stomach). And Blaine doesn't think it's wrong to admire him, he doesn't think it's wrong for people to show their appreciation for what he does for them, but he is beginning to wonder how right it is to ogle his ass in that suit all the time. Except he can't think why he'd want to wear something *that* tight if he didn't want his ass ogling. Except -

Do *you* want this? To plunge into this world, forget risking your head against people with guns, do you want to put yourself into the public domain, even with a mask on? Do you really want people writing - writing you/Ghost slash? He needs to come up with a name. He needs to ask what the boundaries of 'slash' actually are, fangirls seem fluent in this but he's always slightly iffy about - what if they're *actually* gay, what if it's *actually* canon, are heterosexual couples 'slashed'? -

Cooper opens the door without knocking. "Wish me luck, little brother!"

"Break your legs," Blaine mutters, clicking to his emails from an open tab of gifs of the Ghost. As soon as Cooper, humming, bangs the door closed behind himself again he clicks back.

Someone has posted, *Reblog if you worry about the Ghost like a mother, I mean come on he looks like seventeen all I think about is whether hes eating properly and getting enough sleep.*

Blaine's smile wobbles, crooked and real, and he reblogs.

*

Four bullets zip right through him and thump into the brick wall behind him. The Ghost says, "Really, that isn't going to -"

He waits for the echo of the last two bullets to fade before he takes a breath and starts again. "That isn't going to work. I'm a *ghost*. Are you *new*?"

The guy with the gun yells at him in Spanish, so, maybe. The Ghost sighs, tries to remember his faltering high school Spanish. "Parada?" he attempts. "And - y, I, ah, no - *doler*? Oh for god's sake. *Why* you couldn't speak French, I don't -"

The guy throws his gun at him, and it sails harmlessly through his head. Then he screams. The Ghost mutters, "I swear criminals do this specifically to irritate me." and shakes his hands free of his cloak.

*

Midnight, and a fanghost in Australia replies, *These are indeed difficult ethical issues, yes. But, you know, this is the *internet*. It's no place to judge anyone else's kinks. You don't like RPS, don't read RPS.*

Blaine drums his fingers off the mouse, types, *I just think they haven't thought it through. He risks his neck for everyone and they say thanks by writing about it going *wrong* and the worst things happening to him?*

Some people genuinely ship them, you know.

That's not the point.

*Neither is that. That's not how they're saying 'thanks', it's nothing to do with gratefulness, that's just them getting their smut down. I don't know, you shouldn't take it so personally, they don't write it *for* him to see, you know?*

That's the point! he types, harder now. *They're not thinking about *him* at all. They write that and put it on the internet and they never think about *his* feelings, it's not fair!*

Sweetie, she replies, *life *isn't**.

All he can reply with is, **That's* not fair!!*

*Nope. *shrugs** she types, and then a placatory, ;)

*

He thinks he'll head back, weary of the night, running a hand underneath the hood to rub through his hair when the sirens scream past, below him. He shifts invisible without thinking, just nerves - he's been around too many police tonight already - and leans over the edge of the building to watch them blare their way through the night, due west.

He slides down the side of the building, one hand and one foot scraping semi-tangible through the brick, then hops a lift on the back of a truck, gripping on with a hand through the rear door, feet on the fender. Stopping is never a problem, he can always just throw himself right through the road until he slows enough falling through solidity to climb out again. He can hear the alarm from a few blocks down, and the truck has to stop anyway, cop cars are boxing the street closed. It's some antique store with a blown-open window, alarm shrill and indignant, and a ring of cop cars keeping their distance. There's a girl standing there in skintight black and red, hair scraped back in a tight black tail, black mask, lips painted gleaming red in the dark, surrounded by pockmarked, blackened sidewalk. Oh. Wonderful.

The Ghost picks his invisible way between the cop cars, as a guy leans over one of them, holding a megaphone, calling through the static, *"Just raise your hands, miss, this can be real easy on everyone."*

"Yeah it can," she says, hip cocked dangerously in that dangerously tight suit. "It can be *real* easy if you go fetch your creepy little mascot for me so I can kick his spectral ass, 'cause I'm going nowhere until I see that damn ghost, so you tell him to get a *move* on."

"You know we have no association with vigilantes, miss."

"Oh please, all he *does* is wipe your asses for you, an' mess with *my girlfriend*. Tell him to come here or I start blowing shit up! I could reduce this city to rubble before you even put your doughnut down, *get me the Ghost!*"

"I'm here," he says, though he doesn't make himself visible because he's really, *really* wary of her; she spins to his voice, to the side, in front of the cop cars now and approaching her slowly. "Ms Lopez, this is not a good idea."

"You know what else isn't a good idea? Fucking with my girlfriend's brain! You *know* she can't hold onto two ideas at once! An' now they've got her in this 'facility' and she's all 'oh but I can help people rainbows an' kittens an' butterflies an' shit' and *where does that leave me?*"

"With a golden opportunity for a revelation that could get you out of a life of crime?"

She rubs her palms together, and ember-bright light burns between her hands. "With a score to settle, Casper." she says, and flings the contents of her hands at him.

They're about the size of marbles, small clear balls full of skittery amber light which *explode* like grenades; he ghosts straight down, no time even to suck a breath in, and feels the vibrations of the ground above his head. He hauls himself up again to two more stores' alarms going off and one cop car blown onto its side, and a streaked hole in the road. Santana Lopez - the name she chose for herself is Incendiary - already has her hands full of small dangerous marbles again, eyes flicking around for wherever he might reappear. "You got five seconds to show your face before I start popping cops like melons." she says. "Five. Four."

"Ms Lopez -"

"- grow a pair an' face me or else I blow them into *barbecue*. Three, two -"

He fades into view in despair, tense a few paces from her. "Santa-"

"*Incendiary!*" she yells, and throws both handfuls at him. He flickers out of sight as he throws himself down, heat scouring down his back from the explosions, startled at the water main bursting open and raining down over the street with a hiss. He scrambles away from it, makes himself visible again, cloak whirling around himself as he turns to face her again. "*Incendiary*, how fucking hard is it!" Santana

screeches at him. "*God* you *stalk* us back to our secret lair the *once* an' you think you can blow all our secrets to anyone who -"

"An apartment in the Village is not a 'secret lair'."

"And a ghost can still get killed," she spits back at him, sweeping her palms together, more marbles of light glowing into being. "I am gonna *decorate* this street with you."

"Ms Lopez, don't make me-"

"You're not even damp. Water's going right through you, isn't it? Now, what did I say about doing that?" Her eyes flicker over the cops crouching behind their cars, guns ready. "Eenie meenie -"

His voices raises with panic. "You wanted me *visible*, you didn't say -"

"I'm capricious like that," she says with a shrug, and flicks a marble at one of the cop cars. No time to think, he grabs for anything out of his belt - the flashlight - and throws it. The flashlight connects with the marble mid-air and it explodes, so bright he's blind for a second as he's blown back, intangible, slipping through the road and into darkness. He hauls himself up again and she's already got her hand wound back for another one. He grabs for his belt, hangs from his waist in the road surface and throws something at her in return.

There's an extremely discreet guy in Seattle who makes elegant little items for utility belts, occasionally delivered to Mr T Spettro, care of Mr Conti's coffee shop. One of the Ghost's favourites are these, little chemical flash-bangs, the fine glass splinters on contact and the chemicals -

He ducks his head right under the road surface for the flare, and when he lifts it Incendiary's staggering back, hands over her eyes, swearing; most of the cops have lifted their hands to their faces, but one of them -

Fires in their general direction in blind panic.

The Ghost grabs her ankle, wrenches down as she screams and kicks and swears in Spanish until the sidewalk swallows her voice. She twists and struggles in his grip but then they're falling through the ceiling of a subway tunnel, crashing to the tracks - he ghosts right through them and hauls himself back up

again, sucking in air as his head breaks the surface again. Incendiary's still cursing, urgent *shit shit shits* as she holds a deadly-glowing marble in one hand for light and hisses her breath in at her bleeding arm.

He's already reaching for his belt. "I've got a tourniquet. Keep pressure on it."

"Your fault-" she chokes at him, kicking at him when he tries to crouch near her. "Interfering *asshole* of a-"

"You were the one calling me out!"

"You were the one who *stole my girlfriend!*"

"You were the one who made her into a criminal!"

"You were the one who *made that difficult!*"

"This is not helping!" he yells at her, and clamps his gloved hand hard around her bleeding arm. She goes pale, sucks her breath in, drops the marble. Oh -

He makes them both intangible but he can't get them inside anything to cushion the blow; the heat and vibration of the explosion *rock* them, he staggers sideways and falls, she's flung back on her ass, clutching her arm and cursing. It's dark and he doesn't have a flashlight, and how much damage did they just do to the track - ?

He pats his belt down, no choice, pulls out his cell and illuminates it. The spectral light of it shows everything up colourless and weak, but it shows enough: there's a hole blown through the track, the first train that tries to pass it -

"Shit shit shit," he sings softly, and stabs a finger at her. "*Stay put.*"

"Hell're you -?" she chokes, as he runs at the wall, kicks himself up it, grabs on with a hand through its surface for the ceiling, and drags himself through sheer adrenaline back up to street level. The cops are swarmed over the area already and he grabs an ankle - she screams and aims her gun down at him but he holds his hands up in surrender, speaks quickly, "You have to shut down the subway! The track's damaged, you have to stop the trains -"

She *stares* at him, then her head flicks to the side and she shouts, "Sergeant Tanaka -"

He falls back through the road, turns and kicks himself down for that tunnel again, because if a train *does* come -

Incendiary, Santana, is leaning against the wall in the dark, clutching her arm hard, white-faced in the faint light of his cell. "Gonna throw up," she says, her voice wobbly at its edges.

"You're in shock. Keep pressure on it. I'll get you back up there, they'll take you to a hospital."

"No - way. Gonna arrest me."

"Santana oh my god now is not the time to worry about *that*." His gloves are slick with blood, making tying the tourniquet around her arm difficult.

"No. Not goin' - no."

He tightens it as best he can, holds her arm, stares into her eyes looking mad with pain, halfway crazy, wild and wide. "*Please*," he says, and she stares back at him, mouth slack, skin pale.

She doesn't fight, which is a sort of mercy because she doesn't help either, he has to carry her, dragging her intangible back up through the road. His arms shake, he's sweating, he can't *breathe* through the exertion of it - it's a thick patch of solidity to drag the both of them through - and then he gasps at the surface, pulls her head up so she can get a breath down, and they're surrounded by cops as he drags her onto the road like dragging her out of the ocean, sagging, panting, staying there on his knees because he's too dizzy to stand up.

"The trains," he gets out as someone stops in front of him. "Have you stopped the -?"

"Easy, spooky, they're on it." The woman cop gets his arm, and cuffs his wrist. "Gotta do this kid, nothing I can do about it, I'm arresting you on-"

The handcuffs bounce off the surface of the road. Santana, hand shaking on her arm with blood between her fingers as a cop calls an ambulance and two more are kneeling down with a first aid kit, slurs, "No fair."

"Life isn't fair," he says, and fades from sight to stagger away, making his shaky, undignified way back through the cop cars and god back *home* . . .

*

Blaine goes to class and makes notes of, *What even goes into a utility belt? Flashlight, grappling hook? What would I do w/a grappling hook???*

He needs to think this through. Hell, he needs a *mentor*, and there's one already out there in this city but . . . well, if he has to do it on his own, he has to do it on his own. Hopefully when he next bumps into the Ghost he'll be a halfway respectable hero himself, he won't walk face first into any more stationary cars at least. All he can do is keep trying, and one day - one night - they'll be face to face over something dangerous, and Blaine will have one more chance to get this right, to make him understand what it means to him too, to make him trust him.

Mid-afternoon, when class finishes, he heads into the city to walk, to take photographs, to think. He really doesn't want to go back to the apartment where Cooper will be shouting his lines and stabbing his finger at things, his version of 'rehearsing'. He pulls the hood of his jacket up mostly because he's really self-conscious of the black eye. He walks through Central Park and back out onto the sidewalk on the east side, walks and walks, there's too much to think about.

But he isn't, when it really comes to it, much given to worrying; he puts it out of his mind for now, turns his attention to his camera and the leaves all gorgeous-glowing with Fall. He photographs a pigeon perched on a statue, and a dog walker with about sixteen dogs on leashes, he grins and backs up to get them all in shot -

"Oh -" someone says behind him, as he steps into them and jolts them both, staggering not to trip, hood falling down again. A coffee cup hits the sidewalk and spills its contents onto the street, and he turns with his hands up, camera in one, says, "Sorry sorry *so* my fault I'm so -"

The guy with the portfolio under one arm and coffee dripping from one hand blinks and stares at him. And, mouth opening, Blaine stares back.

His eyes are green-blue, round and still widening with increasing, blanching shock, the framing lashes so *perfect* -

Blaine's heart stops and then *bangs* in his chest. He opens his mouth - the guy is still just standing there with his mouth O'd open, pink lips, pale skin, that jawline Blaine *knows* -

He takes a shaky step back, panic entering his eyes as the delight enters Blaine's, his muscles tensing to flee. Blaine says, "No -" and grabs his wrist and sees the panic turn into something else, it's not panic, it's - Blaine lets go of his wrist at the intensity of the *fear*, he's never made anyone look at him like . . .

"Please don't disappear," he breathes out, on the sidewalk as people walk past without looking at them, and the dogs are panting and straining their leashes, crossing the street away from them. "Please, please don't - *please* -"

And the Ghost stares maskless back at him, white shirt and clinging dark vest, skinny maroon tie and neat dark pants, white and dumb like he's going to throw up. "*Please*," Blaine says, all of it straining inside him not to explode out here right in front of everyone, and the Ghost stares back at him looking trapped, looking like he might *cry*, pinned to the spot on the sidewalk with his 'biggest fan' looking at his bared face and *beaming*.

Chapter Four

From the queue for coffee Blaine keeps looking back at him, because he could vanish - literally - at any moment, Blaine knows that. But he just sits there at the coffee shop table with his hands over his face, elbows on the table, like he can't even move.

Blaine brings over his replacement coffee, sets it in front of him. The Ghost - weird to call him that when he's just a *guy*, well, not *just* a guy, he's, well, he's pretty, um, pretty *pretty* - takes his hands from his face and looks at him, sickly white and still. He looks down at the coffee, closes his eyes, mouths without quite making the sounds for it, *Thank you*.

"Are you okay? You look -"

He looks like he's going to be sick. Blaine looks around the coffee shop, spots the jug of ice water standing with the milk and sugar and goes to pour a beaker, brings it over to him. He focuses on it, with what looks like some difficulty, then lifts a hand and accepts it, and takes a shaky sip. This time he does manage to get out, familiar-strange voice (almost too clear without the static of the internet audios) trembling a little, "Thank you."

Blaine pulls the chair out, sits opposite him. "It's okay. You can trust me, you know you can."

The Ghost stares back at him, breathing slowly, and then he puts the water down and shakes his head. He swallows. "No. I don't know that." he says, his voice a little rasping and too breathy. "You don't even know what that means."

"I'm not going to -" Blaine glances over his shoulder but the coffee shop's noisy and no-one's paying them the slightest attention. He leans in a little. "I'm not going to tell anyone anything, you know I-"

"You have a brother. Right? Do you think I don't have people I love? *I'm* hard to kill, you don't think people who want me dead wouldn't go for them first?"

"I would never tell anyone anyth-"

His eyes are as hard and cold as saltwater. "Under torture you wouldn't? If they tortured your *brother* you wouldn't? Your parents, anyone you love?" His face is white, more anger than fear now. "Do you understand what the stakes *are* here?"

Blaine stares at him, mouth still open. He closes it. He tries to think, unable to look away from the fierce light flickering in his eyes. Cooper -

It jolts in his guts like a grabbing, twisting hand.

His mom, his dad. Friends. He looks to the side, away from the Ghost's too-cold glare, vicious pale green, and it shakes a little in him, imagining what could happen to other people because of his choices. *His* choices. He's allowed to risk himself, but -

He swallows, and stares at the floor, and thinks. It's not a decision he could ever have avoided entirely, and he always knew that, really, that he doesn't get to only risk himself, there's no 'only' for humans, tangled together like old cobwebs as they are. And even without choosing the costume and cape that strange power of his could always make someone want the wrong thing from him, and it's not only him who would suffer for that. Even if all he risked was his own sudden stupid death, other people would pay the price too, the suffering for what he did. He never could have kept them entirely safe. No-one ever can; it's a dangerous world to live in, the world in which you love people and people still die.

He speaks to the floor. It's too much, yet, to look back at the Ghost's face.

"It's a decision," he says slowly. "Isn't it? It's the same decision you make every night, when you - put that mask on." He draws a breath and looks at him now, at his distrustful eyes and tense jaw. "You *choose* what you have to do. So yes." It burns in his throat. "Yes, I understand what decision I'm making. I won't - I won't break my word, not about this, not to you. It costs you, so I have to accept what it costs me if I want to do this. So, yes." He shrugs. "Under torture, I won't betray the people you're risking. And I'm the one who chooses to risk the people who love me." He swallows again, hard, and it does hurt. "Just like you do. I - don't have the right to choose them over you. I won't tell anyone anything about you, I swear it. Whatever it costs me. You can trust me."

"Trust you." The Ghost stares at him, confusion flickering in his eyes now, pale and unsteady. The words drop out of him like he hasn't even thought about them; "I can't trust anyone."

Blaine's eyebrows lower a little. "Doesn't that get lonely?"

The Ghost's eyes flick away, across the coffee shop, and something like a shudder passes through him, his wrist slides a little against the table, and he whispers, "You have no idea."

He looks down, picks up his cup, raises it shakily to his mouth. He closes his eyes while he takes a long, slow drink - lashes to his cheek, without the mask his bared forehead is pale to his hairline and his nose is impossibly cuter than Blaine could ever have imagined and *god* his cheekbones - then puts it down, and licks his lips. And his shoulders sag, he puts his head back, he sighs up at the ceiling and *smiles*, nothing like happiness in it, nothing like delight in his laughter, just like he's too tired not to, and then he settles his head, puts his shoulders back, straightens his back and meets Blaine's eye. "Kurt," he says. "My name is Kurt."

It jumps in his throat, to be trusted. "You -"

"You can hardly call me *that* - here." He flicks a hand at the coffee shop, and Blaine is - amazed by his curving, careful physicality, the way his wrist flicks like a cat's tail, nothing of how the Ghost moves, even his mouth looks somehow different, like he holds all the muscles in his face differently as Kurt and the Ghost. "I don't know what to . . ." He props his elbow off the table and his cheek off his knuckles, and just stares exhausted at Blaine. "Eight million people live in this city. Eight *million*. And I trip right over *you*."

"Your biggest fan," Blaine says, and waggles his eyebrows. And the G- Kurt's smile twitches, almost honest. Blaine tries not to let his voice get too eager. "You're going to trust me?"

"Blaine," Kurt says, softly. "If everything's already over then it's already over. If you're going to get me killed then the trigger's already pulled, and I - I'm just," His fingers and thumb rub his forehead - "I'm just so, so tired, it's just - it's been a week." His laugh is short and sharp, like a shot. "It's always a 'week'. How's your head?"

Blaine tries not to feel as troubled as he does by 'if you're going to get me killed'. "I'm fine. I'm - you really can trust me, Kurt, I'll - I want to do this." He reaches across the table, closes his hand over his. "I - I've spent a long time trying to ignore this thing I can do but what the hell is the point of a talent if you don't make other people's lives better with it? I -" Kurt's knuckles shift a little, cool and smooth under his hand. "I want to *help* people. Including you."

Kurt watches him, and he does look tired, and strangely alone at that side of the table. "I should talk you out of this," he says. "You have no idea. It could kill you. It's not even hypothetical, it's *probable*, this will in all probability be why they bury you and why they do it early. You will never get a decent night's sleep again. You have no idea the work that goes into it, the *expense*, no-one compensates you for this - but then remembering your apartment, that's not necessarily a problem for you, is it." he muses, touching Blaine's hand like a warning and then sliding his other hand out from underneath Blaine's warmer fingers. He squeezes his hands together, puts them out of reach on his lap. "You'll have no social life, your friends will think you're an enormous jerk. You will frequently have to *be* an enormous jerk, but that's kind of fine because they're safer off hating you than liking you. Your career will suffer. Your love live - don't even get me started." He rubs his eyes. "You will frequently get hurt, it's just statistics, if you're going to do something that stupidly dangerous that often. And it really will in all likelihood one day kill you. Both police and criminals will want to bring you down, you don't even know which direction the bullet will come from half the time. I cannot even *list* the reasons not to do this."

"So why do you do it?"

His lips part, he looks away. "People shouldn't have to . . ." He rubs his shoulder, then picks up his coffee, and Blaine remembers that he actually has one too at that point and lifts his own cup. "If you can save one person from something horrible, it's kind of," It's almost a smile, very soft. "You just feel - I don't know, *grateful*." He closes his eyes, and he *does* smile. "Does that make sense?"

The promises he's already made today still haven't left his chest, they might be there forever now, a little ball of the knowledge of danger resting rigid under his sternum, he feels it when he breathes. But there's this too, this excitement on the in-breath, *want*. "Yes." he says, quietly, fervently. "Yes, absolutely."

Kurt quirks his mouth, and takes another sip of coffee. "Thank you," Blaine says. "For - looking after me, that other night, I know you didn't have to."

"All part of the service. You fight lethal supers who want to destroy the city and you walk abusive drunks home safe, sometimes on the same night." He swallows again, and Blaine's flicking eyes follow his throat and then his face again, as Kurt's fingers pick at his cup. "Blaine, I - don't have a script for this, I - don't know what I'm doing any more than you do. I haven't told *anyone* any of this since I told my family, and I only told them because I *had* to. I -"

He's so afraid, Blaine thinks, and it feels horrible to be the object of such fear. "I would do this either way," he says, and the- *Kurt's* eyes follow his, uneasy pale green. "If you wanted to help me or not I'd still do it. If anything happens to me then it's my own stupid fault, it's not yours. And if I can just stop something - anything, happening to - to you or anyone else -"

His cheek twitches, half a crooked smile. "Maybe sometimes the heroes do need heroes too. I just . . ." His thumb's still picking nervously at his cup. "Don't look at me like that. Like I have all the answers. I don't know a *thing* right now."

Blaine watches his face, tautness of his jaw and too-bright flickering of his eyes on his cup like looking at Blaine for too long is too much, and he doesn't know how to make all that fear go away, how to make him *trust* him. He pulls his top lip in with his teeth, then picks his bag up and slots a pen out. "Here," he says, writing the URL on a napkin. "I know you don't trust me yet, and I know you have all the reason in the world not to. So, this is my blog. And this - is my cell number, and this . . . is my email. How about you go take a look, and decide whether you want me around or not. Because, seriously, all I have is your first name and that you live in New York, I couldn't come find you now if I *wanted* to. So - you contact me, when you want to. If you want to. But - do you go on the internet much? Do you know about the -" His breath leaves him with a grin, he can't *help* it looking right at him - "the fanghosts?"

Kurt says flatly, "Those creepers who write fanfiction. No. I do not make a habit of googling myself for *that* insanity."

Blaine pushes the napkin across the table to him. "So go check my blog. It's clean, nothing creepy, I promise, well, maybe a couple of photos of uh your ass but it's kind of hard to find photos that *don't* prominently feature your ass in that suit -"

"'Nothing creepy'," Kurt says, one eyebrow raised, and Blaine grins, then picks up his coffee.

"Call me. Or email me. Okay? But - you should know, what you mean to people. It's not all creeping. You have no idea, people are so -" What was the word he used? ". . . they're just so grateful."

Kurt looks up at him as he stands, then looks down at a napkin on the table. "I -"

"If you don't contact me," Blaine says, shucking his bag over his shoulder, "I'll never come looking for you again. But I will be out there looking for trouble too, so don't blame me if we bump into each other one night."

"... Blaine ..."

He should say something, explain it better. That the Ghost, *Kurt*, has saved the lives of people he's never met even in the mask, Blaine should know because he saved his, made him feel like he wasn't a freak, like he wasn't alone, like he could have a purpose, like he *mattered*. That people the world over admire him, worry about him, wish they could repay him somehow. But he doesn't look like a superhero, sitting there on that coffee shop chair, looking so hopelessly up at Blaine. He just looks like a young man, very alone, and still so very afraid.

So Blaine says, "I - really can see why you wear the hood." and Kurt blinks, mouth opening. Blaine rushes out before he loses all courage, "I seriously would have known those eyes again *anywhere*." and manages so quick a smile as Kurt's mouth snaps shut and his face goes *crimson* and Blaine flees for the door, hoping to god not to ruin his one chance of a good exit by tripping, walking into something, looking like the massive dork that he actually is -

Outside it's cold and already getting dark, and he walks away quickly, heart like crazed clockwork in his chest, so Kurt can leave as soon as he wants without worrying about Blaine's presence in the area. Little courtesies; they do mean something.

*

Kurt closes the apartment door behind himself with that little click, that blessed little song of safety, all the world outside and him in *here*. He leans back against it, takes one long breath, in and then out. Then he opens his eyes again, and heads for his room.

Rachel leans out of her doorway in her pyjamas. "You're late back."

"It's not even nine, grandma." he says without breaking his stride.

"If you're having a crisis then you should talk to your roommate!" she yells at him, and he bangs the door closed behind himself.

Then he locks it.

Safe, safe, safe. He turns the light on and his fingers are shaking a little; all he's ever wanted is to feel safe, and the only place he ever feels it is from behind that mask. Safe, safe, no-one can touch him, no-one can hurt him, no-one can even see him -

He drops his portfolio by the desk and pulls the blinds.

Safe.

His laptop's black screen gleams, like a flat matte eyeball.

There's a napkin in his pocket with a boy's cell number on it, and he is such a fool. Why did he - it hits him now he's behind his own door, invisible and safe, hits him like bile in his mouth, why did he *tell* him? He just - felt like he was trapped, like he was already dead, he felt *high* with confusion and exhaustion and terror and he just blurted his name to some guy he's met twice who could - who could -

For a second he feels so shaky like the trembling's coming from his *bones* as he thinks, You can leave. Now. Pack a bag and get out of the city and never come back. Get an apartment somewhere under a fake name and tell your dad he can't call you Kurt anymore and, and -

This is insane. It is insane. You cannot spend the rest of your life *running*.

He swallows, and his hand closes around the napkin in his pocket.

Why did you tell him? Because he has warm eyes and a nice smile, *idiot, why?* Because it's been so long since any guy smiled at you like that that you feel weak in front of him but what would you do anyway, you can't have *him*, you can't ever let someone *rescue you*, do you know what that would *mean*? No. No. You are so *stupid*. You just handed him a bullet with your name on it because he's *pretty* -

(And others engraved *Finn, Rachel, Mike and Tina, Burt Hummel* -)

He has to sit down on the edge of the bed for a bit, covering his eyes with his hands. He's exhausted. That's all it is. He's just so tired that he's finally snapped, he's lost it, he just handed his mask over to some guy because he *smiled* and took his hand and Kurt's skin still feels the echo of it, like it's never actually touched anything warm before. He said *trust me* and Kurt did. Why? Kurt doesn't even trust *himself*.

He thinks, so shaky and so sick and so, so tired, that if it's already over then it's already over. He might as well see what he wanted him to see. It could be anything, he does know that. Anything at all, it doesn't have to be a blog, this could be a link to, what, to the video of a laughing supervillain already tracing his IP address? He doesn't even care. He's so tired, if the guy blows his window in guns blazing then Kurt will only be relieved for the chance to finally close his eyes.

He enters the address, breathes and lets it go, hits enter. Then he folds his arms and ducks his body a little back from the screen as it loads, as if *that's* going to help things now.

*

As soon as Blaine got home he got busy, tossing his bag on the bed and snapping his computer straight into life. The Gh- *Kurt* could be online already, he needs something worth seeing. He needs to know what he means to people. What he means to *Blaine*.

He surfs through his favourite bloggers' archives, reblogs quickly, searching out every - every thank you, every 'I hope the Ghost . . .', every piece of fanart *glowing* with what the Ghost means to people. He reblogs articles on dipping crime rates, a piece by a former offender scared into realising what he put *other* people through, he even reblogs the series of 'patriotic ass-shot' gifs of him shot from behind, cloak swinging, superimposed over the flag (the Fourth of July: *Freedom, Justice, and Dat Ass/I pledge allegiance to dat ass*, Thanksgiving: *I am thankful for dat ass*, Christmas: *Dear Santa I've been good this year please may I have dat ass/Reblog if you're leaving out the cookies and milk for dat ass instead/Dat ass is always welcome down my chimney*). He doesn't think that meme was creepy, he thinks it's cute. And th- *Kurt* can hardly be unaware of quite how amazing his own ass is.

He reblogs the photo of the woman on the subway hugging her daughter in hard, her entire face crumpled in with crying, cheeks shining with tears.

He reblogs until his eyes blur, then lays on his back on his bed and has a headache, there's just too much Ghost in there, too much of everything he means, and far too much of Kurt's eyes across that coffee shop table, far too much of how haunted he looked.

*

Kurt takes his hand off the mouse pad to wipe his eyes.

He blinks, dazed and dreamy like he just woke up, and checks the time; nearly ten. He just lost an hour to - to that. What strange, stunning narcissism that website is, he couldn't have prepared himself for *that* of all things. He has to get up for his bedside table to get a tissue, the only thing to hand is the napkin with Blaine's number on it. He blows his nose, and looks across his room at the laptop, wary of it and its capacity to contain all this. He -

He's never felt like *this* before. He doesn't even know what this feels like, he couldn't actually describe it if he wanted to.

He sits down on his bed to have a really proper cry, and he feels better once it's out. He wipes his face off, sucks his breath in, shudders it out. Well.

We love you, spooky <3

He's seen the graffiti, people yell stuff at him often enough. But he didn't -

... all I think about is whether hes eating properly and getting enough sleep.

He didn't know -

I hope the Ghost is tucked up warm in bed right now, drinking cocoa, knowing he's made the world a better place ^_^

How was he supposed to *know* - ? All he ever thinks about is what he *hasn't* done, he - he's never looked behind himself to see ...

I hope the Ghost finds a twenty he didn't know he had in his jeans pocket.

*Do you think he reads this stuff, do you think he knows we love him? Like, how ***MUCH*** we love him?*

I hope the Ghost always gets perfect weather when he plans a beach trip.

~((((ghost hug))))~

This is the Ghost plush I made!! Isnt he almost as cute as the real thing??

Whenever I have to be brave I think of him.

Please keep on haunting us for as long as you can xxx

. . . if all you ever do is keep running, you never stop to see what you've done. And just maybe, just - just maybe, maybe, maybe you did good . . .

He picks up his cell, and plays with it. The he texts his dad, *I'm getting an early night, I'll call tomorrow, love you xx.*

Then he does the bravest thing he's done in a hell of a long time - and he faces guns and knives on a daily basis - and he emails a guy he's only met twice, telling him tomorrow night and an address.

Then he thinks, half-wanting, of that website. Instead he turns the computer off, and exfoliates thoroughly, and he's in bed before eleven.

Heaven is your own welcoming pillow.

*

Blaine has an email and a pit in his stomach.

How are you supposed to just get through a normal day after that? Just, Oh, gonna meet a superhero tonight, nothing out of the ordinary, I'll just sit in my seminars taking notes on exercises for spinal cord injuries, it's all good. He has - oh god it's a date. It's like a date. It's the address of a bar, it's a *date*.

No it's not a date don't be a creeper he's probably only meeting you again to give you an unofficial restraining order. Which is fine. Blaine will find a way to help people on his own. One way to help people is, of course, paying the barest amount of attention to what he's doing now, even if his mind is a riot of the way he looks and the way he moves and all the things he's done and his *voice* and oh god anticipation is the worst thing, it's like it's replaced his intestines with *ferrets*.

He tries to avoid Cooper, getting ready back home. Cooper is hard to avoid, though, he's feeling needy of reassurance, standing in the bathroom doorway talking in a hopeless puppy-eyed way about the emotional complexity of a scene and how there's nothing really relevant to point at. Blaine keeps his eyes on his hair in the mirror and says he's going out for drinks with 'the guys', other students. Cooper tells him

not to do anything he wouldn't do, and gives him one of those elbow-around-the-throat hugs that shake Blaine's body from side to side, then ruffles and ruins his hair and goes out. Blaine keeps his eyes on his eyes in the mirror, previously pristine hair now resembling dark mashed potato, eyebrows low and heavy as thunderclouds.

Then he heads out, trying to ignore the hollow space in his guts, to meet the Ghost. Kurt. The Ghost. Both of them . . . ?

The bar's getting busy but it's not Friday night *insane*, just New York busy. Blaine makes two circuits of it and checks the time on his cell over and over, but there's no sign of Kurt and certainly no sign of the Ghost's greys in all this noisy colour. He sits with a soda until Kurt is fifteen minutes late. Blaine feels that hollow ball of excitement so slowly *drop* - he's not coming, he changed his mind, he - and then anger rises instead. He has Blaine's *number*. He could have *told* him he's not coming. He -

He can hardly think over the noise everyone makes in here, goddamn irritating -

. . . this is not an appropriate place to meet and talk about superheroing. Blaine's eyes unfocus for a second as he thinks, Oh, god, *Kurt's* not the one who's late . . .

He leaves his soda half drunk, heads outside, looks straight up at the rooftop of the building; no sign of the Ghost, but then unless he wants you to see him, why would there be? He could sneak in and try to find the staff only staircases that might lead him up, but then he might get caught, or just meet a locked door. There's a fire escape in the alleyway at the side but the metal ladder is swung up out of reach, *way* out of Blaine's reach, and he glares at it for a long time, hands squeezing at his sides. Then he checks over his shoulder but there's no-one passing the alleyway, he has no audience for this, and he takes a little breath.

Shields like steps. It's easier sliding down than climbing up, they're so smooth to step on, he has to concentrate; he makes just a few, long strides up until he can snatch the black-painted metal balcony, and then climb his way up to the roof, arms aching by the time he's up there. He drags himself over the lip of the building and rolls a little awkwardly upright again, hand flying to his head to check his hair, and a voice says, "Your coffee's getting cold."

The Ghost is sitting cross-legged with his back resting against the shallow boundary of the building's roof, in full costume, with two cups of takeout coffee in front of him. Blaine stares at him, heart pounding its exertion, then walks over and sits down next to him, stretching his legs out, picking up the closest cup.

He'd like to act nonchalant but his mouth's so dry he's scared one mouthful of lukewarm coffee is going to choke him; thankfully it goes down easy. "You give lousy directions, just so you know."

"I found the place fine," he says airily. "How'd you get up?"

"Fire escape. How'd *you* get up?"

"Inside. Invisible." He takes a sip of coffee, licks his lips afterwards, and Blaine doesn't notice himself staring until too late at the dark pink flash of it. "So, I saw your little website."

Stop looking at his mouth. He looks at his coffee cup instead, and it's weird enough discussing his blog in real life with *anyone*, let alone him of all people. "Did you like it?"

"I don't know if 'like' is the word," the Ghost says carefully, and looks at him with - he can tell the shape they're making behind that grey mask - one eyebrow raised. "It felt slightly like a delusional episode. You could have given me some *warning*."

"I told you people *notice* you, I said -"

He shakes his head away, shrugs, folds one arm around himself. "You can't warn people for *that*, I suppose."

"Didn't you know that people . . . ?"

"That they talk about me? Of course I did. I just didn't want to know *what* they talk about, people discussing you when you're not there are rarely saying anything you'd want to hear -"

"Maybe if you do really amazing things, they are."

The Ghost says, "Hm," and takes another sip of coffee. "So. Why do you want to be a superhero, Blaine?"

". . . that's kind of a big question."

"Well, my letting you into my life like this is kind of a big thing, so I would like to know *why*. If you just want people to make - make sites like that about *you* then you can forget it, mostly you get newspaper articles about what a dangerous influence you are and horrible *hate*-filled discussions in the comments

underneath of how it would've been better if you'd let the criminals do what they wanted to half their victims because they're 'faggots', or 'whores', or - racial slurs I am not going to repeat. I've been called a racist for breaking up a fight between two black gangs and a fascist for not exactly having the time for trial by jury when a guy's smashing a shopkeeper's head in with a baseball bat. I seem to spend half my free time getting blood out of the suit. And a lot of people want me dead. A *lot* of them. Mostly people who've never even met me. This is not a business to get into for warm fuzzy feelings. And -" He lifts a hand, and pulls the glove off. The paler suit underneath runs right up between his pale fingers, and there's a fine metal chain around his wrist, which he turns with a finger and holds out to Blaine so he can see the tiny silver plate, the neat copperplate handwriting: *Blood type A, no allergies*. "And one of these nights they'll very probably pick me up off the sidewalk, maybe in more than one piece, and I do know that. And you *want* to get involved in this." He picks his glove up, puts it back on, tugging it down and flexing his fingers comfortable again. "So tell me why you want to risk your life, mental health and *everything* else, and I hope to god it's a good reason."

Blaine swallows a slow mouthful of coffee, blood burning in his cheeks, and puts his cup down. "There are a lot of reasons."

"Enumerate," the Ghost says wearily, and slides his legs out, stretches them, settles back again with them crossed at the ankles; long muscled legs in clinging-pale fabric, Blaine sort of wishes he hadn't done that before Blaine needs to be, um, all, well, articulate.

"One," Blaine says, and flicks a hand at the air, and green shields flicker alight and fade away again. "This. If I can do this then I'd like to do something for other people with it. Nothing gets through them, seriously, if - if I have this *amazing* thing I can do, I've been keeping it to myself for too long already. I know I should share it with other people. It's - I just should."

The Ghost says nothing, just folds his arms and stares forward, like he's thinking, or maybe remembering.

"Two," he says, trying to put off the real reason, he really - can't - "you shouldn't be doing this on your own. It's not fair that everything gets dumped on you. How much time off from this do you get?"

The Ghost shrugs. Blaine says, "I can *help*. Give you a night off at least now and then. I know you're a hero, it doesn't make you inhuman, you need - frankly you need to relax. Sorry." At the snap of the Ghost's head to his, the narrowing of his eyes. Blaine holds his hands up, placating. "You need to get some proper sleep now and then. I hate the thought - that one day, one night, something could happen to you that shouldn't

have, just because you were - tired or on your own or - it would break a lot of people's hearts if anything happened to you. Not just people you know. And you don't deserve it. Everything you do for other people, you shouldn't have to get hurt for them, maybe die for them. Not alone. Someone should help you, and it really might as well be me."

The Ghost just looks at him. Blaine shrugs, eyes falling to the side because his silence is hard to face in the eye, and rubs his own arms a little. He swallows. He says, "Three."

He rubs his arms.

He sits back again, rubs an eye, lifts his head. "When I was in high school - I . . . I made the mistake of thinking that people might harass me if I came out but I didn't think they would . . . there was this dance, this Sadie Hawkins dance. And I went with the only other gay guy in the school, just as friends. And when we left, when we were waiting for my dad to come pick us up, there were - three guys. They, um."

He wants to pick up his cup just to give his hands something to do.

"One of them knocked me down and two of them started - kicking the shit out of my friend. But the guy - he couldn't hit me. He kept trying but his hands kept glancing off - off these." He doesn't make a gesture, hands clasped at his stomach to keep them still, and he doesn't look at the shields appearing and then disappearing around his head. "He couldn't work out why, it was dark, *I* didn't understand why, I didn't *know* I could do - this. So he swore a lot and got - got bored, I guess, of not being able to hit me. So he started on the other guy too." He has to close his eyes; he can still hear every impact. "They beat the living shit out of him and I couldn't do anything. And - and do you know what it's like, taking someone to the emergency room and he's - like *that*, and you don't have a bruise on you, and . . ." Why is the most shameful thing in his whole life that he *didn't* get beaten up once? He takes a breath, doesn't look at the Ghost, carries on. Makes himself carry on. "He literally never spoke to me again. I don't know what he thought. But I know he got - I know it was worse for him because *I* didn't get my *share*. He, I hear about him through other people sometimes. He's never going to walk easily again. I, um, I'm studying to becoming a physical therapist. To help people who . . . I just, I just want to help people. It's just, life is kind of hard *enough* before people start doing genuinely *horrible* things to each other and I just want to *help* -"

The Ghost's gloved hand touches his. Blaine snaps his head to him, sees under the shadow of the hood how sad and how *scared* his eyes look. He says, very softly, "I'm so sorry."

Blaine stares at him, at how open his face is even behind the mask, and then the Ghost's eyes drop, and he looks to the side again, wraps his arms around himself. He says, "I really should talk you out of this. If I actually was a *hero* I would."

It's not a no, and the excitement jumps again. Blaine squeezes his hands, sucks his breath in. "Please help me to help other people."

The Ghost closes his eyes, and for a couple of seconds he just breathes. Then he says, "Show me what you can do."

*

He's never done this so far off ground level before. For a moment he - hesitates, almost asks, If I fall will you catch me -?

But he doesn't, because he's asking to do something which will involve this risk every day of his life, and he can't whine about it like a little kid to the *Ghost*. So he takes a breath, and runs at the edge of the building.

The Ghost says and does nothing, just watches him.

Blaine springs out at an angle, the hexagonal shields winking into being under his feet, tessellating to make a curved path around the lip of the building he skims like ice underfoot. He uses his own momentum to skate *upwards* for a moment, so he can angle his path of shields onto the roof again from an impressive height, and stagger a little as he hits solidity again but he runs on and saves himself from falling, behind the Ghost now who turns to watch him. His arms are folded under his cloak, falling to cover most the lines of his body, face calmly expressionless under the hood.

He throws a shield up all around himself, perfect neat globe of hexagons, then dissolves it to fling one of them past the Ghost's head. The Ghost doesn't even blink, just watches Blaine's face as the shield swishes past, stirring the fabric of his hood just a little. He says, "How hard can they hit?"

"Pretty hard. I used to smash bottles and stuff with them back home, I'm not a bad shot. And nothing breaks them. I tried driving my car through one of them once, the wheels just skid."

The Ghost walks over, and Blaine brings a little screen of shields alight in front of himself again, which the Ghost touches thoughtfully. "Do they wear you out?"

"Not really. I mean, I got a little tired the time I tried to drive through one but I can keep them going pretty much indefinitely, I think. I always wondered, actually, since, I mean, I can do this and you know I'm a big fan so of course I wondered -" Shields flicker alight all around the Ghost, who freezes stiff. "- if *you* could get through them, I know you can pass through solid walls but nothing seems to -"

The Ghost stares at the shields, lips parted. Then he reaches out, and he touches the translucent wall in front of him, and Blaine sees his gloved fingers and palm settle on it, but he doesn't ghost through. He just stands there drawing his head back a little, something draining weak in his face, and Blaine's mouth opens. "... god, you really can't -"

The Ghost drops downwards right through the roof of the building and he's gone.

Blaine drops the shields, gasps his breath in. "*Don-* damn. *Damn.* Where'd you -?"

Oh god he scared him off. He - *idiot*. Every night he goes out risking his life and *you* put him in a situation he can't get out of and he *doesn't know you*, he's only *trying* to trust you, and you go and -

Shock, confusion, *pain*.

Blaine blinks and blinks, breath choking at the building's roof mashed into the side of his face, arm twisted up behind his back so the muscles *scream*, with what he thinks is a knee dug into the small of his back and something cold pressed to the back of his neck. "Do not move." a voice says, flat and cold and *terrifying* above him. "The thing in your neck is a taser. You do not want me to fire it. But I really wouldn't have to because it would be easier to dislocate your arm than *not* dislocate it in this position, so stay very, *very* still."

He tries to nod but concrete rubs with a flare of pain against his still-bruised eye. "Y- yes. Absolutely. I'm sorry."

He can hear the body over his breathing, quite hard, for quite a long time. He thinks in a panic about apologising again. But then the pressure of the knee relents a little, before his arm is released and the weight on his back is gone, and he rolls panting to his side, drawing his arm close with the shoulder *lead*en with pain, picking himself up at least to kneel. "I - I'm sorry, I didn't -"

The Ghost has backed away, is standing at a distance with his body hidden by the cloak, his face hidden by the hood with his head low. He says, very quietly, "Don't ever do that. Don't ever - *ever* do that."

"I know, I'm *sorry*, I should have asked, I just - I only wanted to know, I'm sorry, I should never have -"

He turns away a little, shoulders drawing closer under the cloak. His voice comes stunted, struggling, flat and curt. "That was an overreaction. I'm sorry. I'm sorry about your arm."

"It's fine, *I'm* sorry, I -" He rubs his arm, swallows. "I know people must try to, like, kill you, *all* the time, I shouldn't have - that was a stupid, stupid thing to do, I'm *sorry*."

The Ghost is still, head down, for some time. Then he lifts his face and looks at Blaine again, pale under the mask, not that he isn't always pale under the mask. He wets his lips. "I - I don't know you. And apparently you're more dangerous to me than any of the supervillains I fight on a regular basis. And-"

"I -"

"-I don't *like* being put into positions I can't get out of. I - do you understand what you're actually asking me when you ask me to trust *you*?"

He sits there hugging his burning arm, says, "I'm not going to betray you. Not ever. I didn't *know* you wouldn't be able to -"

The Ghost shakes his head and walks away, rubbing his arms under the cloak. "This is insane. This is actually insane, I don't have a death wish, I can't help people if I'm *dead*. And you -"

"I'm on your side!"

"You couldn't be more dangerous to me if you were *designed* for it, do you understand that? If a supervillain made you to *spec* you couldn't be more perfect, all -" He flashes an angry arm at him, and despite the cloak, Blaine sees a lot more of Kurt than the Ghost in his movements for the first time. "-deadly and earnest and funny and handsome and -"

"- you think I'm handsome?"

The Ghost's mouth clops shut, and he *stares*. Then he says flatly, "It's disingenuous of you to pretend that you aren't aware of what you look like, Blaine."

"Are you *blushing*?"

"Do you understand the seriousness of this situation?" the Ghost snaps back, arms folding around himself, shoulders bristling under the cloak. "*God* you could be a *plant*, someone in this city is *making* supers and you could have been *invented* to get me killed and I let you -"

"I'm not -" He scrambles to his feet, skids on the cement and hits the ground ass-first again, and sits there holding his arm staring open-mouthed up at him. Then he drops his head, moans to the rooftop, "Do you honestly think that *I'm* the best a supervillain could come up with?"

Silence, for a second, and then the Ghost gives a sudden startled *laugh*, and Blaine looks up, mouth opening. He's still standing a little way off, holding his arms with his body tilted away from Blaine, but he's smiling now, a little flickering smile touching his mouth, his eyes under the shadow of the hood. He says, closing his eyes, smiling still, "They could have designed you to spec." and shakes his head. "I need to think about this. You know I do. I can't just - let you into my life like this. You could . . ." The smile fades. "You don't even know how many ways you could be dangerous to me."

"I'm on your *side*, I want to *help* -"

"And I need to think. So if you're on my side you'll be patient and let me do that." He opens his eyes again, watches Blaine's face. "You said you were studying physical therapy, so I assume you already know first aid."

Blaine's eyebrows knit in. "Yeah, of course I do."

"So your homework is defence. Do you know any martial arts?"

"Home-? I, I used to box, a little."

"Pick it up again. Seriously, this time. You can't rely on your powers all the time." His mouth twists rueful. "Clearly no-one can. So learn to defend yourself without your powers, and I'll - I'll think about it, Blaine. But it's late, and I haven't even patrolled yet -"

"You're leaving?"

He gestures at the surrounding buildings, the big bright lights of New York. "You're not the only person in this city."

Too quickly, "How do I see you again?"

The Ghost draws his breath in. "Well," he says, "if you don't, then I suppose you know what I concluded. Until then work on your homework assignment. I'll contact you - when, if, I can. Don't try to trace me." He looks Blaine steadily in the eye. "If you want me to trust you, don't try to trace me. Don't even contact me. If you do, if you even look into it, you won't *see* me again. Do you understand?"

Blaine looks into his eyes, and understands the threat. He doesn't know how the Ghost might hurt him to keep the people he loves safe. It knots in his stomach, not to be trusted, but he's been so fucking *stupid*, so arrogant showing off like that without thinking what it might mean to *him*, so probably he deserves it. He swallows. He nods, and closes his eyes. "Yeah. Okay. Email me - whenever, I mean, I'll probably be checking it every thirty seconds unt-"

His eyes open and he's speaking to an empty rooftop. He stares, then says, "Are you still there?"

Silence.

He mutters, "Damn," and rubs the back of his neck, shoulder twingeing, then looks across at the fire escape to get down again. "Just so you know?" he calls. "It is going to be a *bitch* climbing down with my arm yelling at me! And if I'm still on your side after this then *yeah you can trust me!*"

Silence. He rolls his eyes to the dark sky overhead, tinted violet by the glaring lights of New York, and walks over to begin the slow and painful process of letting himself down.

*

He goes through the motions, thinking and thinking and thinking.

He ignores the taggers and their rattling cans of spray paint because there's worse in this world than graffiti (and he ignores as he passes the white shape of a ghost's hooded cloak, amidst the sprawl of coloured tangles on the wall). He stops a mugging and what would have been a homicide if the bullets

hadn't ghosted out of the gun to bounce off the sidewalk. He whispers invisible into the ear of a man on an almost-deserted subway platform, who has gradually edged a terrified lone woman almost to the very end of the platform and nowhere left to retreat, "If you even think about scaring or hurting her any further then I will haunt you so hard you'll spend the rest of your life drooling and whimpering in adult diapers."

He takes a certain grim satisfaction in how utterly beyond terror the man is even *without* an actual haunting.

And he thinks, and thinks, and thinks.

Blaine Anderson, powerful, naïve, attractive. There is something so seductive about his earnestness, his eagerness to *help*, the Ghost could just sink into it and close his eyes, oh yes please *help me*. But -

It's not just pride. It's not just admitting that he can't keep this up on his own, that this life is going to kill him through sheer exhaustion, that he doesn't *have* a life, that the cloak is a vampire that sucks all the life out of his days. It's not just admitting it. It's - anyone he lets close enough, anyone who gets close enough to him to really *hurt* him, all the ways Blaine could hurt him, oh god . . .

Anyone he let close enough would have to know, eventually, all the truths about himself that he can pretend aren't true so long as he doesn't have to *say* them. He would have to find the words and he's never told anyone, not one person, he's never even thought - he doesn't want it to be something that defines him but what else is it? It's just this part of himself he closes and locks every door on, puts a mask on to hide from, all he does is hide from it, deal with everyone else's problems so he never even has the time to meet his own eyes in the mirror, he's *safe* when it's other people's problems he's fixing and then - and then Blaine put a shield around him the Ghost couldn't get through, and he felt trapped the way he hasn't in years, trapped like the fear stopped his heart, the memory of fear almost worse than fear itself. The fear numbed him of the last six years of his life, made him a teenager again, truly terrified for the first time. He'd felt weak with fear, like his blood just turned to mercury, cold and sick and dead inside him.

He sits on the corner of a rooftop, hugging his knees, breath hot from the climb running out pale from under the hood. Blaine would get too close, knowing himself - both of himself. He wouldn't be able to hide things from him the way he hides them from everyone else. He's never been honest with anyone, not about everything. What Rachel knows, what Finn knows, what his dad knows - no-one knows *him*. It's the only way he's safe. Safe and utterly, ravenously *alone*.

The city is raucous below him, horns blaring, traffic and noise. He rests his cheek on a knee, and watches how the light from the cars pours from below over the windows of the building opposite, slippery like the bright smear of oil on water. He knows what a mess he is, what a mess what he does is. But Blaine doesn't. Blaine wants to do it himself. Blaine says, Something terrible happened that I should have been able to stop, and I want to stop it happening to other people, I want to get it *right* this time. Blaine says, I have this power so shouldn't I use it to help other people? And Blaine doesn't have to say, This is the most fun *ever*. because the Ghost could read that on his face, his body, seeing him skim his own shields like that, like ice skating, quick and powerful and easy as dancing. His own mouth twitches in memory of the joy of concentration on his face. He was *born* to do this.

What if you trusted him?

(He put me in a cage I couldn't get out of and I thought the fear would kill me on the spot.)

What if you just told him *enough*, he doesn't need to *know* you, not even your dad *knows* you, you could find a way . . .

(I can't face that again. I can't - it shivers like sickness in his guts - I can't face that again, I can't make myself face it again -)

What if you trusted him because you may die either way but do you really want to do it *alone*?

(What if he did that to me again? Someone in this city is making people into supers. What if this is the most elaborate lie in the world, and he did *that* to me again, and -)

Don't you remember that stupid website of his? Don't you remember how much people *meant* it? Don't you think he could be everything you never have been able to be, someone who could stand up in daylight, someone who could be a hero outside of the shadows, someone who could be a real symbol of *hope*, not just a ghost in the dark scaring bad people but someone who could walk in the light and meet people in the eye and be a *hero* . . .

(I can die but I don't want to die *trapped*.)

He closes his eyes, skin cool now in the breeze, and he'll move soon, patrol more soon, before he heads home for the night.

You've already met your match in him. He could cut your life off whenever he wanted, and he won't be the only one. Don't you want to leave something behind for this city when you're gone, something more than a ghost story, something real, and solid, and good? Don't you want something to believe in yourself? He could be this city's white knight, and all you'll ever be is its ghost.

Or he could kill you, and everyone you care about.

He stands up on the corner of the roof, stretches his arms overhead, bowing his back inwards. What is the exact relationship between paranoia and bravery?

... what is the exact relationship between trust and the truth ... ?

Like a turtle's shell, he thinks, those tessellating shields. Like a honeycomb. His mind flickers with possibility - god the line of his waist to his shoulders, and he could do something with the shoulders of the costume to disguise his body shape further to protect his identity -

He gives himself a small glare at *already* mentally dressing the guy he's met all of three times who still could get him killed. Mostly he knows there's no point resisting, though. He would make a *wonderful* model, he can hardly help wanting to dress him, but the costume needs a coherent theme and he thinks - those shields, hives, tortoises, none of these *work*, he's not going to invent a hero called 'the Wasp' because it's seriously not like middle America doesn't take care of itself -

He thinks, thinks, thinks. And he looks for some more trouble, to turn back on the troublemakers.

*

The coach is a meaty white guy, round head with stubbled ginger hair set almost directly on his shoulders for how thick his neck is. "You want to take up boxing," he says, giving Blaine a long look through pale blue eyes, and Blaine thinks that he probably should have changed out of the bow tie before he came to the gym. Behind them a guy's battering the hell out of a punching bag, and Blaine came straight from class just to ask about signing up, not actually considering what he *looked* like until now.

"Take it up again, really, I did a little when I was a teenager."

The man's eyebrows lower, a, *You're not a teenager?* look. He rubs the back of his shaved head, then jerks a thumb at one of the two rings. "Okay. You wanna show me what you remember?"

Someone who is willing to help Blaine without a set of angry, distrustful conditions listed first puts the grin on his face immediately, the world is an instantly better place. "Sure! Just let me -" He drops his bag, shucks off his sweater vest, loosens and discards the bow tie. The coach holds the ropes up for him to climb in, and the forgotten-familiar bounce of the ring underfoot, the smell of sweat and dust, makes him feel suddenly hungry.

"This like, a hobby for you?" the coach says, as Blaine unbuttons his cuffs and rolls his sleeves up.

"Huh? Um, more sort of - I don't know. A bet I have with someone." He smiles. Smiling distracts people. The coach just looks at him, like he really doesn't know where to start questioning Blaine to get the answers he needs, then gestures at Blaine to come at him.

"Lemme check your form. How long's it been . . . ?"

It's been a while, but Blaine is apparently not so hopeless a case that the coach isn't willing to take him up; he loans him a towel afterwards, and Blaine's hair is a wreck but he feels all endorphin-flushed and eager and *confident*, he can *do* this, he can -

He gets home, showers, and there's no email waiting for him, he doesn't get a text. He tries to appease himself online but the internet's pretty quiet. A fanghost called 'SugarGhostGrrl' has written a particularly awful thinly-veiled self-insert fic featuring a female version of the Ghost called 'Ghostette', and Blaine leaves it for the rest of the internet to dismantle, there's no point in his being rude, it won't improve his life or hers.

By the time Cooper gets home he's back on the rooftop again, proximity to his silent computer just depressing right now. His brother invites himself to sit down next to him, to look out at the fall-deep sky, the hazy-clouded dark as the horizon pulls the sun behind the buildings. "No binoculars this time?"

"He can't fly, Cooper."

"Which wise and reliable source of information did you get that from again?"

Blaine rubs his arms a little, because the wind's got a bite to it and he really should have brought a warmer jacket up here. "Can . . . I ask you a question?"

Cooper shrugs, says casually, "Sure, since we've already established what a wise and reliable source of information I am."

Don't rise to him, don't rise to him, don't rise to him. "A hypothetical question. Um. Say there was this - person."

Cooper folds himself to sit cross-legged, eyes closed in Zen-like concentration, summoning all his acting skills to interpret Blaine's problem. All his acting 'skills'. "Okay."

". . . this person you wanted to . . . you wanted to be their friend. But they, um, maybe they've been burned before or something and they don't really want to trust you. And there's no way you can show them that you're trustworthy if you're not already their friend, right? How do you . . . how do you get someone to, to -"

Cooper cracks open an eye. "Is this about a guy?"

"This is *hypothetical*."

"Is it *hypothetically* about a guy?"

Blaine rolls his eyes away, sets his jaw. It's not like he can say what it's actually about anyway. But then Cooper grabs him around the neck and noogies enthusiastically at his hair. "*Score* little brother, is he on your course? Is he a doctor? Is he hot? Is he a hot doctor? Is-"

Blaine manages to manhandle Cooper's arm off himself and smack it back into Cooper's body. "It's *hypothetical*!"

Cooper grins like he's already picturing Blaine at the altar. Blaine gives him a disgusted look back. Cooper clamps his delight down a little, looks thoughtfully at the sky. He says, "Have you tried singing about your feelings to him?"

Blaine grits his teeth. "*Helpful* suggestions, Cooper."

"Does this one not work at the GAP or something? Ow, jeez, okay, let me think." He rubs his arm where Blaine punched it, mutters, "I knew boxing would be a bad influence on you."

"I'm taking it up again, as a warning."

"Wow, excuse me, I'd better get this right then." He narrows his eyes, slowly relaxes back onto his hands, then speaks quite slowly, thinking it through.

"If some hypothetical guy has been through some bad things, and if you really want to be *their* 'friend', not just - the other way around. Then maybe the best thing to do is give them their space. Because if you really care about someone then it's not about you, is it? It's about what they need, even if that's not what you want. So . . . maybe just take it slow. Be around. Be friendly. Be supportive. Don't ask for anything in return. If they actually want to, they'll give it to you anyway. And if they don't, well, you really shouldn't be a friend to someone just to get to be their hypothetical *friend*, because that's why girls hate 'nice guys'."

"I'm not - god I'm not talking about - *that*."

Cooper says, looking at him out of the corner of his eye, "Not even hypothetically?"

Blaine shoves him in the arm. "Fine. Thank you for your advice, oh great wise elder brother. Your presence is no longer required. You may go. *Thank you*."

"Look, Blaine, you're a good guy, you know that? You're smart and cool and fun and you're the second most attractive of the Anderson brothers, just be yourself and the right guy will keel right over for you. The guys who don't keel over clearly aren't smart enough for you anyway." He bangs Blaine's shoulder. "I have to head to a performance. No moping while I'm gone, okay? Not even hypothetical moping."

"I . . . yeah, Cooper." He squirms his shoulder. "Break a leg."

Cooper waves without turning around, heading for the staircase down. "I'll break *all* of them. Ciao!"

Blaine sighs, and wraps his arms around his knees, and thinks, How can I be friends with a guy I can't even contact?

By not even trying to contact him, since he doesn't want you to.

The wind's prickling a chill along his skin. He's not achieving anything out here. He stands up, pulling the blanket up with him, folds it over one arm and heads back for the building. One way to be a friend is to reblog as much Ghost-positive stuff as he can, even if he has to spend the whole night trawling for it . . .

He closes the door to the roof behind himself.

In the corner of the empty rooftop, invisible in the dark, the wind ripples a dark grey cloak. And the Ghost wraps his arms around himself, alone in the shadows, and lowers his head.

Chapter Five

Kurt's sleepily watching the TV over a breakfast bagel when Rachel breezes back into the apartment with a bag full of groceries in her arms. "Look who's finally awake! What time were you up until last night, you missed a *beautiful* morning -"

Kurt doesn't even look away from the news. "I'm going to leave that in the 'it's none of your business' pile and good morning to you too, Rachel."

"Well," Rachel says, unpacking milk into the refrigerator, "to make a change from skeevy nights out with anonymous guys, there's this guy on my course who-"

"No."

"He's really-"

"No."

"But you would really-"

"No." He takes a bite of bagel.

She slams the fridge door. "You would really like him if you met him! He's a nice guy! I don't know what you have against actual relationships as opposed to - to -"

Kurt just keeps his eyes on the news, which is predictably gloomy. "To . . . ?"

Rachel says very seriously, "Kurt, after what Adam said in that message, I - I think you might have a serious and profound phobia of commitment."

Kurt says, "I think I'm busy and I'm fine on my own and I really cannot be bothered to discuss your disturbing obsession with my private life on a Saturday morning."

"Then how come when you're actually *dating* someone you're not interested in sleeping with them but you never have any trouble with - other guys? He's really nice and *he's* up for a date, anyway, I already pencilled in tonight with-"

"You told him about me?" He finally turns his head to stare at her. "You already *set us up*? *What* did you tell him about me?"

"That you work in fashion and you're cute in an anaemic sort of way and -"

Kurt wriggles deeper into the sofa, and huddles scowling over his bagel. "You wonder why I don't want *you* setting me up."

Rachel sets her jaw grim, and begins banging things into cupboards. "I told him that you're a really great guy who I care about a *lot*, that you're funny and sweet and nice when you're not in an *incredibly bad mood* all the time, and I want you to be *happy*, and you need a decent boyfriend for once to break you out of this bad spiral of unsuitable late night *nobodies*."

Now Kurt sits up, back sword-straight, and says, "You told him that I'm a slut and I need rescuing from myself."

"I did not say that!"

"I *think you will find that you did!*"

She stabs the air with a jar of mustard. "Well do you ever think that *maybe you are*?"

He holds her eye and he's so angry he's *shaking*. "No. Not once in my entire life, *no*. And I don't think that anyone else has any damn right to either."

She puts a hand to her forehead, eyes closed, and her slumping hand thumps the mustard onto the breakfast bar. "Kurt, I want you to be *happy*, I want you to be -"

"My happiness isn't something that you get to define."

"You're going to pretend you're happy like you are? I want you to be *safe*, are you at least - Kurt tell me that you do use protection -"

"Oh my *god* are you giving me the *talk*? I'm twenty-three years old, Rachel!"

She folds her arms, says to the breakfast bar, "I know you don't have any in your wallet."

Kurt stares at her, his breath drawing in so slow, so long, so low.

He says, "What?"

"I - looked. When you were - you were asleep on the sofa once. I just want you to be-"

Kurt stands up, leaving the bagel on the plate on the coffee table, his mind a cold dark hush. "If you ever go through my things again then I'm finding a less judgemental nosy *untrustworthy* roommate and avoiding all family events if *you* might be there."

Rachel calls, "*Kurt-*" and he slams his bedroom door on her. Then he locks it.

His heart's banging the inside of his ribcage like he just ghosted his way down the side of a skyscraper, watching the sidewalk's surface *fly* up to meet him.

He's so angry, so *blindingly* angry, and behind it all is the stark, gut-deep fear that if Rachel gets into the habit of going through his things . . .

He checks the false bottom to the wardrobe but it's still impossible to spot, though he might want to get some sandpaper on some lose splinters edging the false bottom of his bed. He swallows, stands up again, folds his arms around himself. God he's not even safe in his apartment. How can he possibly be *safer* wearing that mask -?

He has an email. It's a reply to the email he sent last night - this morning, at around two o' clock when he got in from patrolling - which consisted of a single line, just, *How is your homework assignment coming along?*

The reply is a dozen dense paragraphs long.

He sits in his desk chair, teeth pressing his lip to stop the smile getting too big, as the email babbles Blaine's enthusiasm and excitement and boxing is the *best* and what should he stock up on for a utility belt and should he be on some special diet and does he know anywhere secret Blaine can practise with his powers and -

There are two uneasy knocks at the door. "Kurt?"

Kurt minimises the window and remembers that he's not supposed to be smiling, but it's difficult not to. He takes a deep breath, unlocks the door, opens it on Rachel. "I'm not going on a date with some random guy, Rachel. I'm too busy for a boyfriend. I just - it just makes things complicated." He swallows. "Thank you for trying."

She looks up at him, hands clasped tight together. "I'm - sorry for - prying. I don't want you not to trust me, I won't ever -"

"It's okay."

"Are we okay?"

"Of course we're okay. We're always okay."

She hugs him, and he rubs her back a little. "I really do care about you," she says, in a tear-straining voice, into his shoulder. "I really just - I only want you to be happy, you're never happy anymore -"

"I'm fine, Rachel."

She sniffs. "Do you promise?"

He rubs her back. "I'm fine, fine, fine. And I need to shower before aikido, and I don't especially want to do it with you still attached to me. If you don't mind."

She stands up, and smiles. "Finn's coming over tonight, are you in for dinner?"

"I can be. Do you need help with it?"

"That would be amazing! We never hang out anymore, we really should *re-bond*. I start cooking at five thirty sharp! Don't be late!"

He closes the door behind her, always a little dazed by intense encounters with Rachel Berry's feelings. Then he looks at the computer again, and rubs his elbow a little, thinking, thinking . . .

He emails Blaine, *Are you free tonight?*

*

Blaine got two emails in ten hours.

Blaine is the happiest guy in all of New York.

It's a different address this time, as he comes swinging out of the subway humming to himself, stopping to catch a girl's dropped phone and hand it back to her with a bow, skipping a little dance step up the stairs as he hurries on. He knows the drill. Find the address, *then* find the Ghost. He likes to hide. It's like a game, and Blaine is allowed, now he's been permitted, to seek.

The address is a fire station. He could laugh, it's just - of all places - he thinks it's probably best not to use *their* fire escape, they're probably more aware of it than most people. He makes a cautious staircase of shields, takes it slowly around the back of the building, hood pulled up, hoping no-one's looking out of their windows. It's dark, but not so dark that a figure in black making their way up a red brick building will be *invisible*; he's not the Ghost.

No. The Ghost is up there, leaning over the top of the building, arms folded on its lip and hood falling forward with his head tipped down like this. "How high can you go?"

"High!" Blaine calls, grinning, but then his sneaker squeaks as he slips and he grabs for the brickwork, heart hammering a panic. "Okay! I'm okay! They're just, uh, slip-pe-ry . . ."

There's a hand held out for him, right next to his face. He looks around at the Ghost hanging *out of the wall*, only visible from the chest up. "You okay?"

". . . yeah . . ."

"Take my hand just in case. This is a stupid way to die."

". . . yeah."

He climbs up holding a hand for steadiness, the Ghost stepping up through the solid wall like - like solidity is just something he chooses to acknowledge or not. Blaine swallows, as the Ghost leads him by the hand onto the rooftop as if onto the dance floor, and only after a pause looks down and lets go of his hand. "I . . . I've been thinking."

Blaine just wants this far too much, wants too many things too much, because the Ghost's right *there* and everything he is is every one of Blaine's dreams for nearly five years and looking right at him, flick of his tongue to wet his lips, taking a breath in, he just - "I don't - there isn't a script for this, Blaine, I've never done this, I don't know how to . . . there's a lot to think about. A lot of work to be done. But . . ." His eyes drop off Blaine's, low to the side. "It has been drawn to my attention that - *this* - is currently the only part of my life I can actually deal with, because this has got so big there's no space left for anything else, and - and that makes the other me - *me* - it turns me into an ice cold nasty bitch, actually, and I would kind of like to not lose the very last of my friends. Um." His gloved hands play with each other a little, and then he lifts one, and a little uncertainly, he draws his hood back.

Faint light on his skin, in his eyes on Blaine's, caught gleaming in his dark hair, and Blaine stares at him so close and so *open* behind the mask and thinks Oh god he's going to kiss me.

Then he snaps out of it because this is not one of *those* dreams and this is not *about* that, he can't make it about that, it is about *so* much more than that. "I know, I - I get that you're risking a lot, I really profoundly do appreciate that, and I swear I'll do anything -"

"We need to discuss some ground rules," the Ghost says, so strange to see him hood down that Blaine can't look *away* from him, can't breathe like it's a casual thing to do, does he always have to think about *breathing* this much? God he has good hair. God he has *amazing* hair. Blaine has to fist his hands to resist the urge to pet it. "Because I don't want you involved in this until it's safe for you to be involved. You need a *lot* of practise, Blaine, a lot of work. I had to - make this up as I went along, I don't want you to have to make some of the mistakes I did."

"Yes. Absolutely, yes, whatever you want."

He closes his eyes for a second, opens them again. "One is that you only ever call me 'the Ghost' when I'm in this costume. You don't ever, *ever* call me - my other name. And I'll owe you the same, when it's time. It's - you only need one person to overhear, and -"

"I know. I promise." Blaine does know. He knows the *internet*. If one person were recording even this conversation then it would be all over the globe by tomorrow morning.

"Two is that I'm not - I'm not training you to be my *sidekick* or anything. If you want to be a hero then you should be a hero. Someone who doesn't need me."

"...I..."

The Ghost says quickly, "I don't mean I won't work with you, I don't mean you'll be on your own, I just - you're not some other version of *me*, are you? You're you and you're different and you *should* be different. You're not -" His mouth twitches. "- my ghost."

Blaine - grins. Then he says, "I don't even have a name yet or anything, I have actually *no* idea how to make a costume."

The Ghost flicks a hand, and for just one second, he's *Kurt*. "Leave that to me. Seriously, leave that to me, it's very much my area, I'm working on it. The other . . . the last ground rule. You and I need to know more about each other than anyone else does - than anyone else *can*. I . . . I need you to keep my secrets for me, even to people close to me, people who maybe actually do deserve the truth. My roommate and - and my -" He stops, just stares at Blaine for a moment, then says like it's a strain, "It's the weirdest thing in the world to talk about them like - because, they don't know. I mean, my stepbrother knows I do this but he doesn't know what it's like, he doesn't . . . I need *someone* I can be honest with. But I need that person to still lie to other people for me."

"What lies do you need me to tell?"

Something sharp, humorous and dark, behind his eyes. "Mostly just that I know what I'm doing."

Blaine stares at him, and the Ghost looks back, standing tall and easy and just a little cool, pale grey in the night. "I'm not what you expected," he says, watching Blaine's face. "You wanted the great hero, didn't you?"

"I..."

"It won't make you more than you are now, Blaine. It won't stop laundry machines eating your change, it won't stop the milk going off, it won't stop the way Thursday afternoons *drag*. I'm not - I'm not that poster on your wall, and you're not going to be that either. It won't ever stop you being *you*."

"No," Blaine says, quietly. "I think I get that."

The Ghost watches him for a little longer, then gives a small shrug, arms folding around himself under the falling cloak. "I'm not what you expected."

"... no. Because, you're right. I wasn't really expecting a - a *person*." The Ghost keeps his face so calm, like it doesn't feel of anything to hear Blaine say anything. "But I think that you're a lot more than you think you are. You don't have to be more than you are to be someone's hero. You already are. Believe me, I've seen the blogs."

The Ghost looks at him, wondering wide eyes for a second, then blinks and breaks the spell. "Okay," he says, and tugs at one of his gloves. "How about you show me what you've learned so far?"

"- what, in the last two days?"

He shrugs one shoulder, arms folded. "I assume you have been working? Throw a punch at me. Show me what you've got."

"*Punch* you?"

The Ghost smirks just a little bit. "Do you need me to run over the multiple reasons why it will be fine, given that you are seriously never going to actually *land* it on me?"

"... is that a dare?"

"One you'll lose," the Ghost says, cocky little smirk, cockily angled hip, and Blaine grins his *Jesus, I love you*.

... oh.

*

The guy skids into an alleyway and spins, gun raised in shaking hands, aiming at the entrance, whispering under his jagged breaths, "Jesus Jesus Jesus -"

He tries to steady his hands on the gun, he's not even going to be able to pull the trigger unless he -

From behind him a voice murmurs, "Boo."

He screams, turns and fires until he's out of bullets, and the dark grey cloak in the shadows doesn't so much as flinch. "If you just surrender quietly," the Ghost says, "I won't hurt you. I promise."

He's crying. The gun hits the ground and he puts his hands over his face, and cries.

"Shall I call the cops or will you?"

"I won't do it again," he chokes, palms wet with tears. "I won't I swear I won't I please please -"

After a pause that dark grey cloak says, "I believe you."

"Can't go back I can't go back please don't make me -"

There's a long pause, and then the voice says, "You should really stop doing this because you don't want to hurt other people, not because you're scared of *me*. You know that that girl in the store was just as scared of you as you are now?"

"Jesus yes yes sorry I'm sorry *please* I'm sorry -"

"Go home and *think*." He hears the cloak rustle and lifts his head with a gasp, eyes frantic - but there's nothing in front of him and his heart stops in his chest. "I won't find you doing this again," a voice says from nowhere in the dark, and he stumbles back, hands over his mouth to keep the scream in.

When he looks down, the gun's gone.

It's an hour later when the Ghost gets home, climbing up the side of his building invisible, ghosting through his own bedroom window. He relaxes his muscles, slowly, winds an arm in its socket and scowls, pulls the hood down and unpeels the mask, rubbing with a grimace at the remnants of glue across his nose. It's not just all the pollution of the city, that mask can hardly be any good for skin that needs to breathe . . .

There's another bright and breathless email from Blaine waiting for him, which he clicks open biting his bottom lip to keep the smile small, unlacing and pulling his boots off while he reads it. It's just ridiculous how much Blaine makes him *smile*, he forgets how not to, it's a struggle to not feel like something's trying to bubble itself free of his guts, some too-much ball of light in there. He flicks between a couple of tabs of his research for Blaine's costume, unclipping his cloak, turning away from the computer with a sigh through his nose as he shakes and folds it. Still no inspiration. His sketchy first thoughts for Blaine's costume are worse than useless if he doesn't know what his name will be, all he's got so far is putting him in something skintight just because he'd look *good* in it which is hardly . . .

Those shields, fitting together like jigsaw pieces, like a honeycomb, like, like . . .

He turns for the computer, gets onto Wikipedia again. Not a knight, they're not like a knight's shield, chivalrous as Blaine can sometimes seem. They're . . . something from middle school history flickers in the back of his mind. He uncaps a pen, pulls over some paper with half a gown's design on it, begins scratching something out one-handed on top of it while he clicks open a new tab.

Yes.

Yes.

It's not one shield. It's *lots* of shields.

Yes.

*

They develop a pattern. Blaine starts going to the gym every evening after class, and every other night he meets up with the Ghost, somewhere. During the day, he keeps on reblogging Ghost stuff - Kurt pointed out that he can't drastically change his personality because of this, he needs people to believe he's still 'just' a fanboy with a blog - and he emails Kurt.

Kurt obviously finds it quite hard to unknot himself. Small revelations; he has a father, his mother died when he was young. His dad knows, and isn't best happy about what Kurt does. His roommate does not know and it's best if she doesn't. His stepfamily knows, because they have to, and his stepbrother's a cop which is handy to have, even if slightly awkward every time Commissioner Figgins attempts another serious Ghost-hunt.

And Blaine is careful about what he says as well, because he doesn't know how to say, So, you know how I have kind of a crush on you, because my bedroom's full of all those stalkerish pictures of you? Well, you're actually sort of - more fascinating the more I know you, not less. You don't become less of a hero, you become more of a *person*, there's a full fathom five depth to you, I sort of feel like I might be drowning and I've just forgotten to panic about it . . .

Kurt's not seeing anyone. Says it dismissively in an email, *I told you it will destroy your love life* and Blaine, who's always felt like his love life doesn't *feel* as much as he wanted it to even when he was seeing a guy, doesn't know how to say, It's kind of ignited mine, actually . . .

He believes in love. Ten thousand love songs can't be wrong. But he's never felt *that*, he's never looked at someone else and lost himself, he's cared about people and enjoyed his time with them and always thought there should be something more, struggled and strained for something more, felt like just out of his reach, just beyond his fingertips, there's something *else*. Just a little further than Blaine's feelings were ten thousand love songs, Shakespeare's sonnets, the fall of Troy all because too many people loved one woman, something *real*. But Kurt . . .

There's something subtly unreal about Kurt. It's not just that he can turn invisible and slip through solid objects like less than smoke, it's just, something, like he's spent so long lying that the truth itself has become less than solid, something he can't trust, nothing to do with his life anymore. Because they've exchanged a bunch of emails by now, because the Ghost has stood behind him on a rooftop correcting Blaine's defensive stance with his hands on his wrists, because Blaine has looked right into his eyes and he still has no idea who he really is. He's more mysterious solid than he is as a ghost. Like, maybe he honestly *thinks* he trusts Blaine, but he's actually forgotten what trust means, which means that Blaine can't really touch him when he's solid, either.

So it means a lot, a shocking *lot*, when he gets an email asking him to come to Kurt's apartment so Kurt can measure him for his costume. He stares at the address, astounded. Kurt's apartment. The place Kurt lives, the place he's *solid*, the place he's - the intimacy of it is more than anything else he's offered Blaine, the place he makes coffee in a morning, the place he sleeps, the place he showers and dresses, Blaine . . . does not know how to enter that building.

He emails back, *Sure, tonight's good for me :) because he hasn't said no to a single thing Kurt's asked so far, and he really doesn't intend to start with this one.*

*

A short, dark-haired girl opens the door, and Blaine smiles, says, "Hi, I'm here to see Kurt, is he -?"

From over her shoulder an increasingly-familiar voice calls, "Is that Blaine? Let him in, Rachel."

Rachel gives Blaine an *intense* sort of look and says, "It's nice to meet you, Blaine." with a too-wide-to-be-unthreatening smile, holding the door for him. "Do come in!"

Blaine gives Kurt's eerie roommate as wide a berth as he can, and inside the cosy living room-slash-kitchen, Kurt is leaning through an open doorway. He's wearing some loose-necked sweater, Blaine's never seen the pale, fine base of his throat before, stares at it dumbly. "Hi," Kurt says, and grins. "Come on over, I'm ready for you."

"So how do you two know each other?" Rachel says, closing the door and folding her arms, and trapped between her slightly too harsh aura and the naked column of Kurt's throat, Blaine doesn't quite trust himself with language.

"He spilled my coffee and I need a model, so his owing me a favour works out quite well." Kurt says airily. "Come on, Blaine. Ignore her, she's just labouring under the fantasy that treating my life like a journalism project is endearing."

"Ah . . . right." Blaine says, and follows Kurt dazed into the next room, while Rachel sings after them, "Have fun *dressing* him, Kurt!"

Kurt slams the door on her, then locks it behind himself, and gives Blaine an 'I am trying so very hard not to laugh so much I fall over' look. Blaine - grins back, can't help it, it comes so wide and real, and he looks around Kurt's bedroom like a kid let into Santa's workshop. Framed black and white print of the New York skyline, family photo on the bedside table, neatly made bed, neatly regimented toiletries on the windowsill, sewing machine on the chest of drawers, desk holding the laptop he must email Blaine from and pages of notes and sketches, and the wall behind it covered in - fashion prints, designs, clips of fabric, odd images presumably for inspiration.

. . . an awful lot of his designs seem to be wearing capes.

"Are these - are these all superhero costumes?"

Behind him, Kurt is taking something out from underneath the bed - that portfolio Blaine remembers from the first time he met him as *him* - putting it on top of the sheets. "I work in fashion. I do a lot of projects bringing superhero style to street level."

"You - aren't you worried someone will - if you're working on *this* -?"

"Worried someone will what?" Kurt looks innocently over his shoulder at him. "Will connect fashion designer Kurt Hummel's superhero work with the actual superhero who haunts the streets at night? Maybe it's because I turn invisible, I've always believed in hiding in plain sight. And if I *am* working on an actual superhero costume, no-one gives the designs a second glance." He shrugs. "So."

"I don't believe you. I don't . . . I just don't believe you."

Kurt gives him more of a smirk than an innocent smile this time, then unzips the portfolio and takes out a large sheet of paper. "It works for you too, you know, so long as you look like a superhero fanboy no-one will ever actually suspect you of being one. So . . . this is the current working design." He lays the paper out on top of the portfolio, and Blaine walks over to stand at his side, to look down at it. "It took me a while to settle on . . . I worked with a few concepts before this one but, well, you can say you don't like it but you will be wrong because this is a work of genius."

Blaine stares at it.

That's -

Him.

But . . .

"You'll have to wear your hair different," Kurt says, while Blaine just stares. "Less shellac, something looser. I made sure the mask covers your eyebrows, people will *remember* those, and I went for mostly green to match your shields. Um. Are you going to say anything?"

The mask comes down over the nose, down the cheeks, approximating the shape of a classical helmet. Around the shoulders, the costume has - hexagons, bulking it out, and turning into what looks like the armour plate over the chest. Plating over the shins, the forearms, he sees -

"Like a Greek soldier." He touches, fascinated, the symbol on the chest. "That's a phi."

"Your power isn't one shield. It's *lots* of shields. You're your own small defensive army." Kurt licks his lips. "Like a phalanx."

"Phalanx," Blaine says quietly, and he can't take his eyes off it.

"The armour changes your body shape, it should help protect your identity. I didn't go with the helmet because you don't want your peripheral vision too narrow, and hopefully you'll be shielding your own head, so. No cape. Mine's intangible whenever I want it to be, I disapprove of other supers wearing capes, it's just something to get grabbed in a fight, iconic as I do recognise that they are. I went with asymmetry on the arms because you're likely to lead with the right and you'll need more shielding on there, and it's more aesthetically interesting anyway." Kurt stands very still at his side, then says, "I would really appreciate it if you would say something at this point."

"It's." Blaine stares. "I *love* it."

Too hopeful, "Really?"

"Oh my god. You *are* a genius."

Kurt wriggles a little, trying to control his smile, and Blaine thinks, Oh *god* I love you -

He hugs him very hard, he can't help it, feels Kurt start and then relax. "Okay," Kurt says, patting a little uncertainly at his side. "So, let me get a pencil and get you measured up."

He swishes a tape measure from a desk drawer, snaps it out, looks at Blaine with a little glint in his eye and Blaine stands as still as a mouse just spotted by the cat. "Your body shape's already changing," Kurt says, looking him over. "It must be the boxing, your chest is broader. This will have to be an approximation, I'll need you in for another fitting before I finish it up."

"You notice my - chest?"

Kurt doesn't meet his eyes, says, "This is what I *do*, Blaine." and then slips the tape measure around his lower arm, tugs it taut, pencils in a figure next to his design on the bed. "Can you pull your sleeve up for me?"

"Ah, sure. Let me -"

For a moment there's near-silence, just Blaine rearranging his clothing when Kurt, intent, asks him to. He can hear how even Kurt's breathing is, see how intent his eyes are, the easy practised movements he makes as precise as the way the Ghost moves. Kurt gives no obvious reaction out of the ordinary in asking Blaine to lift his sweatshirt to measure his chest, nor in getting to his knees and tugging the tape measure

taut around his waist, though Blaine's breathing is getting a little fluttery, and he's beginning to get afraid of what some of his own reactions might be.

It's when Kurt runs the tape measure up his outside leg and Blaine is holding every muscle in his body rigid (*please please please don't you're not sixteen don't do this* he pleads with himself) that Kurt hesitates for the first time, Blaine can see it in his eyes, before he just breathes through his nose and measures his inside leg like it's nothing, and Blaine sucks his breath in, and Kurt starts back clutching the tape measure. "I -"

"Sorry -"

"It's okay, I -"

"Sorry! Is it - um." Blaine wriggles his shoulders, tries to smile. "It's a bit - intimate, I - guess."

Kurt grips the tape measure, wets his lips, stands up. "I . . . I think I can work from . . ."

He's still very close to him, head low, tape measure pulled tight around his nervous hands. Blaine stares at his face, the heat in his cheeks and his parted lips, and the want is a hole in his stomach, reaching out to be filled.

Kurt jumps when Blaine touches his arm, looks up with startled eyes at him, freezes at the expression in them. It would be a matter of inches to meet his mouth. Kurt whispers, "No."

Blaine's still staring at his mouth. "Why not?"

"- because it's the worst - idea - Blaine, *no*."

Blaine hesitates, but he's feeling a bit too overwhelmed to think to let go of Kurt's arm; Kurt's the one who says again, louder, "*No*." and bangs his hand off with his wrist, backing up so he thumps into the closed door, tape measure rippling to the floor. "What the hell makes you think this is a good-"

There are two knocks on the door behind him and Kurt starts, says, "Rachel -?"

The door handle jiggles. "Is everything okay in there? I heard -"

Kurt closes his eyes for a second, lets his breath shakily out, says, "No, Rachel, everything's fine. I'm sorry if we were - loud."

Blaine watches his eyes, face warm, holding his own shameful hands down at his sides.

Rachel's voice comes dark through the door, "Are you sure everything's okay?"

Kurt takes a little breath in, unlocks the door, and smiles at the girl standing there with her jaw set hard. "Everything's fine," he says soothingly. "We're having a small disagreement about couture which I am going to win because he doesn't know what he's talking about."

". . . okay. Well. Just so long as . . . okay." She looks at Kurt for a long time, then looks at Blaine and says darkly, "I have mace." and closes the door behind herself again. Kurt puts his hands over his forehead, looks stricken, then locks it behind her again.

Blaine whispers, "I'm sorry."

He closes his eyes, shakes his head, wets his lips again. "No," he says quietly. "I'm sorry. I - that was another overreaction. I'm not good at . . ." Kurt looks at the carpet. "Sorry."

"No, *I'm* sorry, Kurt, I don't want you to feel - uncomfortable, or like I'm, like you can't trust me -"

Kurt folds his arms around himself, stands hugged very small against the doorframe. He says to the carpet, "It's not a good idea. That. It's not. We need to be able to focus when we're out on a night, Blaine, we need - we don't need the complication."

He swallows, and the want is shaky with need in him, he should just do what Kurt says but the thought of what he might *win* makes his head light. "It might not make things complicated. It might make things simpler."

"It won't work out. And then - when it doesn't, and we still have to have each other's backs against the kind of craziness there is out there - Blaine, we can't, all it'll make is a mess that could get us killed. It's a stupid idea."

"I don't think it's stupid. I think maybe we're the only people who could actually *understand* each other so -"

Kurt *hisses* his snarl, keeping his voice down for his potentially eavesdropping roommate, but Blaine has never seen either Kurt or the Ghost this *angry* before. "I am not that fucking *cloak*, Blaine! I am not whatever fantasy of *him* you want me to be! I'm *me* and I'm telling you it *wouldn't work* so will you just -"

"-I don't want *him*, I don't want some *idea* of a superhero, you don't think -"

"Oh *what*, like you're actually interested in *me*?" Kurt looks at him nose wrinkled in derision. "You don't *know* me!"

"You don't know me either! You think I'm just some embarrassing *groupie*, *god*, how long is it going to be before you stop seeing some wet behind the ears wannabe *fanboy* and actually start respecting *me*?"

"How about when you stop trying to kiss me to try to get into *his* tights," Kurt snaps, and Blaine opens his mouth, closes it, opens it again.

"Are we actually having a fight because you're jealous of your own superhero alter-ego?"

Kurt's mouth drops open. "I am not - jealous! Oh my god!"

"So, what, you don't want - you actually don't want me." Heaviness in his heart, dragging it low in his chest. "You . . . god. I'm sorry. I - didn't - I'm so sorry."

Kurt stares at him, breathing hard, then bites his lip inward, sucks a breath in. "It's not - you. It's not. There is nothing wrong with you. I just - I can't, Blaine. This. That. I can't. I - I couldn't - I can't. Please. I'm sorry. I'm *sorry*."

Blaine tries to read his face - he looks like he might *cry* - tries to understand . . . "Are you - not gay?"

Kurt gives him a very frank *what the fuck* face. "I work in fashion. I use *toner*. What do you *think*?"

"You're - I'm sorry, I - I'll stop trying to - I'll just stop trying. Sorry." He rubs the back of his hair, swallows. "I have really screwed up pretty much everything tonight, haven't I?"

Kurt stands very still and very small, then rubs his arm a little, says quietly, "I think maybe we both have."

Blaine looks down at the bed, sits next to the costume design, keeps his eyes on that. He remembers what it felt like to first see it, the soaring inside. Feeling like a hero makes him act like a dick, apparently. He is seriously going to have to work on reeling himself in, growing the hell *up*, not taking things too far . . .

Kurt says to the carpet, "There's nothing wrong with you, Blaine. I like you. I do. I'm glad if someone - if someone got into my life, both of them, like this, I'm glad it's you." He swallows. "But we need to not mess this up. Just - you have to trust me, since I have to trust you. It's better this way. If we could just . . . if we could be friends."

Blaine looks at Kurt's neat handwriting noting Blaine's measurements, then says, "I'd like that."

". . . do you want to . . . I don't know, watch a movie or something, just to keep *her* suspicions at bay? Or . . ."

"No, that'd be awesome." Blaine finds a smile for him, and Kurt's eyes on his still look a little afraid. "I'd like that a lot. What do you want to watch?"

"Well, you should choose, you're the guest."

"So you choose three and I'll narrow it down. It'll be nice." Blaine shrugs. "Just hang out. No capes in the way for once."

Kurt gives him a long, strained look, and says, "Just hanging out."

"Yes." He makes himself hold his eye. "If that's what you want, then yes. Whenever you want it. That's what friends are for."

Kurt holds his arms, and watches his face, and after a long drawn-in breath, he nods. Then he turns for the DVD shelves at the foot of the bed, drawing his breath in quick, and Blaine squeezes his shameful hands shut, and prays to a god he only half believes in for the strength to actually be what Kurt wants him to be, and nothing else.

*

The criminal population of New York gets quite a few bruises to tend, that night. The Ghost is in a particularly bad mood.

The heart of it is miserable, cringing, gut-draining *humiliation*.

Blaine looks at him like he's some kind of hero. Actually a *hero*, not just someone with freakish powers who uses them to beat up lawbreakers in the dark in his spare time. And okay it's not Kurt he's looking at at all, it's the Ghost, but still, sometimes, being looked at like that makes just some part of him feel almost as precious as Blaine seems to think it is. Like some part of him, some small part of him, is good and admirable and *right*.

Well, the odds of him getting another one of *those* looks from Blaine just lengthened beyond any sane gamble. Which is hardly something Kurt can complain about. It's not like he ever deserved them in the first place.

This is the least humiliating of the two humiliating options available to you, he tells himself. Imagine the other. Imagine if you'd let him. Imagine . . .

He pulls his hood down on a rooftop to let the wind cool his face a little, because imagining that makes his blood rise hot.

Imagine what he'd have to learn about you then. Imagine how he'd look at you after *that*.

"Some hero," he whispers to the dark, and pulls his hood over his face again.

*

Blaine's there early for their meeting that Friday night. It's been a week of the same as usual, both of them polite and friendly and not discussing what might have not happened back in Kurt's room. The Ghost stands invisible where he emerged onto tonight's rooftop and watches him, Blaine laying on his back with his arms bent behind his head, gazing up at the stars. He looks quieter than he usually does. Not so bright, not so eager. Gentle, and quiet, and older. Like a man, for maybe the first time, rather than a boy.

He doesn't know how to appear to him now, how to break this reverie. He looks up; there are stars, very, very faint ones, dim in the dim purple sky. He murmurs, "They were brighter in Ohio."

Blaine blinks, sits slowly up. "You've been there?"

He fades into view, shrugs awkwardly. "I grew up there. But sssh. Secret identity."

Blaine - grins, looking like Blaine again, then picks himself up. "Where in Ohio?"

"Secret identity. We can discuss this later. How's your week been?"

"Busy. Training." He drops into a boxing stance, pumps two quick punches at the night. "When are you actually going to let me come patrolling with you?"

"Well, after the costume's finished for one thing."

"How long will that be?"

"Don't hurry genius. I don't know how comfortable I am - yet, letting you . . . you understand how dangerous this is, Blaine."

"Yes, I do, but -" Blaine walks up to stand in front of him, lifts a hand and flashes a clump of shields together in front of his face, between them. "Protecting myself is kind of something I have down?"

The Ghost considers him through the translucent shields, then hooks a foot around his ankle and shoves him with the flat of a hand in the chest, knocking him with a flailing yelp over backwards. Blaine scrambles up, says, "What the hell-"

"People who are good at trying to kill you won't necessarily come at you the most obvious way, and *they* are the ones you need to protect yourself from the most. So, no, Blaine, not yet. Seriously not yet."

Blaine scowls, then jerks his hoodie straight again, says, "You never fell on your ass when you started out?"

"I'm trying to keep you from *falling on your ass* in front of people with knives and *guns*."

"And I'm trying to help you out, and if you don't *let* me help you all I am is one more burden for you and I know it. So I have a 'ground rule' I want to nominate too."

The Ghost raises his eyebrows at him. "Okay. What is it?"

"That when I graduate from your little super-school, you take at least one night off a week to let me patrol instead. Because I would kind of like to know what you're like when you're not this entirely sleep-deprived and *ratty*."

"Ratty," the Ghost says icily.

"Ratty." Blaine confirms, folding his arms.

"*Ratty*." The Ghost takes a deep breath. "Do you have any *idea* -"

Sirens, underneath them. Neither of them think, they just lean over the side of the building, watch the cop cars zip away below them. The Ghost says, "I think the lesson just got cancelled for this evening. I'll see you -"

"No way. I want to *watch* even if you won't let me jump in." Blaine pulls the ski mask from his back pocket, tugs it on over his head. "Besides, I'm your quickest route there."

"We have no idea what this even is, why would you -"

Blaine adjusts the mask over his eyes, hops onto the edge of the building and then onto a patch of shields, gleaming green underfoot over the street far below. "C'mon," he says. "Hold on. Quickly, they're getting away."

The Ghost gives the shields a dubious look, then steps delicately onto the building's lip, tells himself that it is not a step onto something thin and clear as glass forty storeys above street level but something *safe*, and steps onto the shields behind Blaine, bracing himself carefully, he's seen Blaine skid on them before. They're as slick as glass underfoot, and he grips the hoodie at Blaine's waist, a little uneasily. "What -"

"Hold on really tight, lean with me if you can."

"What -?"

More shields flicker into life in front of them, and tilt them into a slide. The Ghost's breath catches as his weight falls into Blaine's back, and Blaine says, "Maybe best not to look down."

"Like I trust you to drive," the Ghost mutters, and Blaine is grinning as he changes the angle of the shields again, and the slow slide becomes a fast-angled *dive*, as two more cop cars speed past underneath them and the wind fills the Ghost's cloak like a sail.

He makes them both invisible as they approach the ring of police lights flashing in the dark, the closed off intersection with a bus in the middle of abandoned cars, doors open and drivers standing behind the shield of police cars. Blaine skids them down to skip onto the startlingly-rough sidewalk after that ice-smoothness, and the Ghost keeps hold of his arm to keep him invisible, pulling him behind an empty car. "Keep out of the way of this. I don't know what . . ."

There's a group of people in black surrounding the bus, holding pretty big guns. One of them - a guy not wearing any kind of mask - raises an electronic megaphone; *"Greetings, NYPD. Thank you for attending our little hostage situation so promptly. Unfortunately if we'd actually wanted all these people dead already that would have been a bus full of corpses fifteen minutes ago, so you still have quite a long way to go before you stop sucking."*

There are people in the bus. The Ghost can see faces in its windows, and oh god, he hates this. He can keep himself safe from bullets, nothing touches him, but other people . . .

Blaine murmurs, "What are you going to do?"

The Ghost just watches the guy with the megaphone, narrowing his eyes, he sort of recognises . . .

"So the reason we've summoned you all here," the guy with the megaphone continues, "is to get an audience for an execution, because we don't get paid if we don't have witnesses. And the reason we borrowed one of your buses is to get plenty of bait. So I would appreciate if you would all get on your radios and spread the word that if the Ghost of New York doesn't get here within the next half hour, we start blowing hostages away. We kill one every half hour until he does get here. And I think you all know what's going to happen if you try to intervene instead, so how about you behave like good little cops and find him for us. Quickly. Thank you."

"That's Adrenaline," Blaine says, while the Ghost just stares at them, and breathes. "They're teenagers, apart from the guy in charge, look. They show up on the super blogs sometimes, they're a group of mercenaries, they - are you actually going to go out there and - they'll *shoot* you."

"Yes," he says, slowly. "They will. They'll either shoot me or the hostages, but they definitely will be shooting someone."

"But -"

"You know how I didn't want you involved in any of this yet?"

"- yes, but -"

"I'm going to need you to do something for me." He stares at the bus, and he swallows. "I need you to do something very *accurately* for me or a lot of people might die. Okay?"

"Yes. Anything. Yes."

The Ghost stares at the bus, and he breathes.

*

The 'Coach' of Adrenaline walks up and down in front of the bus, humming. There are black-clad teenagers with guns standing in a loose circle around the enclosed street, and two waiting by the doors of the bus with the first unlucky hostage kneeling, quietly crying, between them. He checks his watch. Twenty minutes. He knows it's a big city and it could be an irritatingly long time until the Ghost gets here, and it's a pretty big bounty but he still hates *waiting* . . .

"Out of curiosity," a voice says in the dark, a voice says from the empty street in front of the cop cars, "who exactly is going to pay you for killing me? Because I can think of quite a lot of candidates."

The smile grows slowly. He calls over his shoulder, "When I count to five, if he's still invisible, put a hole in that guy's head."

"No," the voice says in the dark, and the Ghost fades into view, hands held appeasingly up, a few paces away from him. "You don't have to hurt any of them. You know you don't, they're nothing to do with this, just let them go. I'll come quietly if you just let them go."

"Well, yes, but, no. I mean, you will come quietly, because you'll be dead. I did my research. Are you solid?" Two members of Adrenaline walk up to the Ghost from either side, and he keeps his back steady, does not

visibly flinch, lets them grab his arms and force them hard behind himself. "Good. Stay that way. Any of your weird ghost tricks and hostages start losing heads."

There are people holding his arms behind his back and everyone can see him and the fear of this, the fear of being *trapped*, makes breathing difficult. He makes himself stay steady. He makes his voice not shake. "Are you going to tell me who set this up?"

The Coach checks his gun, then lifts it and aims right at him. "You really should not have screwed with the Motta family, Casper. Lots of money and not much patience in the mob world. Kneel."

He stares at the gun. It's the blackest thing he's ever seen. He hopes against all hope that there aren't cameras, not tonight, whatever happens he doesn't want this on film. He doesn't want his dad to ever see this. He says, his voice coming just so slightly whispered, "If you get paid either way then actually I'd really rather stand for this."

The Coach shrugs, says, "Your call." and fires.

His eyes snap shut at the *crack* of it but blink open to the translucent shield in front of him, the world tinted green. The Coach says, "What the hell-"

He keeps his eyes wide and innocent. "Nothing to do with me, I'm just a ghost."

"That was a mistake." the Coach says through his teeth. "Kill the first hostage."

The Ghost throws himself forward on one knee, swinging the teenagers holding his arms off-balance, and ghosts. Their heads clomp off each other through his chest at the same second he hears the shriek and the gunfire, and looks up -

The crying hostage is sitting with his back to the bus and his hands over his mouth, surrounded by a blocky shield made of gleaming green hexagons. One of the members of Adrenaline is picking herself up, hand to her head, and the other aims at the shield and fires and the ricochet glances off with a spark.

The Coach says, "What the *hell* -"

The Ghost turns invisible. Now that he's not going to die, he's angry. He's *angry* in the black-cold way he really feels sometimes, when people try to hurt other people to hurt him. They have no right. They have *no right* to make *him* into a weapon to hurt other people -

Teenagers yelp and shriek and fire blindly as something they can't see disarms them, knocks them down. And the Coach backs away, gun aimed on something he can't see, at one point he narrows his eyes and fires right at the member of Adrenaline the Ghost has just disarmed; he grabs their wrist and ghosts them too, curses under his breath, bangs their forehead into the tarmac to knock them out and get them on the ground, below the bullets.

He doesn't want to haunt a bunch of kids no older than he was. He doesn't want them to face what fear really is. Not yet.

The Coach he walks towards, invisible, eyes narrowed, ignoring the occasional bullets buzzing through his body.

"You come any closer-" the Coach snarls, and looks around wildly, and grabs the nearest member of Adrenaline, jams his gun to his head. "I'll blow his brains out, *show yourself*, I swear I'll-"

The gun vanishes from his hand, his fingers start. A voice says behind his ear, "You are *not* a good person."

He spins just as a dark grey glove flashes at his face, and he *screams*.

*

Blaine's in the alleyway where he left him, hands on the wall, watching cautiously as the cops swarm to the bus. The Ghost appears again next to him and he jumps, then grabs his arm, *grins* at him, "*God* I am so glad you're-"

"Later. We need to not be here. Take a breath."

Blaine - does, immediately, and the Ghost puts a hand on his arm and turns them invisible, ghosts them directly down, through the ground and feeling through the dark for a safe route to anywhere else.

Leaning out of a window overlooking the alleyway above them, a girl turns her phone camera off and with shaking hands, replays the video she just took.

He helps Blaine down the side of the building after him, Blaine walking cautiously down his own shield-steps, the Ghost climbing through the bricks themselves. Blaine steps with some relief onto the sloping kitchen roof, and the Ghost smiles, lets go of his hands, lets his own boots thump onto the roof. "I'm a little earlier than usual, I might have to -"

But the door onto the alleyway opens and a man walks out holding a cup of coffee and a paper bag, calling, "Busy night I see! On the news they say-"

He stares up, and the Ghost gives an uncertain little wave, while Blaine with his ski mask pulled up to his nose gives a smile. "Hi, um, would it be possible to get two? I can pa-"

Mr Conti nearly drops the coffee, and the kitchen door slams behind him. The Ghost stares at the empty alleyway and of all the reactions he could have got, he really didn't expect *that*.

Blaine says, "Your friends are about as friendly as you are," and the Ghost gives him a glare.

The kitchen door opens again, and Mr Conti stabs at finger at them. "You wait there!" he barks, and the door slams again.

The Ghost is actually beginning to feel uneasy at this point. "Maybe we should go. I don't know if he . . ."

"You promised coffee. You promised 'thank you for saving my life' coffee."

"Ye-es, but, someone already tried to kill me once tonight and call me paranoid but -"

The kitchen door slams open again, and Sal is coming out this time, carrying a stepladder. "Hi," he says, grinning at the Ghost, who gives a wordless little wave. Mr Conti is following him, hurrying him in Italian with setting the stepladder up, so he can climb up it with a tray in his hands, and balance it on the guttering at the edge of their little rooftop. "I told you," he says, while the Ghost stares at the tray and feels his face heat under the mask and opens his mouth but doesn't know what to *say*, and Mr Conti takes a lighter out of his pocket, straightens the tea light in a little glass bowl, lights it. "Bring a boy! Always welcome! *Buona notte!*"

The Ghost is beginning to make a noise, at least, though it's not really what anyone could call a *word*, as Mr Conti climbs down the stepladder and Sal closes it, shoulders it, grins up at him and they bang the kitchen door behind themselves again. Blaine is staring at the candle, arms wrapped around his knees, mouth

pressed so tight not to grin and utterly failing. There are two cups of coffee on the tray, two slices of cheesecake. The candle. The rosebud in a vase . . .

The Ghost moans through his hands, "I did not ask him to do this."

Blaine *laughs*, and bumps his shoulder. "I think it's cute. He wants you to be happy."

"I *swear* I did not ask him to-"

Blaine is humming *Bella Notte*. The Ghost smacks him in the arm, but Blaine just picks up one of the forks and breaks the point off his slice of cheesecake, still grinning. "I don't know, I think this is a pretty good 'thank you'. Thanks."

He swallows, and stares at that small-glowing candle, and picks his own fork up, turns it in his fingers. "You did save my life," he says quietly. "I don't know what I would have . . . I've been thinking and thinking. Ghost the whole bus, but people would panic, I don't know if I could get them all safely solid again. And that would leave that first hostage up there. Save him, but then they could have just shot the whole bus full of holes. I - *maybe* I could have ghosted him and the bus at the same time, what was the distance between them? - and just hoped to hell the cops could take them all down without too many of *them* getting killed -"

Blaine touches his gloved hand, and the Ghost looks at him, startled. "No-one died," he says, quietly. "It's okay."

He closes his eyes, takes a slow breath. He nods. And then he starts eating his cheesecake, because no way in hell is he turning down Mr Conti's vanilla cheesecake.

When they're just quiet with coffee, Blaine scratches at his forehead, then just pulls the ski mask off. "Secret identity," the Ghost says into the night, not even looking at him.

"It's itchy. If anyone asks why we're hanging out just tell them you rescued me."

"Costume should be ready soon." he says, and takes a sip of coffee.

"Really? When?"

He swallows the coffee, and he wasn't going to tell Blaine this. He was going to pretend it took a lot longer to make so he'd have more time to be sure of him. But, but, but. "Come over on Sunday afternoon for another measuring. Should be done sometime next week."

"You are *amazing*." Blaine's shoulder bumps his, his ankle's against his, it's not that big a roof. The Ghost looks down at the candle, then across at Blaine, at the warm width of his grin and his skin like dusty gold in the candlelight, and his eyes all rich with small bright flames, and fixed on his . . .

He looks down again, and warms his hands on his coffee cup. Blaine says quietly. "Why do you do that?"

He presses the cup between his palms. "Do what?"

"Look - I don't know. You look at me and look away like you're - ashamed or something. You are allowed to look at me, you know that, right?"

He closes his eyes, says weakly, "Don't."

"I just -" Blaine takes a breath. "I meant exactly what I said. That - tonight, seeing you stand up in front of that gun, I *meant* what I said, I want to be a friend to you because god I do not want you doing this on your own. I just, I thought - I thought it would make you want to take *more* opportunities, not less, almost getting killed all the time, doesn't it make you -"

"You understand what's at stake here." he says to the coffee. "If it went wrong, if it came between us -"

"It wouldn't have to go wrong. And I would never, *never* let it be something that put you in danger even if it did, I would never do that to you. I'm not that *childish*. If it's life or death then it doesn't stop being life or death just because of a bad break-up and we don't even *know* it'd be a bad break-up -"

"I'm not what you want." he says to his coffee, because it's the only thing he can bear to face right now, *coffee* never puts him into this position.

"You don't *know* that! I know you think - I know you think this is some dumb fanboy crush, K-" The Ghost snaps his head to him, face white, mouth already opening but Blaine's holding his hands up, mouth clamping shut again. "It's about you," he says, more quietly. "The more I know *you* the more I like *you*, okay? Because you're smart and funny and patient and *so* kind and you don't take crap and you're just sort of *amazing* and I wish you were in my life a lot more than you are right now. And I don't want to make you

feel uncomfortable but I don't think it's - I don't know *what* it is, I don't know why you don't . . . I don't think you *don't* like me, I - see you looking sometimes." The white in his face is instantly flooded out with red, and he looks away again but Blaine touches his wrist, closes his hand around the glove. "Just, please, I don't understand. Just tell me why. If I can understand then I'll drop it, I swear. If I can just understand then I'll shut up about it, I'll never even mention it again, just, *please*."

He stares at the alley wall opposite, and he isn't breathing right. "I'm not what you want."

"You don't *know* that."

"I do. I'm not."

Quietly, "Why not?"

He wants to cry. It's not what the Ghost does. It's what Kurt does, all the damn time, because he's tired and stressed and making his dad unhappy and his stepbrother worry about him and his roommate hate him and his own life uninhabitable. Kurt is lonely and bitter and unhappy, and he cries. The Ghost doesn't. He's supposed to be *safe* behind this mask.

Blaine holds his wrist, and his thumb gently rubs the back of his hand. The Ghost whispers, "I'm not."

Blaine just keeps slowly, soothingly, stroking his hand. "Don't you know that you're everything that any guy in his right mind would *beg* for? Don't you know that you're about a million times hotter when you're *not* in the mask and that is taking into account that *in* the mask you're-

"Don't."

"Why not? Why is it so wrong for people to *like* you?"

"I don't -"

"Even if I never bring this up again," Blaine says, and his voice is shaking a little like it's as scary to say this as it is to hear it, "I'm not going to stop feeling it, you know that? I am completely don't-know-how-to-deal-with-it *crazy* about you, and it actually *hurts* not being able to let you know that -"

"Don't."

"Why *not*?"

"Because -" His breath rasps as it comes in. "Because I'm *scared*, okay? Because I don't - do this, I don't, I *don't*, I date like two guys a year so that other people stop wondering why I'm *not* dating anyone but I don't even *want* to because -"

Blaine takes the coffee off him, gently, because his hands are shaking so badly that he's going to spill it. The Ghost closes them tight, presses palms and folded fingers together, heart beating like it can't take him anymore, it wants *out*. "-because I don't want them near me, I don't want them *knowing* me -"

Blaine's hands fit over his, warm through the gloves, and his eyes look so worried and intent on the Ghost's, his eyebrows low like his hurt is hurting *him*. "Why not?"

He closes his eyes, and he can't stop the shaking. "Because I'm *scared*. And I shouldn't be. I shouldn't be and I am and I can't, I *can't* do this -"

"You can trust me." Blaine is close and warm and solid, and the Ghost feels like the wind might disperse him right now, blow him into mist and gone. "I swear, I swear, whatever happens, you can *trust* me."

He opens his eyes, Blaine's face is almost as frightened for him as the Ghost feels, and - very close, and he's been so scared and so tired for so long, and it would almost be a relief to just -

Blaine reads it the right way in his eyes, and his face softens a little, goes quietly patient, waiting for some prompt from him. The Ghost swallows, and licks his lips without thinking about it, and one of Blaine's palms settles on his cheek, cupping his jaw, as he ducks his head a little lower in the hood.

"It'll go wrong," he says. "It always goes wrong. It always will. Because I'm -"

Blaine waits, then says quietly, patiently, "Because you're what?"

He looks up at him from out of the hood's shadow and Blaine is so heart-crushingly beautiful, oh god, he couldn't have been more deadly to him if he'd been designed to be . . . "Because . . ."

Because, because. How to admit this as little as possible? How to keep his last secrets to himself, the ones that put him beyond ever having anything close to this?

He whispers, "Because I'm just wrong. You just have to believe me. I'm not right."

Blaine makes a soft noise under his breath, and his palm settles to his skin, his fingers - *caress*, and the Ghost feels weak with it. "You aren't 'wrong'. You are *so* many different kinds of right. I know you think I'm a stupid groupie -"

"I d-"

"But I'm a real person too, I'm not just some fanboy, and you can *trust* me. The more I know you," Blaine says, quietly, "all I think is that you're even more perfect. That - caricature of a cloak on the internet - you are a thousand times *better* than that, and I would rather have you, exactly you, with or without the cloak, than anyone else I can think of. I . . . please tell me you're not going to tell me not to mention it again. *Please*. Because I swear I will but *god*," his eyes close, he groans, "it'll break my heart . . ."

The Ghost stares at him, very close, and - if he's telling the *truth* - is he telling the truth? He's never lied to him before, it's almost like he doesn't know how to lie to him . . .

He touches, with two gloved fingers, Blaine's cheek. Blaine's eyes open, and he looks at him, and the Ghost just has no fight left in him. He's shaky and drained and *weak* with too long fearing and wanting exactly this, someone he can't slip away from, someone he isn't actually invisible to. Blaine watches his eyes for a long time, waiting until he's mostly calm. Then he leans in under his hood and kisses him.

His mouth is warm and solid and inarguable. His breath comes in slow, and smelling of him, and when he can finally, needily, respond, Blaine's fingers curl in his hair under the hood, and he's never been so helpless in his life.

Not in a good way, anyway.

*

Blaine insists on walking him home. The Ghost says, "*Really*, Blaine?" with one eyebrow cocked, but Blaine's fingers are all tangled with his and his lips feel warm with him still, and his heart is pumping some insane hormone into his system, he feels *high*. Blaine just pulls at his hand, says, "I bet you don't get many guys walking you home." which is true, and is actually, as a gesture, quite nice.

The Ghost walks them hand in hand and invisible around the back of his building, where he usually climbs up the wall to let himself in through his bedroom window. He looks down at their hands to let them loose but Blaine doesn't let go, just says, "Tomorrow night . . . ?"

. . . and he feels raw and open and defenceless, the great hero, in front of Blaine. So he looks at their hands with the blush hot on his face and he nods, and Blaine laughs very quietly and says, "I am the only person on the planet who knows how entirely adorable you are." and leans in under the hood again to kiss him.

And one last time, when their hands unpeel from each other, arms warm around his back this time.

And one very last time, the Ghost leaning down out of the solid brick wall, cupping Blaine's jaw tilted to him in his gloved hands.

And finally he's alone in his bedroom, turning a lamp on, wrapping his arms around himself to hug the evening to himself. And he *knows*, in the back of his mind, how bad this could be. He *knows* that. But . . .

It's been years since he believed that this was possible. He realises that he's humming and stops himself, and then realises that it was *Once Upon a Dream* and oh god he's completely lost his mind, he might as well be a four year old boy again, clutching a stuffed toy tight, eyes full of dream on his thousandth viewing of a fairy tale.

"Stop it," he tells himself in the mirror, while his heart bangs a waltz. "Seriously. Stop it."

And his heart dances to, *I know you* -

It's like his body has flooded with all the parts of being a teenager that he never got to have, the first time around.

"Stop it," he tells himself, not very emphatically, and his eyes in the mirror aren't afraid enough.

Chapter Six

Blaine gets home *buzzing*, so full of adrenaline that his brain fizzes. There is no way in hell he's going to sleep like this. It's automatic to turn his computer on instead.

No way in hell he can blog about it either, but he doesn't have any pictures of *Kurt*, at least online he'll find some pictures of the Ghost to sigh over like a teenager, oh god, he actually - he let him - he *wanted* him to -

It didn't feel like a first kiss. It felt like *the* first kiss, first time he ever pressed his mouth to another boy's, except this time his face wasn't numb with vodka at a college party and still desperately afraid, this time he was stone cold sober and desperate with *want*. He just wanted to wrap Kurt up in himself, don't be afraid, don't ever be afraid, I'm going to look after you, I know you don't have anyone else to do this for you, I'm going to take care of you now . . .

God, he knows it's dangerous. He knows that what they're doing is deadly, he watched Kurt look down the barrel of a gun and ask to be allowed to stand to die tonight, he *knows* what could happen to either of them. But isn't that only more reason to *care* while you can . . . ?

He gets online, hand on the mouse moving on automatic, mind full of Kurt and how his body felt in his arm, leaning into Blaine like if he was going down like this he was doing it properly, *helpless* for him and god that clenches so hot in his stomach, so it's a double shock when he actually sees what's happened to the internet while he's been away. It's - *exploded*.

Oh god. His face drains. It's not just an explosion.

It's a fucking *sex riot*.

About *them*.

There's a short clip of film, oh *god*, zoomed far in and pixellated as hell but that is definitely Kurt, that's the *Ghost* appearing in an alleyway next to someone all in black in a black ski mask who grabs his arm, and the Ghost puts a hand around his arm too and then they vanish. Just disappear like they were never even there. It's all of six seconds long, and the sound of fangirls screaming might have actually knocked the Earth off its axis.

Because it took them all of three seconds to link that guy in black to the guy in black at the last Puckzilla battle.

Because it's the same shields.

Because it's the same guy.

Because the Ghost is no longer solo, and so many of the tags are just *I'm literally crying omfg*.

Blaine's hand has gone numb on the mouse. He swallows.

Okay. Damage control. Kurt needs to know this stuff just as much as he does. He works backwards, works out how this originated - not even on a fanghost blog, some girl who normally posts photographs of cupcakes and kittens caught it out of her bedroom window. Only as soon as it was out there it was *out* there, no stopping it. The Ghostzilla shippers are declaring war, it doesn't mean anything, it's just *some guy*, they don't have the *chemistry* he has with Puckzilla. But everyone else - well, everyone else is assuming that exactly what actually happened happened.

Oh my god they could be having hot naked supersex RIGHT NOW.

Okay, maybe not *exactly* what actually happened. But . . .

He swallows, and the pad of his finger plays unconsciously with the mouse's scroll wheel. Okay. It's - disturbing in the extreme. But . . . if you don't reblog it, people will notice. You reblog *everything* about the Ghost. So if you don't reblog this creepy piece of craziness about *yourself*, they'll wonder *why*. God, secret identities, this is . . .

So he reblogs it, tagged with, *I have absolutely no idea, Guys seriously that could be his brother for all we know, Or his cousin, Wait for more evidence?*, and then emails Kurt a link to the entry. *You are going to need to see this.*

It took basically a week of *pleading* to get Kurt to let him *tell* him how he felt.

Please, please, please don't freak out about this . . .

*

Kurt wakes up when his shoulder hits the floor.

He lifts his head with a snort and whacks it off the underside of the bed, clutches it and curses, wriggling himself small on the carpet. Ow, ow, ow, ow, goddamn *ow* . . .

Then he just lays there on his side for a while, underneath the bed, breathing. Breathing he can manage. Breathing is fine. He is capable of breathing. *Sleeping* he's bad at, apparently, which is so unfair considering how little chance he gets to practise it. Sleeping he's terrible at. If he's ghosting in his sleep again . . . what was he dreaming?

He doesn't really remember. He remembers the atmosphere of the dream, heavy with anxiety and ending on a sudden flurry of panic, but whatever triggered him into ghosting right through his mattress like a teenager again he has no idea. Which is probably a relief.

He remembers last night and his fingers go tight on the carpet.

Oh god. *Why did you do that.*

Why.

Because he touched my face and my muscles went weak. Because he was so close and so beautiful and he *wanted* to and Christ I'm not a *eunuch*. Because - because he meant it, and I need it. I can't be alone like this my whole life, I can't, I -

You are alone. What do you *think* will happen if you're honest with him? Some hero. Grow the *hell* up, stop whining, some *hero*.

He climbs out from underneath the bed, rubs his grazed elbow, reaches for his robe. Saturday morning he usually sleeps in, only night he ever gets eight hours sleep, but he knows he's not sleeping again now. He touches his forehead, sits in his desk chair, closes his eyes. And he has to stop this. He has to tell Blaine no. He has to tell him that this is all a mistake and it will get them killed, he has to tell him that they can't add more risk to the risk their lives now *are*. He can't do this, can't be whatever Blaine wants, Blaine still sees someone who knows what the hell he's doing and Kurt is disappointment waiting to be unmasked and he knows it, he's never, never what people actually *want*, he's just got very good at hiding both that and the fact that he still *cares* about that.

What Blaine wants is that cloak, and the hero in it. What Kurt actually is is a row of Scrabble tiles without any vowels, a completely hopeless hand of poker, and Blaine doesn't know that because Kurt plays them close to his chest but when it really comes to it he knows that all he is is weakness all the way down. No-one knows that when he's hiding behind the mask, no-one knows then that it's only *him*. Blaine does now. If Kurt lets this carry on, Blaine *will* know.

Something in him so, so deep down, whispers, *What if he did know? Blaine - would it be that bad?*

He shakes his head and opens his laptop, takes a breath in, he'll check a couple of fashion blogs, take his mind off -

He has an email from Blaine.

You are going to need to see this. Please don't freak out?

Freak out about what, Blaine? he thinks, narrowing his eyes at the screen, clicking the link.

*

There's no reply from Kurt when he wakes up. Blaine sits in his desk chair wrapped in a blanket, clicking one-handed through the blogs, eating Lucky Charms out of the box. Ghost and mystery super, Ghost and mystery super, bitter Ghostzilla shipper, Ghost and mystery super . . .

He's kind of getting jealous of his own pixellated image holding Kurt's arm, smiles a little behind the blanket and then stops. He hasn't heard from Kurt since they said - since they *kissed* goodbye last night. He's sleeping, he thinks. He never gets enough sleep. He's sleeping, safe in his bed, god for once it's quite *nice* knowing exactly where he is.

Then the top line of his inbox flips bold. He has a reply. He clicks on the email below it in his hurry, catches it on the second clumsy attempt.

It says, *Blaine I'm freaking out.*

Stupid, stupid, *stupid*.

*

He can't breathe properly.

He tries to stifle it with his hands, tries to slow it, his *eyes* ache with it, his chest *throbs*. It's -

Like being inside a cage of Blaine's shields. Like being pinned, held down, *trapped, seen*, like he can't *escape* -

It was only last night. It was only last *night* and - he doesn't even understand how the goddamn stupid fucking website *works*, what do all the numbers *mean*, is that how many people have seen it? How many people have put it on their own blogs? How far has it spread? Why are they - *why are they typing those things* -?

His breaths jolt in but they don't seem to come out again. His eyes are wet. It takes him a moment to notice that there is an email, and his fingers are almost too clumsy to open it while he tries to cage his breath with his other hand, tries to make it come slower. It won't. Quick shallow in-breaths and nothing like enough comes out again and he feels like his head is going to split open from the inside.

The email says, *Please don't freak out it's okay believe me this isn't as bad as it could be, can you call me?? I still don't have your cell number!*

He tries to use both hands to work his cell but it kicks his breathing to a higher pitch of panic, he quickly covers his mouth again. He manages to hit Blaine's number, sucks in another too-much not-enough breath, and Blaine picks up immediately.

"Don't freak out okay don't freak out it's fine, seriously, I have seen it so much worse you would not believe after that first Puckzilla- Kurt?"

Cell clamped to his cheek and breaths sucking noisily at the damp skin of his hand, Blaine must be able to *hear* it. "Can't," he manages, too rough and too low, but he can't make any more words come out because he can't *breathe*.

"Kurt are you - ? Oh Jesus you're actually - you're not breathing - do you get panic attacks? You're having a panic attack. Can you hear me? Stay on the line. This is a physiological response of your body and you can control it again. Where are you? Are you in your apartment?"

He makes a noise on the next tiny puff of an out-breath, not really a 'yes', an *uh*. Blaine's voice is calm and serious and firm, and even though the skin of his face has numbed with lack of blood, he still responds to the strange hypnotic pull of it, cheek leaned to the cell.

"Your body's released a whole bunch of adrenaline and cortisol in your system and now it doesn't know how to use it all up. It's okay. It will retreat again, you just need to give it some time. Is there anyone else there, is your roommate in?"

He manages another breath *out*, and the in-breath comes easier. "Can you." He licks his lips, his breath is still rocking his whole body but not as badly now. "- talk?"

"Yes, absolutely, I can do that. It's a good idea to distract your brain so it can't keep trying to release hormones you really do not need right now, and it should get your breathing steady again, so, hey, you remember the episode of Friends where there's a blackout?"

Kurt's breath bursts out of him again. "What?"

"There's a blackout, you remember the episode, really early on, like season one? And Ross tries to tell Rachel how he feels about her on the balcony but the cat jumps on his head while they're singing Kumbayah-"

"Top of," Kurt pants. *"the World, Blaine-"*

"Yes! That one. Phoebe sings this song about the blackout." Blaine starts singing. *"New York City has no power, and the milk is getting sour-"*

The uncontrollable breathing is turning into uncontrollable giggling.

"-but to me it is not scary, 'cause I stay away from dairy- are you breathing any better?"

He takes two slower, stunned breaths, and says, "Yes. How did you - do that?"

"Superpowers!" Blaine sings, and Kurt starts laughing again but his breathing's still not right and it sort of hurts, so he crams it back down. *"You okay?"*

"... yeah. I - I don't know what that - was. I'm sorry."

"Don't apologise, god, that was me being a moron, I'm sorry, I thought you needed to know what's happening out there but you know what? You don't. They are insane, your fans, I get that, I'll take care of it from now on. I'll be like, your press guy. I'll keep an eye on them and only let you know if something you need to know about comes up. I'm sorry."

"It's okay." He picks his feet up onto the desk chair, rests his elbow off his own knee to hold the cell to his ear, chest thrumming against his thighs but not so bad, so he can scroll up and down the link Blaine sent him again. "I just . . . I don't know why I reacted like that." He closes his eyes. "No, I mean, I do."

"You get those often?"

"No. Not - ever, anymore, I just - hardly ever. I - hate feeling like - I can't get out. Or like - people are looking at me and I can't, I can't stop them."

"Your breath's going again," Blaine says. *"Long breaths for me or I have to start singing Smelly Cat, okay?"*

He covers the smile, then drops his hand feeling stupid because no-one can see it anyway, and focuses on his breathing. In, slow, out, slow. His heart's too fast. He presses his chest closer to his legs to monitor the beat of it, fastfastfast but slowing, slowing. "Um. Thank you. For . . ."

"I told you, it's my fault. It's okay, I'm sorry."

"Can we just both be sorry and drop it?"

"Deal."

Kurt licks his lips. "They . . . I . . ."

". . . fandom's a bit of a shock to the system the first time, huh?"

"Why are they . . . why do they think . . ."

Silence. Breathe. Slowly. Breathe. Blaine says, *". . . that we're, um. Dating? Um. They kind of ship you with anyone you make eye contact with, it's just kind of what they do."*

"Ship me?"

"Um," Blaine says. "You remember when we first met and you thought I was the world's most embarrassing creepy fanboy? Could you - try not to think that about me right now?"

Kurt swallows, feels his heart beating against his leg, slower, slower, easier. "I think that I have no idea what's happening and you do."

"So," Blaine says, and swallows. "They want you to be happy. Um. They think you've got a boyfriend. They're happy for you."

Kurt is silent, staring at that tiny, rapidly looping video of them holding each other's arms and vanishing.

Blaine says, a little nervously, *"Is it - really that far from the truth . . . ?"*

He breathes, breathes, breathes. On the screen, some pixellated figure in black that only Kurt in all the world knows is *Blaine* takes his arm, and Kurt takes his, and they disappear.

You have to tell him no.

He breathes. He remembers Blaine's arm around his back, Blaine warm at his side. Blaine's voice and how Kurt's body *reacts*, relaxes, instantly, safe somehow when Blaine speaks. He remembers - his mouth, almost more than he could cope with, and his fingers getting into his hair . . .

He hears a squeak on the other end of the line, a chair shifting with someone's nerves. He says very quietly, "You must think I'm the worst 'hero' in the world."

Blaine's silent for a second, then swallows and says, *"I think you've been alone for too long."*

Kurt wipes his eyes. They watered because he wasn't breathing right. That is what happened.

Blaine says, very obviously *makes* himself say, *"Do you regret it? What happened last night?"*

Honesty. He lost grasp of it a long time ago. It's not like lies ever made him safe, they just made him less *acutely* vulnerable. But he's tired, now, and lying takes so much strength, it doesn't come naturally to him even after all these years, so he rubs his eye and says in all aching honesty, "I don't know."

Silence. He breathes.

"Blaine . . . it's . . . I'm, I'm difficult, and, I don't know how to do these things, not normally, not the way normal people do, and -"

Blaine says, *"It's okay."*

"- and I don't want to - have a relationship based on waiting for you to *realise* that and -"

"Hey," Blaine says. "Could we - not freak out about it maybe? Just - just let it be okay if it is okay? Because I . . . I seem to have some difficulty convincing you that I actually am interested in you, Kurt, not - not some idea of you I've got in my head. And anything could happen to either of us at any moment, last night seriously did teach me that. So as long as we're both alive can we just - feel what we're feeling and not second-guess everything? We literally just . . . I don't mind taking the time to get to know you more, you know that? It's kind of all I want to do right now. So unless . . . unless you really seriously don't want me and seriously just say it if you do and I swear I'll back right off, unless you don't want this, could we maybe just care about each other if we do and not worry what it - what it means or where it's going, not yet? Because, um. All we did was kiss. And I know the internet is being a little bit internet about it, but it doesn't - mean anything. Anything heavy, I mean. Just . . . I'm sorry, I'm not very good at this either, at - romance. I just . . ."

Something stirs in him at just the word 'romance'. He whispers, "You just what?"

". . . I just like you a lot, I just sometimes - wish maybe we'd met - actually met that time I walked right into you and spilt your coffee, if we didn't have . . . you know, all this. Making it complicated. I don't get to spend much time with, you know, just Kurt. And that's kind of all I want to do right now. Spend time with you. Talk to you. Kiss you, a lot. Um. I don't . . . I still don't know what you want."

His heart beats against his thigh, steady, now. He's breathing like breathing would never dream of being difficult for him. Even his lungs are lying bastards. But it's Saturday morning on not enough sleep, and Kurt really is trying to be honest, for once. "I don't either, Blaine."

Silence. Then Blaine says, *"Do you want to get coffee?"*

He blinks. "What? Now?"

"Maybe this afternoon. I still have to shower, my hair's doing the eighties werewolf movie thing."

He presses his smile into his knee. "I have - I have aikido this afternoon."

"Could you skip?"

"You haven't met my aikido teacher."

"Okay, afterwards, when you do finish? What if we skipped coffee and got dinner?"

"Like - a date?"

"Like a date." Blaine says. "Like normal people have. Since we do need to keep up the façade that we are normal people."

He licks his lips. His heart is beating too hard again, but he doesn't think it's fear. ". . . I have to patrol tonight."

Blaine moans. *"You're dumping me for the Ghost?"*

He buries his face in his knees again. "Stop making me laugh!"

"Have dinner with me. Please. Then we'll patrol."

"I'll patrol. You are still in training."

"I'll watch you patrol. I'll learn things that way. Dinner first? Please?"

He just loses the ability to think, loses grasp of all the reasons it might be a bad bad awful mistake, when he's talking to Blaine. All the fear and all of the difficulty just stop meaning anything when there's Blaine's voice and the inescapable memory of his eyes and his sweet, boyish hopefulness.

". . . okay."

The triumphant noise he makes on the other end of the line, chair creaking with his bouncing, makes him choke the laughter into his knees again.

*

Blaine leans down to switch his computer to stand by and he has a new message, another one asking him if he's read Spookmehard's flashfic of the Ghost fucking his black-clad associate into that alley wall yet. He closes the window, checks his hair in the mirror for the sixteenth time in five minutes, ducks out of his doorway under Cooper's arm. Cooper pounces for the hair but Blaine escapes around his back, and knocks his hand out of the way on its second attempt. "You haven't even told me his name! I can't let my kid brother go out on a date with some guy if I don't even know his name! What will Mom think?"

"She'll think that it's none of your damn business, Cooper." It's more than a little difficult to get his shoes on without Cooper completely dismantling his hair. He manages it by beating him with a shoe until he backs off just enough.

"I need his name in case you come home late! What if I have to call the cops? What kind of big brother am I going to look like when I don't even know the guy's name?"

"He's called Kurt!"

"Hypothetical-Kurt?"

"It's-none-of-your-damn-business-Kurt!"

"Call me if you're going to be late?" Cooper says, fighting the front door as Blaine tries to slam it on him and leaning out of it, dramatically grasping the doorframe. "Do you need a wingman? Blaine! I can sit at the next table! He'll never even know I'm there!"

God, what Blaine would give to be able to turn invisible sometimes . . .

He knocks on Kurt's apartment door and hears voices from inside, hurrying footsteps, a second's pause and then it opens on Kurt, Kurt in - an exquisitely tapered jacket and some incredible striped shirt so colourful and so perfectly pressed, his hair swept up pristine, his eyes a jewel-bright turquoise in the light of the lamps, so colourful and so, so far from the Ghost. "Hi," he says, small smile growing as Blaine's comes the size of a pumpkin's, and from behind Kurt Rachel's voice calls icily, "Do you know what time you'll be back, Kurt?"

"Oh my god, Rachel, what's *that*? In the corner - it just ran behind the TV -"

She shrieks, "What?"

"It's *your business!* How about you go mind that!" Kurt sings, and bangs the door behind himself. "Well," he says, and bristles a little, wriggling it loose out of all his muscles. "Um. Hi."

"Hi," Blaine says, and comes onto the balls of his feet to kiss his cheek. "You hungry?"

"I . . . famished, actually." The squirming turns embarrassed, as Blaine offers his arm and Kurt stares at it, takes it with another of those soft smiles, eyes low. "Is there somewhere you wanted to go?"

"There's this amazing sushi place my brother took me, my first night here, in SoHo."

"Um," Kurt says as they walk down the corridor, for the stairs. "It's not - Chisou, is it?"

"You know it?" Stupid. Kurt's been here years longer than him, of course he -

"I might have - been there before." Kurt glances at the doors of his neighbours as they pass them, then gives Blaine an embarrassed look, and flashes his hand at his eyes. "In - slightly more noticeable clothing?"

"More - oh." With a mask on. Oh. "Um. Somewhere else maybe?"

"That might be - sensible."

". . . is there anywhere you *haven't* been in slightly more noticeable clothing?"

Kurt squeezes his arm, and walks that strutting-swaying stride of his that is nothing like the Ghost's measured walk. "I know another decent sushi place I've only ever visited in the very drabbest of attire."

"You count that as drab?"

Kurt glances at himself, smiles just a little. "Oh, Blaine. How little you know me."

Well. Yes.

*

It's -

Bizarrely nice to hang out with Kurt.

Like actually kind of *ridiculously* nice. Like, after a second's awkward pause when they're seated in the restaurant, they both start talking at once and then stop, and then apologise at once and stop, and then they're just laughing. And Kurt picks up his chopsticks and plays with them, says, "So, where in Ohio?" and Blaine says, "Westerville? Just outside-" and Kurt *stares* at him, and that's all the conversation they need until the food arrives.

Kurt lived practically *next door* to him until he was eighteen years old and Blaine never even saw him at the *mall*. It's just -

"We probably did pass each other at the mall," Kurt says, offering him the wasabi.

"I would have noticed *you*."

"Take the hero goggles off," Kurt says. "I was an unremarkable teenager. Believe me. You wouldn't have noticed me. You, on the other hand . . . you said private school?"

"Blazer and everything."

"I would have noticed *you*," Kurt murmurs, drawing a little pattern on his platter with his chopsticks before he starts. Blaine drops his sashimi.

It's weird seeing him relax. It's weird seeing him *flirt*, which he does without thinking and then - hesitates, like maybe he did the wrong thing, and Blaine touches his foot with his under the table so he relaxes again. Kurt, rueful over mochi, says to his spoon, "It's - I'm not good at this, am I? Um. Normally I'm just . . . acting."

"You're not acting."

He stares at his plate. He shakes his head.

Blaine says, "Trade you some ice cream for mochi."

His eyes raise uncertainly, and his smile comes shy, but very real. "If it's the green tea one."

"Cool." Blaine efficiently completes their dessert transaction, swapping between the plates, and Kurt's smile - flickers, the way it does, like the wattage turned up. It's not like it gets any wider, it just gets *more*, real in his eyes and his cheeks, and Blaine -

He touches his hand afterwards, over the tabletop, says, "This is okay, isn't it?"

Kurt drops the napkin he'd been playing with and after a second's tension - he lets Blaine touch his hand. Which should not be as big a deal as it is. "It's about the weirdest thing I have ever done in my life," he says, thoughtfully.

"Have dinner with a guy?"

"Have dinner with a guy I actually want to have dinner with." He - looks at Blaine. It would be so easy for him to look away to say that; he doesn't. He looks at Blaine, and Blaine can see the small pulse in his jaw, the small fear in his eyes, closes his hand around Kurt's to make it go away.

"I know you have every reason in the *world* to be wary about this, Kurt, but all I want - I want to respect every boundary you put up, okay, so all the . . . other things don't get involved in this, and this is something you want, this is -"

"Safe," Kurt says, very quietly, watching Blaine's hand on his.

"Safe." Blaine confirms. "I want you to feel safe with me."

He watches Kurt's face, while Kurt watches their hands. Then he lifts his eyes to Blaine's and his heart bumps, he wants -

He wants to kiss him so gut-knottingly much he can't breathe.

Kurt says, "It's getting late. We still have - things to do, tonight."

He licks his lips, swallows, manages to blink. "Yes. Of course. Let me get the cheque-"

They put their jackets back on against the increasingly cold fall - October now, and chill in the concrete - and walk back to the subway station, close enough that their arms brush, speaking only now and then. They share a pole on the train - there's only one seat and neither of them are willing to take it at the

expense of the other so they stand, like idiots, hands touching on the same pole; and outside the door to his apartment Kurt plays with his keys and says, "You really didn't have to walk me home, again, Blaine."

"I'm a gentleman. It's a dark night. Anything could happen out there."

"I'm really not afraid of the dark."

Blaine - runs a hand down his arm, takes his hand, cool from the walk from the subway. "And I'm not afraid of ghosts."

Kurt's eyes flick from their hands to his face, and he wets his lips, watches Blaine's eyes. Blaine swallows. His heart is pumping in each ear, a rush of hormone-laced blood, it bubbles in his veins.

Kurt closes his eyes when he leans in.

He kisses against the wall next to the door, one arm sliding off the plaster to wrap around his waist while Kurt's breath whispers out of him and his fingers close in Blaine's hair. He kisses him - harder, than last night. He only understands now himself how *much* he wants him, he hasn't felt want like this since he was a teenager, like he can't conceive of what else could happen next but *Kurt*. The want is sluicing every artery, pounding in the echoing of his oversized, overloaded heart, Kurt, *Kurt* -

The door clicks, opens on its chain, and Kurt's roommate's eye glitters darkly at them. "Welcome home, Kurt."

The kiss breaks, Kurt tilts his head down - forehead bumping Blaine's, nose running down his cheek - and lets his breath out with a shiver. "Rachel. Hi."

"Did you have a pleasant evening?"

Kurt's eyes open, dark blue and dark pupils, and he murmurs, "I loved it." and his fingers stroke a command in Blaine's hair. Blaine pulls himself off him, stands up again, tugs at his jacket to hopefully disguise the fact that he's standing a little strangely. "Thank you, Blaine."

"Believe me, it was my pleasure."

Kurt smiles, says, "Goodnight." and kisses him, once, innocently, on the cheek. Then he turns for the door as Rachel opens the chain and the last thing Blaine hears before the slamming door cuts off all but the high angry *noise* of their voices, "*Twenty-goddamn-three years old, Rachel-!*"

He dances all the way down the stairs.

*

Just over an hour later he climbs over the edge of tonight's rooftop and there's the Ghost, cloak running dark grey in the wind this high, disguising the stance of his body. Blaine - smiles, it drops out of him, but Kurt's face is calmly blank, and he says, "If you're going to observe you'll have to follow me on the rooftops. I don't know how you'll keep up anyway, I'm usually invisible most of the time."

All business, and no mention of *tonight*, and Blaine feels like a puppy smacked on the snout with a newspaper before he thinks - it's not Kurt. It's the Ghost. And you're not Blaine, not right now. Now you're - Phalanx. Or you almost are, anyway. So he closes his hands into loose fists to try to make them stop wanting to reach for Kurt, and he nods, coolly like a superhero might. "I'll keep up. Don't worry."

And the Ghost lets his breath out, a quiet sigh of approval, and turns for the night. Blaine follows him like a shadow, even darker than he is in that cloak.

Leaning over the edge of buildings he gets a distant view of a few small incidents - it's a fairly average night, the Ghost tells him, it's a mercy when the supervillains stay home; a couple of early muggings, one of them a man hands shaking over the ATM with another guy digging a knife into his ribs, until the knife is invisible and intangible and the guy turns to a flash of a grey glove at his face. Blaine doesn't know what the haunting really is, yet, hasn't asked. He should. There's all kinds of things he should ask him, about his powers and the limits of his powers, about how he found out he had them, about why he does this -

But he recognises the threat Kurt takes it as, being pushed too far, questioned too hard. That panic of his over that video on the internet, *I - hate feeling like - I can't get out. Or like - people are looking at me and I can't, I can't stop them* - he's been alone too long, Blaine thinks. He's been in terrible danger every night of his life for so long, he's putting people he *loves* in terrible danger and he knows it, and the things his powers can't save them from he finds terrifying. Part of respecting Kurt's boundaries, he realises with a falling heart, is not having to explicitly push him to *state* his boundaries, Kurt would only view that as

attack as well. He has to work them out for himself. He has to work out what Kurt needs from him until he's okay telling him it. He has to know Kurt almost as intimately as Kurt knows himself.

And on the street below the Ghost, perched on the roof of car, ghosts his head through to say to two guys trying to hotwire it, "This model is seriously not worth the grief, you don't read up on these things before you steal them?"

*

There's a kid in a hoodie with a bulky bag over the shoulder, clanking and rattling on their way home behind a parking lot. Four guys are following - *hey emo, punk, what's in the bag, what've you got, you gonna share, gonna show and tell, punk?* - and the kid keeps walking, head down, gripping the strap of the bag so tight. If they come any closer they're getting fifty dollars worth of spray paint smashed over their heads, *assholes, assholes*, if they *touch* -

A hand grabs their shoulder and they turn kicking, instantly off-balance, wrenched and knocked painfully to the sidewalk. "*off me kill you I'll fuckin' kill-*"

No-one's touching them anymore. They look up, blinking, at the honeycomb of green hexagons surrounding them - and the figure in a dark grey cloak appearing between the shield and the small gang of attackers, who back up, cursing and shoving, until one narrows his eyes and swings the beer bottle to the right grip in his hand -

"I very much advise you not to." the Ghost says, quiet and steady, and the man spits, "Fucking cocksucker prick not scared of-"

The Ghost barely moves, just sways with his lurching body, a flash of the pale costume inside the dark grey cloak and the beer bottle shatters in the street, and the man is choking at the sidewalk, arm stretched out painfully long across his back, the Ghost kneeling easily on his waist. "Run." he says to the other three, who curse and yelp and do. The Ghost ties the man's hands off while he groans, kicks and struggles and says, "Sue you man, can't do this, sue your cheap hallowe'en costume *ass* -"

The Ghost looks over his shoulder, says to the teenager, "I can haunt him if you want me to."

The teenager pulls down her hood, short dirty blonde hair and five piercing in one ear. "*I wanna kick his ass.*"

Someone laughs *behind* her and she spins, quick as a cat, to some guy in a black hoodie, black mask covering his face. He holds his hands up in a friendly way, and the green dome around her disappears. "I don't think we should let you do that, you could do some pretty serious damage to him."

The Ghost has leaned his head down, is whispering to the man's ear, "Do you *like* making other people feel scared? Do you know what it's *like* to be scared like that?" Lower, and the skin all down the teenager's back tightens, "Do you want me to show you what it's like?"

He stops struggling, breathing hard and fast, trying to look behind himself to see the Ghost but he can't, pinned to the sidewalk like this. The Ghost stands up off him, leaves him just lying there on the ground, wipes his gloved hands off on each other and says, "He might as well hear it, if we're spreading the word. Hi, by the way."

He smiles at her and she stares back, blushing slow and very hard under her freckles. "Hi."

"You're one of the Ghost taggers, I've seen you here and there."

She shrugs jaggedly, face scarlet by now. "You gonna get me for copyright infringement or what?"

The smile turns into an undeniable *grin*. "No. I'm here to ask for a favour, actually. This is my friend, Phalanx."

She looks around at the other guy, who waves. "Crummy costume," she mutters.

"The costume is a work in progress. But he's here now and people need to know that. Would you mind adding something else to the wall, next time you paint a Ghost?"

She shrugs again. "Yeah. What?"

"May I borrow a can?"

She checks the nearest wall, grimy with old graffiti, offers him a can of yellow to show up clearest. He shakes it, then sprays - an upright stick with a circle looping the halfway point. "It's a phi," he says. "For Phalanx. Just to let people know there's not only one cape running around the place on a night anymore."

She looks at Phalanx, who's standing politely to one side. "S'what you do? Make that -" She motions it with her hands. "Ball thing?"

"I make shields." A clear green hexagon appears in front of her face, gleaming in the dark. She blinks, stares, touches it; smooth like running her fingers over a mirror. "To protect people."

She nods, and pops the lid from a can of green paint. She shakes it, then flashes a line next to the Ghost's phi, draws, instead of a circle, a hexagon bisecting it. "Phalanx." she says. "Cool."

". . . cool," Phalanx breathes.

"Thank you," the Ghost says, handing her the can of paint back. "You've been most helpful. I owe you one."

"We do," Phalanx says, and waves as the Ghost walks over and takes his arm.

"Hey," the guy on the ground says, tied hands wriggling behind his back. "What about me? What about -"

"Have a good night," the Ghost says, and the two of them vanish, empty sidewalk and the orange streetlight acidic on the ground. She tilts her head, waits to hear footsteps, and doesn't. Then she looks down at the guy on the ground, who squirms, trying to roll himself onto his back. "What about - you're not gonna untie my hands -?"

She kneels down, pulls his head up by his collar, holds the can at his face. She spits, "Close your eyes, asshole, I'll show you a *cheap hallowe'en costume*-" and sprays.

*

On a safe rooftop Blaine stretches his arms, pulling one of them to properly pop the shoulder after the climb, grins with his eyes closed at the sky. "That was awesome. Are you going to let me-"

"No. Maybe. Slowly," the Ghost says, watching his face as Blaine settles himself again. "You need more practise. Do you know what it would . . . if something happened to you now it'd be my fault, I couldn't - I don't want that."

"If something happens to me later on it'll be my fault?"

The Ghost shrugs. "It depends how much it actually does appear to be your fault, yes."

He laughs, then pulls the ski mask off to get some air on his itching skin. "Does it - bother you? When they say things like that?"

His face is even, cool. "I've heard worse. Did it bother you?"

He thinks about it, then gives a small, not actually happy smile. "I guess I've heard worse too."

He looks - hesitant, watching Blaine. "I told you it wasn't nice," he says, quietly.

". . . I know." He holds a hand out. "I told you I didn't want you doing it alone."

The Ghost looks at him from the shadow of his hood, nervous in his shielded eyes, then looks at his hand, takes it. Blaine closes his fingers through his, squeezes gently, and the Ghost - looks across the skyline, Blaine follows his eyes, he's checking the lit windows they can see. He squeezes the Ghost's hand again. "I don't think anyone's filming us, this time. Your paparazzi don't follow you *everywhere*."

"Hm."

"I know you . . . I know it's important you stay hidden. But you know they only do it because they care about you."

"They don't *know* me to care about me."

"Do they have to? They know what you do and they think it's awesome. They think *you're* awesome."

"That doesn't explain why they wrote all those *things*."

"You're really hot, people are going to notice that. I'm not saying I don't get why it's a bit creepy, because I do, but . . . you're beautiful. You can't hide that even with a hood and mask."

His lips have parted a little, staring at Blaine. Blaine touches his cheek under the hood, leans up to kiss him, drawing his head down to his. The Ghost's arms, after a second, settle around his shoulders, cloak falling around Blaine too, drawing at him like he needs him close. And this -

How many fantasies of Blaine's has this been? How much, how *many* times has he wanted this, exactly this except it never was exactly this, it never was Kurt behind that mask, in his daydreams - and he tried to keep his daydreams PG, he really did, he knew that he didn't want to *use* some guy he'd never even met like that - the sexiest part of those dreams was never the stomach-heating knowledge that the Ghost *trusts* him. But it's that that makes him want to moan into his mouth, the fact that this is something he's so afraid of but he's still letting Blaine do it, wanting him to do it, and when Blaine parts his mouth from his he hangs his head, biting his lip, eyes closed and breath fluttery.

Blaine holds his hips inside the cloak. "You know you are *allowed* to smile, right?"

His laughter bursts out of him, visible in the night - after the kiss his breath is a pale ghost in the cool air - and he tilts his head, *smiles* at Blaine. "This has been a nice evening. Even including the muggers."

"Interesting sort of date," Blaine confirms. His thumbs stroke his hipbones through the costume, and he thinks, First date, Blaine. And he wants to, god he wants to, *god* he wants to. But he's done nothing but push and the Ghost is - happy, in his arms, maybe it's the first time Blaine's ever seen him this honestly happy, but he's given no indication that he wants *more*, not yet. So Blaine kisses him again and lets him go, hands still held, and tries to work out how long ago it was, his last boyfriend, ten months? Can he really be blamed for overeagerness when he's got *this* man in his arms?

He remembers this morning, Kurt on the phone, so scared he couldn't even breathe right. And he doesn't know what he's so afraid of - he can guess, Kurt knows what the world he moves in really is and he knows everything he has to lose - but if he can make him not be afraid, if he can make him feel *safe*, Blaine knows what Kurt meant sitting at the other side of that coffee shop table now; if Blaine can make Kurt feel safe then all he feels is a throat-choked *gratefulness*, like he's the one given the gift.

Blaine says, "I'll walk you home." and the Ghost gives another small laugh, his hand swinging a little in Blaine's, and his eyes when he smiles, Blaine didn't know anything could be so beautiful.

*

Sunday evening and Rachel is occupied with Finn, and Kurt is occupied with Phalanx. He's standing in Kurt's bedroom in front of the full-length mirror, excited as a little boy and really trying not to show it too much while Kurt adjusts seams and tacks alterations into place, kneeling next to him with pins in his

mouth. "I don't even look like I *might* be me," Blaine says, staring into the mirror, while Kurt glances up and then pops the last pins from his lips, pulls in the material at the back of Blaine's ankle.

"That's the point, Blaine."

"How did you -? I look insanely buff. Can I wear this all the time?"

"No. Leg straight, stop jiggling."

"I'm not jiggling. How did you do that? It's not just the shoulders, is it?"

"It's a matter of where the lines draw the eye in," Kurt mutters, tacking the leg closer. "Tricks of perspective. This is what I *do*, you don't have to act so entirely surprised that I know what I'm doing."

"Hey." His ankle jigs again. "I'm not surprised. I'm just *amazed*. Because you are *amazing*."

Kurt pulls the pins out, says, "Boots on. I want to see how this holds together."

Blaine says, "My boyfriend is amazing." and leans down, catches his face in his hands and kisses him, happy and bright, and sits on the bed to pull on the boots. They're classic superhero knee boots, with thin greaves and sandal-like straps over them to fit the costume's ancient Greek hero theme and Kurt only just resisted adding wings to the heels because when he skims those paths of shields he looks like he could *fly*. And now Kurt kneels there with Blaine wearing the costume he's worked on until his eyes blurred with the word *boyfriend* filling his chest up until there's hardly enough room for his heart to keep beating.

Blaine says, "... I probably shouldn't ask why these have heels."

Kurt rolls his eyes, stands up. "One to alter your height, yes. Secret *identity*, Blaine. And two, they're mostly to give you a way of locking onto your own ridiculously slippery shields." He lifts Blaine's leg by the calf, smacks a karate-chopping hand into the small gap cut between heel and sole of boot. "Like so."

"Do you think of actually everything?"

"I'm a professional."

"You're amazing." He hops up for the mirror again, turns himself about, catches Kurt's eye and just *grins*.
"What, the first time you put the costume on you weren't excited?"

Kurt doesn't change his expression, just folds his arms around himself, rubs them a little. "It's not the costume that's going to make you a hero, Blaine."

"Hm?" His eyes have been drawn back to the mirror again. "So what will?"

Kurt takes a step closer to him, hesitates as he turns to him, then puts his hand on his chest. He feels Blaine's heart beat, an even, unending pulse against his palm. And then he smiles, just a little, and says, "Take it off, I'll finish the adjustments this week. I'll go - put a DVD in, make popcorn or something. We should probably be doing something 'normal' when Finn and Rachel get back."

He closes the door behind himself to let Blaine change. A boy is taking his clothes off in Kurt's bedroom. He swallows, and heads into the kitchen to find a pan for popcorn.

Not a boy, as much as he might act it, or not only a boy. A man. And a good man, it settles low in his throat, that knowledge, Blaine is a *good man*. He seems to understand the things about Kurt that he *doesn't* understand, he knows how to back off, he knows how to give Kurt his space. And -

Not now. Not *now*. Not yet, of course not yet, he couldn't understand *yet*. But . . . but, but. But it might be okay. One day. To give Blaine the rest of himself. Wouldn't it be? To say, This is the truth about me. I'm sorry that it is but it is. Do you still want . . . me . . . ?

Not yet, the fear says, the ever-present fear tight around his heart. Not yet not yet. Not yet. Don't ruin it yet. Don't taint it yet. It's perfect right now, isn't it? It's perfect before you fuck it up, so just keep your mouth shut and *enjoy* it, not yet, not yet . . .

He busies himself with making popcorn until Blaine comes out of his room in a ridiculously adorably preppy winter cardigan, all bright-eyed and happy as a puppy and Kurt just . . . Blaine says, "What?" and runs a hand back over his hair, checking under the intensity of Kurt's stare that it hasn't dislodged, and too much happiness hurts the heart, sometimes.

"Come here," Kurt says quietly, and holds a hand out for him, and the smile almost aches, like maybe the muscles in his face have never moved quite like that before.

*

Before he heads out to observe the Ghost's Sunday night patrol, Blaine sits in front of his computer, tapping his fingers off the mouse. And he knows he has to do this. Perversely he feels like if their relationship *wasn't* what it now is, it might still be okay, but it's not, not like this. Not when he knows - he can see it in his eyes, feel it in the thrumming nerves of his close body - how tentatively *much* Kurt means this, how much he wants it and knows that he does and he's being so brave in the face of so much to lose. Blaine knows how scared Kurt's been, and what he's risked already. He owes him a hell of a lot back.

And one thing he knows is that Kurt does not *like* being viewed as a sex object - *object* is the specific problem with that phrase - does not *like* people thinking that about him, is simply not willing or ready or comfortable with making his relationship with Blaine into *that* yet. It wouldn't have been so many years ago that Blaine would have misread that particular fear of Kurt's, would have thought it meant Kurt didn't want him in any capacity, or even god help him he might have clumsily tried to 'show' him that he *did* want to sleep with Blaine after all. But he's an adult, now, nominally at least, and he's watched Kurt look down the barrel of a gun, and he *knows* what's at stake for them, he knows the reality of loss to them, how close they might be to it every single night now for the rest of their lives. He has to protect him. All these shields, the last thing he wants to do with them is hurt *him*.

More than that he has to respect Kurt. He has to mean it when he says that he respects Kurt's boundaries and that Kurt's decisions matter in their relationship. He has to be honest with Kurt and only ever honest with Kurt, because if Kurt ever found out that Blaine *wasn't* being honest -

If Blaine ever scared Kurt like that then he might never see him again. Literally. And no thought scares Blaine more.

So he goes to his blog, and sighs, just softly. And he blacklists the tag *Dat ass*.

Then he grabs his black hoodie and mask, and opens his bedroom window.

Chapter Seven

The Phalanx costume is a little heavier to wear than he might have expected, once the utility belt's on too; Blaine put in the order for its various components, delivered on Kurt's instructions to a Chinese takeout they eat chow mein on the roof of on Thursday nights. Blaine - Phalanx, while he has that mask on, he needs to get used to it - is adjusting to the weight, and the boots, and the weird feeling of *nakedness* - while it's bulkier than his body in places, there are other areas where it clings so close to him that he is aware that he might as well have it *painted* on.

Kurt designed this for him.

Hm.

The Ghost is sitting on a shipping container swinging his legs, watching him practise with his shields in the abandoned dockside warehouse he nominated for the purpose. "The Motta family used to use it for -" He lets go of the container to make the quotation marks with his fingers - "'tax-free' imports and exports."

Phalanx sends another can balanced on a container noisily flying. "Drugs?"

"Mostly. Guns, cigarettes and alcohol. People." Phalanx looks at him over his shoulder, and the Ghost shrugs, but his face is too bland. "You promise someone passage to the States and a job at the end of it, then you bring them here and force them into prostitution. As an extra exercise in really sick irony, you sail them in under the Statue of Liberty when you do it."

Phalanx narrows his eyes, turns back for the cans, mutters under his breath, "Give me your tired, your poor . . . so you busted this operation of theirs and now they're offering money to get you killed."

"I'll admit I'm curious how much." Phalanx sends another can flying with a neatly skimmed shield, and looks back at the Ghost, who's kicking his ankles playfully, resting back on his hands as he sits. "I hope they're not underselling me."

"And you're using their police-seized property to train supers in."

"It's not like they're using it for anything right now. And it's just the one super." He tilts his shoulder with a smile. "I only take on the apprentices with the *most* potential."

"I thought I wasn't going to be your sidekick."

"Apprentice sounds classier." The Ghost drops from the edge of the container, lands with a neat tap of boots on the floor. "One can left. Do you remember where it was?"

Phalanx says, "What?" and the Ghost slips his hands over his eyes from behind, turns his head for the cans - the can, there was only one left standing - again.

"You've been knocking cans from the same spot for ages. Come on, you remember where the last one was."

"I make shields, I'm not *psychic*."

"Think about it. Muscle memory. This kind of thing could save your life one night, you know that?"

Phalanx scowls, but it's not actually unpleasant standing there with the Ghost's hands over his eyes, his body just touching his. He breathes, and he thinks. He was setting the cans up in the same place every time. He *should* be able to remember exactly where the last one was. It was the one on the left, so, directly ahead but very slightly -

He hears the hollow metal *doom* and the Ghost murmurs, "Higher."

"You helping me is cheating."

"Me helping you is what's going to happen out on the streets. Higher."

"How much higher?"

"Oh my god, do I have to do everything?"

This time he hears the swish of the shield and the crunch of it hitting a wall, and a pigeon flurrying from the rafters. He pulls his breath in through his nose, says, "Lower?"

"Lower." the Ghost confirms. "If it helps, you were closer on the too low one than the too high one."

Phalanx thinks about it, squinting his eyes open behind the Ghost's hands -

Which are semi-translucent, he can *barely* see, darkness and a silhouette . . .

The can bounces off the ground with a *pang-pang-pangangang* . . .

"*That* was cheating," Phalanx says, taking the Ghost's wrists and turning to face his grin.

"That was training. I believe in exercises which boost my pupils' self-esteem."

"Yeah?" Phalanx says, slipping his hands under the hood, letting it down.

"Yes," the Ghost says, eyes happily closing as he kisses him.

So, dating the superhero you're training with to *become* a superhero; it's a slightly rocky situation to navigate, but Blaine - he still feels more like Blaine than Phalanx, even wearing that mask - honestly couldn't conceive of any different life right now.

They've had their first argument - their first screaming-at-each-other-on-a-rooftop argument - over Blaine ignoring his orders to watch and not get involved as the Ghost broke up a gang fight, more than *half* of them just fleeing as soon as his dark-cloaked figure appeared in their midst. But the remainder fell on *him*, and in the confusion of bodies - this was when Blaine learned that the Ghost can plant his heel into the face of someone a hell of a lot taller than he is, while simultaneously disarming someone else of a knife with their wrist twisted right around, in time to spin and haunt someone at his back right through the face - Blaine came skidding down a slide of his own shields to boot a guy taking shaky aim at the Ghost with a gun off his feet. And, skidded a bit over-far and into the side of a dumpster (no *facial* bruises this time, mercifully) and heard the Ghost's yelp and the sudden change of pitch of the brawlers' panic - "*Where'd he go? Where the fuck did he-*"

And Blaine sat up, hand to his aching side, looked up at the guy aiming the gun at *him*. The bullet kicked sparks off his shields before the guy *screamed*, and the Ghost appeared over him, letting go of the back of his hoodie so he hit the ground and curled up in a shrieking fetal ball, and the others cursed and shoved and fled. And then the Ghost hauled Blaine off for a rooftop and a noisy yelling 'what the hell were you thinking' fight, which ended in his furiously *vanishing*.

Sometimes dating someone who can turn invisible at will does kind of suck.

He went to Kurt's, afterwards, texted him continuously until Kurt let him in. Held him on the sofa in the dark while he tried to stop trembling and choked at him, "If anything happens to you, if *anything* happens to you -"

Blaine pressed his fingers through his hair, Kurt all hard-sharp angles and muscles so tight they shook, difficult to hold but Blaine wasn't letting go. "It's not okay for me to feel the same way about you?"

"You're not *responsible* if anything happens to me!"

"Neither are you if it happens to *me*, Kurt." He dropped to a whisper, pressing the words and a kiss to his hairline, "I can't just follow you at a safe distance forever and you know it."

Kurt's hands were tight in his clothes. "Not yet. Not *yet*."

"Okay, okay. Okay. Not yet."

Kurt nodded against his shoulder, exhausted, mumbled, "Not yet." and let Blaine huddle him closer. First time they slept together - genuinely *slept* together - tangled and uncomfortable on that sofa, and both of them too tired to really care. Rachel woke them in the morning humming wrathfully as she moved around her room, waiting for them to clear off the sofa so she could make breakfast.

The internet does not believe that they've done nothing more intimate than share their secrets and one tangled night's sleep. The Ghostzilla shippers are frothing at the keyboard but the problem most of fandom has with Blaine so far is that they don't even know what to *call* him. He's seen himself listed under any number of identities, some of them just call him 'sidekick' (*Ghost/sidekick*, "*Do you always get this horny after a fight?*" NC-17, *oral, frottage, costume fetish*), some of them use Ghost-like names - Shadow, the Spectre (*Ghost/Spectre*, "*What it's like to have a hand to hold.*" a short fluffy G) - some of them try to work with the shields (*Ghost/Shield*, "*We shouldn't do this. Especially not in a bank vault with the alarm still blaring, Shield.*" R for language, violence, boys in capes kissing), but fandom can't coherently haul itself together until they have an *agreed* name for him. They haven't made the connection with those hexagonal phis appearing all over the city yet. Those have been *noticed*, photography blogs of New York feature a number of them in pretty prominent positions, but the fact that they always appear alongside pale Ghost-cloaks hasn't yet clicked.

Nor has Blaine clicked on any of those pieces of fanfic. Not even the ones he has in a gut-twisting agony of appalled fascination *wanted* to.

Blaine breaks from his mouth to kiss down his gorgeous bared throat, and the Ghost with his head tipped back murmurs, "Haven't even patrolled yet."

"Five," he breathes into his skin, kisses, *sucks*, "minutes."

The Ghost's hands are in his hair and he's panting, "Phalanx . . ."

Want you so bad, he thinks, almost choking on it. Want you so bad -

He has to make himself stop because although the costume actually wouldn't show it, given that it features a fairly industrial cup which Kurt informed him was non-negotiable, it will become pretty damn uncomfortable pretty damn soon. Plus neither Kurt nor the Ghost has given any indication that anything beyond making out is welcomed, and it has barely been more than a week. So he makes himself not mark the Ghost's neck, makes himself pull back, hands squeezing at his hips. The Ghost gives him a head-cocked and very frankly flirty look, checking his mouth - his lips feel puffy and raw - and his eyes with a satisfied little sparkle in his own, and then flicking his hood back up. "Come on. Keep your *distance* tonight. You don't look entirely comfortable in that yet."

"Well, it is from the *you* school of fashion design, which means I'm very - aware of my ass right now."

"There is nothing wrong with your ass."

"That's not what I meant, it's just sort of, um. Prominent."

The Ghost looks around his shoulder, considering. "I thought about including the pteryges but they just seemed sort of whippy and distracting."

"Pter-?"

"A sort of ornamental leather kilt."

"Okay." He squints, thinking about it. "I don't think that that would necessarily draw *less* attention to the whole . . . the whole ass area."

The Ghost shrugs. "Use your assets. It's distracting."

"You find it distracting?"

"We're going patrolling now, Phalanx."

He pulls at his cloak as he turns away. "Hey. You find my ass distracting?"

The Ghost's cloak slips insubstantial through his fingers. "Patrolling, Phalanx."

"You sure you can manage to patrol with my ass being all distracting like this?"

The Ghost sings, "Patrolling, Phalanx!"

His laughter echoes from the roof of the empty warehouse, as a pigeon resettles in the rafters and Phalanx catches the Ghost up.

*

Phalanx waits around the corner, leaning against the alley wall, while the Ghost, invisible, is putting his head through the side of a police car to listen to its urgent radio. "Sotheby's," a voice says at Blaine's side, and there he is, visible again with a frown. "Cops, ambulances and fire service."

He stands up straight. "Do they know what's happening?"

"No idea. Lots of smoke. I -" He squeezes his eyes closed, shakes his head. "I hate fire. Okay. Quickest route -"

"It's not far. Up this building and slide down, we could be there in minutes."

"Or I could hop a cop car and you could catch me up at a safe distance."

"Define safe distance."

"I don't know, out of bullet range? We really do not have the time to discuss this. Meet me there, be *careful*, don't do anything stupid."

"Wh-"

He's already gone. Blaine grits his teeth, knows that this is not just about the Ghost bossing him around, this is the Ghost genuinely aware that every extra second he's not where he needs to be, someone might be dying. He looks up at the building's fire escape, sighs, and makes his staircase of shields.

*

Sotheby's is closed off, ringed in cop cars, fire trucks and ambulances, which the Ghost slips invisible between and through one of the plate-glass windows, since the doors are busy with cops and firefighters helping panting, choking people out, the paramedics waiting for them, and thick grey smoke is pooling out with them into the night. The smell -

He knows this smell.

He finds the small gas mask on his utility belt, settles it and pulls his hood up again, messages Phalanx; *Wear your gas mask. Keep your distance.* and slips his cell away again. Okay. Follow the panic, up the stairs, follow the path of people trying frantically to escape, because wherever the trouble is worst is where you're needed . . .

The door to one of the auction rooms is sealed, and the smoke is so thick down the corridor that the cops can't get down there; a handful of them are pulling on hazmat suits around the corner as the Ghost passes them, the air coming chemical-bitter through the mask. It's not as safe as those suits and he knows it, and he needs this done quickly, he needs to inhale this stuff as little as possible. The last time he smelled something like this . . . please don't be him again. It's not only that he's genuinely dangerous to the Ghost and he knows it, just for the factor of how *infuriating* he is, please don't let it be *him*.

The smoke is so thick inside that he can't see further than the length of his own arm. He squints against it - it burns the eyes - and wafts at it with his cloak a little, takes a step and *starts* at the sight of an arm on the ground. He drops to his knees and he can see the whole woman, face-down; he checks her pulse and hisses in his *thank god*, rolling her into the recovery position. There are more bodies on the floor, and for a second he just crouches there dizzy with being the only person in the room with his eyes open. Then he takes another thin unhealthy breath and stands up, squinting through the smoke for the podium. The gas is beginning to clear; there's a figure on there, flanked by two shorter figures, crooning at something held as protectively as a baby in its arms.

"Oh but you're so beautiful, oh god, jewel of my collection, oh god I've waited all my life for you, oh . . ."

"Why are you doing this?" the Ghost yells through the mask, storming through empty chairs, their occupants unconscious on the ground. "All these *people*, what the hell is so important for you to -"

The man on the stage - yes, as the gas begins to thin, it is the Pink Dagger, and yes, the Ghost wants to knee him in the nads as much as he ever did - flinches back, claspng the thing in his arms close to himself. "- you! I knew you would come here! I knew you couldn't let me just enjoy my final triumph!"

"Your final-" The gas has finally cleared enough for him to see the screens up behind the podium, to realise what was mid-auction when the Pink Dagger struck, what he's got in his arms. "- this is because of a doll? This is because of some *stupid doll*?"

The Pink Dagger gasps, clutching his prize against himself. "*Stupid doll*, go wash your mouth out, this is a mint in packaging nineteen fifty-nine -"

"I don't care if it's a diamond-studded replica of the Queen of England! All of this - all of *this* because you wanted some *stupid doll*-?"

The Pink Dagger hugs the box of the doll against himself with one arm, and holds a remote control out at the Ghost with the other. "The next time you call her *some stupid doll* you and *everyone* in this room is going to regret it, so you just back your drab little cape on out of here and leave me alone with my -"

The Ghost holds his hands up, a mock surrender, because he's actually ignoring the Pink Dagger right now to read those screens behind him. "This is a charity auction."

"I think you can tell by the bids some of them were putting in for my baby that, chyeah, they need some charity," the Pink Dagger says, stroking with his thumb at the box in his arm.

"This is for *charity*. You really are *low*, you know that?"

He snorts. "Coming from the dowdiest extra on *The Lord of the Rings*. I should be sending you my therapist's bills ever since that *thing* you did to me, maybe I'll just knock you out and leave you here as a present for the police, nice little trade-off, hmm?" He waggles the remote control at the Ghost. "Go back to scaring your petty thieves and jaywalkers, poltergeist, don't make me *dose* you."

The Ghost stands there and grinds his jaw behind the gas mask. This is a charity auction and he has a damned *score* to settle with this guy, but they're in a room full of unconscious people who could very easily be hurt by this going wrong, and as irritating as the Pink Dagger is, the Ghost is not weighing up people's lives against some doll. He stands there helpless and furious, thinks, Fine. Let him go. Then follow him back to his hideout, haunt the living crap out of him, call the cops and bring the stupid doll back for the auction.

Stupid doll, he thinks again for good measure, glaring into the Pink Dagger's eyes. Stupid, *stupid* doll.

"Fine. You don't have to hurt anyone here any more than you have already. Just take the damn doll and go."

"I'm glad you recognise superior power when you meet it." The Pink Dagger sniffs, and the Ghost just holds his jaw and waits for him to *leave*. "Actually, one last thing." the Pink Dagger says. "The police are going to be tedious to get back through. How do you get out of places without them arresting you?"

"I'm a ghost." he says irritably. "I turn invisible."

"So you could escort me out, invisible."

"You think I'm going to help *you* out of here."

"I think you don't want me hurting any of them, so . . ." He gestures at the crumpled bodies littering the floor with his remote, then freezes. "*No*. If you get close enough to me you can - do that thing to me again, no, no way in hell are you touching me again, it's a *lawsuit* if you try, Casper-"

"I'm just standing here, this was your idea." the Ghost snaps back, hands still held up like he's surrendering, really irritated beyond all bearing by this point. "You didn't think this through, did you? You didn't actually think about how you would get out of this situation once you put yourself and everyone else into it. You are the worst supervillain in the *world*. This building is *crawling* with police, how are you going to get past them? You can't knock them all out with gas, I *know* you'd have to hurt them and *you* know I can't let you do that. Look - there are ambulances out there, people are *worried* about the people in here, they have *families*. Let me get them out first, just let me get these people safe and then we can settle this -"

"Oh no, I know what *settle this* means, if I don't have any hostages you can just turn invisible on me! You'll do *that* to me again! I see what trick you're trying to pull, you think you're smarter than me?"

"I'm having an argument with a man holding a doll in a room full of unconscious people! What part of this do you think this is some kind of *strategy* I have?"

The Pink Dagger says, "I think the ones I can't gas out," he hits a button on the remote, "I can blast out."

"Y-"

One of the shorter figures on the stage turns to him with an unnatural jolt. The Ghost starts - it's a *doll*, a knee-high Barbie with open gun barrels for arms, aiming at him. He's standing *right in the middle of a crowd of unconscious people*. If he just ghosts -

He grabs a chair, swings it up, and the blast blackens the chair and flings him backwards, a chair edge folds his knee from behind, he lands on his clumsy knees on someone's unresponsive shoulder and yelps, "Sorry-!"

It's taking aim again as he hauls himself up on another chair, and vaults himself onto its seat - the higher that thing is aiming the less chance it has of hitting someone on the floor - and into a *run* across a row of chairs for the edge of the room, staying visible as that insane Barbie-bot shoots after him. "Stop shooting! You'll hit someone!"

"Well if you care about them that much, stay *still*!"

The sound of shooting in the room rushes the cops outside into action; only a couple of them have hazmat suits on but they knock the door in, and instantly fall back behind the walls again as the second doll pins them down under fire. The Ghost doesn't even have the time to worry about them, skids into the empty aisle at the edge of the room and finally he can *ghost*, the shots can go through him without hitting someone else, just the wall. There are burnt holes in his cloak. He runs for the stage, reaching into his utility belt, can't haunt a doll -

Its head rattles off the podium and rolls under someone's chair, and the shuriken thumps into the wall as the Ghost skids to a halt too close to the Pink Dagger. "You could have got someone killed! You can't even *gain* anything through this, you can't get through me and the police!"

"Maybe the police wouldn't mind me taking my doll if I took care of a public menace in return." the Pink Dagger growls, and hits another button on the remote. The Ghost freezes - and the second doll fires right in his face. He ghosts, instantly, but - it didn't fire a bullet but some kind of powder spray and he's right in the middle of it, he's *blind*.

He stumbles away, trying to waft it clear of his face, his heel misses the edge of the podium and he goes down with a yelp. Picking himself up off the floor, eyes blurring and burning, he still can't *see*, shoulder aching where he landed on it, he thinks, Why can I bring down Incendiary without a scratch and the goddamned *Pink Dagger* keeps nearly getting me -

There's a hand on his face under his hood and the panic makes him *lash*, he can't be *touched*, he can't be - he ghosts back, scrambling away trying not to scream out loud in his sudden cold-veined *terror* (he can't be *touched*-) but the gas mask is ripped loose with that hand. He trips on something and falls again, hands at his eyes pressing at the blurring tears but all he can see is a looming pink shadow.

"I cooked this one up just for you, you sad little spectre, so *you* know how it feels."

He hears the hiss of an aerosol and flinches back, clamps his mouth shut, *don't breathe* -

The pink in front of him's gone green.

He blinks and blinks, wipes his eyes again, sees the hexagon shields covering him, so the aerosol's spray runs harmlessly over them and away. He sets himself from the fall into a crouch, ready to *spring*, says loudly as the Pink Dagger stares open-mouthed across the room, "Drop them."

They vanish. The Pink Dagger raises the remote as the Ghost punches a hand up and ghosts it right through his head.

He screams at the same second that the last doll on stage fires blindly, shooting into the rear wall - right next to Phalanx, standing inside the knocked-open door with his eyes huge and gas mask still on, throwing shields up in a panic around himself and the police behind him - shooting again higher at the rear wall as the Ghost flings another shuriken. It's firing as its head is sliced clean off, so it falls dumbly backwards and the last shot takes out the ceiling, bringing it down at the back of the room. The Ghost's heart squeezes like a fist has it, no time even to yell -

- and the falling debris hits not unconscious, helpless people but a smooth layer of shields like a turtle's shell, sliding harmlessly down to land in the aisles at either side of the room, and the Ghost blinks through the blurring, and thinks, Oh god, thank god, thank god . . .

No-one died. Not a cop, not an innocent, not him, not tonight. No-one had to die. No-one. Not . . .

When the last rubble rattles down, Phalanx drops the shields, cautiously, head still a little ducked, eyeing the ceiling. But as one of the cops reaches for his arm he's already running for the Ghost, jumping and wading the mess of the fallen ceiling, grabbing his arm, "Are you -"

The Ghost looks at the police, and one of them, shakily, raises his gun.

There's always enough time for someone else to die. He ghosts them straight down, through the floor, and trusting, obedient, trustworthy creature that he is, Phalanx takes a breath without even needing to be told.

*

It's cold outside, chilling Phalanx's blood running hot at the surface of his skin, crazed with the realisation - he *helped*. That wasn't Phalanx watching from the sidelines and maybe taking care of something that in all honesty the Ghost could have handled on his own, that even wasn't him doing exactly what he was told, that was his intention, his desire, his initiative, he *helped*, he was *needed*, he *saved people*. It feels like the difference between -

Well, it feels like the scope of difference between fetching someone a cup of coffee and saving their life. It feels exactly like that.

There are still so many police cars and ambulances, the sidewalk outside Sotheby's is still full of people and confusion and now the beginnings of October drizzle. At the edges of the police cordon are camera crews, reporters speaking on microphone on camera, and also the gatherings of a good old New York crowd of gawpers.

The Ghost hesitates, holding them invisible near the building, then walks them away from the building, towards a small group of young women behind one of the ambulances.

"-cops complaining about supers, it's got to be -"

"Can't even see around this stupid -"

"What would you do if you *did* meet him?"

"'Faint' so I could be 'rescued'?"

"I'm kind of shaking. Look at my hands, am I shaking?"

Phalanx - sees his own arm, fading into sight. His head whips to the Ghost, who keeps his head down, lets go of his arm. "What are you -?"

To those girls, Phalanx just appeared right in front of them, with the Ghost's semi-translucent form standing a little way back, head low, hood covering his face. And one of the girls grabs another's arm with a *jolt* and they *stare*, and two have the presence of mind to lift their phones to film.

One girl blurts, "Are you the guy? The guy with the shields? Are you his -"

He's never been on this side of this kind of attention, and doesn't know what to say or even what he feels.
"- I -"

"*What's your name?*" another one shrieks, like it's the most important question he'll ever have to answer. His mouth drops open but nothing comes out, until the Ghost says, "Phalanx," and his barely-there arms wrap around one of his again. "Come on."

"What did he-"

"Onmygod." one whispers.

"Phalanx?"

"Look it up," Phalanx finds the presence of mind to call, and waves as the both of them turn invisible again, and the Ghost tugs him away intangible through the crowds; the girls are already connecting to the internet, a manic huddle around their cells.

"What was that about?" Phalanx hisses at him, poking at where he thinks his side is. The Ghost shushes him, hurrying along the sidewalk, two whole blocks before they slip down an alleyway and he says, "We need to climb."

He'll get nothing out of him until they're safely out of casual earshot on a roof and he knows it. He grits his jaw, endures the Ghost's paranoia until they're up the side of the building and the Ghost is stretching his arms back, head tilted back, grimacing at the grim sky overhead. "I hate him. I *hate* him, I'm going to have a bruise the size of a basketball-"

"What was that about? You tossing me to the fangirls, what was that-?"

"You need some control over your image. You at least need them to use the right name."

"I'm going to be all over the internet!" He stops, mouth hanging open. "Oh my god I'm going to be all over the internet."

"Yes," the Ghost says. "You just saved the lives of a room full of people. You're going to be a hero."

He breathes, slowly. His hands shift, curling into fists and falling loose again at his sides.

Ten thousand hours you've spent reblogging Ghost stuff with the joy and pride on his behalf *aching* in you. And now . . . they're going to be doing that about . . . they're going to be doing that about you. Right now. Hell, Blaine knows the internet: literally, *right now*.

The Ghost shrugs, folds his arms around himself. "People need heroes. As soon as you decided you wanted this you knew that was part of the choice, giving yourself to them as an icon they'll use how they need to, *you* knew that. And you can be *real*, do you realise that? The way they talk about me is a lie and you know it, it's a fantasy for people who've never even seen me and it doesn't mean anything on the ground, in this city in the middle of the night. You've seen what it's like. People are *scared* of me, I'm not a hero, I'm a *threat*. But *you can be*. You can be everything they want you to be. You can - do you think I dressed you in that because I thought it looked cool? You look like a *hero*. You don't look like a ghost. You're not a lie, you're *real*. You're a real honest to god *hero*, you saved all those people tonight, I -"

It's gone cold in him, and the fine damp in the air is settling cold on his face, and it hurts to speak but he does. "You're my hero." He swallows, hands squeezing at his sides again. "It's not a lie. You know it's real and it's ugly and it hurts you and you still do it. You're *my* hero. Nothing's going to change that."

The Ghost's face is quiet, and sad, and he holds his hands out. Phalanx doesn't even think about not taking them. "We're night and day," the Ghost says softly. "What's wrong with that? It's just who we are. I can fade into the shadows, and you'll inspire people, and -"

"That's not what I want!"

"It's what I want." His hands press Phalanx's. "Please. It's not just about protecting my identity, it's not just protecting people I love, please - understand -"

Phalanx watches his face and the Ghost looks at the ground, swallowing, struggling with it. And he does understand. It settles heavy and hard in his throat; he does understand.

He brushes the Ghost's hood back, brushes his hair back. "You need a shield." The Ghost's eyes flit to his, still bloodshot from whatever the Pink Dagger sprayed at him before Phalanx got there, still damp, still anxious and struggling, and he squeezes his hand, gently closes his gloved fingers in his hair. "It's okay. I get it. I'll shield you." He shrugs, gives a crooked grin. "It's what I'm good at."

It's halfway through the kiss before the Ghost relaxes into it, leaning in with his body, arms sliding free of the cloak to scoop around his sides. And Phalanx is still high on adrenaline, feels shocked and sad and *strange* from the last few minutes on this rooftop, but he saved lives tonight, he saved *his* life tonight, he finally used his shields for what he knows they were *meant* for and his hand is getting tighter in the Ghost's hair and the Ghost's breath shivers close against his cheek and he could -

What he could do is fuck everything up, if he thinks that the volume of want is in direct proportion to permissibility of taking. He's not going to. The Ghost needs a shield wielded for him, not one that herds him, pushes him, traps him.

He breaks the kiss, adrenaline and arousal a ringing high note, the wind in the taut rigging of his veins, and he makes himself swallow it down. He smiles, and squeezes his hand, and says, "I've got your back."

The Ghost gives a tired smile, arms still holding him close by the waist. "You were amazing, by the way. Thank you for saving my life."

He grins, can't stop it, and the Ghost laughs so *happy* and kisses him again. Phalanx spins him around off his feet so he laughs again, cloak whirling around the both of them, adrenaline makes him feel *high*. "My

hero," the Ghost murmurs, arms sliding around his neck, close enough that if his hood were up, it would hide both their faces.

*

Oh my FUCKING GOD. No seriously OH MY FUCKING FUCKING GOD OH MY FUCK

*I was going to keysmash but oh my god this is the first time it isn't *enough**

I can't words look at them look at how he looks at him oh my god I thought it was just fandom stuff holy shit they're actually fucking

wtf is a phalanx

*Jesus Wikipedia's down oh my god how will any of us *cope* civilisation will *end* no-one will understand how to do *anything* anymore oh no look no it's not you're just a fucking moron. [Learn to google.](#)*

God they would have beautiful babies. Don't tell me men can't have babies because they can because they have MY OVARIES

*Fucking yes I am ficcing the *shit* out of this.*

I just want to squish his nose. Is that a weird thing to not be able to stop thinking?

aslkadfgghostnlcoolcanktcopeajlksdfghlaf

Ghostlanx? Otherwise we're stuck with 'Phost' :P Sososo happy for you spooky! xx

*Look at how he takes his *arm* I can't even oh my god spooky look what you went and found he's so pretty I'm so *proud* ;_;*

New username > Spookyshield

everyone jumping on the boat their just fairweather shippers ghostzilla is endgame and you know it their love is so tortured

Look at how he keeps his head down and just watches him. He's such a precious shy little thing, oh spooky, I'm so happy for you <3 <3 <3

New username > Ghostlanx

BITCH I was THREE SECONDS behind you

FUCK YEAH GHOSTLANX

I CLAIM FIRST DRABBLE Ghost/Phalanx NC-17 'Relieving the tension'

Obv Draxie gets first drabble ;P Speedwriting queen of the fandom!

this is bullshit hes not a homo there like partners or something

They are EXACTLY like 'partners' omfg yes you massive homophobic fuckbag! <3

Every fanghost in the world: holy shit what happened to the internet while I HOLY SHIT

Okay I'm just gonna come out and say it: I don't ship it. Hero on hero does not do it for me, I want my angsty conflicted hero/villain fucking with a side course of guilt and not-so-secret desire for domination, please. So I guess what I'm saying is, I'm going to start shipping Pucklanx. Fuck yeeeahh.

i am so weak from the dying whale noises i can barely type send help

My baby is all grown up and I'm so proud I don't know what to do with myself ;_;

Ride it, spooky, you deserve it <3

New username > Superboyfriendsaresuper

I preferred 'Shadow' =/

*

Cooper knocks on the doorframe, but Blaine stays face-down on his keyboard, arms folded in front of his eyes. His brother has, frankly, found him in stranger positions after blogging sessions.

"You okay there, squirt?"

Blaine says into the desk, "Don't call me squirt."

"Did . . . something really sad happen on your little internet creep-club? Did the Ghost leave a sock in the wash with his costume and now he's fighting crime in off-pink?"

"I hate you, Cooper."

"I love you too baby brother. What are they squawking about this ti-"

Cooper walks over to lean over his shoulder and Blaine's up with a flail, minimising the window. "This is private! You are such a-"

"You put it on the internet, it is not private."

"It's nothing to do with *you*!"

"Why don't you ever let me see your creepy little blog, Blaine?"

"Because you keep calling it a 'creepy little blog', Cooper."

"It *is* a creepy little blog, what am I supposed to call it? It's a weird kinky combination of butts and violence and I don't like to think what you're getting out of it."

"You *wouldn't understand*."

"You haven't even introduced me to your boyfriend yet, you don't share anything with me anymore. He does *exist*, right? Oh my god. God, he's one of them, isn't he? You two go on dates with binoculars searching the skyline for flashes of spandex-"

"He is not get out of my room what would you know about *anything* -"

Blaine manages to slam the door on him then stands there fuming, chest heaving, glaring back at his computer screen.

Well. If this is the karma for all those years stalking the Ghost online, there are tens of thousands of fangirls across the planet who are due to come into their own superhero personas and find themselves fancicced and fanarted across the entire internet any day now. And Blaine *looks forward* to it.

He needs to get to the library, so long as he's sitting at his computer at his desk he isn't even going to *start* his assignment for class. He picks up his iPad and messenger bag, snags his camera because the sky is interestingly, angrily gloomy today, grim creased grey silk overhead, and his phone. His phone is necessary in a new way now, because one other person on the planet in particular has one too, the only other person he so, so, so wants to talk to all the time . . .

He texts Kurt, *So, I *am* all over the internet now.*

By the time he's out of the building Kurt has texted back, *I imagine so, they would notice that you're beautiful, you can't hide that even with a mask xx*

By the way, Blaine thinks of texting back, even when you're being an asshole, *especially* when you're being an asshole, I love you.

Ten thousand love songs and it turns out that every last one of them was really about Kurt Hummel. Blaine smiles a lot more than he needs to, recently. His life is over-rich, it's all excess, Kurt and joy and worry and exhilaration.

He yawns, covers his mouth on the way to the subway station. Well, there's lack to balance it out, lack of sleep, too . . .

Worry. He does worry about Kurt. He worries about all the things he doesn't say, the gaps in what he's told Blaine, the invisible parts of him. He worries about all Kurt's ghosts, following him wherever he goes - he knows Kurt doesn't forget them - cold at his ankles, whispering at his back. He can tell the ways that Kurt has fractured himself, into Kurt who dresses in the colours of a tropical bird and snipes his way through life acting like nothing ever hurts him, all sass and snark and carefully poised perfection, and the Ghost, dressed in nothing but grey, barely there, a shadow scaring bad people away, a bleak sort of guardian angel for the city's threatened innocents.

Because, somehow, it is the Ghost who still deals in innocence, the Ghost who believes in and protects these things, the Ghost who gives so much. Somehow it's Kurt who is darker and harder and so entirely secretive and so entirely *scared*. Why does Blaine feel like Kurt is at his most honest when he's in that mask, when he's standing between someone and something they don't deserve, instead of when he's wearing the costume of Kurt Hummel and a carefully sharp-curved smile?

It's not that he's ungrateful, it's not that he doesn't want Kurt exactly as he is, it's not that he would *change* Kurt, *but*. He just worries . . . it's just that it's *Kurt* he's fallen in love with, and he might even find the guts to tell him that one day, big hero that he is. Only the Kurt Blaine's fallen in love with wears a mask. It's not that Blaine is in love with the *Ghost*, which he knows Kurt still fears sometimes, still thinks might be what Blaine wants when he reaches for him, because Blaine *isn't* in love with the Ghost. He's fairly certain that Kurt Hummel is the brave and beautiful boy who stands up in a cloak in the dark, and faces down guns so that other people don't have to. That's the boy Blaine is in love with. He's fairly certain that it's Kurt Hummel, fashionista and professional bitch, who is a lot more of a mask than the Ghost has ever worn.

It's pretty early and he hasn't had enough sleep, and he doesn't know how much sense he's making even to himself right now. Okay, boil it all down, the elevator pitch while you head down the steps into the subway: I am in love with Kurt, and all I want is for him to be happy and safe, and I am slightly concerned that he's closer to those things in the cloak than he is in his office.

Blaine makes shields. Maybe if he can make Kurt feel safe *enough*, everything might be okay.

He's not particularly given to worrying. He gets a few quick photographs of a pigeon walking with its head bobbing inside a greasy paper bag, scattering cold fries before it manages to shake itself free just in time to scramble from under the feet of a commuter on his cell and into the air, away up the staircase and into the grey sky and gone. And then he catches his train, humming, already thinking about tonight.

*

Blaine can't change into his Phalanx costume in his room; he can't trust that people wouldn't eventually notice him climbing out of his own window and sliding off on a path made of shiny green shields every night of the week. He heads out while Cooper's at a performance and meets the Ghost at the night's designated location, carefully chosen to give him some privacy for changing; a disused subway station, an empty loft or warehouse, the Ghost travels, he knows the city, he knows its hidden places. Blaine itches to

photograph them, knows without asking that the Ghost would say no. No evidence. Not even when the light cutting through the grime-furred windows is in the starkness and the silence so *perfect*.

The Ghost stashes the bag of his clothes in a wall cavity, in an underground pocket, somewhere safe.

And then the city is theirs.

They haven't yet worked out a rota, which Phalanx insists they should and the Ghost says, Soon. It's not that the Ghost isn't willing to go out solo to give him a night off, he's just not certain yet about letting Phalanx out solo to catch up on sleep himself. "It's been a matter of weeks. Patience. You have the rest of your life for this, you know that?"

Neither of them say out loud that given what they do with their lives, that might not be so long a time, actually.

They're travelling through Hell's Kitchen, parallel to the river and rooftop-surfing, alert for the street below when Phalanx hears - the anger, between two buildings, the ugly burst of noise, a man's bellowing voice and a woman's, higher, shrieking - the only part he can make out is the man's *fucking lying bitch* and the woman's sharp *Carl Carl* -

Phalanx runs for the other side of the building, but the Ghost has already vanished. He can see them down in the alleyway, the man holding the woman by the wrist and punching her in the side of the head as she tries to pull away, hits herself into the wall; he throws a patchwork of shields in front of the guy's face and he falls back in shock, and the woman crams herself to the wall, sobbing into her hands against it, "*Don't, don't -*"

The guy looks around, startled, looks up - sees Phalanx. "Fuckin' hell are you?" he spits up at him, maybe too surprised still to process that it might be a bad idea to pick a fight with a super.

But Phalanx is running off shock more than sense right now too, because he's never seen someone - never seen anyone - is it because it was a woman? He's never seen someone hit a woman like that, not holding anything back, that guy punched her like he wanted to break her *skull* open - he's just never seen violence like *that*. So full of hate, so full of heat, so ugly and grotesque with it, so full of a frenzy just to *hurt*. Like there was nothing human about it, nothing innocently animal either, nothing at all but *hate* as a punching body.

He remembers that attack in the parking lot in the dark, thinks, You have seen it before.

No. He didn't see it. He heard it; he was crying too hard to see it.

His heart is pounding the hollow inside of his chest. He says, too low and too raw, "Worry about who the fucking hell *he* is."

And the Ghost is there, appears between that guy and the woman like they might have blinked and missed the trick, and the guy *swears* and nearly falls over and *runs*. And the Ghost looks up at Phalanx, and says, "Stop him."

He pulls his head back. "M-? Yeah."

No time to think. He hops onto a slide of his own shields, skims down and around the corner faster than the guy can possibly run, sees him heading hard down the sidewalk away from that alleyway. He throws a shield up right in front of his running face; he hits and rebounds himself violently backwards, legs swinging, crumpling to the ground with a bloody face and a couple walking by jerk back out of the way, *stare* as Phalanx slows his trajectory, skips lightly to the ground and crouches by him. He checks his pulse; alive with a broken nose and hopefully a fuck of a headache to look forward to. Good.

He cuffs him to a streetlight, smiles maybe a little manic at the staring couple and says, "Hi. He's a really bad guy, believe me. Could you please call the police and an ambulance?"

The woman stares at him, and then flips open her phone. The guy says, "Wh. What -"

The woman lifts the cell to her ear. "What did he do?"

He looks over his shoulder. "I need to go back, there's - he hurt a woman."

He runs off then, because he doesn't need more questions, he needs to be back with the Ghost and that woman and his own shocked horror at what happened. He needs the Ghost. If he's being honest that's all he needs, he feels *shaken* and he needs the Ghost, he needs to feel what humanity really is again, he needs *him*.

Down that alleyway the woman is sitting, head slumped forward, long black hair stringy with blood at one side of her face. The Ghost is crouching in front of her, holding her cheek, pressing so gently with damp

cotton padding at the side of her face. He's speaking, softly, his back to Phalanx, speaking to her. "You're going to be fine. The mascara's a lost cause but I don't think he broke anything. You're going to be absolutely fine. Do you have your cell to call an ambulance?"

"My friend Marina met you," the woman slurs, in a rich low voice. "You remember Marina? Little Latina, like five foot nothing, pretty as anything, fuckin' angel she looks like. She said you gave her your cape an' walked her to the centre."

He dabs at the wound again, says, "I meet a lot of people." and then brushes with his thumb at her eyebrow, wet and spiked from the antiseptic, neatening it again. Then he says, quieter, "Yes. I remember her. Do you have your cell?"

"There's a, um. Passer by's calling in now." Phalanx says, and the Ghost looks up at him from his kneel, acknowledgment only in his eyes, then looks back to the woman.

"Are you okay to stand, to move closer to the sidewalk for the ambulance? Do you have a friend you want to call to come with you?"

"I'll call Marina, she'll get a kick out of it." He offers his arm and wraps the other around her back, helping her up, and she staggers; he catches her upright, tugs her jacket right, cut-off denim and not enough on a night like this, nor that skirt. He very carefully brushes her blood-tangled hair behind her ear before it can catch on the jacket's studded lapel, and turns her, she staggering drunkenly and him bearing her weight, for the lighter end of the alleyway. She *laughs*, suddenly, staggers on her heels and he catches her right again, and Phalanx can see - this look on his face, in his eyes, this horrible bare look, like he can't stand it. "This why all the guys you meet're such assholes?" she says. "'cause all the actual gentlemen wear capes?"

"It's just a few steps - careful, okay. What's your name?"

"Amie. With an eye ee. Hell it hurts."

"The ambulance will be here soon. Phalanx, can you -?"

He snaps out of just staring, takes her other arm. The woman gives him a *look*, says, "Where'd you find *him*. He's, what, your boyfriend? Marina said you were queer as."

"It's just a few steps, Amie."

"He's cute. Good for you."

"Just two more. Easy - okay." The Ghost helps her sit on the edge of the sidewalk, easing her down, holding her grabbing hands. Phalanx steps back again, not knowing what to - that man and woman are still standing there, standing uneasily close together, as the Ghost kneels down next to Amie again and says, "Where's your cell? Call your friend to meet you in the hospital."

"You're not coming with me?"

"I'm sorry. The cops are coming for him, they'd arrest us too."

"Cops're idiots." She puts her hand on his face and Phalanx expects the Ghost to *flinch* that way he does, but he doesn't. He just looks sort of sad as she strokes his cheek with a thumb and says, "We know that, don't we?"

Phalanx can hear the sirens. The Ghost says, "We have to go. I'm sorry." He touches her wrist, as she lets go of his face. "You're going to be okay."

"I know. Hey, spooky, thanks. You're good to us girls."

He closes his eyes for a second too long to be a blink, and says, "Please take care of yourself." and stands up again, looks at Phalanx. Phalanx reaches for his arm and they're instantly invisible, and she just blinks like it's an effort to blink, while the woman further up the sidewalk sucks her breath in, a quick hard gasp. And then she's hurrying for the woman sitting with a bloodied forehead with the man following her, and the Ghost backs them away, whispers, "Take a breath."

They slip downwards. Phalanx closes his eyes, lets the Ghost lead their fall; he feels the rattling all around them, thinks, We're above a subway. and as soon as the vibrations stop, the Ghost lets them out into open air, catches his hand and lowers him, lets him drop to the tracks. Phalanx finds his flashlight, turns it on, looks up at the Ghost swinging himself from upside-down to hanging by a hand through the ceiling, then drops to land. Phalanx looks down, lifts his hand by the wrist; there's blood on the glove.

He takes his hand back, closes the other gloved hand around it. "I told you it wasn't nice."

"What . . ." He doesn't even know which question to ask. "Are you okay?"

He gives a little breath of a smile, touches Blaine's arm with his unbloodied hand; he doesn't feel like *Phalanx* right now, not at all. "Are you? You look - maybe you should call it an evening."

"No. No, I'm - fine. This is - this is what we're here for, isn't it?" He swallows, and it does hurt. "All the ugly things that shouldn't happen. We're supposed to stop them."

"You look pale. You at least need to sit down for a bit, we should go -"

"I - do need to sit down." He does, on the track, because suddenly he really does need to, the edges of his vision have gone dark. The Ghost crouches in front of him and puts a hand on his arm, and Blaine thinks, In case a train comes. He needs to be touching me so he can ghost me if a train comes. God there is nothing sane left in my life anymore.

The Ghost holds his arm, wets his lips, swallows. "You don't - have to do this. You - don't -"

He says, "This is the real you. Isn't it? When you were helping her. This is *you*. No masks."

"Did you hit your head chasing that guy down?"

"No. *No*." He squeezes the bridge of his nose, rubbing the mask he's still not used to, nearly banging himself in the face with his own flashlight. "Maybe this is the real me too. Is that how it works?"

The Ghost's hand settles on his bent knee, and presses, comforting and firm even if he's still confused. "Who's the 'real you', *Phalanx*?"

"I don't want you doing this alone." He looks at him again, at his face in the crazy-cast shadows of the flashlight, aims the beam away to soften the glare for him. "Because if you were on your own you would've had to choose, right? Get the bad guy or stay with her. And you don't want him going off to hurt anyone else but I *know* you couldn't leave her on her own -"

The Ghost's face is steady, and his eyes still look so hurt. "People shouldn't be on their own. Not when the worst things happen."

"So we should be a team. Right? Help each other. Help them."

The Ghost holds his knee, and holds his eye, and speaks slowly. "I've seen someone shot in the head right in front of me. I've seen - some really horrific mafia stuff. People in parts. I've seen people do - things to each other, I . . . are you sure you want this? Do you realise - there's nothing you won't have to see, you're -"

"Ghost."

"- what?"

He looks at his eyes, and he feels so sad, for all his own innocence when *he's* had to do this for so long alone. "People shouldn't be on their own when the worst things happen."

The Ghost watches his eyes, for quite a long time. Then he just sighs, and nods, and helps him stand up again. "Come on. I'll get you a drink, get you ready for round two, if you're sure."

"I just need a breather. That was sort of - intense."

"Careful with your shields for the rest of the evening."

"Hey," Phalanx says, and catches his cheek as he turns, and kisses him underneath the hood. The Ghost licks his lips, watches his eyes.

"What was that for?"

"Being my hero."

"I didn't save *your* life tonight."

He remembers hate made into muscle and flesh, hate and rage and a human being reduced to the total urge to *hurt* someone. And he remembers the Ghost, brushing her hair back so she wouldn't get blood on her jacket, quiet sad eyes and doing something so small and so, so huge, a human being with blood on his gloves still caring for a stain on her jacket. And Phalanx says, "Yes you did." and takes his hand, squeezes it, while the Ghost just looks at him, sort of wondering, like maybe Phalanx in some miniscule way did the same for him.

Chapter Eight

He dreams about sheets as dark as his cloak is, spread out underneath his open white limbs. He dreams about his hands sliding up his thighs from behind, cupping and spreading them - like a flower blooming - thumbs pressing into the flesh and how soft the skin is as he mouths the faint blue lines of the veins underneath, and how Kurt's hands catch in the sheets, and how his breath catches in his throat.

And Blaine wakes up with the sort of erection that sort of hurts.

He squints his eyes closed, groans, fumbles across for the insistent alarm clock. The movement, the drag of sheets and his pyjama pants against himself, makes him grit his teeth, everything too sensitive to deal with right now, his mind a fog of what it would be like to bend his back and open his mouth for Kurt, and the blood *throbs*. And that is not going away, wishful thinking and distractions will not soften that thing or the desire behind it. Damn.

Damn damn damn damn damn damn damn.

He showers and works himself too quickly and too roughly, think about porn, think about porn, think about porn, don't think about him, think about porn. Unfortunately most of the porn in Blaine's life has been Ghost-themed fanfic which doesn't help. Think about porn and not your boyfriend. Think about porn. Think about anything but

(the way his lips part without thinking, the unconscious press of his tongue to them before he speaks, the ways he can *bend* himself, that suit hugging his legs arms chest ass his *voice* oh fuck fuck fuck)

- fuck.

Some hero.

He towels his hair off feeling miserable with guilt. He's twenty-three and it's been a while is the only excuse he has, but sometimes he thinks that if Kurt had access to his innermost thoughts then he'd do exactly what he promised the first time they ever met: haunt him, cuff him, *vanish*. Because Blaine - Blaine wants him, in a very honest and he thinks respectful way, he just finds him mouth-dryingly sexy and he *wants* him. And Kurt -

If Kurt has ever actually got so far as thinking about having sex with Blaine, he's never given any indication of it.

It's coming up to Hallowe'en and they've known each other for nearly two months, been dating in this weird way they are for nearly a month. Blaine has had a grand total of two boyfriends in his life before Kurt, and with both of them he stuck to the tried and respected third date rule, and it and worked out pretty well, for as long as it worked out. He doesn't know quite what counts as a 'date' to him and Kurt but, well, it's more than three however you slice them up by this point. Blaine is perfectly willing to take this at Kurt's pace, but - it's not just the pace. It's the reasons for the pace, which Blaine doesn't know, but which are beginning, really beginning, to worry low inside him, like something he doesn't dare to feel *enough*.

Kurt likes kissing him, Blaine knows that. In costume, in dark places; on the sofa in his apartment, smiling and drowsy and settled. At the door, goodnight before they reconvene in very different clothing. Kurt's hands touch him - Kurt's lovely hands, Blaine loves holding them, touching them, running his thumbs over them, soft skin and perfectly kept nails - and Kurt leans into him, and Kurt's mouth is so giving and so gifted to Blaine, anything he wants, Kurt is not a *shy* kisser, sucks Blaine's lip and his breath moans when Blaine presses back harder. Kurt likes kissing him. Which Blaine likes doing too and that is all very, very well and good.

Kurt still goes stiff if Blaine tries to kiss him in his bedroom.

It's the presence of the bed, he thinks. It looms in Kurt's consciousness like it's the size of the Titanic and just as deadly. If Blaine forgets he wasn't supposed to and he's already too much in Kurt's space to stop it, he keeps it at a peck, a closed-mouth press, and then backs off and changes the conversation. If the flinch makes him flinch too, he just backs off. Closes his hands together to keep them from doing anything stupid and suggests they do something or go out or *anything* to not be in this room with a bed in it anymore. Kurt sets the pace. It's Kurt's decision.

That alone might just make Blaine think that Kurt takes these things slowly and that's fine. Only it has occurred to him by now, as Cooper keeps on muttering about never meeting his mysterious boyfriend, that Kurt has never been back to Blaine's apartment since the first time he visited it as the Ghost. Blaine's invited him a few times and never noticed then that Kurt always has an excuse not to, a reason why his place is better. He's beginning to count the excuses, now. There seem to be an awful lot of them.

Like he doesn't want to be in Blaine's apartment. Like that would - what? Mean something? Put him off his own territory, give him less control of the situation? Like -

- like it would be dangerous to him?

Blaine couldn't bear for Kurt to feel threatened by him, feels sick inside at the thought, what would he - he would *never* hurt him, he would never, *never - hurt* him -

He combs the gel through until his hair's finally neat, picks up his messenger bag, looks at himself in the mirror: Blaine Anderson, superhero blogger, physical therapist in training, dating a fashion designer he is *hopelessly* smitten with. He knows that's how most people know him. When Kurt looks at him . . .

He sees Phalanx. He sees the boy behind Phalanx. He sees his boyfriend, and sometimes in the clutch of his hands, the pull of his eyes, Blaine really sees Kurt *needing* him and he *has* to be enough for him in those moments. Does he really also see a *threat*?

It's not just that he wants to take things slowly or maybe just doesn't want to at all, which is something Blaine would just have to deal with if it were true. It's that something about this is actively *frightening* to him. And Blaine is really beginning to wonder -

What does Kurt see when he looks in the mirror? What does Kurt know that he's not telling, what exactly, *who* exactly, is he trying to protect from what here?

Blaine takes a long breath, holding his own eye. Until you can find the words to ask him and he can find the words to answer, all you can do is keep on loving him.

He goes to class, texts Kurt on the way. At least he has plenty in his life to take his mind off things, because he really just doesn't have the practise at worrying, he is really not very good at it . . .

*

"*Thanksgiving*." his dad says. Kurt sits on the edge of his bed and props his cell between his ear and shoulder to tug his boot on with both hands, frowning.

"Dad, that's not for a month."

"I know, and I also know what you're like at wriggling out of these things, so Carole's booking you guys your tickets tonight. You coming?"

He switches the cell to his other cheek, squirms the other boot on. "I don't know what I'm doing in a month, things happen pretty quickly sometimes."

"Not for Thanksgiving they don't. For Thanksgiving you come home to your family, that is what happens."

"Dad -"

His dad says, calm like he's getting through this even if his voice is a little hoarse, *"You are the thing I'm most thankful for. I want you there. So are you coming or not?"*

Kurt slumps his head into a hand, and his dad is actually the universal grand master of parental guilt trips. Which is probably something Kurt brought on himself by giving him all the ammunition of being a superhero in his spare time, but still. "Yes." he says into his hand, and he can *hear* his dad grinning. "Emotional manipulation is a form of child abuse, you know that?"

"Yeah, think of it as karma for all the times you wobbled your lip until I sat through The Sound of Music with you again." his dad says. *"What about your boyfriend, is he coming back for Thanksgiving too?"*

It is still so strange to hear his dad use the word 'boyfriend'.

When Kurt first confessed to him that he'd bumped into that amateur super from the last Puckzilla fight again and he'd been sort of helping him train, his dad had gone the scary kind of quiet. Kurt didn't mention it again. Didn't mention it didn't mention it didn't mention it while it filled his nights and all his thoughts during the day until the giddy headrush of actually seeing him again, *him*, after spending every spare minute of his life designing a costume custom-made for Blaine's body, Blaine's powers, Blaine's *heart*, thinking so intimately through every detail of him, remembering the shape of his ankle bone, remembering the shape of his *ears*, god Blaine was the biggest part of his life even then. And then -

And then Blaine kissed him on a rooftop, and Kurt's hands went so weak that he dropped the glass case he'd been so carefully keeping his heart in for years. Whoops. Splintered glass on the alley floor and Kurt's starved heart gasping the blood in after all this time and Blaine's hand so warm on his cheek, like Kurt had never known how cold he'd been before that touch told him what warmth was.

He didn't know how to tell his dad. The intimacy of it, the horrible naked vulnerability of it, he feels so much for Blaine that he feels bare and scared with it all, shockingly exposed with it, and admitting to his dad - he told him, eventually, aiming for a throwaway comment, "And Blaine was over last night so we're out of soda -"

"Blaine? That guy you're - that Blaine?"

Breath in, slow, steady, you're good at breathing, you know how to breathe, well done. "We're kind of dating now."

"Oh. Huh."

"So, I need to run to the store so I can't really speak long, how's Carole doing?"

But the next night his dad asked him how Blaine was.

And the next night.

And the next night.

Kurt remembers how long it took him to tell his dad he was gay, when in retrospect he knows that his dad knew anyway - he would have known that even if his dad hadn't told him that he knew anyway, *everyone* knows anyway - so stupid, he thinks now, to have waited so long, *seventeen*, so stupid to have left it until he felt like he had no choice, because they were both so scared that he was going to just disappear. To throw it out as a lifeline between himself and something solid in the world, to desperately try to anchor himself to his dad before he just became a *ghost* - *I'm gay. I know*. So simple. To just say it, like maybe honesty could save him.

Maybe it did.

"I don't know, I can ask him. He could, um. Maybe come for dinner one night."

"I'd like that. You tell him he's welcome. He's welcome for Thanksgiving dinner if he hasn't got plans."

". . . okay. I'm sure he'll have family stuff but, thanks, Dad."

"I gotta get to the garage. You look after yourself."

"You too, Dad. I love you."

"Love you too. Speak to you later."

"Bye," he says quietly, and waits for his dad to hang up, then just stares at his phone for a while, feeling sort of dazed. Like maybe honesty can save people, like maybe if you scrabble at it hard enough, there's enough solidity in the truth when you *share* it to hang on to . . .

His eyes fall from his phone, track the carpet. What truth would you tell him? That nothing that bad has ever really happened to you, and you let it nearly wipe you from the face of the planet all the same? That it's nothing - *nothing* compared to what you see every night, *nothing*, and you still can't cope with it? That you have let it fuck you up and you know it even if you don't want to admit it and it was *nothing* and you are so deeply *pathetic* -

That it was not nothing, is what scares him the most, small cold black hole inside him. That it was not nothing, and he can't deny it, and that he is that weak and he is that damaged and all he is is all that ugliness and he *knows* it. Why does he think he puts that mask on every night? It's not because he's a *hero*. It's because he just needs to not be *himself*. All of that - that never happened to the Ghost. Nothing can hurt the Ghost, nothing touches the Ghost, the Ghost was born in New York and never survived - barely - Lima, Ohio. It's so much safer to be the Ghost than to be Kurt. It's so much better to not have to be *him*.

And are you going to tell Blaine all that? All the ugliness in you and what it's done to you? (It's not about that, he thinks; *It is about that*. It's not, it's not, it's not - *It is and you know it is and you can't even admit it to yourself, how the hell would you ever tell him?*) Because the thing is -

Because the thing is, he's in love with Blaine. It stole up over him blanketed in fear, and once Blaine pulled the fear away, once Blaine's shields weren't something that trapped him but something that made him *safe*, it filled Kurt's heart like a rising spring tide, arteries rushing with it all, bright and frothing with it, astonishing with the sheer amount of it, how can there be so much of it? Because there are moments - moments when Blaine just tips his head on the sofa and grins at him and Kurt's breath drops out of him, stupid and ungainly with love, moments when Blaine offers his hand to help Kurt onto or off his path of shields and Kurt feels, with this smallest of courtesies, *cared* for. Moments when Blaine kisses him and Kurt feels like almost anything would be okay. Almost.

All the lies he's told over the years, all the truths he hasn't told, all the bullshit and hiding and shadows and *lying*. And then Blaine, Blaine so sweetly, hopelessly earnest and eager and honest and Kurt just - admitting it to him, to *him*, saying to beautiful heartbreaking breathtaking *him* that Kurt is this small, and this tarnished, and this broken . . .

Admitting to himself that it's true, and this is what was done to him, and it always will have been done to him, the one thing he never can fade away and escape from.

He covers his eyes, sucks a breath in and lifts his head again. He needs to get to work. There's no time for this now, no time to worry about himself now. If he keeps himself busy enough, there never is.

He has a text from Blaine. *Good morning beautiful! :D xxx*

There are two things he never can escape from; sometimes he couldn't not smile at Blaine if his life depended on it . . .

*

No new photos in daaaaaaays ;_;

*That's because they're far too busy with all the hot naked supersex, they're probably too *exhausted* to save lives right now.*

Sometimes I genuinely think about jumping off a bridge to see if he'd rescue me, but that would probably be immoral. Probably.

Try not to waste the superhero's time when he's actually risking his neck for people in serious danger on a daily basis? :P (no I know what you mean though like why can't a supervillain ever threaten MY life omg ;_;)

Fic rec: 'Herculean' by Blackbindings, NC-17. It's gorgeous smut combined with a quietly mind-blowing meditation on the hero in Ancient Greek literature and it's by Blackbindings. Can I just repeat that it's beautiful breathtaking smut. By Blackbindings. With that mind-expanding/soul-silencing commentary on THE HERO IN BLOODY ANCIENT GREEK MYTHOLOGY. WHY ARE YOU STILL READING THIS. GO. GO.

AU: The Ghost is New York's premier catburglar, Phalanx is the hero duty-bound to stop him, if only the Ghost's particularly distracting ass didn't keep getting in the way of things.

^ omg yes please this forever

Ghostzilla NC-17, Banged Up: The Ghost visits him in his cell, they both know why. 'You always like that, don't you baby, fucking can't get enough. Yeah? You want more? Scream for it.'

*Okay, I have now collected *every* gif of new Ghost graffiti logged in the last two weeks, and I would like you to note this and try not to scream too much, guys: every single one of them has a funky sort of phi next to it. Hint for the dead-language challenged: that would be the ancient Greek letter Phalanx starts with. Commencing squee-splode in 3... 2... 1...*

The next time I see that graffiti I am painting love hearts between them omg <3 <3 <3

*I hope the Ghost is never out of condoms when he needs them, and I hope he needs them *lots* <3*

Oh Jesus fucking Christ they're so adorable I can't I hate them LIFE-RUINERS WHAT GAVE YOU THE RIGHT oh fuck what the hell I waSN'T USING MY LIFE FOR ANYTHING ANYWAY

Ghostlanx, R, H/C, One With Your Name On It; Phalanx's shield fails, the Ghost has to get him to safety. Followed by comfort-smuff because hell it's me.

I just want them in a basket and little bow ties and I want us to roll around oh holy crap what happened to my life

Ghostlanx fanmix here! Yes we start with 'The Only Living Boy in New York', bite me, at least try to take it seriously =P

Blaine shuffles his folded arms on his desk, nudging his notepad and coffee cup a little further out, and huddles down behind them. His professor's not here yet, which means he can catch a few - he yawns behind his arms - a few, few minutes' nap . . .

Someone bangs into the seat next to his. "Hey. Up late blogging, Blaine?"

Blaine blinks up at Paul, gives a little grin from behind his arms. "Maybe I was up late with my boyfriend."

"No, I'm pretty certain you were blogging, you have internet addict's eyebags." Paul taps Blaine's coffee cup with his pen. "It'll stunt your growth, you know."

"That's hilarious."

"I'm the funny one. What the hell were you doing last night, you urgently needed to deal with someone on the internet being *wrong*?"

Blaine sits up, arches his back, stretches his arms bent over his head. What he was doing last night was wading around the sewers with the Ghost, bringing down the alligator army of a kid with glasses and insanely bushy hair, apparently breeding them to take over the city. The Ghost was in a foul mood, because they were in a sewer and it was pretty phenomenally disgusting and it turned out that when you haunt an alligator, all you do is make it panicked and *angry*. Phalanx managed to box most of them into little shield-pens but there were so many, and it was so complicated an arrangement of shields, that he was pretty much incapable of doing anything else. He just sat there vague-eyed and dazed, dropping shields as requested by the Ghost, who stood at his side with his hand on his shoulder directing the animal control cops who'd eventually managed to turn up, and occasionally saying in a *really* pissed voice, "Don't even *think* about it." when someone apparently looked like they were considering arresting either of them.

And New York smelled so cold and *clean* afterwards, for the first time ever, Phalanx laughed like he was high in the alleyway the Ghost hauled them back up into. The Ghost said guardedly, "Are you okay?" and Phalanx kissed him, both of them sewer-rank and sweaty and exhausted, but it was only a second before the Ghost's hands settled around his wrists, holding his hands to his face.

"I'm perfect," Phalanx said, still holding the Ghost's face, watching his wondering eyes. Phalanx's smile was still trying to get broader but the human face can only manage so much. "*You're* perfect."

The Ghost still blushes under his mask, small crooked helplessly pleased smile, Phalanx wants to be kissing him always.

Instead he sits in a lecture hall and says to Paul, "I didn't plan to. It was just one of those things that happened."

"Nice excuse. One of the things that 'happened' to me was that I totally slept through Thompson's class on Monday, can I borrow your notes? Since you're such a nice guy?"

Blaine props his head on a hand, gives a sleepy smile. "I'd rather be the funny one."

"But you do nice so *well*."

He grins. He spent last night saving the city from the invasion of the alligators. Sometimes, yeah, he kind of does.

*

Kurt is on his third coffee of the day and a mid-morning fruit salad, still working one-handed on how he wants the back pleats of a coat to spread - damned pleats are always a nightmare - the office busy with focused industry. He loves his job, despite all complaints, when he's at this desk it's just like being in that cloak, nothing else enters his mind. He's still only a junior designer and he spends a lot of his time turning the inspired scribbles of more-senior-than-thou designers into actual workable clothing, but they give him time for his own projects and actually, as annoying as they are, there's something soothing about the fiddly necessities, even about pleats. Understand the fabric you're working with, measure it right, cut it right, stitch it right, and it will be perfect. He likes it when things come out perfect, for one fraction of a second reducing the world to one perfect thing, making the external world conform to the world inside his head, serene and pristine and *perfect*.

"I'm just heading out for coffee," Chandler says, Chandler bright and bouncing on the balls of his feet next to him, Chandler breathless and rushed as always, as Kurt starts up from his notes and stares at him. "I was going to ask if you wanted one but, well, you always already have one." He gives one of his little grins. "Would you maybe like the next one bringing, to be ready for you when you need it?"

He smiles back, maybe only a little awkwardly; he's getting better at not minding Chandler's attention. Chandler is very sweet and entirely harmless, he knows that. It just takes time for that to outweigh his own overready paranoia. "I think I might try to make it through to lunchtime on this one. But, thank you."

"So, um," Bouncing on his feet, hands pressing together, Kurt recognises his *own* nervous energy in Chandler sometimes, god what would their relationship have looked like, had it happened? Like two squirrels on one bending twig trying to decide whether to leap for the earth or run back the way they came - "what about the coffee after that? We never did grab one the last time we, ah, said we should, are you . . . ?"

His breath comes in, fills his chest, and he lets it go. He rolls his pencil on the desk in his fingers, says to Chandler's elbow, "I'm, I'm kind of seeing, someone, right now. Um."

"Oh, god, no of course you are I mean obviously you are I'm so sorry I have the *worst* timing -"

"- no no it's *fine* honestly I'm sorry it's fine it's -"

Robbie, who's their own straight male junior designer, mutters into his desk, "God it's like watching Bambi headbutt his clone."

Chandler stops squirming and gives Kurt one of those tilted smiles of sympathy - they are both of them easily flustered and prone to social agitation and, yes, probably quite often in communicating with each other they resemble butterflies panicking at themselves in a mirror. "I mean," Chandler says, and does a gesture encompassing, with a shrug, *Kurt*. "Of course you're seeing someone. So, at least you can give me the gossip! What's he like, what's he do, what's his *name* -?"

"I - oh. Um," Kurt turns his pencil in his fingers, finds that as he's staring at it, what he's seeing is Blaine, and he can't stop the smile coming. "He's called Blaine. He's a physical therapist - he will be, he's a student now. He's, ah -" Probably no-one has ever blushed quite so hard while staring at a pencil before, and his voice comes with too much and not enough breath behind it all at once. "He's kind of perfect actually."

(His name is also Phalanx. He's a superhero, he's a superhero *archetype*, all handsome and helpful and bold. And he is 'kind of perfect' in the costume as well as out of it, Kurt never realised how exhausted and defeated the end of a patrol used to feel, back when he didn't have someone - someone in particular - to hold his face and kiss him and tell him to sleep well.)

Chandler makes a *noise*, like a puppy whining, and Kurt looks up to his hands pressed like he's praying right under his nose, against his starry-eyed smile as he says, "Oh my god, you totally love him."

Last night the Ghost had pressed his face into his post-sewer hair and hadn't even cared, nuzzling down into the mop of his curls with his arms tight around him and just not feeling like *himself*, like there was too much love in him for there to be any room left for *him* -

Kurt says, "I... have pleats... to..."

"God yes and I have coffee to grab, but oh my god over lunch you have to tell me all the details. All of them. You sit tight and - coffee!"

Kurt turns his pencil in his fingers as Chandler buzzes out of the room, and presses his lips together. He might not have said it out loud, but he 'totally' does love Blaine. He thinks about the size of the word, so little considered, the sheer mass of the word *total*.

He totally loves Blaine. Every straining part of him does. He totally, entirely, utterly *loves* Blaine.

And maybe things really will be okay, if Blaine can return even half of all this . . .

*

New username > phuckyeahphalanx

Reblog if you've ever been rescued by Phalanx. OH MY GOD HE WAS SO ADORABLE IT WAS ACTUALLY WORTH GETTING MUGGED FOR

omgomg was the Ghost there??

Yes! I think, he cut down an alley and vanished right after. Keeping an eye on his boyfriend from the shadows <3 <3 <3

Wth did you not get pictures?!???!

*Can I just repeat the HI I WAS BEING MUGGED IT ALL HAPPENED A BIT QUICKLY AND I WAS NOT VERY TOGETHER FOR THE TAKING OF PHOTOS FOR YOUR AMUSEMENT, THANK YOU ALL. Long winded explanation later, give me some room to *breathe* :P*

And while I remember: Reblog if you've ever been rescued by the Ghost. Let Figgins know what an assbutt he's being. We love you, spooky <3

Because I know you were there, you perfect poltergeist you.

Cannot. Cope.

I am simultaneously so sorry for your experience and so fucking pumped you got to meet him oh my fucking GOD seriously

I hope the Ghost always and only passes buskers playing his favourite songs (well).

Fanart, G, 'King of the World' - Titanic pose!ghostlanx on the corner of a building. No regrets!

*Guys, have you seen this article yet? Is The Ghost Gay? Exclusive on New York's most controversial citizen I would like to draw your attention to the fact that their sources are *us*. WELL THAT'S SOME NICE JOURNALISM' YOU'VE GOT GOING THAR ALL THE AWARDS TO *YOU**

whut

... wtfffffffff

Aahahahahahaha the conservative bloggers are gonna love this, they were fine with him beating up criminals when they thought he was straight.

*They are actually using *our shipping* as a 'source'? I mean obviously yes they are fucking because look at the googly eyes they make but still, WAT.*

Wait, I thought what we were doing was journalism, are you telling me fanfic isn't an actual documentation of fact? Mind. Blown.

That's some nice sarcasm you've got going there, Paleandghostly.

Draxie my dearest, I aim with all my sweet warm heart to please <3

"Hey, happy lunchtime."

"Hi. Where are you?"

"Catching the last sunlight we might get this year in the quad, where are you?"

"Hiding from both the sun and my colleagues in a lovely air-conditioned coffee shop. So, I kind of had to tell my whole office about us. And I do mean my *whole* office, gossip gets around that place like mono at a college party."

"Wh - you told them - *what?*"

"What? Oh my *god*, yes Blaine, I told them all about *that*, I thought it would be a *wonderful* idea, don't you? I told them that I'm dating *you*, honestly. And by the way, everyone is very happy for us."

"Oh."

"Yes, oh."

". . . uh, why did you 'kind of have' to tell them?"

"Um, because, another guy who works there kind of asked me out, so I kind of, I kind of had to."

"You hadn't told anyone before?"

"Why would I? I never talk about my personal life there. Blaine . . . before you I really didn't *have* a personal life, you - know that."

". . . I don't like thinking about you being lonely."

"I'm not. Not now. I'm not."

"I know. Neither am I, isn't it great?"

"You are so . . ."

"So, uh, who asked you out?"

"Oh my god. He's very sweet, actually. But he's not, you know. My hero. So."

". . . god I, ahah, I actually don't know what to say to that, um."

"Mmm. How was your morning, Blaine?"

". . . well, mostly I was still half asleep, I did take some notes in seminars and they might yet turn out to mean something. How was yours?"

"Same as every morning, um, I did call my dad."

"Oh, great, how's he doing?"

"He's - he's fine. He wants to, um, god. He wants to meet you. He's already plotted dragging me back for Thanksgiving, are you heading back to Ohio for it?"

"Uh, no, actually. My parents are taking a cruise and Cooper has to work, so we were planning on staying here."

"Oh."

". . . yeah, oh."

"- it's okay. There'll be other opportunities. He's getting pretty good at dragging me back for Christmas too, will you be heading back then -?"

"You really want him to meet me that much?"

"I don't know, I know he wants to meet you, and I guess, well, why wouldn't I want to show off my ridiculously perfect boyfriend?"

"So, um, I don't know what to say again."

"Mm."

"I know you're doing the cat-who-got-the-cream face."

"I know *you* just touched your face and did the shifty-eyed embarrassed thing."

"God, okay, I surrender before this gets any worse, you got me, you win, three-zero. Hey, but, some of the guys are throwing a Hallowe'en party, do you want to-"

"- Blaine, we have to work Hallowe'en."

"We - really?"

"Do you have any *idea* - every *year* - it's absolute bedlam, all those costumes and all that craziness, *yes*, we have to work it."

". . . s'my favourite holiday."

"Oh god. *You* go, I'm sorry I can't -"

"No, no, I'm not - not without you. And I don't like it when you're out there alone anyway."

"I've done it for years."

"No. It's not the same, not now I'm here."

". . . maybe it's not. God, the time, I have to get back. Have a good afternoon, I'll speak to you soon -"

"I -"

". . . what?"

". . . I'll see you tonight."

"- you too. Bye, Blaine."

"Bye!"

*

*Light My Candle, Ghostlanx, NC-17: It's Phalanx's birthday and the Ghost surprises him in the cloak. *Just* the cloak. No warnings apart from WHOA that's a lot of smut.*

Fanart, greengraygreen (that's a big old PuckzillaGhostPhalanxwich) which is very very NSFW

**fans self* Oh holy fuck that was all a bit too much to happen in one lunchbreak am I seriously supposed to go back to work now?*

Do you ever think that making the Ghost the entire superfandom's bike is really fair on him? Every time he comes near a camera he turns seven different kinds of shy, I sometimes think he must hate us :/

*he is not the *entire* superfandom's bike, noone's ever slashed him with iborg over in chicago*

Challenge accepted! :D

lol, draxie ^^;

*I don't think he even *sees* this stuff, don't flatter yourself that he takes the time to wade through everything we spew out - he should know that, at heart, we only do it because we love him and he is fuckin' *smoking*, which he can hardly not be aware of <3*

*This is serious, can I call for an EXCOMMUNICATION here - Ghosthunter22 is blogging stuff trying to work out the Ghost and Phalanx's heights and probable weights and ages, and putting up 'probable' maskless photofits. I should not need to point out to you guys that WE ARE NOT HERE TO GET THESE GUYS UNMASKED. It could get them arrested or *worse*. If anything happens to either of them because of this I know that *I* will feel personal responsibility in it, fandom means *all of us* and if fandom got him hurt or killed then that's something *we did*. You guys *know* how much I love the Ghost, I would never do anything to put him in danger or stop him doing what he has to do and we *need* him to do. I'm not calling for cyberbullying here, I'm calling for something that might save his life - he protects that whole city every night, we owe him these little things back: what Ghosthunter22 is doing is not cool on any level. So all I can recommend is DO WHAT IT TAKES TO GET THOSE POSTS DELETED. I have already contacted the blogger in question and had no response in 24 hours, we are in a situation for drastic measures, that is his *life*. Their lives. Please behave responsibly but do what you have to do.*

Oh Jesus what kind of idiot does that wtf.

Fucking idiot like 12 people would see those posts if you didn't shout about them like that

My wanksense is tingling. Imma go hide in the corner and look at gifs and wait for it to be over ^^;

**pets Blackbindings* Look what you did. Now it's *personal*.*

It doesn't matter if '12' people would have seen them, THAT'S TWELVE TOO MANY. They don't need to be barely viewed, they need to be OFF THE INTERNET.

we never had these problems before phalanx showed up puckzilla was better for him

Puckzilla tried to electrocute him you moron

If anybody is trying to unmask my baby, shit just got real.

Ghost/iBorg short, R, "Hey, I just wanted to see the lights of New York City, I didn't know I'd run into its ghost too." . . . so what did I miss while I was writing this? the fuck o.o

*

Blaine gets back into the apartment humming, pulling his shoes off and putting them neat into the shoerack, straightening a couple of pairs of Cooper's shoes and hooking one stray boot off the floor to put back tidy, hanging his jacket and heading for his bedroom. He's got Katy Perry stuck in his head.

He wakes his computer again, he makes a point of staying off the fanghost blogs during the daytime now so he retains *some* ability to concentrate in class, finds his camera in his bag to put it next to the keyboard, pulling clothes off, still mostly thinking about the photos he caught of a husky in a pink diamante collar, pink hanging tongue, dragging her owner across the quad to drink out of a fountain, scattering pigeons as she went - he can't wait to get those online - still humming as he starts stuffing his gym clothes in a bag

He's pulling his sneakers on when he leans over the desk chair and checks what actually happened on the internet while he was busy all day with class and texting Kurt.

For a while he doesn't even think anything, because he doesn't even know what the hell to think. He does sit down in the chair.

Then he closes his eyes for a moment, steadying himself in his sway, because sometimes the line between Blaine/Phalanx/fandom really is difficult to walk, himself and his internet self and his *superhero* self all caught up in this -

He works backwards. The blog that caused the complete shitstorm of wank sinking the fandom in the mire is gone, deleted, and he can guess why; if even a fraction of the Ghost's fandom set about something in a determined enough manner they can turn the tides back, they can move mountains, they can break the *internet*. Blaine doesn't like to tell Kurt how big his fandom is, he thinks Kurt doesn't actually have any clue that the most casual sighting of the Ghost will get tens of thousands of reblogs, that the fandom BNFs command armies larger than those of some small countries. If a tiny percentage of them set about Ghosthunter22 in a determined enough manner they could have made their online presence impossible within an hour. And Blaine feels sort of bad for them, to get dogpiled on like this, but he does know that even if he was only involved in this as a fan, he'd still have disapproved of what they'd done - *I solemnly swear on all that is holy/all that is good and true in this world/dat ass [delete as applicable] to never do anything to put a hero in harm's way, to never make their mask unsafe, and to never make their life more complicated or dangerous, because I am not a bag of dicks so help me Ghost forever and ever amen.* runs the new creed making its way around the blogs - but god, if Kurt found out. If Kurt found out that people online were doing *that*.

It's not the first time. It probably won't be the last. Blaine's sort of curious what 'photofits' they came up with, but, deep breaths, it's probably a good thing he *wasn't* around to panic over this all day . . .

The fandom is still stewing in the aftereffects, it'll be days before it wears off. Everyone's bitching and sniping at each other, the rights and wrongs, whether or not the Ghost would be proud/angry/not give a fuck for what they did. Blaine posts, *So, I'm glad I wasn't online today.* along with a video of a sloth orphanage because people could probably use the cheering up.

Then he puts his headphones in and heads out to go boxing playing something perky, to try to get the worse parts of humanity out of his mind . . .

He's not much given to worrying. He's singing along by the bottom of the elevator.

*

Kurt's only just dropped the bag of groceries on the breakfast bar, hand up to cover a yawn, when Rachel marches over and stabs an iPad under his nose. "Have you seen this?"

He cracks his eyes open, squints, closes his eyes again and because he can't quite deal with this immediately after getting home from work, he delicately finishes his yawn first. Then he holds out a weary hand and takes the iPad from her, and takes a breath, and reads again, *Is The Ghost Gay?*

His stomach doesn't know whether to knot itself. Hush, he thinks. The *midwife* knew. It doesn't mean they know anything *else*.

"Explain to me why I'm reading this?"

"Do you think it's true?" Rachel says, leaning a little into his space, narrowed eyes searching his as if for clues. "Have you ever thought - maybe -? About him -?"

"Are you actually asking me if my gaydar is good enough to ascertain the sexuality of masked men I've never met and never think about? Rachel, you have two dads, this is absurd." He jabs the iPad back at her in a gesture warning that if she doesn't take it, the floor will; she grabs it back. "I neither know nor care."

"You're the one on their side! I thought you liked him!"

"He's a little monochrome for my tastes," Kurt says, and begins unpacking groceries. "Why are you even interested?" A little bubble of hope jumps under his ribcage. "Would it make the slightest bit of difference to how you feel about him if he *were* gay?"

"I just think it's probably interesting in terms of his psychology," she says, looking down at the article on the screen. "I don't know, some sort of search for acceptance, or a need to overcompensate-?"

Kurt gives the carton a murderous look, gets out too sweetly, "I got the soy milk on the off-chance that you're vegan again this week, Rachel."

She looks up, says, "Wh-" and then stops, and gives *him* a glare in return. "Thank. You. Kurt."

"I'll be working in my room tonight. If you have any other fascinating insights into the sex lives of men in capes, feel free to not tell me about those too." He tosses the balled-up bag into the recycling and heads for his room, where he needs to find that damn article online and actually *read* it, god he hates googling for himself . . . Rachel says after his retreating back, "You're not seeing Blaine tonight?"

"We're busy people, Rachel."

"Which is precisely what you told me when you said you weren't interested in dating *anyone*. Anyone not vetted by me, anyway." she mutters, and Kurt rolls his eyes, says, "Are you seeing Finn tonight?"

"Given that I am actually interested in dating *my* boyfriend, yes." she mutters, and he opens the bedroom door. "Kurt -"

He gives her a look over his shoulder, says, "*What?*"

She folds an arm around herself, iPad dangling from her hand, shrugs. "I like him. Blaine. I - like how he makes you laugh."

After a moment, he can pay attention to enough beyond the blood so hot in his face to realise that his mouth is open. He closes it, and swallows.

"Yes," he says, and the smile comes unasked for. "I like that too."

Sharp edge of that smile between them before he closes the door; and now, god, the internet -

He takes a breath, and remembers that he has a 'press guy' to deal with these things now.

So he emails Blaine, and works on some designs to soothe himself, elegant little eveningwear masks, and hangs on to the thought that he's not alone in this anymore, and waits for his reply.

*

Why don't I just save myself the text posts and change my name to Fandomcangofuckitself.

You remain the most charming woman in the fandom, Paleandghostly.

CAN PEOPLE PLEASE POST HAPPY THINGS BEFORE I START CRYING INTO MY KEYBOARD AND NO IT'S NOT THE GOOD CRYING fml that this crap means so much to me ;_;

*When in doubt, think of the ass. *pets**

*Reblogging this because I'll never get over this gif, not until the end of time, *look how he puts his arms through his*. Not *around* it. *Through* it. Like he's *hugging* it. SUPER BOYFRIENDS ARE SUPER I CAN'T EVEN*

Sometimes I think about how happy he must be now and how lonely he must have been before and I just feel so sad and so happy at the same time I think my heart is trying to implode and explode simultaneously.

Let's ignore the very very bad day and have a fic rec: if you're not reading Draxie's Victoriana!verse, there is something seriously wrong with you. Think the Ghost meets Sherlock Holmes in atmospheric turn of the century NewYork, now with a charming classicist with a secret added to the mix. If I can't have the Ghost's babies then fuck it I want Draxie's, I don't know how she does it <3

*I like to think about them post-life-saving, in their secret cave under the city or whatever, getting out of their costumes and chatting about the night and then just something really ordinary, like joking about who took down more bad guys that evening, maybe getting into a mini playfight with their powers, then just heading off to shower and sleep. Not even the smutty stuff, not that I don't think about that too, but, just them *hanging out* and *being* together. Because people who love each other are beautiful, especially when they're already beautiful people <3*

omg high school AU updated!!

Guys I know some shit has gone down today but can we please just try to remember that we're here because we think that what he does is awesome and he is awesome and he needs all the support he can get. And also he has a really fabulous ass. But mostly can we please just be here for the Ghost love and fuck all the rest of it, all the bitching and wank isn't why we're here. We're here for HIM. And I sincerely doubt given the crap he deals with that he would have a lot of time for the mess we made today.

I know that girl shits rainbows, but the rainbow turds do have kind of a point, children.

fuck me did paleandghostly just agree with someone saying something nice

Ghostly! No! What did they do to you??

Draxie you're so funny I forgot to go into flailing fangirl capslock omglmfaoetc. Someone go say something nice to Blackbindings so she might stop crying underneath her desk and write us some porn to end the day on a decent note, fucksake.

*God I love this fandom. I don't care how crazy it gets. I fucking *love* this fandom.*

*

"Seriously, I wouldn't even worry about it."

The Ghost sits next to the skylight with his arms wrapped around his legs, watching the moon low and dimly golden behind the cloud. "I don't know if I'm worried. I don't know *what* I am, I wish people who don't know me would just not *talk* about me, god it's like the whole world's bitching about me behind my back and I never even knew about it -"

"Well, you don't know about it, when it's happening behind your back."

The Ghost gives the skylight a look, then leans over and bangs it with a palm so its cobwebbed frame shivers. From somewhere inside the disused loft the voice yelps, "Nah *naahhhh* dust-!"

"It's like being famous without any of the benefits! No-one ever sends me free skin care products or anything," he mutters, huddling his legs closer again. "I just get people writing stupid things about me and I can't say anything in return."

"Well," Phalanx says, finally sticking his head out of the open skylight window, "*you are* gay."

"*I know!* I just fail to see how it's *relevant!* The only person who should give a crap about whether I like guys or not is *you* and-"

"I'm glad you're gay." He folds his arms on the skylight, tips his cheek to them and grins. "Otherwise my life would kind of suck right now."

The Ghost looks across at him, still moodily hugging his knees, then says, "You still have dust in your hair."

"I don't have a mirror. Brush it out for me?"

He - sighs, the smile so helpless, leans down and scuffs his hair about until it's more black than grey again. And then because he can't help it, he kisses him through that tangle of curls because he loves him even with dust in his hair, he just *does*.

"Come on."

Phalanx takes his offered hand to climb onto the roof. "It'll be okay. Your fandom looks out for you pretty well, you know that?"

"I know *some* of them do," he says with another little smile, and Phalanx - grins back, still holding his hand, walking across the rooftop.

"So what are we doing tonight, Ghost?"

"Same thing we do every night, Phalanx."

"Try to stop people taking over the world?"

"On a very small scale," the Ghost steps carefully onto the path of shields Phalanx creates gleaming beside the building, "yes."

Try to turn the tide that very little, between bad and good. Because one person suffering a little less can mean the *world* to that one person, and that one person is their own small and fiercely felt world.

He wraps his arm around Phalanx's waist for sturdiness, turns them both invisible, and lets himself fall with the slant of Phalanx's body into the slide.

Chapter Nine

"Ghost Ghost Ghost," Phalanx hisses at him from the other side of the rooftop. "Come see oh my god -"

He gives up trying to tune the little electronic eavesdropping device Phalanx bought to pick up the radio of the cop car twelve storeys beneath them, walks over and dumps it in his hands. "Here, you play with it, I'm not getting anywhere. Where am I loo- oh."

Down on the street, not yet eight o' clock and already dark out, a man and woman are walking with two small children, each child holding a parent's hand and a plastic pumpkin of candy. Each child - impossible to tell their gender under the hood, and neither can be more than six - is swamped in and dragging along the sidewalk behind them a dark grey Ghost cloak. Phalanx looks like he can't quite contain whatever he's feeling, and the Ghost folds his arms, huddles spikily behind his own cloak, feeling the blush rise. "I ought to be getting royalties for all this."

Phalanx pokes him in the arm. "*Don't* pretend you don't think it's adorable, *don't* pretend it's not awesome because it is-"

"It's better than those cheap *godawful* 'sexy Ghostette' costumes girls are barely wearing -"

"You're their favourite superhero, they've been looking forward to this for *weeks*, they probably haven't stopped talking about it," Phalanx is saying, still staring misty-eyed at those kids, so the Ghost gives him a long look (he is still blushing and, yes, his heart is giving a painful sort of flutter, for those tiny little things in the street who aren't scared of him and aren't *shipping* him, they just think he's - what? *Cool*. When has he ever been *cool*?) and then scans the street again, still some kids and parents around before the night gets out of hand. He raises his eyebrows, catches Phalanx's face in his hands, aims him in the direction of what must be another pair of siblings - probably three siblings counting the older kid with them, a sulking teenager dragging her boots and not in costume. The little girl walking with her is in another grey Ghost cloak, and pink sneakers. The little boy - he must be about eight - is wearing a Phalanx mask, and has green cardboard hexagons stuck to his shoulders.

The Ghost looks at Phalanx's face. Phalanx looks like he's so happy he might start crying.

"Police radio. Phalanx. Please."

Phalanx just stares smitten at those kids, and the Ghost would pretend to be annoyed but oh god look at him, he's the most adorable man on the planet and when has his own life ever been so perfect?

Because it is, absurd as that might sound for someone who slips out of his apartment every night to put himself in harm's way for no reward and endless cost. He never knew how unhappy he was, because he just never knew what happiness was, he thought he was a realist when he never knew what real life could *be*. Phalanx - Blaine -

Every conversation is a gift, every touch is a privilege, every kiss is a miracle. He doesn't get used to it. How can he start taking this for granted? Every glimpse of his eyes is a *blessing*. It is actually stupid how happy he is now, he finds himself ridiculous, but then he's with Blaine again and he's just helpless behind the pull of his heart *desperate* for him, Blaine the sun and Kurt a helpless orbiting comet. He always thought of himself as a cat person. How strange to find that he's got a dog's heart in him, loyal with love to the point of stupidity, too blind to anything but *him* to realise how obsessed it is, grovelling for every petting, every tossed scrap of attention, and *happy* in doing it.

It isn't that the undercurrent isn't still there, the undercurrent of everything else, those dark things he pretends aren't still here, aren't still his. The ghosts he insists must belong to someone else, that cold presence, that rattle of chains, no, he can't hear them, feel them, why don't they change the subject to something light and warm and forget the clammy whisper of dead breath behind his back? He just forgets to be afraid, when he's with Blaine. Phalanx. He trusts his shields, trusts his containing arms, trusts in his dog's heart too, he feels it wag its tail in Blaine's chest, *thumpathumptahumpathumpa* with all his happiness. He knows that he's never been good at working out when the undercurrent will become a riptide and drag him under, it just turns out that he never was a realist, he's always been an optimist. Maybe that was how he survived those empty years, by not even realising that he believed that things were better than they were, and now he has all *this* and he tells himself that it will be fine, it will work out fine, everything, everything will be fine . . . look at him. How could anything ever be anything but perfect?

He touches his gloved fingers to the back of Phalanx's hair. "Are you ready to patrol yet?"

His voice is all rough in his throat. "Look he's even made a little cardboard shield, oh *god*."

He curls his fingers in his hair, sighs through the smile he can't make smaller, and watches with Phalanx as the children fly down the sidewalk, dark cloak fluttering, and their elder sister curses and yells and catches them up.

*

The Ghost kneels on the parking lot tarmac next to the head-lolled boy in zombie make-up, while Phalanx is cuffing his would-be-mugger to the motorcycle ranks. "Were you out with friends? Girlfriend, boyfriend? Were you on your own?" He pets the guy's pockets, ghosts out his cell and holds it over his shoulder without looking back; Phalanx takes it, and dials nine-one-one. "Can you hear me?"

The guy grunts, his head slumping to the other side across his chest, and the Ghost catches his face in his hands, gently lifts it to squint into his eyes. "Were you just drinking or did you take something? Do you remember what you took?"

He slurs and mumbles, shakes his head free. The Ghost looks up at Phalanx, tilts his mouth helplessly. "He might just be really drunk, I can't tell. Get them to send an ambulance too."

"- and an ambulance for the victim, don't know if it's drugs or alcohol but he might be in need of a stomach pump. Thank you!"

The Ghost - puts his grin into his glove, fingers over his closing eyes. "I can never *believe* how perky you sound when you're phoning in a mugging."

"It's not like it's the operator's fault it's a crappy situation, there's no need to make them feel bad about it too."

He focuses on the guy again, who's trying to let himself down from the car he's propped up against to curl up on the tarmac. "Hey, no, come on, it's really cold. You can't lie down like that."

The guy just groans, huddling his arms in over his head. "The natural recovery position," Phalanx notes gloomily, and the Ghost unhooks his cloak, bundles it over his fetal form like a blanket. "You're going to be okay," he murmurs, rubbing his shoulder. "Help is coming. You're going to be fine. Have you found his ICE number yet?"

He glances up as Phalanx passes him something, smiles and takes the activated heat pack, slipping it under the cloak and against the guy's chest, as he tries to work himself into a tighter ball, his breath shuddering every time it comes out. "You're going to be just fine," the Ghost tells him, and Phalanx says, "I think his ICE is his mom. Do we really want to be calling his mom with this just before midnight? Because, uh, mine would freak the hell out."

The Ghost rubs the guy's shoulder, because he's still cold lying on the October - ten minutes to November - ground. He wouldn't want his dad stuck in Ohio being called about this in the middle of the night either. "Check who he last spoke to and when."

"Okay . . . 'Becca', eleven oh eight. Presumably she won't mind another call, then." Phalanx turns away, humming quietly, while the Ghost rubs the guy's back - he's feeling the cold himself with the cloak off, and fades himself half-invisible, nervous and naked without the hood - while Phalanx says, "Hi! Sorry, no, I'm not Matt. His name is Matt," he says, and the Ghost murmurs, "It's okay, Matt, we've got you, help's coming."

"Someone just tried to mug him and we've contacted the emergency services but we just wanted to check if you could maybe come to the hospital with him. And tell us if you know if he might have taken anything? He's not incredibly responsive. No, we're not - I'm not a cop. If it's recreational drugs we will not be pressing charges, believe me, we just want to help. Oh, um, just think of us as concerned citizens." He covers the mouthpiece of the cell, looks at the Ghost. "She's shifty enough that he's taken *something*, yes. Okay, Becca, the ambulance should be on its way here, do you maybe want to head to the hospital to wait for him? Are you with friends? Cool, if you - I can hear sirens."

Phalanx lowers the phone, and the Ghost can hear the distant, "*-hello? Hello, which hospital-?*" from it as the sirens sing closer. The Ghost rubs Matt's back while he shivers. "You're going to be fine. They're almost here, you're going to be absolutely fine."

A cop car is pulling up, and the Ghost slips completely invisible, still murmuring, "They're here now, Matt, they're going to take care of you. It's all alright now." while Phalanx holds the cell out for the first cop getting out of his car. "Mugger's in the corner, this guy might have taken something that disagreed with him, his friend's going to need directions to the hospital when the ambulance comes. And thank you for being so quick."

"Who the hell're you?"

The Ghost twitches his mouth a 'sorry' and takes his cloak from Matt's body, fastens it again. "He's with me."

"Wh -" One cop has a hand on his gun; Phalanx's shields ripple around him, a little flurry of nerves - he's still unused to casual close proximity to guns, and the Ghost will never, never warn him to be *less* cautious

- letting them down for the Ghost to take his arm, and appear just long enough to say, "Happy Hallowe'en." tugging at the hang of his hood like a salute, before Phalanx tosses the cell to the second cop, and the Ghost turns them both invisible.

"What just-"

"It would be him tonight, huh?" the second cop says, still-squawking cell in hand, kneeling at Matt's side. "Okay son, let's take a look at you. Can you hear me? Ambulance is on its way . . ."

*

"He's not a bad guy," the woman dressed as a devil weeps, smearing red paint and black eyeliner as she wipes her cheek. "He's just, it's just been a crazy night and he drank too much, he's always, when he's drank too much -"

Phalanx guards the entrance to the alleyway, arms folded, while the Ghost offers her a Kleenex and says, "Are you living with him? Are you safe to go home?"

"I - while he's like this - he just needs to cool off and - and -"

"It's okay, it's okay. Do you have a friend you can stay with? There's a women's shelter a few blocks down from here, I can walk you there if you want."

She blows her nose and it looks like she blew blood out with all the smearing red. "I don't know what to - I don't *know* what to -"

"Maybe we should go to the shelter, and you can talk to someone there."

"He isn't normally like this, he's only - when he's drunk too much -"

"I'm sorry," the Ghost says, and hands her another tissue, his voice dropping softer. "I'm sorry."

She blows her nose again, and starts crying harder. "I sometimes wish - I didn't love him -"

"I know," he says, so quietly. "I'm sorry."

Phalanx looks at the alley floor, because he feels sort of uncomfortable witnessing this. They scared off the guy holding her by the shoulders and *shaking* her down this alleyway, screaming terrified woman but she only screamed *harder* when Phalanx tried to chase him - *no, no, leave him alone, leave him* - and now the Ghost is carefully taking her shoulders, where she's wearing a red catsuit and he hopefully won't get red paint on himself, saying softly, "You can have a cup of coffee and warm up a little when we get there. You'd be amazed how much clearer things look on the other side of a cup of coffee. Come on, it's not far. Do you mind if I'm invisible as we go?"

She dabs at her bloodshot eyes, like they're trying to turn red to match her costume. "They still want to arrest you, is that still a thing?"

"Unfortunately yes."

"For doing *this*?"

He shrugs a 'what can you do'. "I'll be right next to you. You can take my arm if you want. Phalanx, can you wait . . . ?"

"Sure." He smiles and makes a stool-high shield to sit on, and the woman stares at him, stares at the Ghost.

"They want to arrest *you* for handing out Kleenex and hugs, and Kyle-" She stops, puts a hand over her mouth again, and the Ghost rubs her back a little, says, "Come on and walk with me, we can talk as we go. Have you ever spoken to the police?"

"I don't *want* him in jail I just - I just wish he'd -"

". . . I know. I'm so sorry."

She's crying hard again as the Ghost fades out of sight, she holding his arm and his other arm around her back, around the corner and down the street. "I just want him to not *hit* me -"

Phalanx can hear his whispered and sad, "I'm so sorry." as they walk away.

He rubs his arms a little, chill once the adrenaline sweat cools. Bedlam, the Ghost had said. It's really not far off. The clubs are all over-spilling, costumed, alcohol-fuelled chaos on every street. They've already stopped a break-in by a guy in a rabbit suit and a hold-up in a convenience store by three guys dressed as

clowns, creepy bastards that they were. It's not normally like this. But then, on the other hand, it has involved all that *sitting* the Ghost told him there would be - sitting with the rabbit guy who bashed his head falling back *out* of the window he'd been trying to climb in through, so they had to sit with him to wait for the cops. Sitting with the terrified guy at the store after that hold-up until the police arrived, sitting with that high kid after the mugging waiting for the cops to get there. Phalanx is genuinely getting to know the faces of a couple of regular cops, tries to keep back the way the Ghost does, though the mask does cover most of his face and he frankly *he* never recognises himself with his hair all puffy like this. The Ghost turns him invisible as soon as he can, every time.

This kind of thing - there's no heroism in the things like this, not the way people think of it, it's so dirty and *everyday*, scaring that woman's own boyfriend away from her - is still what distresses him the most. The Ghost takes it very much in stride, *terrifying* to those who commit these sorts of crimes - he only haunts people when he has to, Phalanx knows by now, because he usually can cuff them to something before needing to but there are still times when he never hesitates - and then he's so utterly, heartbreakingly patient and gentle with the victims, Phalanx doesn't know how he can *forget* himself so much. When *his* heart's still straining quick and high and he's all full of the rage of the fight, the Ghost is already speaking softly, making himself available and yet unthreatening and telling them that it's going to be okay, and they really seem to believe it when he says it. Phalanx doesn't know if it's relief or something else, women in particular just seem to *trust* him, the gentleness of his voice. He has realised by this point, embarrassed of his own naivety, that they've already rescued a number of 'working girls', all of whom seem to know someone else the Ghost has helped . . .

He helps people when no-one else will. Maybe that's what 'hero' really means.

He folds his gloved hands together, squeezes his fingers, looks up at the sky overhead grimy with the lights of New York. He's learning a lot about what 'hero' actually means, about how much of it is ignoring what's immediately happening to you for someone else's longer term good, about the size sacrifice can take, about courage and difficulty. It had rained, two nights ago, and the Ghost looked out at it from under his hood and said, "You would not believe how little crime happens in the rain. Even criminals aren't dumb enough to get soaked for it." and took him to Tina and Mike's instead. Mike needed some of Phalanx's blood, creepy thought, but if he needs a transfusion in the middle of the night Mike can hardly go out onto the street asking for donors.

"I am not stealing this from the hospital." Mike said, as Phalanx settled his head into the Ghost's offered lap on the sofa, the Ghost cross-legged and touching Phalanx's hair back from his face, Phalanx laying out

and trying not to look like he didn't want to look at the needle. "I risk a lot for you but I am not being the medical student they fire for stealing *blood*, that's just - too creepy to live down."

Tina set two mugs onto the coffee table, said, "*I* could always steal it. I could say it was for art."

"No-one has to steal anything," the Ghost said, hands cupping the sides of Phalanx's head, thumbs stroking soothingly across his forehead. "Well, nothing anyone will miss, anyway. We are all technically on the side of the angels."

Phalanx looked up at his face, thought, The angels might be on *your* side, actually, then yelped, "*Ow*-" when the needle slipped in.

"Sorry. Just let me get the tourniquet - there we go. Okay, okay I think we're good."

"Settled?" Tina said brightly, leaning down so her hair swung a fine black curtain next to cheek. Phalanx smiled, and the Ghost stroked his hair back again, then lifted a hand to hide a yawn. Tina grinned. "I would've thought superheroes might have a 'no dating rescuees' rule, like doctors."

"He's breaking a lot of my rules." the Ghost mumbled, and kept his head down in the hood. Phalanx looked up at him, lifted the hand without the needle in it and touched his cheek. "Your rules are kind of harsh on you. I'm just - balancing things out."

"I could put a movie in while we're waiting," Tina said, heading to the DVD rack next to the TV. "What do you guys want to watch? We have a couple of superhero movies . . ."

"Because those things are always so realistic."

Phalanx said, "You would like if they were more realistic?"

"I'd like at least one scene with someone cursing over trying to mend a burnt patch on a cape, what the hell *tailors* do these guys use -?"

Tina ended up putting a musical on, classic black and white and it really made Phalanx want to dance - forget the slow drain of blood from his arm, just take the Ghost's hands and whirl him around the room like Gene Kelly - but when he looked up a few minutes into it the Ghost's head was sinking sideways, eyes drowsy on the TV, and he was asleep before ten minutes had gone. Tina caught Phalanx's eye and grinned,

carefully draped a blanket over the Ghost's shoulders and turned the volume down, and crept into the bedroom.

Mike crouched to check the IV. "How long've you been doing this for him?" Phalanx murmured. "Looking after him like this?"

". . . coming on four years. He's not as bad a patient as he could be, we've only had two or three really scary situations."

". . . do I want you to define 'really scary' for me?" Phalanx said, eyes flitting to check the Ghost, eyes still closed, breath still low under Blaine's body, cheek still resting peaceful on the sofa cushions.

Mike breathed, slowly. He said, "If he's not telling you this stuff I don't know if I should. He has - told you what it's like, right? How dangerous it is. He can ghost, other people . . . if it's enough to hurt *him* sometimes, it's *dangerous*."

"I can keep myself safe." Phalanx said quietly. "Yes, he's given me 'the talk'. Multiple times. I just - I don't want him doing it on his own, he really helps people and the only reward for it he gets is - well, never a full night's sleep, for one thing . . ."

Mike was silent for a moment, then stood up and walked to the window, peered through the blinds, pulled them again. He said, and Phalanx had watched his shoulder blades taut as he looked at the closed blinds like he could see through them and into another night a long time ago, "He walked her back. After that - after those guys. That was what . . . she was so upset and I knew that was what helped her more than anything, not even that he took those guys down, that he was just *there* for her. She was crying pretty bad, she called me from the street to come down and meet her, and he was standing with her, she was hugging him and crying into his cloak and he just - looked at me, and handed her over, and he was so *patient* while she clung on. And I didn't even think about it. I told him I was a medical student and if he ever needed anything, I owed him my life. She is my life," he says, as if he really needs to clarify that, looking back at Phalanx, who just watches him, can't do much else lying on his back with his head in a sleeping superhero's lap.

"He vanished. That way he does. And we didn't hear from him again for - I don't know, weeks. Until after that fire, something landed on our fire escape with a crash at one in the morning." Mike rubbed the back of his neck. "Freezing cold, soaking wet, chargrilled superhero, thankfully cooked quite rare. He wouldn't let

me get him to the hospital, had to make do with what I had here. I should thank him, really, that was pretty much the most intensive crash-course in medicine I ever got . . ."

"Was he okay? When was this?"

"That firebombed building. There were all those photographs . . . *four* years ago now, almost exactly. He was okay. Did not take half the time off afterwards that I told him to and I know it, but yeah, he was okay. He looks after himself. Mostly."

That firebombed building. The Ghost gasping down oxygen presented by a firefighter, somewhere in between endless trips into a building until it came down, the first time most of the world ever saw him. He'd never known the Ghost had . . . stupid. Of course he was still in it when it came down, and he never even thought about whether he was hurt by it. Phalanx had watched his sleeping face and thought, If I'd been there it would have been different. If anyone had been there it would have been different. You shouldn't have to do this on your own . . .

The Ghost hadn't woken when the blood was eventually done, hadn't woken when Mike turned the TV off and gave a small grin of solidarity and closed the bedroom door behind himself. It was coming on for an hour later when he finally shifted, lifted his head with a start and Phalanx murmured, "Hey, I'm here, it's fine." and reached for his face again.

The Ghost took his wrist, looking so startled of the world and in that second, eyes on his, so young.

He's pacing the alleyway for warmth when the Ghost's voice says, "I'm here," and he appears at his side, and sighs. "Sorry it took so long. She was crying pretty hard, I didn't want to just peel her off and dump her."

"No, it's fine. Is she okay?"

"I don't know. I hope she will be." He closes his eyes, and Phalanx rubs his arm, feels his muscles struggling to relax. "I'm just tired. I feel worn right out after that."

"We could call it a night."

"It's barely one, the crazy hasn't even begun."

"Well, how about we sit down somewhere quiet for a while and try to work this radio hacker out again?"

"We might have worked it out sooner if someone had brought the instructions out with them."

"Someone might have done that if someone else had included pockets on their costume."

"Someone should have worked out what that damn belt is for, Phalanx." the Ghost snaps, and snaps the utility belt against his hip for good measure. Phalanx yelps before he laughs, and tweaks the Ghost's hood.

"Excuse *me* great genius. Is she - really going to be okay?"

His face - quietens, again. "I don't know. That's up to her, mostly."

"She should leave him."

"I know she should. It just - I think it's more complicated than that."

"How can it be more complicated than he gets drunk and beats you up? She should-"

The Ghost's eyes slide off his. "It's the most likely cause of injury for women of her age group. Statistically she had this to be afraid of more than some stranger mugging her all along. Most women who get hurt are hurt by the people they trust the most, the ones in their own homes, and I can't do - *anything* about that. So yes, she should, I know she should, *but*." He folds his arms, head low under the hood. "But life seems to turn out different to how it *should* most of the time. I'm sorry. This is only - I told you it wasn't nice."

Now Phalanx looks somewhere else, and rubs his own arm a little. "You carry those statistics around with you?"

He takes a breath in. "You have no idea. I - don't know what it must be like for them sometimes. Women. Living under the kind of odds you wouldn't want to bet on, *knowing* that. And I can't believe men don't do more to fix it, if you *can* make things better for people then *why wouldn't you?*"

". . . same reason we're still living with racism and homophobia?"

The Ghost closes his eyes, then adjusts his hood, shaking his head back, opening his eyes to fix one of his sad, steady looks on Phalanx. "We're not exactly saving the world, discussing this surrounded by the scent of garbage, are we?"

"Come on." Phalanx offers him a hand, and the staircase of shields begins flickering into life ahead of them.

"Work this radio thing out and maybe we'll find something, I don't know, *cleaner* to deal with . . ."

"Something that at least doesn't overtly smell of garbage."

"Mm," Phalanx hums, as the Ghost walks cautiously after him, boots carefully catching their grip on the edge of the tilted shields.

On the edge of a building, boots dangling over the drop - it's only about fifteen storeys, amazing how Phalanx can now think 'it's only' about that sort of distance - Phalanx narrows his eyes and works at tuning the little gadget, not especially confident in what he's doing. "This is stupid," the Ghost says, huddling his cloak closer around himself. "And cold. And my ass is going numb. How much did that thing cost you?"

"Ssh. Listening."

"Listening to static." the Ghost mutters, and glares at his own boots. Phalanx gives a sudden shiver, and the Ghost glances across, then throws a wing of his cloak around Phalanx's back too. Phalanx *grins* at him, shuffles closer so their thighs bump.

"Regretting not giving me a cape now?"

"You would only trap it in something. I'm working on your winter costume, I need to get mine out to air again."

"Do you think of everything?"

The Ghost yawns and says through the huff of white breath, "Yes." Then, "Do - you hear that?"

"Hear wh-"

. . . like an airplane, they always hear airplanes overhead, this is *New York*. But -

Not quite like an airplane. Like a teeny tiny little airplane, headed right for -

The cloak is off Phalanx's back and the Ghost is on his feet, staring up as something gleaming like a rocket spins in towards them. Phalanx scrambles up and the Ghost grabs his arm as the rocket calls, "Hey guys, took me forever to- ah, crap."

They're invisible, the Ghost gripping Phalanx's arm tight before Phalanx *recognises* the guy touching down on the roof in front of them, gleaming in full body armour, the bright light of the thrusters on his metal boots cutting out as he lands. "Wh- that's iBorg. Oh my *god*-"

"Phalanx," the Ghost hisses, but he's pulled out of his arm and reappears again - so weird to see your own arms and legs suddenly pop back into sight - in front of iBorg, who turns his head to him; he's wearing a full metal helm, with goggles over the eyeslits.

"Hey, it's the noob. What up."

"You're iBorg! Don't you normally hang around Chicago, what're you doing *here*?"

"Scouting for your, uh, other half, actually. Who I'm guessing is still - somewhere, around, it's kind of creepy, Hallowe'en and everything, yo." He trails into a mumble, turning slowly and with an audible whirring of gears to scan the rooftop. "Seriously at least technology's always in *front* of you, how does he do that . . . ?"

"What do you want?" Even Phalanx starts at the Ghost's disembodied voice, hard and Phalanx thinks angry through *fear* from his side. "Why are you here for *me*?"

iBorg holds his hands up. "Chill, okay, I just - know some people who're finding you hard to get in touch with. Could you maybe, like, appear, how do you . . . ?"

"It's fine," Phalanx says to where he last saw the Ghost. "He's a hero, haven't you even read about him? He's on our side."

He tries not to visibly start when he feels invisible hands close around his arm. "We might have to ghost straight down at any moment," the Ghost murmurs by his ear. "Don't panic. Just grab a breath if you feel it."

"He's a *hero*, what would he -?"

"Tell me why you're here." the Ghost says, flatly. "Why are you here for *me*."

iBorg holds his hands up, weaponless and harmless. "Just carrying a proposition for you. I got myself drafted into this new group initiative they've got running, government thing, for when things come up too big for any of us to deal with. They want the whole tights and cape squad working together, you know they need -"

"I know they tried to *register* us, I know that anyone with a power *they* were scared of vanished more absolutely than I do. Why would you trust *them*? Why would any super want to have anything to do with *them*?"

"Well, actually, I'm not a super." iBorg knocks twice on the side of his own helmet. "Made this with my own two hands, only super I am is super-genius. And part of the proposition I was supposed to give was a whole spiel on apologies for the whole compulsory registration thing but evidently you two didn't register back when it was a legal requirement anyway so I guess what I'm *really* saying is they're not gonna press charges against you for not registering, especially if you sign up now."

Phalanx remembers that law. He remembers night after sleepless night staring into the dark dry-mouthed thinking about that law, the law that gave humans with superpowers the same legal rights as a firearm, permissible only with paperwork. It only lasted two years, it was unworkable, how do you *make* people come forward and register their powers? Supers are so small a portion of the population that how can you *tell* if all of them register or not? And as the terrified teenage Blaine had thought, what would they do once they knew, why did they want to know, he wasn't hurting anyone, what did they want from *him* - ?

"Well thank you so much," the Ghost says, his voice breathy and *shaking*, "for that lovely offer-come-threat. But you can tell *them* that I don't want anything to do with them. I have the entire police force to deal with on top of the criminals, so I am hardly going to think about working with the authorities when I still don't know if I'll get arrested for it. And you can stay away from *him*, he has enough to deal with, don't you *dare* put him in more danger -"

It takes Phalanx a moment to realise that the Ghost is talking about *him*.

"- and get the hell out of my city. I don't care what they want, get the *hell* out of my city."

"Dude, I'm only -"

"I'm here to protect the supers on this island as well. I don't want them anywhere *near* them. Get out of my city. Now. *Go*."

iBorg stands there with his hands held up a little while longer, then says, "You might've been doing this longer than some of us but no-one made you king of the supers, you know that?"

Phalanx has never heard his voice like this. "I know that that metal suit wouldn't even slow me down."

iBorg stares at them, as much as suit that can't blink can. Then he says, "... so that's why the criminals are all terrified of the Ghost. Okay. Leaving now. Just - think about it. It's not so bad having back-up, you might even want it one day. But I'm - definitely going now. Away from the scary. Um." He looks back at Phalanx. "Good luck with that," he says, and his thrusters kick in again, raising him like a firefly on their light before he hisses off like a rocket again, into the dark dark sky and away, cast in a curve like a firework.

Phalanx's hand finds the Ghost's invisible arm. "What was *that* about?"

"Why would I want anything to do with them? Why would I ever trust *them*?"

"Okay, okay, I get that, but - I mean, you could've been nicer to him, he was only -"

The Ghost's hands - aren't on his arm anymore, he feels the slightest pressure of their ghosting through the bone and gone. "Ghost -" Phalanx says, and, slowly, on the edge of the building, that dark grey cloak fades back into sight.

He says quietly, head low, "You know how much I overreact when I'm scared."

Phalanx's mouth twitches, and he finally sighs out the smile. "It's okay. You don't have to do anything you don't want to. And you know I would shield you if anything happened."

He doesn't lift his head. Phalanx remembers, *You might've been doing this longer than some of us* . . . and the smile fades a little. He's been following the super blogs for years and he struggles to think of anyone who's done the hero thing for as long as the Ghost has at this point, five years alone, it's a hell of a long time. He was nineteen, he thinks, he can do the math. He was nineteen the first time he put on that cloak. He's been defending a whole city single-handed since he was a teenager, and can anyone blame him now

for being overprotective of it, of everyone, standing like a snarling wolf next to Phalanx, *don't you dare put him in more danger -*

He walks over, finds the Ghost's hand under his cloak, closes his fingers through his, swings it a little. "Hey," he says. "Call it a night soon? Since we can't get this thing working for -"

The radio crackles into life in his hand and they both stare at it, as three sirens zip away high-pitched and urgent underneath them. *"-cident, repeat suspected super incident approach with extreme caut-"*

Gone. Because the signal's gone, wailing its way down the street towards its destination.

"Phalanx-"

"Hold on," he says, jumping onto the bridge of shields, the Ghost swinging on after him, letting go of his hand to wrap his arms around his waist. "And again -"

The wind rushes up to meet them like it's glad of their return.

*

It's Fifth Avenue. Fifth Avenue is -

For some time they just stand at the edge of it all, hands held and invisible, staring. Phalanx hopes that he's not the only one who's never seen anything like it. He doesn't know how to . . .

Screaming sirens, screaming people. Abandoned taxis, dropped pieces of costumes, broomsticks and tridents and that might be a Ghost's cloak spilt over the sidewalk . . .

While the mannequins walk towards them, like a plastic undead horde.

"They're from Saks," the Ghost says, a little weakly, at his side.

Phalanx just stares. There are dozens of them, god knows how many, walking with the grim tirelessness of something not actually alive, a little jerky but sickeningly *almost* human. "You can tell - where they're from -?"

"Don't even ask me, they're from Saks." Some of them are dressed for Hallowe'en, black corsets and huge skirts, baroque masks over their sightless eyes. "They're heading this way. Why are they - ?"

"Are they attacking anyone?"

"*Him.*"

The Ghost is visible in a second - so is Phalanx, following his point, the running guy in a Ghost costume, a pretty cheap one, thin cloak fluttering as he *runs*, flat-out mouth-open *runs* towards them, and mannequins pick up speed following him. There are cop cars blocking the road ahead but the Ghost breaks into a run, springs across the hood of a car, closely followed by Phalanx and a cop's yelled, "Hey-!"

The guy in the Ghost costume sees them and *stares*, and the Ghost gestures at him urgently; he puts on a final burst of speed and runs past them, runs so hard he runs right into one of the cop cars, then gets pulled behind it by the police. "You - you -" he pants, pulling the Ghost cloak and mask off, face scarlet and shining with sweat, sitting heavily on the road behind the car. "You -"

"Happy Hallowe'en," the Ghost says, still watching the mannequins. "Why were they chasing you?"

"Don't - don't -"

"They're - still coming this way," Phalanx says, shields flickering around him, nervous of them. It's like something out a horror movie. An eco-horror movie. A non-biodegradable zombie apocalypse.

"Let me . . . try something." the Ghost says, and turns invisible. The mannequins slow, begin spreading out, not focusing on this one determined target anymore. Phalanx sees something grey to the side, looks across at the Ghost reappearing at the other side of the street - and the mannequins concentrate again, picking up into a run at *him*.

"Why are they interested in *you*?"

The Ghost throws his arms out in an irritable, *How the hell would I know?*, ducks a swiping plastic arm, boots a mannequin away in the stomach, hesitates and haunts his hand through the next one's head (it's wearing white, and it occurs to Phalanx that he chose haunting rather than a kick because the Kurt in him can't bear to risk soiling it); the haunted mannequin doesn't react, just slams an arm through his side.

Through his side; he's ghosting. He backs away, turns to see the *horde* of them surrounding him, turns invisible. Mannequins headbutt each other, tangle their limbs, turn and teeter and fall - but they pick themselves up and begin moving away again, all that horrible flat determination gone without their target there.

The Ghost's voice says beside Phalanx's ear, "Anyone in the cloak. How many people in this city do you think are wearing tacky imitations of my costume right now?"

"In New York City? On Hallowe'en?" He shrugs widely. "I don't know, a fifth of them? *I* would be if we weren't-"

One of the cops leans over the hood of a car. "I know we're not strictly on the same side but can you *do* something about this? This kind of insanity is your area, not ours!"

"Well since you asked so *nice*ly, officer," the Ghost says, irritably turning visible again, "how about you lend a hand?"

As soon as he's visible the mannequins turn towards him again, and Phalanx draws his head back a little at their dead-eyed lurching towards them. The guy in the Ghost costume behind the car is being led away by another cop, cloak discarded and forgotten, and the Ghost folds his arms and looks at the cop, a, *Well?* look.

He fires six rounds into the approaching wall of plastic people. Shoulders and faces explode, bullets and broken plastic piece clothing, and the Ghost winces at Phalanx's side; he looks across and the Ghost mutters, "That was Alexander McQueen, he could show some respect."

The mannequins just keep on coming. The Ghost takes a breath, says, "Well. I suppose you can't kill something that isn't alive. Phalanx . . . ?"

They are eerily human, eerily not-human, sickening to watch. Phalanx swallows, then chops his hand at the air, and a shield crunches through the neck of an approaching mannequin. It staggers, off-balance, and falls stiff-limbed onto its ass - then rocks itself clumsily up, and, headless, aims itself right at them again.

"I am going to be having nightmares for something like . . . forever, after this, actually."

The Ghost's fingers knit through his, and he squeezes his hand. "No time. They'll follow me, we need to get to Saks and find out what caused this."

"Wh -"

"We're ghosting through them."

"We -?"

"Just run!"

He breaks into a run, and Phalanx is dragged after him, straight at the approaching mannequins. His breath thumps out of him in shock and he snaps his eyes closed -

Feels -

He opens his eyes. They're running through them. *Through* them, confusion of dark and light as they run right through plastic bodies, plastic arms clubbing uselessly at them, confusion of limbs and stiff plastic faces. They pass through a thick throng of them and the Ghost *stumbles* on a patch of clear road, Phalanx yelps and catches his sides as he falls, thumping to one knee and hanging his head, panting.

"- too much," he gasps. "You and me, have to keep - soles of our feet solid - too much, can't concentrate on - I know where *my* feet are, you're just -"

Phalanx looks over their shoulders at the mannequins turning for them, looks up at the mannequins in a narrowing circle around them. He snaps a shield up all around them, a dome of interlocking hexagons, and tightens his arms around the Ghost when the first blows of hollow arms strike on it. The Ghost touches his forehead under the hood, sucks his breath in and lifts his head.

"You can follow behind. They'll follow me, you just follow them."

"On your *own*-?"

"I can't ghost both of us like this! They can't touch me, you know they can't, I'm *fine*. Just - keep yourself safe, please, just - drop the shield around us, put it around you. Just you. Keep yourself safe, *please*."

It's against every instinct in his body and his muscles, his *bones* say no. Leave the Ghost vulnerable - himself safe and *him* vulnerable -

The Ghost holds his face in his hands, eyes holding his, says to him low and urgent, "Phalanx I am fine and I know what I am doing and will you please do this for me because I *need* you to and please, please protect *yourself*." Then he stands up and backs away as much as he can in the small safe circle of the shield, and says, "Drop them."

He draws his breath in, and he does. mannequins lurch forward as the shield snaps up smaller, just around Phalanx, and the Ghost ducks a swinging arm, turns and ghosts right through the body of the mannequin who swung it, vanishes from Phalanx's sight through its body. The only way he knows where he's gone is because mannequins bump and scrape off his shields, pouring after the Ghost up the street. Phalanx watches them helpless, until they've tailed off into enough of a trickle around him rather than that flood, and he can drop his shields, walk with them - ready at every second to flicker more shields alight, they are *horrible* things moving the stop-start way they do - knowing the Ghost is up ahead, alone.

He can't move a stationary shield. He understands his own powers, understands instinctively how they work; they can be thrown, or they can be stationary, and those are the only two options. A shield created still cannot be moved and a shield created moving can't be stopped, though he can make it stop existing. It's an irritating limitation, because it's not like he can go anywhere once he's inside a shield, he can't carry them like a turtle's shell and be safe as he goes, he has to stand where he is. At a push he could surround himself with moving shields but if he doesn't move fast enough they'll knock him right over. He remembers that limitation of the Ghost's powers, that struggle to run with Phalanx and ghost the both of them -

It occurs to him that the reason the Ghost stopped trying was because if he got too confused about what parts of Phalanx to allow solid and where the solid ground was in relation to them, he could very easily have ghosted Phalanx's feet right through the surface of the road, and if distracted . . . made them solid again too soon. He doesn't even want to *think* about that.

He follows the mannequins following the Ghost, and he's now auditioning in his head for a new and less creepy favourite holiday, he always used to like Valentine's Day . . .

*

It's not that he's not afraid.

(Oh, Kurt thinks, new season Jason Wu, oh I like what he's done with the draping -)

It's not that he's not afraid, as he flat out *runs* with his cloak spilling behind him, ghosting through blank-eyed mannequins falling over each other to stab at him with their sharp plastic hands. An army of unkillable monsters (dressed largely quite tastefully but there are some he refuses to get killed by just because of how ill-conceived their outfit is) wants him dead, and all he has to do is trip, all he has to do is fail to ghost in time, all he needs is a half-second's fuck up and they'll tear him to bloody pieces with their clawing plastic fingers. So, no, it's not that he's not afraid.

He is also aware that invisibility is no longer possible for him, because if those mannequins can't see *him* then they'll kill anyone else who looks like him, on a night when a pretty large proportion of New York has dressed itself in copyright-infringing replicas of his cloak. The option of invisibility is one of the few things that ever makes him feel safe and now it's gone; so, no, it is not that he's not afraid.

He just doesn't have the time to *feel* it now.

Phalanx is here, Phalanx who would get himself hurt to save *him* in a heartbeat, which only gives him *more* to worry about. There are police, people, god he knows they'll be at home snuggled down in bed right now but his throat's gone hard at the thought of those *kids* in his cloak, all those children who could've got hurt if this had happened sooner -

The shattered doors to Saks are up ahead, glass windows and doors spilt like frost across the sidewalk, and he's mostly in front of the mannequins now, just the stragglers at the rear - now at the front, as he's run right through them - lunging at him as he approaches. Inside the store he can see a woman watching, hands at her mouth before she backs away, and he runs right at her as she turns and flees.

The debris of broken glass skitters and crunches underfoot and the woman runs ahead, dark hair bouncing, screaming as chasing mannequins shatter the last remaining fragments of window, knocking displays to the floor as they flood back into a building they just deserted. The Ghost catches her up before she reaches the first counter, grabs her arm and bodily turns her as she tries to swing an elbow at him, catching her arms behind her back. He holds her between him and the approaching mannequins and she *screams* again and he yells, "If this is you then *make them stop*-"

She struggles, tries to kick him and he pulls her arms tighter to her back, growls, "I don't want to hurt you believe me I *don't want to hurt you* but I don't even have to if you don't make them *stop* -"

They're almost on them, and he'll have to ghost them any second to keep them both from being torn to pieces, but the woman is crying, hanging her head and *crying*, weeping, "They have my daughter they have my daughter they have my little -"

The mannequins are slowing. Their expressions don't change, they never have, no grimace of hatred or fury, just a flat passive stare as they slow their run, stagger into each other, bang into counters and send perfume bottles crashing, the air's gone thick with scent. The Ghost backs up a step as the mannequins slow, giving them just a few more seconds, says, "Who has - I can help, you don't have to do this, I can *help* -"

The mannequins slow, slow, slow, like their batteries are running out.

And then they just stand there like they were set up there, faces bland and arms outstretched for the Ghost, who releases the woman's arms so she can put her hands over her face and *cry*.

There's a stool behind one of the perfume counters he sits her on, and gets her a tissue. mannequins are being bumped about at this point, he can hear the voice approaching as mannequins rock from side to side, one falls right over and starts an unfortunate domino effect until they hit a wall - "-excuse me sorry sorry *sorry* did I do that oh god excuse me -"

He calls over, "Are you apologising to mannequins?"

Phalanx pushes his way to the front of the silent crowd, and grins at him from around a mannequin in Burberry. "It's kind of instinctive. Is - she -?"

The Ghost rubs her back a little because *that's* instinctive, he spends a lot of his life comforting crying people. "Tell us what's happening. We can help."

She sucks her shaky breath in, blows her nose. Her voice is a little rough, almost a smoker's quality to it, as she squeezes the tissue at her mouth for a second then says, "Some of the Motta family's *apes* have my little girl. They said - I have to kill you. If I want to see her again. They - they found out I can do this, I can't say *no*, they'll - I can't -"

"Hey, whoa," Phalanx says quietly, backing up as some of the mannequins shiver at their shoulders, coming to life again.

"Where do they have her?" the Ghost says quickly. "I can get her out safely, you know I can. Tell me where she is."

"They'll notice if I'm *not* trying to kill you, do you think I can risk this? She's my *daughter*, they'll- I can't risk relying on *you*, I have to -"

"We can talk this out," Phalanx says, backing right up to stand with them now as the mannequins begin straightening their backs, raising their faces to the Ghost again. Phalanx can't take his eyes from them. "No-one has to do anything, anything . . . permanent."

The Ghost puts a hand to his forehead, teeth clenched in frustration, and then sees -

One of the window displays must have been full of mannequins in Hallowe'en costumes, there's black confetti spilt all over the floor along with the broken glass, trodden-on fall leaves sprayed with glitter, a snapped broomstick. And . . . the remains of a mannequin, pulled apart, plastic limbs torn out and torso and head punched barely recognisable, held vaguely into a human shape by the pale, tight bodysuit it was wearing when destroyed, torn and stretched and sagging empty where the plastic's been punctured. Laying on the floor tangled in it, trodden on and creased, is a dark hooded cloak.

He says, "They aren't going to know that you're not trying to kill me. As far as they know that's still exactly what you're doing."

"You think there won't be people watching, you think they won't -"

She stops in sheer surprise when he just walks over to that crumpled cloak, lifts it and shakes the glass and glitter from it, then turns to Phalanx and flaps it around his shoulders. Phalanx blinks bemused at him while he fastens it at his throat, and flips the hood up. "Oh," he says, eyes lighting. "I get it. Not gonna lie, not the first Hallowe'en I've dressed up as you."

"Stalker," the Ghost says fondly, tweaking his hood, turning to the woman again. "The mannequins will chase him, and I'll get your daughter to safety. All you have to do is tell me where she is." The woman stares at him, red-eyed and hands still twitching, squeezing around the balled-up tissue. "If this goes wrong," she whispers. "My daughter -"

"I swear," he says, holding her eyes from under the shadow of the hood, "I will let them kill me before I'll let them hurt her. I *promise*. And - I'm leaving something pretty precious to me with you as 'insurance', anyway." He drops his eyes to the side, and his hand finds Phalanx's under his cloak, squeezes; Phalanx squeezes back, and keeps watching the woman. The Ghost wets his lips. "Believe me, you're not the only one - with someone you care about in danger over this."

She stares at them, for quite a long time, then clears her throat. "How old are you two, you look . . . god you're children. Why are you doing this, you can't just hide it and live a normal life -?"

The Ghost says, "I don't know how you define 'normal' for people like us. Tell me where she is and tell me her name, I don't want to scare her."

She watches them, and swallows, and squeezes the tissue in her hand. Then she says, low and rasping, "She's called Beth. They've got her - there are three men with guns in our apartment, out in Elmhurst."

Phalanx murmurs, "Where's -?"

"It's about a million miles away, god, I'll have to cab-surf. It'll take a while. Can you - can you hold them off that long, can you keep yourself safe -?"

"Hey." He squeezes the Ghost's hand again. "Shields, remember? Keeping myself safe I can do. It's fine. You - be careful."

The Ghost watches his eyes, all warm and sure and - there's a depth in them he can't bring himself to think about, the depth of feeling Phalanx has for *him*, it makes him too light-headed to consider it. "Stay safe," he whispers, running his thumb over Phalanx's gloved knuckles, and Phalanx watches his eyes and smiles, just gently, putting his other hand over the Ghost's for a second before they both let go. The Ghost turns to the woman again, says, "What's your address?"

*

Once the Ghost has vanished, headed invisible off into the night, Phalanx shakes his own cloak out a little - weird to wear, feeling it touching his back and sides like this - and says, "So, how do they work? You - bring them to life? Like zombies?"

"Like golems," she says. "You're lucky it's mannequins and not statues, they leave a *mess* behind when they start smashing things. I give them one thought to live for. All they can do is act out that thought." Her mouth twitches a haunted little smile. "Usually it's just dolls for my daughter's games."

"But you gave these the thought . . ."

She shrugs, brushes her hair back a little, trying to settle herself, smoothing her skirt. "Kill him."

"Okay. Can I - maybe get a head start on them before you wake them up again? I need to be out in the open if we need witnesses anyway. I'm - Phalanx, by the way."

She sits straight-backed and composed now, though still with the scrunched up tissue in one hand. "Shelby," she says.

"Nice to meet you, Shelby. Give me to the count of twenty?"

She raises her eyebrows, and he grins, turns and begins hurrying out through the crowded mannequins again, back out into the cold of the October night - after midnight, November now and bitter in the air - holding the hood over his face with one hand, cloak flapping up as he runs.

At his back, the first mannequins begin their shudder of waking.

*

She wakes up again when the men start laughing and then arguing about something on the TV. The TV's too loud anyway and she only just went to sleep, and now she's awake she's scared again, and tired, so tired, and so so *scared*.

She makes herself small in her bed, clutching Blue Kitty close. Their voices vibrate in her bones, like they get into the floor and into the walls and rattle her bed, rattle her body, like they're in every part of the apartment, making every part of the apartment not safe. Nowhere's safe. They made her mommy cry and leave her alone with them. Her mommy promised she'd come back and pushed her hair back and kissed her head, and left tears on her. And now she's in the dark in her room on her own and there are bad men out there shouting at the too-loud TV and she's already cried so much her pillow is wet -

In the pile of toys in the corner, her light-up Tinkerbell lights up. She blinks, wipes her eyes, looks at it, as Tinkerbell's wings flicker and flash a few times, and then go dark again. She stares, but Tinkerbell is quiet now. But then the nightlight shaped like a tulip turns itself on, giving the room a rosy glow. The men didn't turn it on when they closed the door on her, and she was too scared to get out of bed to turn it on. All she could do was cry in the dark.

In the pink light, her Ariel doll sits up from the pile, and lifts one of her arms, and waves at her.

Beth swallows, and lifts a hand out from the covers, and waves back.

Ariel puts a hand up to her mouth, a *ssh*.

Beth blinks damp eyes, and puts a finger up to her own mouth. *Sshh*.

And slowly a man fades into view in her room, sitting cross-legged on her floor, a man in pale clothes wearing a dark cloak. He lifts Ariel, and makes her wave again, and Beth - smiles, a little, and points at the chalkboard in the corner, where she's drawn a ghost for Hallowe'en. She drew it in purple because she likes purple best.

The Ghost looks across, and *smiles*. Then he whispers, "Hi, Beth, your mom sent me to get you. You need to dress warm, it's cold out, do you have a jacket in here?"

He helps her, silently while the men laugh in the next room, into her puffy red jacket and winter boots, and ties a scarf around her neck. She clamps Blue Kitty under one arm and Ariel under the other, and he lifts her a little awkwardly to his side, hikes her higher on his hip. "If you close your eyes," he whispers, "I can make us invisible. This might be a bit scary but I promise we'll be invisible, they won't see us. Okay?"

She squeezes Blue Kitty's arm, and closes her eyes. And he starts walking.

Something - rushes past them. And then the TV is much louder, the men's voices are louder, they're in the other room - her heart thumps into her dry throat but he just keeps walking, and the men's voices don't change, they just laugh at whatever stupid game show is on the TV. And then there's another rush and their voices are muffled again, and he whispers, "You can open your eyes now, Beth."

They're outside, in the hallway. He lets her down and holds her hand - waits patiently while she gets Blue Kitty and Ariel carefully stuffed under one arm - then says, "We're going to need to catch a couple of buses, and we have to do it invisible, so you need to be really quiet. Can you do that?"

"Yes." she says. Like being quiet is *difficult*.

He smiles again, says, "You've been really brave. You get that from your mom."

She wipes her eyes, because she's been crying again. He crouches down and brushes some tears away with his thumb, says, "That was really scary. But you were very brave. I'll tell your mom how brave you were."

She - smiles, a little, and he smiles back and that makes her smile bigger. Then he stands up again and holds her hand as they walk for the door, and she says, "Can we be invisible again?"

"If you promise to be very quiet."

"Yes. I promise!"

He makes a little noise like a laugh but he sighs it, and then she can't see her own arms anymore, she can't see Blue Kitty and Ariel even though she's holding them, and she skips a little as they walk, and this time he does laugh out loud.

*

The street is a wreck of plastic, and Phalanx is out of breath.

He has to stop for some time just resting in his shield, sitting with his arms on his bent knees and panting hard, while plastic fingers claw at the slippery green hexagons and blank dead eyes stare right through him. They scratch at the shields until their fingers snap and then they thump with their hands until their wrists snap and then they beat at it with their cut-off arms until he has to close his eyes under the hood, *god*. And he's surrounded, now. He doesn't know how long it's been, he doesn't know why the sky isn't light again yet, but he took out as many as he could - destroying the chest seems to be the important thing, not the head but the heart where Shelby's words make them wake - littered the street with limbs and heads and torn-up clothing and still they kept coming. They are tireless. He is *tired*.

And now he's surrounded. If he drops the shield, they'll fall on him in a second. He wouldn't have the time to take them down before they - but if he can't drop the shield then he can't do anything, he's stuck, trapped in this little green orb while they thump themselves to pieces against it, he puts his hands over his eyes to not see it. It's horrible and it won't stop and he can't escape. He could; he could take the cloak off and they'd lose interest in him instantly. But then they'd only go to find someone else wearing the cloak to kill, and he doesn't know who they might find . . .

He tries to ignore them, just get his breath back. They're eerily silent, they make no noise but for the beating of their hands and arms off the shields. They never stop, it never slows down. And he's beginning to realise, now, because he's simply never been in this situation before - the shields *do* wear him out. He's never pushed himself this hard, and now he knows that it takes time and it takes a lot of effort, but he can't keep them up forever. God at some point he'll just pass out from exhaustion anyway and then he's *screwed*. But there is effort in this and he can't keep it up indefinitely, not forever, he's - if he is a hero then he's not *that* sort of hero, or not yet, or not ever, he just can't be. He's still human. He's still incredibly human and vulnerable.

He swallows, because his mouth is dry.

The Ghost warned him about this. *It won't make you more than you are now, Blaine*. No. He has this power but he's still him and he'll still falter, eventually, still fail. He's not a god, he's not a comic book character, he's not the Ghost as some of the world thinks of him, he's not more than human. All he is is himself in a shield surrounded by evil undead (*unliving*) mannequins, alone and exhausted and cotton-mouthed *scared* however much he tries to ignore it because god if he fails then the *way* they'll kill him -

Don't think about that. The Ghost needs you to do this. Do you think he's never done this, pushed himself past whatever he thought his limits were? He went back into that burning building thirteen times, he only stopped because it collapsed and took him with it. If you die like this he won't just be sad, he'll be *disappointed*. It's difficult and you don't want to but you're still alive and no-one else can do this -

He clenches his hands, takes a breath in, lifts his head. And the mannequins aren't clawing at his shield anymore. He stares, at their still shapes, hands still lifted to beat and scratch, eyes unfocused on him, unmoving as plastic. He stands up, turns to take them all in, all still, all dead. Then, drawing his breath slowly in, he drops the shields.

The mannequins just stand there, still in the night.

Now they've been trying to kill him for a few hours he's really wary of touching them, pokes very cautiously at one until it falls over and knocks a bunch more down with it with a clatter of stiff limbs. He picks himself over them, looks back at the cop cars still flashing their lights in the night, looks across at Saks -

Where inside the shattered store frontage Shelby is kneeling, hugging a little girl in a red coat, and the Ghost is running towards him while Phalanx lets his hood down. The Ghost's hug knocks him into a spin, no-one has ever thrown themselves so *utterly* at him before, grabbing him close and knocking him staggering around, choking at his ear, "I was so worried you have no idea -"

He folds his arms around him, cups his head close through his hood. "I'm okay. I'm okay."

The Ghost pulls back just a little, arms still around his shoulders, stares into his face - Phalanx thinks he's about to say something, but then he blinks and looks back at Shelby and the girl instead. "We need to get them out of the city. It's not safe for them here."

All business, unpeeling his arms from him, no hero's kiss for Phalanx right now. He looks across at the cop cars, at the dark figures behind their barrier, swallows and nods. "Yeah."

But he does take the Ghost's hand, to walk back to that small frightened family with him. He thinks he deserves *that* much.

*

Shelby and Beth they sent away in a cab to the airport, to catch the first flight to, of all places, Ohio. "I have some connections, we can lay low for a while." she said, arms still around Beth's neck as Beth stood in front of her legs, staring up open-mouthed at the two very dishevelled heroes by this point in the evening. Morning. "It's going to be an adventure, isn't it Bethie?"

"Are you going to be okay?"

She shrugged, smiled tightly. "If they know then other people could know, we wouldn't be safe here anyway. All we can do is go somewhere quiet and try to *be* quiet. We'll be fine. Won't we, honey?" She stroked Beth's hair back. "We'll be absolutely fine."

The Ghost said quietly, "She was very brave." and Beth leaned her head into her mother's knee, too sleepy to keep it up otherwise.

Alone again Phalanx rubs his eyes, yawns, leans into the Ghost's side. They'd fled the scene, invisible, heading south; they're now a lot closer to Kurt's place than Blaine's. "Call it a night now?" he says, as the Ghost's arm settles around his side, rubs at his ribs. "M'tired."

"It'll take you forever to get home."

"nother one of those things you never think about if you're *not* a superhero. Can't exactly get a cab in costume." He smiles, keeps his eyes closed, head on the Ghost's shoulder. "S'okay. Sleep in tomorrow."

The Ghost says, "You could sleep at mine."

Phalanx opens his eyes.

It's a casual sort of offering - a very carefully casual offering - but there's still a certain inflection on 'sleep', a little strengthening of the word, an unthreatening warning that all that is on offer is specifically *sleep*. Phalanx - smiles, and wraps his arms around the Ghost's waist without lifting his head. "My hero," he says, and the Ghost laughs a little, and his fingers comb through his hair so good he could just go to sleep leaning against him in an alleyway, on his feet but in his arms . . .

*

Kurt wakes up on Saturday morning with a boy in his bed.

They'd rolled, at some point in the night, Blaine shifting away from him and Kurt turning with him, so now Kurt's draped along his back, their feet tangled lower down, his nose against Blaine's shoulder blade in one of Kurt's old t-shirts. He spends some time just laying there, doing nothing more than breathing and blinking now and then, warm and settled and drowsy still, and happy if all he does is go back to sleep, holding Blaine like this.

But then Blaine shifts, stretches his feet free, shifts and turns under the covers to lie on his back. "Hi," he says, rubbing one eye, grins without even opening his eyes yet, and Kurt stares at his face - he already needs to shave, his scuff becomes visible a lot earlier than Kurt's does, his hair's all sleep-mussed and his skin is all so close and *there*, he's so *real*, so astonishingly heavy and solid on Kurt's mattress -

"Hi," he whispers, and Blaine tilts his head, squints an eye open at him, rolls his neck so he's looking at the ceiling again.

"If I have morning breath will you be grossed out?"

He immediately puts a hand in front of his own mouth. "Do I -?"

Blaine looks sleepily across at him, lifts his hand and pulls Kurt's down. "Nothing about you could ever gross me out."

He kisses him once, and quite gently, then says, "I need to pee insanely much." and climbs over Kurt to get out of bed, bouncing him on the mattress and making him laugh, swatting after him with a hand. He blows another kiss from the bedroom doorway, grinning, then wanders off in Kurt's t-shirt and sweatpants for the bathroom. Kurt just lays there a moment longer, savouring the heat of his body still in the mattress, playing the warm edge of the duvet that had laid over him between his fingers.

Saturday morning, they missed their Friday night coffee date with Mr Conti in all last night's craziness. They'll go another day in the week. He'll scold but he won't mind, and he'll want to know everything that happened, and he'll talk baseball with Phalanx for a while, and the Ghost can just sit peacefully with his coffee and listen to them, to how surrounded by people he is, how entirely the opposite of alone he is. Like he's finally sitting inside in the warmth of the building he's been staring in through the windows of for his whole life.

Rachel's not around, she must have stayed at Finn's last night. He's in the kitchen when Blaine re-emerges, pulling things from the fridge, saying, "I thought I'd make French toast, I don't normally do breakfast, I never have time, just chug some coffee and then snack all morning which is awful you don't even need to tell me if I wasn't burning a crazy amount of calories every evening I'd be the size of a beach ball and I don't even want to think about -"

Blaine's arms wrap his stomach from behind, as Kurt stands there with the egg box in one hand and a stick of butter in the other, and he nuzzles his cheek comfortable against the back of Kurt's neck. He mumbles there, still half-asleep and so warm and so happy, "I love you."

Kurt's heart stops. His heart stops like it's stopped time, so that it can always be this second in which Blaine told him that he loved him and Kurt, disarmed of all defences first thing in the morning, believed him.

Then it beats again, and he breathes, "I love you too."

Blaine says, "Do you need help with anything?"

"No, I've - got it. You can, um, lay the breakfast bar if you like, plates are in the cupboard underneath -"

Plates clatter behind him, and the butter is pale in the frying pan before it melts and froths. And Kurt holds the spatula in numbed fingers, like his heart feels too much right now for any other feeling in his body to compete.

I love you. I love you too.

He feels so dazed, like he's been waiting his entire life for Blaine to say that, and now it's happened he doesn't know what happens next. All he can imagine happening next is Blaine.

I love you. I love you too.

Maybe it will all be okay after all . . .

Chapter Ten

Halloween is my new favorite holiday SO MUCH GHOSTLANX AJKEFGLHASEURISDJKL

So it took forfuckinever but I managed to get that gif of the Ghost spin-hugging Phalanx almost seamless so you can watch them twirl forever. Wheeeee~

God it's not just us, is it? They're totally all over each other, oh my god they love each other so muuuuhuhuhuhuch. And I love them even more oh my god ;_;

We must only get photos and footage of like, 5% of what they actually do on a night. If anything actually happened to either of them we'd probably never even find out about it. We'd just wonder why we never saw them after that, or only saw one of them alone from then on.

The list of things that are not okay is headed by THAT POST

*That post is so far past the line it can't even see the line. The line is a *dot* to that post.*

After Midnight, R, pre-Ghostlanx, a meditation on fear and promises and the dark.

omg blackbindings updated omg omg omg

That awkward moment when someone's rec list is full of their own stuff ͡_͡;

To my anonymous phantroll: it's really nice that you like Phalanx so much, really it is, but there is no need in hell to insult the Ghost in the process of it, he's been laying his ass on the line ON HIS OWN for five years. So basically you need to take a long hard look at basic manners and your personality and how those two things don't align, and gtfo my blog. Why is it so hard for fandom to remember that loving something doesn't mean you have to hate everything else?

^ This. Always. This.

Why was Phalanx wearing a Ghost cloak when he was fighting those dummies? Is he a fanghost too, did he dress up as his favorite hero for Halloween? ;)

*My theory is it was some kind of plan they had. Like the Ghost was taking out the big bad while all the 'henchmen' (henchmanikins? ^_^;) thought they were fighting the Ghost when *actually* it was Phalanx.*

Can someone fic this please because I need it. I particularly need to know what happened after that grabby-needy hug. If there could be more needy touching that would be really really nice <3

Dangle the prompt in front of Draxie and see if she bites.

ew ew ew mannequins hate them hate them love the superboyfriends even more now thank you for killing the nasty horrible horrible HORRIBLES thank you boys <3

Echo, Echo, Echo, part I of II, R, Ghostlanx AU: the Ghost is a real ghost, doomed to haunt the city where he died. It's a long dark night alone before a museum puts the remains of a Greek soldier on display - but it's a temporary exhibition, and in the length of the afterlife, they barely have the space of a breath to make it count.

Oh god, Draxie, why, why, why would you do that ;_;

Reposting the Ghost Caramelldansen to try to counter all of the SHATTERING OF FANGHOST HEARTS GOING ON TODAY OMFG

can someone add a phalanx to that already? ^^

God the way he hugs him though it's just like asjgfljkasdKISS ALREADY

ikr like lotr all over again JUST SHAG WTF

Mirrored and looped this gif of the Ghost turning, now you can watch his ass for all of eternity ahhh . . .

Reblog if you've ever been rescued by the Ghost. Let Figgins know what an assbutt he's being. We love you, spooky <3

*He wished me a happy Halloween and everything. Doubt he'll remember the chubby guy hilariously failing to run for his life and sweating right through his Ghost costume, but dude, whatever anyone says, you *rock*.*

*Can I just point out that if they *are* having sex, they're unlikely to be doing it where other people can record it?*

Well now that's just selfish of them

i wish puckzilla would break out of jail again

life ruiners oh god the way they look at each other brb going to try to get myself mugged on the offchance they'll rescue me <3

*

Quite a lot of the ways Kurt defines himself are negatives; what other people think he is, he is profoundly not.

Rachel thinks he's a conflicted commitmentphobe who leads on nice guys while having anonymous sex with not-nice guys on the side. Kurt doesn't even know where to start correcting her on that entire concept, and mostly gets on with Rachel by internal seething and ignoring fifty percent of what she actually says.

His dad thinks that he's too innocent for what he faces every night, too fragile for it, too easily hurt, when Kurt knows that it's fragility of feeling that lets him get by; all the suffering he sees is what drives him on, to survive and keep helping. If he didn't feel it as deeply as he did then he couldn't help as much as he does, and he can't, can't want to feel it less when it *should* feel exactly this much . . .

Finn thinks that he's being selfish, not thinking about what his family goes through while he's doing this every night. Kurt thinks about his family all the time. He protects people so they can go back to *their* families, so other people don't have to stand at a graveside and learn what death means before they really know what life means. He knows what it's like. He hopes his own family understands that, and will forgive him, eventually.

Blaine thinks that he's brave, and noble, and heroic.

And Kurt . . . Kurt tries not to think about himself at all.

Despite that he has developed some self-impressions over the years, you sort of have to when you're stuck in your own head all the time, dealing with being yourself. For a long time he's thought of himself as someone who doesn't - can't - lean on anyone else, because he doesn't have the right, because there's so much weight on his shoulders that if he leaned on someone else he'd crush them both. He's thought of himself as more of a conduit than a person, someone who does things for other people, his own life merely a pretence to be kept up before he slips back into his *real* life, mask on in the dark and looking for suffering to stop. He's thought of himself as someone who does not want and does not need intimacy of any real but some very particular kinds; but Kurt Hummel is not a eunuch . . .

It thumps in every part of his body sometimes, the arousal. Blaine in his arms and pressing close, the smell of him and Kurt's fingers in his hair, he feels on the edge of fever, like Blaine's fingers might press through his skin and overload the circuit, blow electricity through all his nerves. The balance between fear and want, bright and skittery inside, the fear makes it *more* somehow, he's weak for him, exposed for him, he already knows that he's in far too deep and anything Blaine did to him at this point, Kurt would, powerless, just take it. Finally understanding exactly how alone he's been he couldn't survive going back to it, to *that*. And he knows all the things he's risking, the knife edge of telling-him/not-telling-him, the pressure of his secrets, he's never told anyone so how can he know what it might cost to give them up -?

(Not him, not him, please please not *him*)

It would be simpler if it wasn't for the want. It would be something to logically consider if it wasn't for the warming of his body, in very particular places, whenever he thinks of Blaine, of Phalanx, of his arms his thighs his mouth. Because one thing he does know is that he has no right in the world to take his relationship with Blaine any further *without* telling him. He didn't have the right to come this far without saying it but they're here now and he can't let it get worse. But how much does he want to tell him because god he needs to tell him he needs to know it'll still be okay he needs it out of him it's *poisoning* him clotting his insides black like it is - and how much does he want to tell him for Blaine's sake, because Blaine should know, because Blaine deserves to understand what his choice actually *is* in choosing Kurt, what Kurt actually is - and how much does he want to tell him just because his own starving skin is *screaming* to be touched by him?

This would be so much easier if he just didn't *need* things.

Like relief, after years of holding it down, relief that it's out of him like shrapnel from his side. Like knowing that Blaine loves *him*, everything he is, not just the half of the story he's actually been told. Like

sex, which he wants so badly with him and only him that he can't even bring himself to think about it, his face heats dark and his chest strains quick and between his legs everything goes sharp and keen and far too hot with feeling . . .

Sharing a bed with him that one night was the most *peace* he's felt in such a long time, Blaine there, sturdy and warm under the covers with him, Blaine in the morning so trusting and happy and drowsy-bright like a woken puppy. But three weeks later Kurt can't bring himself to extend the offer again, however much he wants to some nights, some broken early mornings. He knows what it means to most people, the offer of spending the night. He would love, dearly love, to settle into a bed with him again and just to sleep so safe. But he knows what the offer might represent to Blaine, and he can't trust his own body anymore, Kurt Hummel is not a eunuch, he doesn't know what might *happen* if Blaine was in his bed.

He wants, and wishes he didn't, and wishes he could give in, and wishes Blaine would throw all chivalry out of the window and take the decision out of Kurt's hands, and wishes Blaine would just hold him and tell him that whatever Kurt is he'll still love him. Even if this sad ill-repaired wreck Kurt is is all he can ever be, Blaine will still want him, Blaine will still love him, and Blaine will hold him while he sleeps without it deafening Kurt with how much it represents his own complicated failure, again, to just be *normal*.

People think that Kurt Hummel is prissy and precious and uptight.

Kurt wishes that was all he had to deal with.

*

What if Kurt never wants to have sex?

It's not that Blaine is a Neanderthal and values his relationships by how much he gets to get off in them. It's not that he thinks that he's more highly sexed than anyone else, that he's over-hormonal, that he's some kind of hussy; he's never had sex outside of a fairly serious relationship, which means that in his entire life, he's slept with two people. If anything statistics might define him as the opposite of a hussy. It's just . . .

He just desperately, desperately wants to touch his boyfriend, and he's so confused about how *that* makes him feel like a bad person.

He researches, for the first time in his life, asexuality. He doesn't know if he doesn't quite believe that Kurt is asexual because Kurt isn't, or if he just doesn't want to admit to himself that, yes, maybe Kurt never wants to have sex. Maybe Kurt doesn't just take these things glacially slowly. Maybe Kurt doesn't take these things at *all*, and maybe Blaine is just going to have to not be a massive dick about that.

(But Kurt looks at him a particular way, parts his lips a particular way, his body is *open* a particular way when he faces Blaine, he hears how his breath changes and he doesn't understand . . .)

And god he wants so *badly* to touch him, he wants his hands all over him, he wants to submit himself to making Kurt feel amazing, he wants that closeness, that sense of sacredness with Kurt, the *fun* of it, the open, vulnerable, nothing to hide behind *connection* of it. He wants to kneel naked at his feet. He wants to mouth his most secret places, he wants to know what he looks like all over, he wants to trace over every centimetre of his gorgeous perfect unmapped body with his own skin, he *loves* him and he hates how it makes him feel that he wants to make love with him. He hates the guilt and shame and solitude of his desires, hates feeling like a teenager again, trying to convince himself all over again that there is nothing wrong with him and he is not, *not*, diseased, dirty, *wrong*. All it is is love. All he wants to do is *love* Kurt.

He's not the one who gets to define how Kurt wants to be loved.

(He knows Kurt sometimes actively freaks out about being touched, he knows Kurt is afraid to be put into restrictive situations, he knows the patience and struggle it took for Kurt to accept Blaine's kiss, let alone anything else. And maybe he does know what it means, that it's not a lack of want but actual *fear*, but he doesn't think about it. He doesn't. Because he can't. Because he doesn't know and he can't know and he can't think about it and he won't. Not Kurt. Not -)

He should ask him. He really should and he knows it. He should sit down with Kurt and say, I know this isn't something you're comfortable talking about but for the sake of both of us I think we need to. Get it out in the open, Blaine hates secrets, just talk about it, talking is good for you. But. *But*.

Kurt isn't comfortable talking about it, he knows that, and Kurt reacts to being put into situations he's uncomfortable with with varying degrees of *panic*. Blaine can't bring himself to say to Kurt, Can we talk about this? because he's ashamed to admit how much he wants him if he faces Kurt not wanting him back, and because he's too scared of how much he'll scare Kurt in saying it out loud - and because he's too scared of what Kurt might *tell* him. He's just scared of everything, always has been, some hero, doesn't Kurt need more from him than this . . . ?

He always tells himself he can wait one more day. He can wait one more day before he puts the both of them through it all, one more day, he's waited this long, one more day won't kill them.

One more day, one more day, one more day.

How many more days?

*

It's been a fairly quiet evening so far, maybe the cold spell has sent the city's criminals shivering back indoors. The Ghost sits next to Phalanx on the edge of a building, legs swinging, hands around their coffee cups, the little electronic device occasionally stuttering out police radio traffic perched between them. There's music, some oldies station, playing from out of someone's open window a couple of storeys below them, just quiet on the edge of their hearing, and the city is dazzling all around them, crisp November cold and a fantastic amount of lights. And the Ghost feels, as much as he ever can, peaceful. Phalanx is humming along with the music, lifting his cup so his smiling breath shifts the visible steam over it before he drinks, and maybe this isn't how other people hang out with the person they love, but for them it works. Normality is negotiable, and Phalanx's elbow and hip rest against his side, and he is perfectly, in this moment, content. What could in his life ever be better than this?

The song changes below them, and whoever's in the room with it suddenly hikes the volume up, and it's *The Way You Look Tonight*, the Sinatra version. Phalanx scrabbles to put his cup down, grabs the Ghost's hands, pulls him up while he's saying, "Phala-" and grabs his waist, spins him into a rooftop dance and he just *laughs*, hips bopped along with Phalanx's, cloak whirling around them like a ball gown.

And the little radio squawks, *"Back-up required on West Forty-seventh repeat break-in in process back-up requested on West Forty-seventh-"*

They break instantly, skidding back to its side. *"Keep that breathless charm,"* Sinatra sings, as Phalanx makes the path of shield to skim them away. *"Won't you please arrange it -"*

The Ghost scoops the radio up, tugs his hood straight, hops on behind him already grabbing for his waist for grip, those shields are like oil-covered glass they're so slippery. He turns them invisible so no-one can see the superheroes 'flying' on their way, the wind peeling the Ghost's cloak out long behind them.

It's one of the jewellery stores, alarm screaming, street level at the base of a tall broad building; its doors are blown out and there's smoke coiling away in the breeze, while cops are crouched behind a couple of cars with their guns out, the debris of some explosion in front of them. The Ghost keeps hold of Phalanx's hand when they're on the street, keeps them invisible, they can't trust the police to be on their side. "Blew their way in," Phalanx murmurs. There's not much broken glass on the street, it's all on the inside of the store, glittering like a snowdrift on the carpets.

The Ghost can hear sirens at a distance. "Let's try to get this taken care of before more cops complicate things," he says, and heads for the open entrance to the building. Inside it's dark, there's the looming gloom some balcony-level over the first floor of the store, and the alarm is disorientatingly loud, and most of the display cases are empty for the night anyway. Whoever they're looking for will be looking for the safe . . .

The smoke's thinning inside, and there's no point being invisible in the dark, in the smoke, their unseen bodies will only show up where the smoke *isn't*. He drops Phalanx's hand and turns visible again, narrowing his eyes in the dark, there's a back room door open behind the counter and he can hear noise from inside it. Phalanx strides forward, shields flickering and vanishing around him, and the Ghost walks silently at his side, murmurs, "Careful . . ."

"Shields," Phalanx sings softly, as they round the counter and, slower now, approach the back room.

It's an office, desk overturned and blackened by a blast, computer crashed to the floor, paper everywhere - and there's a woman with a flashlight trying to break into the safe, and a very nervous looking man with a gun next to her. His eyes go wide at the sight of them and he fumbles, swings the gun to them - Phalanx's shields ripple, the Ghost is instantly intangible - and he stutters, "Honey, Honey Badger -"

The woman kneeling in front of the safe turns to look over her shoulder and says, "Oh, oops! You caught me." and pops the pin from a little grenade with a smile, tossing it at them.

Phalanx's shields surround them and the grenade bursts with a flash, instantly blooming the room full of smoke, so thick everything beyond the shields is invisible. The Ghost had ducked his head under his hood but Phalanx curses and slaps a hand over his eyes, blinded by that half-second's light, taking a clumsy step backwards as footsteps hurry for the exit. There's no time to do anything but chase, the Ghost snaps, "Drop it!" and the shields vanish, and smoke fills their tiny sanctuary of clear air instantly, so thick he can't see Phalanx at his side.

He leaps forward and hears, "Freeze!" from outside, the cops, god he can't see a thing and he doesn't know what - he hears a commotion behind himself, Phalanx's voice and that nervous man whimpering, "Not the face-!" before there's a clattering noise and as the Ghost turns, tries to head back blind for Phalanx, he stumbles his step on the guy's dropped gun.

A hand grabs his. "Come on. Cops, we need to get *out* of here."

He looks up at Phalanx's face, fuzzy through the smoke, his breath sucks in with relief and - comes bitter and black, too much smoke, he's coughing too much to say *just let me ghost us down*. Phalanx pulls at his hand, says, "Come on!" and runs, dragging the Ghost with a lurch after him. He coughs into his free glove, and hopes to hell Phalanx knows where he's -

Phalanx runs them to the *side* of the store - he can hear the confusion of cops up ahead, and the Ghost thinks they'll just ghost through the wall but before he can pull him forward, Phalanx bangs something that lights up, and elevator doors open. "Going up," he says, tugging the Ghost in, stabbing the button to close the doors behind them; smoke coils in through the doors but then they close with a smooth rumble, and the air is clearer and the Ghost's stomach drops as they rise, fast.

"What are you -? That woman -"

"She has to get out through the cops, they'll stop her. We need to get on the roof, get some air, we couldn't've got out through all of them -"

"I could've ghosted us down." He rubs his eyes, blurry with smoke. "Wonderful. Well, we were an *enormous* amount of help in all that."

"I brought the stupid sidekick down, cops'll get him at least even if she gets away - what was her name - the Honey Badger?"

"One of the dumbest names for a criminal I have ever heard," the Ghost mutters. "Almost as bad as the damned Pink Dagger."

"Dumb enough to get clean away from *you*, huh?" Phalanx says, and the Ghost blinks at him, opens his mouth, but the doors ping and slide open. "Come on!"

He has his wrist again, jerking him into a sprint along - some corridor, bare painted walls and cold floor, banging his shoulder into a doorway so it bursts open and then they're out on the roof, the Ghost dizzy with sudden cold and disorientation. "Are you okay? You're being -"

Phalanx pulls him further out onto the rooftop. "I'm being what? You don't get pumped from the fight?"

"You are acting really *strange*. Did you - are you okay?"

Phalanx touches his chest and puts on a . . . strangely smiling expression, the Ghost doesn't know how to read it. "You're that worried about me?"

". . . Phalanx -"

"Call me by my name."

"What?"

"My name," Phalanx says, and puts his arms over the Ghost's shoulders. "Call me my *name*, why not? There's no-one to hear it."

"Did you hit your head taking that guy down?" He puts a gloved hand into Phalanx's hair, feeling for a bump. "You are a pain for spewing personal information when you hit your head, did you -?"

"Maybe I just like you saying my name." He's turning them now, and the Ghost - feels uncertain and uneasy and something is wrong and he doesn't know what, he tries to take a step back and Phalanx has him by the wrists, pulling him around so he can't stop and focus. "Phalanx, *stop* it, did you - breathe in something-?"

"You're not the boss of me." He bodily jerks him sideways and the Ghost's cloak jolts, his foot catches the lip of the building and his breath sucks in, suddenly held by the arms leaning over the rear edge of the building, one boot over empty air, feeling - a gulf of emptiness below, and the wrong tilt of his own weight. "I'm not your little sidekick, you know that?"

All he can do is stare at him. He hasn't got enough of his mind together to feel anything, really, just - so much confusion, and that drop underneath. "Phalanx - ?"

"What?" Phalanx says, watching his eyes, his smile all teeth and horribly proud, and the Ghost's stomach drops again, slower than that elevator journey a million years ago when the world was something he understood, his stomach drops slower, lower, opening up hollow space behind it. "New York doesn't need two superheroes and let's face it, spooky, it was never going to be creepy old you. It's just progress, you've just been made terminally redundant is all."

He probably should do something. Ghost (he would fall through his grip and backwards). Fight (they might both go over the edge). Haunt him (haunt *him*?). Say something (. . . what can he say?). All he can do is whisper through numbed lips, "I don't understand."

Phalanx's brows nip, and his mouth is a mocking smile. "Oh," he croons, "of course you don't. Well, it's okay, you've got until you hit the sidewalk to work it out."

He doesn't understand. Him - he doesn't understand. It's not funny if it's a joke, it's not *funny* and -

(. . . he couldn't have been more deadly to the Ghost if he'd been designed to be.)

He says again, numbness spread to his throat, "I don't *understand*," but -

No.

He knows that he does.

No. Because - it doesn't make any sense, it doesn't - he could have killed him in his *sleep* if he'd wanted to and why did he wait until now, why *now* when he's got the Ghost's heart shocked and bleeding at his feet, why didn't he wait a little longer until he'd sealed the deal and got his body out of it too, why -

No guy's ever been willing to wait for him. No-one's ever waited *this* long before. And he does understand, pulse fluttering in his throat, chest tightening, all his insides gone so cold and so heavy like things fallen out of space; why would he wait any longer, why would he want to, why would this ever be *real*, when the Ghost isn't worth the time . . . ?

Stupid, desperate, lonely, *pathetic*. He must have looked so laughably, pitifully easy to fool. And he must have - *laughed* at him in all his ugly ungainly weakness and neediness - he still can't believe - not him not him he doesn't *understand* -

But you were the kindest person I'd ever met, he thinks, and he feels like he's already falling because one step sideways and this is too cruel to be real, this can't, it can't, I don't understand . . .

Too late for all that. He'll die whether he understands or not. He thinks, like he's fainting, *Dad*, as Phalanx says, "So long, spooky." and his grip slips on his wrists.

- and the door bangs open a second time, and the Ghost just has time to look across at - Phalanx, out of breath and stumbling in his run and screaming like his lungs might crack with the force of it, "*No-!*" and he doesn't even have the time to register the confusion before his wrists are released and he's pitched over the edge, open air, and his cloak snaps upwards like a noose.

*

He'd followed the Ghost's coughing until it cut off and his blind hands in the smoke found the door of an elevator, and no way of calling it back. So he cursed and fumbled and found the door to the staircase, and he *ran*. He ran until his side was stabbing and his breath was scouring the hollow shape of his lungs, ran ran ran up he doesn't even know how many flights of stairs with no idea where he'd gone without him or why until he burst out onto the roof -

And saw someone in his costume, someone in his *face*, look back at him, holding the Ghost out over the edge of the building, the Ghost staring dumbly back drained pale as if there was no blood left in him, weak and white as a . . .

He dropped so quickly it was like a trick. Like maybe he'd vanished that way he does instead. Because you can't make a human being vanish like that. You can't make a human being stop existing so quickly and so easily, like snapping your fingers. You can't do that to a person.

Only someone just did, and Phalanx doesn't even think. He throws a shield at them like a shell.

It punches the other *him* in the stomach and sends him crumpled in half off the edge of the building with such a strange *high* scream and *then* he thinks, *then* his breath catches in again, and almost instinctively he throws up a catcher's mitt of shields lower in the air, hears the thump of his breath as they land in it. And -

And his legs don't want to walk him to that side of the roof to see what's below.

He's a ghost. He can turn intangible, he can turn invisible, he can scare the *mind* out of people, but the one thing he can't do, the one thing Phalanx knows damn well he can't do, is fly. He doesn't know how many storeys up they are. He knows it's enough. He doesn't want to - see. He doesn't want to look down and have to spend the rest of his life knowing what Kurt's split body leaking blood on the sidewalk looks like.

He makes his hands go into fists, and he makes his legs walk.

He can hear the panicked panting as he gets closer, draws his breath in until his chest is full, leans over. He can't see down beyond the bowl of his shields, holding up - that woman in black, the Honey Badger, staring up at him. "Shape-shifter," he mumbles, not even really thinking about it. He didn't know anyone could really do that. She made herself look like him.

She made herself look like him and the Ghost followed her like a lamb to the butcher's block, trusting in him all the time.

"You can't drop me!" she yelps, scrabbling in the slippery bowl of shields, she can't stand up in their angled curve. "You're one of the good guys, you can't let me fall-!"

"Like you let him fall?" The words come out just as hard as his jaw feels, it *hurts*. "Like you *pushed* him-?"

She holds her hands up in surrender. "You're one of the good guys! You can't blame me, I'm really *not* one of the good guys, and you *can't* blame me, a girl has to eat, *Jesus* do you know how much his neck is worth - ?"

"You di- for money. You -" He shakes his head, he can't take her eyes off her, he can't *think*, all he can think is - "The world would be a better place if you weren't in it."

"No - *no* -"

The world would be a better place if people like her weren't in it. The human race would be, statistically, *better* without her. There would be less hurt, less selfishness, less stupid ugly greed. If the human race can't have Kurt then why the hell should it have *her*, to balance out losing *him* doesn't it need to jettison this bitch too - ?

He thinks about dropping her. He really, seriously does, he really, seriously *wants* to. But - but he doesn't know if he's dropping her right onto Kurt's body. The sense of - defiling -

The thought of what Kurt would do, what the Ghost would do, what he would *think* about Blaine doing this.

Phalanx, he thinks. You're in costume, you're a hero, *Phalanx*.

No. Not if he does this he isn't.

He bites his teeth together so hard they hurt, and leans over, and holds his hand out for her. She blinks at him in her panic and then scrabbles to grab it, lets him haul her with some slippery difficulty back onto the side of the building - and wrench her arms that way the Ghost taught him, hold her so he can cuff her, and after a glance around the building, drag her over and slot the cuffs through the door handle before snapping them closed. She flexes her wrists and wriggles her shoulder and looks up when he says, "If he's alive someone will probably find you eventually." His breath has gone really strange, too short and too loud in his ears. His voice sounds cracked. "If he's dead I'm coming back up here."

She moves her mouth a couple of times, says, "I only-"

"Don't."

She snaps her mouth shut, and Phalanx works his hands, and makes himself breathe, and turns to walk for the edge of the building.

Deep breath. You can do this (I can't).

(Not without him.)

(... he didn't get any choice either.)

Look.

- there's a guy sitting on the sidewalk.

His breath bursts free, he leaps onto as tight a spiral of shields as he dares sliding him right down to the street, skipping clumsily to his feet on the sidewalk at this speed. It's not the Ghost, it's just some guy in glasses and a scruffy short beard sitting there with both hands clamped over his mouth, eyes fixed on a parked car. He stares wild at Phalanx and then points, croaks, "- through -"

He was ghosting. He ghosted right through the car. Phalanx swallows, and breathes, and crouches. After a moment he can make himself open his eyes, but there's no sign of him under the car either.

He sits back on his haunches, folds his numbed hands together under his nose, stares at the shadow under the car and thinks, *Please please please please please* -

He ghosted. He would have been falling *fast* and he ghosted, and Phalanx knows what it's like ghosting through solidity, the fall a little slower, almost like falling through water but without the buoyancy, nothing but gravity dragging him down. He would have to let himself fall, let himself slow gradually, because a sudden stop - trying to stop himself too suddenly inside solidity would be no different to just hitting the sidewalk. He'll be -

He could still be falling, through the deafening blinding suffocating black.

Or he could be trying to haul himself back to the surface, dragging himself through sheer strength up out of the dark.

. . . or he could have already run out of breath in trying to drag himself back. How long has it been? If he loses consciousness while ghosting *inside* something . . .

"Please please please," he whispers into his hands, staring at that black shadow underneath the car, every muscle in his body *begging*. "Please please please please -"

Jesus god anyone please not him not like this not because he trusted *him* please please how can this be a world where this is how he dies, suffocating in the dark on his own because of *him* - ? They would never even *find* him, there would be nothing *to* find, oh god please no please please if there's any justice any mercy please please please no -

He stares so hard his eyes hurt, straining for any sign, any movement, the flicker of a fingertip trying to reach out from the dark.

"Please," he whispers into his hands. "Please, please -"

There's a noise behind him, to his left. He knows the still-stunned guy in glasses is sitting to his right.

He turns like a startled cat, the breath huffs out of him, and further down the sidewalk, just outside the yellow ring of a streetlight's radius, there's a hunched dark cloak heaving like its occupant just hauled itself out of an ocean, on his hands and knees and breath almost sobbing at the sidewalk. Phalanx nearly trips in his run, drops to his knees and doesn't even feel the bruises he will have, can't even say anything, just chokes a *noise* at him while the Ghost looks up, propped on his trembling forearms and back bowed -

That fear in his eyes is Kurt, the first time Phalanx, *Blaine*, ever met him, standing on a street and suddenly terrified beyond thought or movement at his own lack of a mask. And, even more than that time, that fear of his gets into Phalanx's stomach like a knife, so cold and thin.

"It's me," he chokes, reaching out with shaky hands. "It's *me* it's me it's me -"

The fear falls, in his eyes, into need. He pushes himself up on trembling arms and Phalanx grabs him, bodily hauls him into the hug while the Ghost buries his face into the side of his neck, hood against his cheek, fingers digging tight into his back. "It's me it's me," Phalanx gasps, dragging him closer, arms pressing hard around his back, he can feel the strain of his lungs and his panicked heart clockwork-fast inside him -

"It's me, it's me, it's me," he chants, and nuzzles down against the side of his face, burying himself in his hood. "It's me, I've got you, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, it's me -"

Something bursts out of the Ghost, a noise not yet a word, and Phalanx just starts rubbing his back, quite hard, to try to soothe him down. He doesn't know what depth of dark he fell through. He doesn't know what that woman wearing *his* face said to him before she -

God he's the only person on the planet the Ghost actually trusts and he just got pushed off a *building* by him, he must be . . . but he clutches at Phalanx so tightly, head lifting just a little, turning so their foreheads bump, noses touch off cheeks, brushing the edges of masks. "It's me," he promises, getting a hand up to his face. He's calming, a little, breath slowing, heart thumping hard but steadier into Phalanx's chest. "It's me, you're okay, it's me, are you okay -?"

He nods, closes his eyes, lets Phalanx's thumb brush his cheek. The tension leaves him, he just sags and lets Phalanx bear his weight, and there's no way in hell he's capable of anything else tonight. "I'll take you home," he whispers to him under the hood. "I'll take you home, you need to -"

"No," he says, first syllable since he fell into the breathless dark, small and cracked but he clears his throat and his hand finds Phalanx's wrist, holding it to his face. His eyes search Phalanx's, and then - they steady, they hold, like he's so suddenly understood something. "No," he says. "I want - to go to your place."

"- okay. Can you stand up? Okay . . ."

If he said he wanted to catch a plane back to Ohio Phalanx would help him right now. If he said he wanted to go the moon he's pretty certain he could manage it for him somehow. The Ghost holds onto him while he helps him up, and Phalanx stands there holding him, the Ghost's cloak half-enclosing him too, while the guy in glasses puts his hands in his pockets and says, "Do you - guys need a - anything? A hand?"

"We're good," Phalanx says, finding a smile to wear, a little too tight, maybe more of a grimace. "Thank you."

The Ghost in his arm, and his own body, are beginning to fade out of view. He says, "Goodnight, sorry about the scare!" and then they're invisible, and the Ghost leans into his side, breath shuddering out of him, as Phalanx rubs his back and begins to walk them for a subway station, leading his shaky steps in the night.

Silent and invisible through Cooper's apartment building. Phalanx doesn't have the keys - they're in his bag with his 'normal' clothes, he'll have to go fetch it tomorrow - but that's not a problem when you're hand in hand with the Ghost, who doesn't even hesitate, just walks them right through the doors. Phalanx tries to behave, remembers how difficult it was for him running the both of them intangible on Hallowe'en, tries not to do anything unexpected. Just hold on, and walk with him.

Inside the apartment he hesitates, fading them back into sight - the lights are off and the view across the city glitters in the black windows - and then just stands there, looking lost. Phalanx glances at Cooper's bedroom door and hurries him for his own bedroom, closing the door behind them and sighing, finally safe. The Ghost lets his hood down and stands there in the dark, blinking when Phalanx - Blaine, he can be Blaine here - lights the lamp. His skin looks bleached under the bulb's friendly glow.

"Hey," he whispers, reaching for him again and the Ghost's legs - go, he staggers and Blaine catches him, stumbles them both sideways until their legs fold them onto the bed. "Hey," he says, closing his arms closer around him while he *shakes*. "Hey, it's okay. It's okay now, I've got you."

The Ghost's breath sucks in at his shoulder. "You were right."

He keeps rubbing his back. "What?"

The Ghost clears his throat and lifts his head and he's Kurt, he is Kurt, Kurt looking stunned in the light of the lamp, like he just dragged himself out of the dark all over again. "You were right," he says, voice cracked. "About - almost getting killed. And taking opportunities. Because -" Fear flexes his throat. "- because if - if that had killed me - that would be something to regret. It's not - not something I've ever, ever regretted before."

He brushes his hair back from the mask over his forehead, very gently. "What are you . . . ?"

He breathes, staring at the carpet, and then lifts a hand and unpeels his mask, rubs a little dried glue off his cheek, and meets Blaine's eye. "I love you," he says, small, scared, *brave* little voice. "I just - I think it's obvious now there's nothing you couldn't do to me, Blaine, you already *have* all of me, I don't know what I've . . . if I don't have a choice to, if it's got to be this dangerous anyway, I don't want to die regretting that I've never - been with you. Like that."

"You mean . . ."

His eyes flick down to his own knees again. "If you want to."

". . . I think we both know I want to. Do you, are you . . ." He needs to shift on the mattress and he really needs to not, he's scared of *scaring* him, he doesn't feel like this is really happening, he feels like he's waiting for the elastic of this strung-tight moment to snap and *sting*. "Are you sure? It's been - a night, you don't -"

One breath, slight swell and fall of his chest. His eyes meet Blaine's again, such deep blue, darker at the edge of the iris and then paler like shallower waters to the pitch black of his pupils, wide. He watches Blaine's eyes, then reaches over and unpeels his mask too, rubbing the glue from the bridge of his nose while he grimaces and he laughs, softly, nervous but real. "Yes. I - didn't want to die like that. Alone in the dark. And knowing - that I'd missed out on so much, with you, just by being afraid - while I was falling I was just - if that was all the rest of my life I'd got, I know there are things I'd wish I'd done. With you, at least."

Blaine takes his hands, their masks squeezed in his one fist. "Kurt. Anything you want is okay with me. Anything. I just want to know that - this is really what you want."

He sucks a breath in, blinks very hard at the wall opposite Blaine's bed. He says, struggling to keep it flat, "I kind of want you to sound more enthusiastic about it."

He squeezes his hands, says, "Oh god Kurt oh my god I -" He grabs his face, kisses him. Kisses him again. Forgets that he was going to say something else, just kisses him, while Kurt's arms pull him closer and his breath comes hard against Blaine's cheek. "- love you," he manages, breathless and heart beating high now, not what he meant to say but he can't think of any other words. "I love you. I -"

Kurt's hands find his wrists and squeeze, and he pulls Blaine's gloves off, then his own, so their fingers can tangle together. He starts to say something and the words don't come. He stares at their hands. Then he says, slowly, "There are some things I need to tell you. There are - god there are - so many things I should tell you, we'd be here all night -"

"You can tell me anything. Kurt. If you want to say it then say it, you know I'm not going anywhere. You know that."

He drags his breath in again, shakily, eyes on the ceiling and still blinking too much, and takes a long breath in, lets it go, and swallows, and is finally something like steady. "I've never - done this. Not with - not with anyone. I -" Blaine can feel how tense his muscles are straining again as he whispers out, "I'm a twenty-three year old virgin, Blaine. And I know that is very not cool."

"It's not - it's not anything to do with -"

"I just, I ghost in my sleep sometimes and I didn't know how I'd explain it to anyone and - and I keep the worst hours and -" His mouth moves silently for a while, and then he swallows and closes his eyes and says, "I've just never been in love with anyone else. I don't know who I'm kidding, I've just never even wanted to. Until you. I've never even . . . told anyone, everyone just . . . assumes . . ."

Blaine watches his face, and Kurt wets his lips, and stares at the wall. "I'm not," Kurt says, and stops. "I'm not what anyone thinks. Everyone has this idea of me in their heads and I don't fit any of them, I'm - less than *any* of them imagine -"

"No. *No*, hey -" He pulls both Kurt's hands into one of his, so he can reach up, brush his fingers over his cheek and into his hair, cupping his jaw so Kurt's eyes flit skittishly away and finally, defeatedly, meet his. "Kurt. No-one else gets to - decide what life you've been living, no-one else *knows* you. And - Kurt - god, I lost my virginity because I felt like I *ought* to, because I was too scared *not* to. I'm not saying I didn't - *want* to at the time, I just, if I'd waited . . . Kurt . . ." He closes his fingers in his hair and Kurt's eyes are too bright on his, as he says too dry, "You're still the bravest man I've ever met."

He whispers, "Don't."

"Kurt."

"*Don't*."

He's crying when Blaine kisses him, but Blaine just keeps hold of his hands so Kurt can't lift a hand to wipe the tears, and Blaine does it for him, kissing him and drying his cheeks and whispering to him, "It's not even that late, you know that? I don't think most people are actually having half the sex TV tells us we should be having. I am hardly the most experienced guy on the planet, I've slept with *two* guys, it's just - it's going to be okay. It's always going to be okay. We can do anything you want, Kurt, anything will be okay."

He swallows, eyes closed and forehead leaning exhausted to Blaine's, breathing in his breath this close. "There are -" he says, and his jaw tenses a grimace. "There are scars."

That after *everything* tonight makes him gasp a little disbelieving breath, and Kurt's eyes flash open but Blaine just cups his head, keeps his face tilted to his. "Oh my god, Kurt." His thumbs brush under his eyes, smudging the wet into his skin. "Nothing anyone else does to you could ever make you ugly."

He kisses him then so he feels the jog of the uncontrolled sob, before Kurt's arms get around his back, his hands claw him close, and Blaine can finally run a hand down the bared side of his throat and kiss him and know that it's going to be okay, *this* they can make okay . . .

*

There are some scars.

The costumes take some time to unpeel, they're not designed to come off easily. Blaine runs his palm along the strange diagonal length of the silvery-dark loop running all the way around Kurt's body (ghosted the wrong way through something, a bar or something, he thinks, kissing him and running his thumb along its edge burnt into the base of his ribs), feels on his lower back with blind fingertips the precise remains of an incision to the right of his spine (a knife? If he ghosted there would be an entry wound but no exit wound, which might be why it's as sharp as a paper cut to feel) as he pulls him closer under the covers, and Kurt is all shivery confusion and overstimulation, mouth open and eyes on Blaine's, fine rim of pacific blue edging blown, shocked pupils. "It's okay," Blaine whispers, shifting his straddle, rolling his hips down onto his, feeling the sharp-edged *drag* as Kurt's head spasms back on the pillow. "Everything's - okay -"

There's sweat in his hair and he never imagined this, never could have imagined this. Kurt is right. All those images of him people carry in their heads - the Ghost, Kurt, they never see *him* when all they're actually looking at is what he represents - and Blaine's fingers folding through his, Kurt's breath bursting high against his throat as he thrusts them by slow degrees towards that pitch of breaking, neither of them capable of thinking of crazy bedroom athletics right now, just this wet messy slither of body against body and Kurt pulling him down to kiss him, Blaine panting into the corner of his mouth, "Love you, I love you -"

No-one could ever have imagined this, that it's just this simple, that it's not about hot wild superhero sex, it's just this guy Blaine's in love with - in love with in the way that hurts his throat and makes the slide of their bodies together *claw* him with pleasure - this guy Blaine's in love with who *trusts* him and folds his naked arms around Blaine's neck, choking his name at him like he can't contain it. Blaine lets his head sag forward on his neck and Kurt's forehead rolls to nudge off his, their noses bump, they stare glazed and blurred at this distance at each other, breathing not quite in rhythm. Blaine shifts forward on his knees, scoops his arm under Kurt's head to brace off his own crooked elbow, to raise his face for the kiss, and to give him a hand free as Kurt's hips rolling to meet his encourage him to raise the pace.

He's hot and sticky and soft-skinned and startled under Blaine's hand, which Blaine spits on to help with the slide. "Are you okay?" he pants at him, while Kurt's arms are tangled around his neck like he can't bear for Blaine to be any further away, fingers scraping and slipping on his shoulder blades. Kurt opens his mouth, stares at him, and his voice comes lower than Blaine might have imagined as he gets out rough with his head tipped back and throat laid bare, "Next time will you fuck me?"

Blaine comes with an immediate agonised *groan*, messy between them, jolting his hips *again, again, again*, head hanging and mouth open. He doesn't let go of Kurt's dick but he hasn't the presence of mind to

actually work his hand in any rhythm, and in the end it's the glancing stroke of his fingers and thumb that bring Kurt's hips off the mattress and make his voice come high again, a startled single cry and then he's shuddering on the mattress, and Blaine is letting his own wet weight slump onto him.

Their arms and legs make a clumsy tangle of them. Blaine rolls them to the side so he's not crushing Kurt with his own leaden body and feels stunned with it all, and he doesn't think it's the near-year of nothing but his own hand, he doesn't think it's his horny young body, he just thinks it's *Kurt*.

Kurt unpeels an arm from their clutch, pants, and touches with warm fingertips Blaine's cheek. "Are you okay?"

Blaine watches his face, lifts a hand, brushes his hair back a little and then traces over his eyebrow, around the bone of the eye socket, down his pretty nose, skimming around his cheek and dazedly skating the shape of his lips. He whispers, "Never, never been better."

Kurt - smiles, blue-green eyes and the framing lashes so, so perfect, and closes his eyes to let Blaine brush his fingers into his hair again, cupping his head closer now, finally exhausted of all feeling but contentment. He thinks that, finally, with Kurt, he actually understands what sex is for, what it means for *him*, and what it means for him is - this, this, *him*.

He wants to say 'thank you', but all that comes out is a yawn.

*

Kurt wakes up in someone else's bed.

This is not something that happens.

His muscles shift instantly on edge but then he can smell Blaine, that's Blaine sleepily wriggling closer - he doesn't think Blaine's aware of doing it, still half-asleep as he is - and he relaxes again, doesn't open his eyes, just lays there and lets Blaine huddle further into him, burrowing and settling his face into Kurt's throat. Then Blaine blinks, Kurt feels the brush of his eyelashes on his skin, and his hand rubs an apology on Kurt's hip, his voice comes sleep-rutted and rough. "... are you awake?"

"I am now."

"... sorry."

"It wasn't a bad way to wake up," Kurt says, shifting as Blaine shifts and - oh. Blaine winces and sits up and lifts the blankets to look but Kurt really doesn't want to know, it *feels* disgusting.

"Shower?" Blaine suggests.

Kurt begins to assess the situation.

He is in Blaine's apartment. The only clothing he has with him is the superhero costume discarded on the floor (which he will be ironing the wrinkles out of later, wonderful). It is Sunday morning. He has missed yoga. Rachel will not know why he didn't come home last night. Why he didn't come home last night is because he was having sex with Blaine.

He had sex with Blaine.

He had sex.

... he feels the need to add 'with Blaine' to that again. It didn't feel general, he can't connect it to anything wider, and he doesn't feel different. It's just - Blaine. Something he did with Blaine. It was just wonderful, with Blaine, seeing Blaine, touching his perfect skin and being touched and it being okay ... it was just perfect, so strangely breathlessly perfect, that, with him.

So he's smiling, when Blaine kisses the corner of his mouth, smiling despite everything while Blaine says, "You go first. I'll try to rustle up some clothes for you."

Blaine's bathroom is small - this might be a more luxurious apartment than Kurt's but it's still New York City and the second bathroom is basically a very well-fitted closet - and as he washes his really quite disgustingly *encrusted* souvenir of last night off his stomach with Blaine's ginger and black pepper body wash, he keeps remembering ... it's hard not to feel interested in doing it again. Blaine is only in the next room and Kurt has, he feels, some time to make up for; while he's glad it's Blaine because he couldn't *bear* any other guy, now he has Blaine he would quite like to do that as often as they can fit into their schedules. There are - things he knows about that he wants to do. Hands, mouths. Other things. He wants to see Blaine make that face and move his hips like that again. He wants to make it happen.

He tries to think about something else, and borrows a dab of Blaine's gel to deal with his catastrophic bedhead which he has no-one to blame for but himself, trying to bore his head backwards into the pillow like that while Blaine was, Blaine was, Kurt is really supposed to be thinking about something else right now.

He emerges in a towel, hiked up quite high - clutched at his chest to hide that ugly burn where he fell through a heated metal bar and it hurt so much he couldn't even scream - and Blaine is in a robe, bending up from a drawer and holding up a polo shirt. "This one should fit! I might have to borrow a pair of pants from my brother, it's the wrong weather for you to have that much ankle showing. Not that you don't have very attractive ankles."

And then he kisses him and puts the shirt into his hand and then shucks off and puts the *robe* into his hands and closes the bathroom door behind his very naked self, and Kurt just stands there for a while, staring at the back of his door, not really able to process this yet.

He borrows a pair of Blaine's boxers, which are only a little bit wide, and pulls the robe on over the polo shirt because it's chilly this far into November. The light's getting in around the blinds, thin and pale, and he glances at that poster on Blaine's wall - he doesn't even remember when it might have been taken, it must have been some kind of zoom lens, could have been anywhere, anywhen - and sits down at Blaine's computer, there's not much to do in here. He plays listlessly with the mouse and the screen lights up, and he blinks at the website it's on - *I hope someone hugs the Ghost every single day, one of those really *good* hugs, the really *meant* ones* - and flicks his eyes away, looks for something else to do. Blaine's in the shower, he can hear him singing, and his eyes are trying to slide back to that website (*Reblog this to campaign for a Ghost Day Holiday throughout NYC (if not THE WORLD), a day when we will patrol the streets in rabid fanghost gangs taking down any evildoers we encounter so that he can put his feet up and crack a beer or something for once. He deserves it!*) but, well, he would like them not to. He opens a fresh tab to read a newspaper online instead. It just. Feels. Too. Weird. When he reads anything on Blaine's strange little blog. Like something is trying to get out through the skin of his face. Possibly all of the blood in his body.

Blaine comes humming out of the bathroom, towel around his hips, hair gelled back and looking very pleased with himself for that. Kurt says, "Do you always wake up in such a good mood?" and Blaine leans over the back of the desk chair to kiss him, then starts finding clothing for himself out of his drawers.

"I always wake up in a good mood when I wake up with you."

"Flatterer."

"Fact. Just let me get dressed and I'll ask Cooper if you can borrow some of his pants, he won't mind, he's been bugging the hell out of me about getting to meet you . . . you want breakfast? We have cereal and we should have bagels."

"A bagel would be lovely."

"They're so good."

"They are *heaven* in bread form," Kurt agrees, maybe a little too fervently. "Coffee?"

"Of course." Blaine pulls the sweater vest on over his shirt, vanishes back into the bathroom to discard the towel, swings back past Kurt close enough for a kiss and then heads humming out of the room. Kurt instantly hears another male voice sing, "Good morning Blaine! And -" increasingly rushed before Blaine can close the door on it - "good morning Blaine's guest who he didn't introduce to me last night!"

The door slams, and Kurt smiles a little, and twists side to side in the desk chair. Nerves worry at his stomach, low down in his guts, but he tries to ignore them. Meeting Blaine's brother is just so very *permanent*, another life he's a part of, he's never done meeting family or friends. Never got anywhere near it, Kurt makes as few ripples in the world as he can manage. But Blaine's brother is important to him and Blaine - Blaine, he knows, is the most important thing in the world now to Kurt. So he will meet him, and hope to god he likes him, and not freak out at how embedded into each other's lives they are, how much they *matter* to each other now . . .

He can hear their voices through the door, Blaine's sort of pleading, his brother's more excitable. He slips from the chair and creeps over, he only wants a peek at him, just to know his face.

He cracks the door open and peers through the gap.

Blaine is standing in the kitchen with his arms folded looking embarrassed, head tucked in, while a taller man Kurt's eye focuses on is sitting - lounging - in one of the breakfast bar stools in front of a cup of coffee, grinning at him, both of them glancing over at the sound of the door opening -

In that second Kurt doesn't know if his face is holding too much blood or too little, staring into the eyes of the man in Blaine's kitchen, who notes Kurt's stare and *smiles* a delighted, dazzling smile, and Kurt slams the door like he just got stung.

Oh god oh god oh god oh god.

Blaine's brother is Cooper Anderson.

- of *course* Blaine's brother is Cooper Anderson. *It's my brother's. He's an actor.* He's Blaine Anderson's brother, he's called Cooper, of course he's -

Oh god oh god oh god he walks up and down in Blaine's bedroom wearing not his own clothes and clothes he would never have chosen in a thousand years feeling like he's been hit in the face with a bucket of ice water, *Cooper Anderson* is out there and Kurt must look like -

The door opens, and Blaine looks in on him. "Are you okay?"

Kurt flaps a hand at him, an *oh my god close the door* hand, and Blaine slips inside and clicks it closed again behind himself. Kurt puts his hands over his mouth while he's steadying his breathing, then swallows and says, "Your brother is Cooper Anderson."

"- yes?"

Kurt puts his hands over his mouth again while he draws up the strength to speak without squeaking. "Rachel and I saw him. On Broadway. We -" He stops. "Three times. We went. Three times."

". . . are you okay . . . ?"

Kurt wants to scream at him. He could have given him some *warning*, he could have *said* 'oh hey Kurt my brother is Cooper Anderson try not to have a meltdown in the same apartment as him okay?' instead of just - just *being Cooper Anderson's brother*, oh god why -

There's a knock at the door. "Blaine? I've got a pair might fit him, what's his waist size?"

Blaine says, "What's-?" and Kurt slams the bathroom door behind himself, and then stands in *there* with his hands over his mouth trying not to squeak while in the *next room* Blaine is probably giving Cooper

Anderson incorrect information about the size of Kurt Hummel's hard-fought (literally) waist and he cannot, cannot cope with this -

He wets his hands with cold water and stands for some time with them over his burning cheeks, making himself calm the hell down.

Then he opens the door, and looks out at Blaine, looking confused and a little sullen, holding a pair of black jeans in his hands. "You want to try these on?" he says, and Kurt looks at Cooper Anderson's jeans and immediately all the good work of the cold water is wasted, because he blushes Barbie-pink again immediately.

"I - thank you."

Blaine leans back against the wall with his arms folded, still looking moody, while Kurt puts on a pair of Cooper Anderson's jeans. They're too big. Blaine wordlessly opens a drawer and gives him a belt, and Kurt tugs them up a little at his ankles and then just lets them trail the carpet. He takes a breath in, looks at Blaine, says, "*Please* don't let me embarrass myself."

Blaine rolls his eyes, unfolds his arms and stands up. "Come on," he says, opening the door, and Kurt creeps out after him, folding his hands together and squeezing and squeezing them with nerves.

Cooper Anderson is sitting at the breakfast bar in front of the culture section of a newspaper again, looking back at them and - smiling the sort of smile that makes Kurt's stomach pool down through the cracks in his intestines and slosh about all loose inside him. "*You* must be the famous Kurt my little brother has completely failed to introduce to me so far."

Kurt stops next to Blaine, just beyond the border of the kitchen, and bobs on his ankles trying to make his hands hang at his side without squirming like they want to. He manages to say, "Hi," and then knows that anything else will come out as that squeak and so clamps his mouth shut again, while Cooper Anderson climbs down off his stool to very enthusiastically shake Kurt's hands.

"It's *great* to finally meet you, Kurt."

"*Enchanté*," Kurt whispers, staring into his eyes, sort of hypnotised, unable to do very much about his hand still being pumped up and down. He thinks about Rachel. He thinks about the things Rachel will not

forgive him for not saying. "I - my roommate and I saw you on Broadway." Three times. "You, we're - huge, huge fans -"

Cooper Anderson's eyes light up, like Blaine's eyes do when something delightful happens (like Blaine's eyes do about every five minutes). "Well now you come sit down and tell me all your favourite things about my performance, and Blaine can rustle up some breakfast for us all, how about that, Blaine?"

"Delighted to," Blaine grits out, and Kurt is put into a seat by Cooper Anderson, and oh god maybe he did die falling off that building last night, life since then has been far too good to be true.

It is too good to be true. Presumably he talks, answers questions, has some form of conversation more than just making noises which is all he actually feels capable of doing while Cooper Anderson is speaking. Probably he eats a bagel, at least when Cooper Anderson says he has to go and it was good to meet him, there's an empty plate with crumbs on it in front of him, and Cooper Anderson shakes his hand again and oh god he can't wash it at least until he sees Rachel again she will kill him -

The door finally closes behind Cooper Anderson, and Kurt is standing by a stool in Cooper Anderson's kitchen in Cooper Anderson's apartment, buzzing.

Blaine is leaning against the refrigerator, arms folded, scowling. Kurt touches his forehead, which feels too heavy and too light at the same time, looks at his half-empty cup of coffee and then takes a long cold drink. He leans against the breakfast bar for a moment, eyes closed, then laughs sudden and sharp and looks across at Blaine's surprised face. "Well," he says, shoulders wriggling embarrassed. "At least now we *both* know what the other looks like when we're in 'number one fan' mode."

Blaine stares at him for a moment, tightens and loosens his face, and then his mouth turns into a weary, amused smile. "I guess."

Kurt rubs his elbow, cold in the polo shirt, and Blaine pushes off from the fridge, walks to the black sofa and takes the cream throw from it to wrap around him. Kurt ducks his head a little closer to his, says, "Thank you." and runs the fabric between thumb and fingers, and Blaine hugs him from behind and burrows his nose into the side of his neck, and sighs. And Kurt . . . feels it, suddenly, the opening inside him.

Nothing anyone else does to you could ever make you ugly.

He just doesn't need it anymore, all the secrets and all the screens and all the shadows. Blaine knows him already, Blaine knows him more than anyone ever has, ever will, Blaine saw through that mask a long time ago and it's not Blaine that he's been testing for trustworthiness all this time. It's himself.

He closes his eyes, tips his tired head against Blaine's. His mouth is dry, but on the second attempt he does say it. "There's something I need to tell you. If you have the time."

Blaine runs a hand down his arm, says, "All my time belongs to you." and his hand slips into his, so he can lead him for the sofa, so they can sit, so Kurt can breathe, quietly, and draw his thoughts together, and look for the words for something he's never put into words.

He draws the throw a little closer, legs curled underneath himself, and draws in a slow breath, lets it slowly out again. His voice starts too small, and it struggles to grow, weak and thin. "- years ago, now. When I was in high school . . ."

Blaine's still holding his hand. He squeezes it a little, and his eyes are so innocent of everything, and it clots in Kurt's throat; can you make me feel like that again . . . ?

He closes his eyes. "There was this guy."

Blaine's thumb strokes his hand. The past breathes at the back of Kurt's neck, cold and clammy like something dead, like something's ghost.

Please make this okay. Please make this be something that is okay.

Blaine strokes his hand.

Please, please, please, he thinks, already blinking the tears down. Please, please, please let me be strong enough, this time.

Please, please, *please* still see *me* after this . . .

Interlude: Cold Water

Out through solidity and he falls like a brick again, and hits something hard shoulder-first, crumpling him onto his side, head bouncing off the surface. It's pitch black, and one arm is slumped into the water he can hear running-dripping-glooping, and it smells really very quite bad.

He's in a sewer.

It's a serious struggle to think, head full of fog, of that horrible thick fog sprayed into his face, numb and dumb with it, struggling to think think think and he can't move. He has to move. He has to -

That's why he can't breathe properly. It's a paralysing agent. His lungs are locking up. He's going to suffocate surrounded by all the air in the world, because his lungs just won't breathe it. He's going to die because of that balding cretin in a pink onesie. No way. No way in hell. He is not going down to *him* -

His hand doesn't move until he makes it, a clumsy lurch. Third attempt he finds his belt - nothing has ever been this much effort, it has never *hurt* with exertion to make his muscles work - and hope begins to choke in his chest because his fingers are too far gone, he'll never be able to work the cell if he even can reach it. He's going to die down here in the dark in the sewer and no-one will ever even know where he is. He'll just vanish. He'll finally be entirely invisible, entirely untouchable, he finally will be less than a ghost.

Thought of like that, this has been something that was going to happen to him, something already happening to him, for most of his life.

No. You don't have the right to give up. Dad.

He gets the right compartment open, breath huffing painfully against the concrete against his cheek. The cell clatters out and he loses grip of it, and it takes two attempts to get his hand around it again. He scrapes it closer, activates it so he can at least *see*, the thin light of its screen blurs his eyes. Unless his eyes are just blurring because he breathed in something very wrong and this is not how he wants to die.

It is a miracle, he could cry, that he does manage to unlock it on the first attempt.

There's already a message for Finn drafted to send. It takes *minutes* to send it, while his breath slows, every inhale becomes a fight, and his fingers shake with exhaustion and that only makes it worse. When he

finally does send it he just lets himself slump, closes his eyes with his forehead on damp concrete, just lays there like a body. Behind his closed eyelids, the faint glow of the cell dies off.

Don't go to sleep. Might not wake up.

Does it make a difference?

Three years, he thinks, trying to flex his fingers to keep some movement in his deadened body, feeling the cold water tug like it's a game at his hand, playfully encouraging him to follow it. He focuses on every in-breath, every out-breath. It's not so bad, three whole years. You helped a few people. You really did. You did something. You did *something* -

This isn't how he wanted to die.

He knew it might happen. He's seriously weighed up the possibility of his own death since he was seventeen years old. He's met it in the eye because he's had no choice, and he's come to some sort of peace with his own mortality; at least he won't be around for the afterwards. But - but there's dying and there's dying, he'd thought it would be quick, he'd thought it would be - a bullet, a ghosting gone wrong, something, anything, not this -

Breathe. Make yourself breathe. Make yourself breathe.

In a sewer, in the dark, on your own. The stone is cold underneath him and he can't lift himself, can't pull himself out of the grip of the cold clutching up at his bones. He thinks about the last time this was a really serious possibility, that fire, thinks about the heat like a blow. At least he was unconscious so quickly, then, he didn't have to lay there with his thoughts, *waiting*.

Finn might not get the text. Might not know what to do with it. Might not be able to find him. Might not want to.

Why would he think that. Why - Finn is a good person, Finn cares about him, he tells himself that but - but having to ask, having to say *help me* to anyone, he's always, always afraid because the worst thing isn't their not being able to help but their not *wanting* to. Help me. Who cares about you?

(Help me.)

Breathe in. Breathe out. The muscles strain and shake.

You were the one who chose to put the mask on. Why do you have any right to ask other people for -

His cell buzzes on the concrete, alight again. He opens his eyes, slowly, struggles to focus on its screen; a message from Finn, he reads, *Where are you man whats up??* before the light fails and it's dark again. He lets his eyes close, he can't keep them open, everything is a strain. His heart is slowing, he thinks. The temperature won't help. He'll just shut down, gradually, like he's running out of batteries. He'll just fade, fade, fade. Like a ghost.

He didn't choose that name.

He'd thought about - well, maybe ghosts, a little. Moths, he'd thought about. How dull and how unnoticed they are until they hit a light. A pale flutter and then gone in the dark. He doesn't know what he was thinking. He was thinking - what was he thinking - ?

It was already too late for the Ghost to get out there and rescue Kurt. He could search every inch of this city, Kurt wasn't there to be saved, Kurt was already a dead loss. Forget him. Rescue other people. Make sure no-one else has to become a ghost. *Help* people.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

He feels so leaden and slow and tired. And cold. So cold. He thought it would be quicker than this. He thought it might hurt, but that would be better than this, pain can be contained, this is all of him. His own body's given up on him. Three years. His dad won't know.

Won't know that Kurt loves him more than anyone on this planet, and knows exactly how much he's betrayed his dad's love in return by doing this. Won't know that Kurt needed to do this, and why. Won't know why. Won't ever know why. No-one ever will. The only person who knows is -

He could be anywhere now. Anyone. He could be better than that. Could be worse. Could be happy. If he's happy he won't need to hurt other people. He hopes he's happy. Someone out there should be . . .

He tries to move the arm hanging clumsily over his side, his hand in cold running water. He can't. His body's too heavy, his *arm's* too heavy, and the cold of his dead hand in the tugging-giggling water, it *hurts*. All he can do is lay there, and make himself breathe.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

Is there anything you regret? he thinks, opening his eyes, the black is as dead as his body feels, while he tries to move his fingers and he can't anymore. Well. Maybe. But nothing he had any power to change. He knows how weak he is.

I only wanted, he thinks. What did I want? His brain fogs and darkens. To help people. To not be the person that happened to. To be someone else and to stop that happening to someone else. You did that. A little, you did. Three years, it's not so bad.

My arm hurts.

Breathe in, breathe out.

I wonder if there is an afterlife, he thinks. I could always be wrong. Mom could be . . .

Wanting something to be true doesn't make it true. You learned that far too long ago to pretend that you don't know it now.

What would she think? *Now* his throat hurts; what would she think that this is what he did with his life, the life she gave him? Was it okay, did he do okay -? Not *well*, he knows that, just *okay*, he couldn't have - he wasn't strong enough to - he didn't know *how* to -

It is ridiculous that his eyes still have the strength to get wet when his breath is a rasping battle to keep up. Breathe in. Breathe out.

Is this what it was like for her?

Stop it stop it stop it you're not helping her you're not helping yourself you're not helping *anyone* thinking like this. Dad. You can't do this to Dad. You can't make him go through it *again*, you cannot do that, you have no right in this world, suck it up, *breathe*.

In. Out.

He's so cold.

What if they never find you?

In. *Please*. Out.

Dad I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I didn't know what else to do

Dad

I'm sorry

in please please

please

no

help

*

For a long time, there's just someone breathing. Understanding that it's him is a faint light turned on; oh.

He's warm, and aching, and tired. And -

There's something on his face.

He's up with a gasp, tasting chemical air and one hand doesn't obey at all, the other flailing ineptly, smacking him in the chest before someone says, "Hey, hey hey no-" and grabs his arm before he can hit himself in the face with it. His arm goes through their fingers, he panics, his hand grabs for his face -

Oxygen mask. For one second -

Fuck, kid, how old are you?

He focuses on the room. He focuses on the man leaning over him, Mike Chang, who tentatively takes his hand from the mask and says, "It's okay. You're okay, we've got you."

His breath grates out, in again, out again. Breathing. Okay. Good. He tries to sit and Mike stops him, pushes him to his back again, and another shadow looms over Mike's shoulder, too tall to be Tina; the Ghost squints up at Finn, closes his eyes, sighs.

He's in their lounge, on the folded-out sofa bed. He's not wearing his cloak but he can still feel the mask on his face. It turns like a stone in his throat, the gratefulness that Mike understands. He tries to speak and nothing comes out, clears his throat, croaks, "'nk you."

"You're entirely welcome." Mike says, adjusting a blanket over him again, heavy and warm. "It might be a while before all the effects wear off. Unless you're actually going to let me take you into the hosp-"

Low and cracked at the edges, "No."

"Then you just have to wait it out. Your, um. Do you want to speak to your friend in private?"

The Ghost opens his eyes, finds the right way to focus on Finn, who looks drawn and shocked like he's only now seen the Ghost like this for the first time. He closes his eyes again. He doesn't know if Finn wants to speak, he's *exhausted*. Finn says, "Do you mind, dude?" and Mike says, "You've got five minutes, he needs to rest." He pats the Ghost's shoulder. "Don't move. Promise."

He makes a small noise as he breathes, a tiny affirmative grunt. He really doesn't feel capable of much else.

Mike's footsteps walk away, and a door closes. And there's silence for a moment, as the Ghost just lays there swimming in all the exhaustion and Finn says nothing, and then he gets out like a snarl, "What the *hell*, man, what the *hell* happened to you? You think I need that kind of text in the middle of the night? I nearly crapped myself! I had to make my excuses to Rachel and leave and I'll spend a *week* making this up to her, you know what she's - what the hell, I had to haul you out of a *sewer*. Do you have any, do you have any idea . . ."

He manages to haul his eyelids up, but Finn's a fuzzy dark shape, more of a shadow than a person. "-sorry," he manages, voice muffled in the mask. "Can - won't text. Next time."

"Wh - that is not -"

"Sorry."

"What the hell, *next time*, you could've *died*, do you even get that? I thought you were dead! You were just *laying* there, I almost stepped on you, and you were so cold -"

He just breathes with his eyes closed. The world's just going to have to happen to him for a while, he's got no strength for happening back.

"What the hell do you have any . . . what'm I supposed to tell your dad?"

He shakes his head, forces his eyes open. "No. Don't-"

"No way in hell he doesn't know about this. *Next time*, are you *insane*? Quit! It's gonna get you killed, quit! This is the universe's way of telling you to quit!"

The Ghost breathes.

If he'd quit the first time he'd got hurt, he wouldn't have been there to help Tina, and for all he knows Mike could be alone in this apartment now, his life completely broken. If he'd quit the first time he'd nearly died then there are dozens more people who would have been left to horrible shattered lives because of nothing that was their fault. If he quits now -

All those people not yet knowing what terrible thing could happen to them, and only the luck of the Ghost being there to stop it.

He says, "I'm tired, Finn."

Finn is silent, for quite a long time. Then the creaky sofa bed springs sag and stretch and *glink* and settle under his weight as he sits by the Ghost's head. "Hell," he mutters, and rubs his eyes, and the Ghost blinks sleepily, lets his eyelids sag again. He is so, so, so tired . . .

Finn says, quietly, "You don't owe the world anything, you know that? Not like it's ever given you much in return."

He doesn't really know what to say to that. Funny of Finn to notice it, Finn notices so little. But he can hardly complain. He has his health and a family and a roof over his head, and nothing that bad has ever really happened to him. It's not about owing. Not in any way Finn thinks.

He doesn't say anything. He can feel himself slipping under sleep again.

The world owes you nothing. The universe is a cold unfeeling place, and there is no justice written into the laws of physics. But.

But we're here. But we can see what's happening. We know what it's like to *hurt*. How can you let it happen to someone else? How can you suffer the way that living is suffering and *not* want to shield other people from it? If there's no mercy in the world shouldn't we make our own? If there's no justice then don't we *need* compassion?

I can't quit. You need to understand. This isn't a habit, an addiction, a quest. This is individual human beings who only want to live their lives. This isn't about some tally chart on a chalkboard. This is someone's *life*. Finn, please, people should *want* the life they're in, how can you let someone else take that from them . . . ?

Finn sniffs, and there's a faint swiping noise; wiping his cheek? "Thought you were dead, man."

He would move, say something. He can't. He's so tired. But Finn needs *something*, and he opens his eyes - like dragging himself up from the dark - takes a breath in -

Finn's hand lays warm and heavy over his eyes. "Go back to sleep, idiot."

He blinks, lets his eyelids fall again. Idiot yourself, he thinks, heavy in the dark. His breath sighs out.

I'm sorry, Finn.

I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry.

Like he can hear him, Finn lifts his hand, and his eyelids feel cool without it there. He knows that Finn understands, really. Finn came out in the dark for him. Finn wears a badge and a uniform every day. Finn understands, maybe more than Kurt does, Finn can point to what rationalises it for him. The Ghost -

. . . why wasn't someone there for him . . . ?

Chapter Eleven

*So, I spent half the night debating whether it was right or not to do this, and I sort of came up with a compromise. Last night while I was totally minding my own business, heading out for butter at one AM don't even ask whole nother story, I took a different route home because there was some big police crazy going on down the street. And I ended up seeing . . . I don't want to post in too much detail because I don't know what trouble it could get those guys into. and I feel pretty bad about the fact that in the aftermath, all *I* did was take a few photographs which I don't feel comfortable posting. It was a really intimate moment and I don't know if it's something that should be all over the internet. So this is just one of them, just because there's a lot of wank and debate and I think this will end some of it. Just, the way they were holding onto each other: yes, everyone, I am certain they're a couple. All the best to them. Sorry for being a creeper. Hope the phanghost joy and support makes up for that a little.*

Oh my Jesus God fuck I'm crying wtf

God look at how they're holding on to each other dude you have to tell us what happened are they okay??

*I forget sometimes what absolute shit they must deal with on a night, fuck, look at how he's gripping his back, it looks like they've been through *hell**

*. . . I know what you mean, I feel kind of uncomfortable looking at that. I know you can't even see his face in it, that's still the most *maskless* I feel like I've ever seen the Ghost.*

This is a definite score for 'New York's superheroes are an ass-kicking gay couple and the bigots can go cry about it in the corner', I've never seen anyone hold anyone like that before. Fuck.

god my babies I hope you're okay xxx

I made this noise when I saw this. This sort of inbreath squeal-moan-seagull. I could not replicate it if I tried, it hurt to make.

. . . I kind of know I'm going to fic this and I kind of feel like an evil person for it, that is . . . I just hope they're doing alright.

it happened right out on a street if they wanted it private they shouldnt do it in public

*Just like you shouldn't have come on the internet if you didn't want to be mocked for not knowing how to use a shift key, like the demi-literate that you are? I'm not saying that I don't appreciate gifs of them clinging on to each other like they want to be inside each other, I just appreciate Prescriptionbeard's point, if not his irritating hipster username; that is a really, really intimate image, clearly neither of them are aware of it being taken, they're not aware of anything but each other. And just for the record, if anything shitawful ever happens to *you* out on the street, I hope people film it from various angles and put it online for gawpers to disseminate as they please, because let's face it it would be funny as fuck. And because you're not intelligent enough to punctuate and thus presumably not intelligent enough to read this much text, here's the tl;dr: you're an idiot, no-one is obliged to give a shit about your opinion if it's a fucking stupid opinion, try lighting some of your sad little brain cells up and *thinking* before you put crap in the public domain, and have a *lovely* day <3*

*... Paleandghostly's charming way of wording it aside, she's right, they don't *ask* to be followed everywhere they go by us, they're just trying to make the world a better place. Our ogling is not something they invited. Presumably the skintight suits are actually for ease of self-defence rather than the public display of particularly glorious asses. So, yeah, don't act like their personal moments are public property. It's an honor that they protect us the way they do, and all the rest is just, well, I don't know how to justify it. We want them to be happy and we think that they're amazing and we struggle to find ways to express how *much* we feel that. That's all it is, in the end.*

bnfs always defend themselves like high school girl cliques

Yes little troll, every night we gather around our cauldrons, Draxie and Blackbindings and I, and we cackle over how we will make the empty lives of minnows like you even shittier, it's how we spend every evening, it's all we live for, nothing amuses us like god I even almost kept a straight face while typing that.

Seriously no-one bring Blackbindings into this, she hasn't said a word yet and she does not need dragging into wank. You have an opinion. Clearly we disagree. How about we just don't discuss it any further. Thank you.

*We've still never seen them do anything but *hug*, how do we know they're not just partners?*

*I don't particularly want to upload the rest of the photographs, I kind of think I should delete them and I feel like a tool for putting *this* one up there but there's a lot of political weight and debate behind their being partners or more than that and it's a pretty serious moment we've reached if NY's resident superheroes are a*

*same sex couple. Which I would bet my life they are, after last night. I didn't catch a photo of it but there was some eye contact going on I can't even describe. They . . . yeah. They are. Trust me. I don't want to go into details about what happened because I don't want to put them in any danger of it happening again, but something happened to the Ghost and they were both really happy he was okay. They're both alright as far as I know, walked away from it still holding each other. Then vanished. *Spooky* as hell when that happened.*

*I just hope they're ok, I worry about the Ghost enough anyway and that just *really* made me worry.*

he has phallanx to look after him now <3 <3 <3

Phalanx is clearly doing a fucking amazing job of that, he looks like hell.

*Could we have one day without wank, just one, just *one*? *sobs**

maybe it was puckzilla!!!

Fucking hell I'm blacklisting the entire fucking fandom.

Kurt curls himself up on the sofa, tucking his entire body inside the throw like it's his cloak, just letting Blaine hold his hand. Blaine watches his face as Kurt looks at the floor, and his mouth opens for a moment before he says, visibly straining to force the sounds out, "- years ago, now. When I was in high school . . ."

His mouth closes again. He stares at the floor. Blaine squeezes his hand and Kurt looks up at him, and his eyes have gone a strange dark green Blaine's never seen them before, he didn't know eyes could be that colour. All he can do is stare back at him until Kurt closes them, cutting off their strange hypnotic power. "There was this guy."

He stops. Blaine waits, and strokes the back of Kurt's hand with his thumb, and he doesn't know where this is going. Kurt looks across at the window, not at the view, just not at Blaine, and his free hand under the throw is making a little rhythmic jogging motion, like he's picking at his nails.

"I don't know how to word this," he says, quiet and breathy. "I've never . . . I don't talk about this. I don't know where to start."

"We've got all day. I can make some more coffee. Just - I'll be here as long as you need me, you know that."

Kurt stares out of the window, and holds Blaine's hand. "I didn't have any friends in high school," he says, and then he does look at Blaine, pale but steady. "I don't mean that I didn't have many friends. I mean that literally not one person was willing to talk to me. I ate lunch on my own every single day. My lab partner leaned across the bench and talked with her friends while I worked. I don't think I helped myself. I know I didn't. I knew they hated me so I kept my nose up and swore they'd never see me *care* about that. Which." He wets his lips. "Was really just one more reason to hate me."

Blaine holds his hand, and watches his eyes, and his mouth twitches a little. He knows what loneliness is like. Maybe not the absoluteness of isolation that *that* must have been, but he knows what feeling like your friends *can't* know you is like. He says, very quietly, "I'm sorry."

Kurt just shakes his head. "Rachel and I weren't friends back then. We might have been, once, we even - we both auditioned for the school show choir, but since we were the only people in the entire school who did audition, it was disbanded before it even began. The only other time she talked to me in high school she, um. She wanted to start a 'gaylesball' with me. A 'gay and lesbian alliance'. And I wasn't actually out and I just walked away from her. I don't know why I wasn't . . . everyone knew, *everyone* knew, and I just . . . I hated being put in that corner, not having any *choice*, not having any *control*. Everyone just taking it for granted that they already knew me. So I never spoke to Rachel at school again. Finn -" He looks at the window again, and picks at his nails. "When my dad married his mom he asked me to not talk to him at school."

"- he - ?"

"I don't blame him." Kurt says, quietly, to the window. "I was social smallpox. No-one wanted to be near me." He shrugs a shoulder. "He was the quarterback on the football team, he dated cheerleaders, he . . . it would have just cost him too much, people knowing about us. Our families. I don't blame him for it. He's sorry now. I - probably get away with too much, with Finn, because of how sorry he is now."

Blaine thinks, white hot with anger, He *should* be - but Kurt is just looking at the window, sort of sad and quiet and struggling, closing his eyes and swallowing. He whispers, "Blaine, I'm not - you know me. I'm not a *hero*, like people think -"

"I know you're more of a hero than you think."

"I'm not brave."

"You're the bravest person I've ever met."

"Will you *please* - I need you to understand. I need you to not - lose - I don't know, to - to change your mind too much about me, will you . . ."

"Kurt." He finds both of his hands under the blanket, holds them, holds his eyes. "You and me - if we can't be honest with each other then we are seriously in trouble, and I know that. So I want you to be honest with me. I do. But I want you to believe me when I'm being honest with you." He squeezes his hands, watches the quick skittery nervous light in his eyes, deep green and *scared*. "Kurt, I love you. I . . . if bad things happened before then the only thing I care about is that you're okay now and that I wish I'd been there, I wish I'd known you, I wish you hadn't been alone all this time, I wish . . ."

Kurt's hands turn, settle around his, stop their squeezing and make them unfold, gentle. "I just want you to understand," he says quietly, watching their hands, their fingers latticing, Kurt's paler and Blaine's richer, breathing slow as he makes himself think the words through. "I need you to actually hear what I'm saying. Because I've never told *anyone*. He told me not to and I didn't. And I don't know *why* - I just - there's just never even been anyone *to* tell -"

"I'm here. I'm listening. Of course I'm listening-"

Kurt lifts his eyes to his, settles his breath, holds his head steady. His voice is still husky. "Do you promise?"

Blaine tries to understand. Of course he's listening. Kurt is telling him something *important*, of course he's -

Kurt is telling him something important. He doesn't, Blaine realise, want to hear *Blaine's* reading of the situation, not yet. He needs Blaine to understand it first. What he wants is for Blaine to actually listen to what he's actually saying. It's not just a statement of facts, it's how Kurt *feels* about it all, because what happened isn't only the facts but what they did to Kurt then and what they still do to him now, and Blaine . . .

. . . Blaine has spent so long trying not to think about all the whys of Kurt, and now he's being asked to actually listen to the answers to the questions he hasn't had the courage to ask. And Kurt doesn't even

believe that he's brave, because Kurt is aware of how much it's costing him to say this, how very afraid he is. It could take Blaine days to convince him otherwise. For now all he can do is listen, the way Kurt wants. Just listen, because he's never told anyone, and Blaine shouldn't make it harder for him than it already is.

He turns to face him on the sofa, sits on the cushions with his legs crossed so he can hold both his hands and his eyes with more ease, and says, "I'm here. I'm right here. I'm listening."

Kurt watches his eyes, then looks to the side, to the shiny glass coffee table, and he swallows, again. He draws his breath in, long and deep, and lets it go. And he says, again, "There was this guy."

He doesn't look at Blaine.

"There was this guy who, um." He wets his lips again. "He was on the football team with Finn. He was . . . just another meathead jock, he didn't - matter, at first. Someone else tossing me into dumpsters and throwing things at me and calling me a fag. I." He closes his eyes, shakes his head like he's dislodging something. "They all did it. It wasn't personal. I was there and I was an easy target, it would have been someone else if it wasn't me. But -" He presses his lips in again, and he's still looking over at the coffee table, not at Blaine. "But in junior year - I don't know, it got worse. It got worse and I didn't know what to do about it. I guess I was just running out of - just out of everything. Energy and patience and -" He closes his eyes - "strength. They tell you things will be different when you leave. I always knew I would get out of that town and never go back because I had to. I knew I'd get out and do something *different* because I *had* to. But that didn't help, knowing that, being in the middle of it all. How does it help knowing one day you'll be somewhere else and things will be better when it's not 'one day', it's *today*, and *today* you're being shoved over and spat at and always sitting on your own and you have another year and a *half* to get through -" He puts his head back, swallows again. "Sorry. I'm sorry. I'm getting sidetracked."

"No. No. It's important. I'm sorry." He rubs his hands a little. "I'm sorry I wasn't there."

"You are the last person in the world," Kurt says, to the ceiling, "I would ever blame for any of this."

He keeps on staring at the ceiling. He takes a hand back, to pull the throw a little closer, like he's cold. Or maybe just like he wants to be hidden in it.

"Junior year I completely lost it one day after he launched me right across a corridor into a locker on the opposite wall. My dad had recently had a really serious heart attack, they, the doctors didn't know if he

would die for a while. I was stressed out and just kind of wrecked and I wasn't thinking, I just wasn't thinking, I didn't realise - how people can get hurt. I was just a kid, I didn't know what people can do, I thought the worst that could happen was getting beaten up. I followed him into the locker room to yell at him. I mean I really - I had *years* of this stuff in me by then - I don't even remember what I said, Blaine, I just laid into him, I wanted him to feel *half* of what I'd felt, I wanted him to understand that I would be something *else* one day and he would *never* be better than this, I really - I really wanted him to understand what *hopelessness* feels like." His jaw works for a moment, silent and angry, and then something fades behind his eyes, the anger fades, and he looks naked somehow, and small. "He kissed me."

Blaine just stares at him. Kurt looks at the coffee table again.

"He would have done it again if I hadn't shoved him off. And I think - I don't know. That might have been the only moment I could have fixed it. If I'd said the right thing, if I'd - because he was scared too and if I could have, just, *something*, then - but I didn't, I couldn't, I just stood there like an idiot. I'd never been kissed. I'd never . . . been anything, no-one had ever wanted me, no-one . . . I didn't know what to do. I was a kid and I didn't know what to do."

Blaine forms a word and stops himself. Kurt wants him to listen. Kurt doesn't want Blaine to say, Why do you care about *him*? because - because to Kurt that question probably wouldn't even make sense. For better or worse, Kurt cares about *everyone*. He's so finely attuned to the sad, lonely tones of human suffering, all their strange discordant harmonies. And Blaine is maybe, finally, beginning to understand why.

Kurt touches his face, his own closed eye, with his free hand, then lowers it, and his fingers shift nervously under Blaine's. Blaine holds onto them. He doesn't want Kurt to take them away from him, to lose grip of him, not now.

"He found me," he says, quietly. "The next day. To ask me . . . to ask me if I'd told anyone. Which I hadn't. What would I tell them? I wasn't - either, I wasn't being honest, what was I supposed to say? No-one would believe me. I knew that, we both did, he was on the football team and I was *me* and no-one would believe me. He -" He stares at the coffee table, and Blaine watches his eyes, dark dark green like, like what? The colour of secrets. Kurt takes a little breath. "He told me that if I told anyone he'd kill me."

Blaine stares at him. It takes him a moment to swallow, to shift his grip on Kurt's limp fingers, to clear his throat and say, "Kurt - ?"

Kurt says to the coffee table, "I believed him." and blinks, slowly, like he's very tired. Blaine - doesn't know what to say. But Kurt resettles his back, lifts his head a little, sighs his breath out. "But after that he knew - he knew my - he knew me. He knew I was scared and he knew I wouldn't tell anyone. And he, um." He swallows, wets his lips again. "He started - to push what I would keep quiet. He -" He swallows again. "He would say - things to me, at me, in the cafeteria, like he always had, but he - he winked." His mouth twitches sick in one corner. "Like we had some *little secret*. And he would - be there, in corridors, I never knew when he would . . . he looked at me." He rubs his arm with his free hand, shoulders tensed. "I don't know how messed up it is that that's the worst. The way he *looked* at me. He trapped me against my locker and I was too scared to *say* anything. He would." He swallows, again, like there's too much saliva rising and Blaine knows the feeling, low, shifting dread is creeping up like bile in his throat too. "He would touch me. Not like before. He didn't need to shove me. He would - brush my arm." He closes his eyes. "I thought I would faint, but -" His breath sucks in on a *nasty* little smile - "I was never so lucky."

Blaine looks at him. Looks at him so pale in the morning light through the window, the fine bones in his jaw and throat, the untouched snowy sculpting of him. Looks at his closed eyes coming slowly open, a little dazed like he's making himself come out of a fever-dream, hauling himself from some oppressive depth inside. If Kurt can say this then Blaine can say *this*. "How - long did this last?"

Kurt looks at him then, finally, a little surprised, like maybe he's never thought about that. "I don't know," he says. "A few weeks? I don't know. A couple of months, I think."

"What . . ." He has to swallow. His saliva tastes wrong to him, and there's too much of it anyway. Be brave. *He* is. "What happened?"

Kurt looks him in the eye, looking drained and tired and completely spent. "Nothing happened."

". . . what?"

"Nothing happened. Nothing happened. *Nothing happened*." He closes his eyes, looks away from Blaine again. "I went to bed one night and I had nothing left in me for the next day. I - couldn't. I could not. I knew it. I could not get through another day of being trapped in that building with that boy who - who just kept *pushing* and I was too weak to make him *stop*."

"N-"

"So I cried I don't even know how long, I cried until my head *hurt* in the dark and I knew I was too weak for any of it. I couldn't tell anyone. I couldn't make him stop. And I couldn't make myself stop either. I lay there and prayed to nothing I actually believe in to just stop existing. I begged the universe to just make me disappear. Make me not *be*. Not have to feel anything, not have anyone look at me like that, I just didn't want people to see me at all if it meant they could look at me and think - whatever he was thinking. I would rather have not existed than him ever be able to - *touch* me or *look* at me - I just wanted my life to *stop* and I was too much of a coward to kill myself so I just wished the universe would do it for me."

"- don't. You are *not* a coward. Don't ever -"

Kurt looks back at his eye, quite coolly, though he's shaking just a little. "Physically, maybe not." he says, horribly calm. "But I couldn't do that to my dad. I have always been too pathetic to want to hurt other people like that. I could not leave my dad my body to find."

Blaine hardly knows how to look at him, he hardly looks like *him*. He holds his hand. It's still Kurt's hand. He's not letting go. He's *not*.

Kurt - blinks, then, and looks down at their hands, and his breath loosens again, comes slower. He says, "When I woke up I was invisible." He - smiles, then, *snorts*, and Blaine feels pale and sick, can't find the humour in it. "You know how strange it is, you've seen it, not being able to see your own body. God, I was terrified. And I thought . . . I just had to tell my dad. It was no better than finding me dead, me just *disappearing*. I couldn't leave him on his own not knowing what had happened to me. I had to tell him. They had brought in that registration system for supers two months previously." He swallows. "After the freaking out and the calming down, that was the problem. He didn't - he just didn't even seem to need to think about it. Like he knew. He just knew it was about us and not about anyone else. He told Finn I was sick and sent him to school without me, he called in sick at work. We spent the whole day hoping I'd change back and I didn't." He shrugs. "That evening we had to tell Finn and Carole. What could we do? I couldn't even . . . things I was holding, my clothes, things kept becoming visible and invisible, I couldn't control any of it. I stayed like that for three days. At least it got me off school, away from . . ." His jaw is looser now, his lips a little parted, his shoulders less tight. "We talked. For the first time maybe ever. About just - things. I didn't tell him about Karofsky. The - the boy, at school. But I told him I was gay while he couldn't actually look at me and he said he already knew, and - and when he held his arms out - he still knew how to hug me even if he couldn't see me. But I didn't have the courage, Blaine. Not to tell him . . . I've never told anyone. Not one person. It's not just - it's not just outing him. It's saying." He tries to pull

his hand out of Blaine's and Blaine, stubbornly, won't let him. "It's saying - what he did and what I let him do - and how it's *nothing*, it is *nothing* and I let it - wreck me and I know I did and -"

"It's not -"

"Do you *understand*?" Kurt says, squeezing his hand *hard* since Blaine won't let go, and Blaine stares into his eyes. "Don't you *understand*? It's *him*. All of it's *him*. This *thing* I am, that *cloak*, every *night* it's *him*. All of it's *him*, he's in *everything*, he - changed my *body*, this thing I can do, it's all *him* -"

"It's not, it is *not*, Kurt it's *you*. You took some - *horrible* thing that happened and you turned it into - into making other people's lives better, I can't - that's why you save people, isn't it? Because you know what it's like to *not* be saved. Kurt - how can you hate yourself for this? I can't - you became a *hero* because of this, you rescued other people from ever having to go through it and you made *me* want to do the same, you inspired so many people - if it wasn't for you - do you know how many people are actually capable of taking something so *ugly* and turning it into something so, so beautiful?"

"Taking *what*?" Kurt spits at him. "It was *nothing*. I'm out there every night, I know what it's like, I've seen the worst things that can happen to a person and I let some scared little boy do *nothing* to me and it turned me into this, I don't even know what -"

"It was not nothing."

"It was *nothing*. The things people survive, and I couldn't cope with high school. Why do you think it *hurts* when people call me a 'hero'?"

Blaine is furious, can't even understand how angry he is, at the contempt in Kurt's voice. "You would never let that happen to someone else, you would never *say* that about someone else, you would never, never call someone else *weak* for surviving *that*, what - why the hell is it *nothing* when it happens to you and if it happened to anyone else you'd do *anything* -"

His eyes are too bright and too dark and Blaine understands that spat contempt in a sudden sick rush, grabs Kurt's shoulders and pulls him in, pulls him in as close as he can, tightening his grip on his shaking body until he can't get away while he feels the tears still hot on Kurt's cheek go cold on the side of Blaine's neck. "It wasn't," Kurt chokes, before crying steals the rest of it. Blaine holds him hard, rocks him back and forth, keeps his eyes tight closed to try not to see what he can't unsee.

Kurt knows it wasn't nothing. And it's the cruellest thing in the world, to make him admit it.

*

Blaine strokes his back through the throw and holds him close until he's quiet, head tucked in over Kurt's, staring at Cooper's kitchen and feeling sort of numb, in a gut-churning, hollow way. He remembers - things, little things, about Kurt. How very badly he reacted to the whole internet, just hours after it happened, sharing and scrutinising and dissecting a video he didn't know was taken and had no control over at all. How he really struggles to *say* anything about himself, like - like he really just doesn't *like* himself, like he wishes the truth didn't matter because he hates the truth. How he 'overreacts'. Which, Blaine thinks, running his hand down his back now it's stopped shaking, feeling the rhythm of his breathing sides become more regular, easier, calmer, is not an overreaction at all. It is, to Kurt, the most rational reaction in the world.

God, he thinks. God, other guys he's seen, guys he's dated, if they got pushy and he flinched back - people must have said it to him in as many words, more than once. Friends will have said it, people who don't know him - *You are overreacting*. Taking everything Kurt is afraid of and making it into him being stupid. You are overreacting. Your emotions are not legitimate. Your response is not valid. *You are overreacting*, and what it must always have meant to Kurt: *It was nothing, what you went through was nothing, you don't deserve to feel the way you do, you don't deserve sympathy, get over it, get over yourself, it was nothing* -

Oh god, what do you say to people when they do something you don't understand?

What is wrong with you?

... oh god, god, what that must always mean to Kurt ...

"When," he says, and clears his throat a little, his voice comes too rough. Kurt just breathes against him. "When a person is in under extreme stress - even briefly, but for a - long, long period of time. It, um." He swallows. "The body isn't supposed to function under those conditions. It ... the hormones involved, it can have long term effects on the brain. It actually, um, it rewrites ... it's not, doctors don't really understand it enough yet, it's not predictable what it'll do. But there's a state called hypervigilance. When - you just react to, maybe earlier warning signs than other people might."

Kurt says into his shoulder, "When you repeatedly freak out about nothing at all."

"No." Blaine gets a hand into his hair, presses a kiss onto the crown of his head. "No. To your brain that is the optimum way of responding. It's aware of how bad things could get and it acts accordingly. And actually in your line of work it's really not like it's a disadvantage, not, not always."

Kurt breathes, against him. Blaine just keeps an arm folded around his back, keeps him close. He's worried about what Kurt could do, how Kurt could react. He's worried about the nothing-that-was-not-nothing. He doesn't know what happened next, and he doesn't want to push Kurt into saying it. He just -

All he wants is for him to be okay, and he doesn't know how to make that happen, and it's killing him. All those shields. What the hell is the point of him if he can't even keep *him* safe?

Kurt sits up, coming back onto his heels from his clumsy kneel into Blaine's body, lifts and wipes his eyes off on the back of a hand. He sniffs, and Blaine looks at the magazine-scattered coffee table, passes over the box of tissues; Kurt takes one, his mouth twitches not yet a smile, and he blows his nose. "I walk a lot of women to the rape crisis centre," he says, closing his eyes. "And a couple of guys. A woman who worked there gave me some pamphlets once, I suppose she thought I needed to know about - these things. In 'my line of work'." He plays with the tissue in his hands, throw sagging low around his shoulders. He draws his breath in. "They call them 'little rapes'. The way someone will - push. Violate - body space, and comfort, and. And work out - test - what a victim will -" His chest jumps a little, and his fingers are tighter on the tissue. "And you're right. I know it's no-one's fault if they're too scared to do anything. It's *terrifying*. But. But -"

He cups Kurt's hands in his to stop him twisting that tissue ragged. "But," he says to them, quietly.

Kurt's head hangs lower. "But it doesn't change what it felt like. What it feels like. I didn't tell anyone. He told me not to and I didn't. He - he just wiped me out. I felt like *I* didn't exist when he was looking at me, like I literally couldn't have done anything anyway, nothing would have worked, I was just a thing he - I was just a thing. He made me feel less than human. And no-one noticed." He stares dazed at the carpet like he still can't understand it. "No-one even noticed. It was like I was - invisible and *illuminated* at the same time, like the only person who could see me was - *him*, I couldn't escape him seeing me, but it wasn't . . . me he saw. He saw something that wasn't a person. Because no-one could do that to another person. Could they - ?"

He looks so bewildered, like he just doesn't understand the entire world, and Blaine catches his face, brushes his thumbs over his blotchy cheeks, combs his hair back, and when Kurt looks at him he leans up

and kisses his forehead. Kurt closes his eyes, holds his wrists. "I don't know what I thought," he whispers. "I thought you wouldn't want me. I don't know why anyone would want me. It makes me feel so weak and pathetic and - wrong and so - *disgusting* -"

"No," Blaine whispers back, laying little kisses over his overheated face. "No, no, no."

"Hated it," Kurt breathes, eyes closed, just letting Blaine hold and rock and hum to him, kissing him on the raw damp skin under his eyes. "Hated it. Hated *me*, it's the biggest part of me -"

"No."

"It's like - I don't know. Like maybe . . . like I got my strings tangled on that, and all I do is dangle from them, and wait for it to saw them right through and drop me. Like all my life just hangs off *that* and it always will. Like I'll never, never get away -"

"You are still here," Blaine says, holding his face, holding his opening eyes. "Still here and still amazing, Kurt, he didn't take any of that away from you. Still my hero." Kurt's too tired to cry anymore, though his eyes are wet again. "Still love you," Blaine whispers, tilting his forehead to Kurt's. "Still do, you know I do, I . . . I don't know what I thought had happened. I'm glad you're not hurt even worse. And I'm so glad you're still you, despite everything. I know you don't believe it yet, but I'm so grateful you're still you and you're still so brave and beautiful and *incredible*, I just . . . I just want you to be okay."

Kurt squeezes his eyes so *tight* to keep the tears in. "Blaine, I am. I really am, I don't know how *bad* I was but I know I've never been this good, do you know that? When you - I'm scared to put so much of this on you, to just make you - *everything* like this because it's not fair, not to you -"

"Kurt, when I felt like a freak and a coward because I have *these* -" Shields flicker around them, and Kurt's eyes flick to follow them, bright and dark and wet. "- and I couldn't even help someone right next to me, I felt useless and weak and - I felt like a *waste* of a human being, you have no idea, I felt like I should never have been *born*, *anyone* else would have been better. And then you came along and you were helping people and you were just - everything, everything I wanted to be, I . . . when I tell you that you've saved more lives than just people you've actually met, Kurt, I really mean it. You saved mine. I didn't know what the point of me was until I found out about you. I can't believe you managed to make something *good* out of all that. I don't know how I would have . . . I don't know. I can't imagine it. I don't know what I would have done after that, if it had happened to me. Not what you did." He kisses him, and Kurt's arms fold

around the back of his neck. "I didn't have the imagination or the strength, not without you showing me the way. To be able to think about other people getting hurt, and having enough of yourself to give to them too. I couldn't have. You changed who I'm capable of being. I'm *more* because of you. And you're so much more than I could have, than anyone could have - Kurt, I'm not going anywhere. Not without you. Not away from you. I owe you so much. And I *want* to give you even more."

Kurt lifts his head a little, looks at his eyes, He looks tired - he always looks tired - but there's a steadiness to him, that too-much of earlier has faded, he's containing himself again. "Shall I tell you the rest, since we're here now?"

Blaine tugs him back against the sofa, settling him under his arm, pulling the throw up a little. Kurt gives a faint smile, cheek close to cheek, like something of the playful intimacy of the position helps. "By the time I went back to school - it was a week later, we had to make sure I could control it first - by the time I went back I'd already started ghosting. I still do it in my sleep, sometimes, right through the bed, it's ridiculous. I was 'dropping' things, only I knew I wasn't. So I started practising. Paper, pencils at first. The first time I walked through a wall it was one of the most terrifying things I'd ever done. But," he says, and Blaine can see the way his head's higher, the determination in how he's holding his jaw now. "I went back and it was enough. It was *just* enough. That I knew. That I *could* stop him looking at me, *could* stop him touching me, if I wanted to then he couldn't do anything to me, *no-one* could. It was enough, just enough, it meant I could meet his eye and stare him down. He didn't know what to do. I suppose it's what a wolf would feel like if a sheep turned on it. It *really* freaked him out. I - wonder what happened to him, sometimes. If he got out. If he's different now."

Blaine watches Kurt's hands play with each other, and his jaw flexes with the urge to say that he hopes the guy got hit by a truck but he can't. He can't hate him more than Kurt does, and Kurt doesn't actually seem to *hate* him, and Blaine can't explode out his own horror, his own sick rage, when Kurt is calmer now, and watches as Blaine takes his hand, and does not squeeze the crap out of it, and he smiles.

"So I survived high school. I'm not saying I was happy. I felt different and isolated and I had still never had anyone I could call a friend, but I told myself I was okay with that, and Karofsky transferred out for senior year anyway. I applied to New York for college, anywhere that would take me, I had no idea what I wanted to do. When I was a kid I wanted to be on stage." He smiles wider at their hands. "Can you actually imagine that? All those people *looking* at me. My god. I bumped into Rachel at college, she'd started journalism to do an exposé on 'corrupt admissions practices at performing arts schools' and latched onto me like a *leech*,

I guess she was feeling less confident about New York on her own than she let on. And I ended up majoring in fashion design, eventually." He shrugs. "I have a knack."

"You're a genius."

"Mm," Kurt says, a, Well, yes. Blaine laughs, and tugs at his hand a little.

"Was that when you started? Being the Ghost?"

". . . sort of. I guess. I didn't plan it. I, um. I was walking home from the library late one night, because I'm that cool, when there was a girl stumbling out of a party - really drunk, I mean, really in a very special way *drunk*. And a guy came out after her, and started trying to pick her up off the sidewalk and she was - shoving at him and trying to make him stop and saying she wanted to go home. And I - my whole life would've been different if I'd just walked past." He presses his lips together, thinking about that, and Blaine watches his face. "I stopped. I asked if she needed a hand. He told me to 'fuck off fag'. She was crying, *really* crying, she was so scared. And I couldn't, Blaine, I couldn't leave her. So I - I tried to pull him off, he swung at me - and his hand went right through me and I just -" He swishes a hand at the air. "Threw a hand at his face and it went *through* his face and he *screamed* and went down. And she was drunk and crying and didn't see what had happened, and he was unconscious, and *I* did not really know what had happened, not at the time. I sat with her and got her to show me her friend's number on her cell, and two girls came out to pick her up, and called an ambulance for the guy who must have 'slipped'. And I went home. And I didn't really think about it. Not at first." His fingers shift, settle around Blaine's. "Until I did."

"Did they still have the registration laws then?"

"Yes. That guy in Detroit had died the year before in a fight with the cops. There was that woman in New Orleans still, the one we don't hear from anymore, I don't know if she quit or died. But I . . ." His eyes are distant, looking right through that coffee table. "I saw the potential. To combine . . . I wanted to be an actor as a kid. I spent my days designing clothing to prop up a personality. And I could - do what I could do, and, and -"

". . . and people shouldn't be on their own when the worst things happen."

"No." Kurt says, quietly. "No. They shouldn't be."

"So you decided to become a superhero."

"I didn't think anyone would notice me. I put the hood up and the mask on, I thought . . . I don't know." He shrugs. "No-one had ever noticed me before. Apart from - him."

"Weren't you afraid?"

"Weren't you?"

"I was looking for you. What were you hoping for?"

". . . I was hoping that someone else wouldn't have to be afraid." He looks at their hands again. "I was hoping that someone else wouldn't have to wish they didn't exist hard enough to make it almost true."

Blaine says quietly, "I'm glad you exist."

Kurt huffs out an almost-laugh, smiling. "So am I, Blaine. I didn't know - all of this. That people - the internet stuff. How could I have known? I didn't know anyone would notice, god knows I dressed drably enough, I didn't *want* to be noticed, I didn't like anyone looking at me, it - I didn't want people looking at me. I *hate* it when they look at me. I've never wanted anyone to see - whatever he saw." He licks his lips. "And it turns out the whole damn internet was looking at me the whole time -"

"- and all they saw is a hero." Blaine says, and Kurt looks at him, exposed for a second before his face softens.

"Well," he says quietly, and looks down. "That's what they see."

"There's a reason they see it." Blaine says, and doesn't let go of his hand, and Kurt looks to the window, finally does, Blaine think, actually see through it, to the busy-built skyline of New York.

"It was a choice," he says, slowly. "I understood the choice I was making. Because if there's some superhero out there who can turn invisible and walk through walls . . . then Kurt Hummel can't. Not ever, not even to save his own life, because if he does then people will know, and that's just too dangerous, far too dangerous. I didn't have many people I loved but I didn't want anything to happen to them because of me. I just had to . . . to know that maybe, maybe maybe maybe, if the Ghost could make the world a good enough place, maybe Kurt wouldn't even *need* to be able to protect himself. I don't know. It just got . . . I liked being him better. Not being me. This is beginning to sound really crazy, isn't it?"

"No, no, but - Kurt -"

"I don't anymore," Kurt says, fingers closing around Blaine's. "I don't care who I am anymore. So long as you're there I don't."

"That's fine." Blaine says. "I'm not going anywhere."

He kisses him. And again, as Kurt's arms close around his back, drawing him into the throw's warmth too. He kisses him, and Kurt tangles them closer, and shields ripple in the air around them but eyes closed, neither of them notice.

Blaine brings a fresh cup of coffee over to where Kurt is sitting in Cooper's fancy spinny armchair, feet up on the cushions, watching the city through the windows from from over his own bent knees. "Thank you," he says quietly, taking the cup, but he doesn't look away from the view. Blaine leans back on the sofa's arm, looks out with him at the city, strangely silent through the glass.

He says through his coffee steam, "What are you thinking about?"

Kurt's eyes don't leave the view, breath stirring the steam a little, palms around the mug and fingers playing with the heat of the surface, touching and retreating and touching. "I don't know," he says. "Just processing. That someone else knows. No-one's ever known."

"Do you feel okay?"

"I don't know what I feel like." Kurt's eyes are paler in the direct light, an oddly vulnerable grey-green, as he watches the world so intent on its own business all around them. "I don't know. I feel . . . like I just . . . like maybe I found something down the back of the sofa I'd been missing so long I'd forgotten I ever lost it. And now it's back it's just like . . . oh, of course. Like life's gone right back to always having it, never having lost it. I . . . it's been a slightly crazy twenty-four hours, I don't know how much sense that made."

"I understood it." Kurt blinks, drags his eyes from the window to look across, up, at Blaine. Blaine shrugs. "There's things I've been looking for forever too. Like . . . the right feelings, I don't know, I've always felt like I've been - one step off from what I should've been feeling. And then there's you and it's just - right. Everything is right. It just is, it's just easy, I just -" He shrugs again. "I never used to understand . . . I don't know, Helen of Troy. How anyone could start an entire war because of one person. Passion. Only then there's you and I just . . ." Kurt watches him, and Blaine watches Kurt, and everything feels so balanced,

like the universe has finally evened itself out, come to equilibrium, cosmic spirit levels finally show the whole world standing steady. "I get it, now. How much it can feel. I could do some pretty crazy things for you. I really could."

Kurt takes a sip of coffee. "Like put on a superhero costume and fight crime every night?"

He laughs. "Maybe. Maybe more."

Kurt smiles, and then looks out of the window again, shuffling smaller, huddling the cup closer. "It's still weird," he says. "Someone knows and look, the world's still here. Maybe it's just because it's you. If it was anyone else it really might have ended, you know that?"

"It's not going to end. You wouldn't let that happen to it."

"I'm still here," Kurt says, sounding still surprised by that. "Someone knows and I'm still here."

"Still beautiful," Blaine says. "Still perfect."

Kurt's mouth twitches wry. "I am very much not perfect."

"Still the best imperfect I've ever met."

Kurt closes his eyes, smiles through the steam. "I keep thinking maybe I did die. Everything's been too good since then to be real."

"You might just have to get used to that. I feel like that pretty much every time I see you."

"Blaine," Kurt says, and looks across at him, and he doesn't even mean anything much by it, Blaine thinks. He just likes saying his name.

He walks over to lean into the chair's arm, next to Kurt, and watches the city with him, so quietly, busily industrious all around them. Kurt takes another sip of coffee. It's Sunday afternoon and they have no deeds to do, no promises to keep. Blaine says, "Could take a nap."

Kurt says, "Everything would have been different if I'd known you then. Everything. You might not even like me if I was the person I would have been, if I'd known you all along. I would be different. Everything would be different."

Blaine says, "This wouldn't be."

They drink their coffee, and watch the city, and share the quiet, and think.

*

"You know the end of The Little Mermaid? The original story, not the Disney. When she just vanishes into foam. I cried so much the first time I read it, it was - it's just so unfair, it just killed me as a kid."

"You're not going to turn into foam, Kurt."

"No, I mean - I feel like I turned *back*. From being foam. Sorry. That was stupid."

"It's not stupid. So . . . does this mean you have your voice back too?"

"I love you, Blaine."

"Hm, sounds like it."

"Mm."

"I love you too."

"Mmm."

*

It's the late afternoon when Kurt says he should go, and it's been kind of a strange day. They haven't spoken much, like they used all their words up early on; they've just been sharing space, thinking, occasionally sharing little thoughts. Blaine's played music and put the news on at Kurt's request and tried not to obviously follow him around the apartment like a clingy dog while Kurt paced, and sat in various chairs, and thought, and thought, and thought.

Blaine doesn't want him to go, hugging him in his bedroom while Kurt shakes and folds his Ghost costume for Blaine to return to him tonight, stroking the creases out with a hand. "I have spares. We can stash it with yours while we're patrolling, I'll take it home with me then."

"You could stay for dinner."

"I just - need to think. And face Rachel, my cell's in my bedroom, she seriously could be *panicking* about this by now. And I need to call my dad. He gets pretty anxious if I don't call him every day, I guess I do see why."

"You know -"

Kurt folds his costume and lays it on the bed, then looks at Blaine, all patient and pale and contained. Blaine takes one of his hands because he feels so needy for him and doesn't even know *why*, he just wants to be touching him, always, he knows he's really *there* when he's touching him -

"You know I said we should work out a rota, so you get a night off once a week?"

"And you," Kurt says, voice soft, lifting his hand to run a thumb over the tired circles underneath Blaine's eyes. Blaine grins back.

"And me. I want us to do that. But, I want you to take two nights off a week."

"- Blaine . . ."

"Both of us. One night I'll go out and patrol and you can catch up sleep. One night you'll let me get some sleep. And one night - we'll both take off. We should get one night a week that belongs to us and not New York. Kurt . . . this is the most important thing to me. *You*, and you and me, and I want this to *work*. And I think we need the quiet times as well as all the crazy, I - want us to be able to go to the movies and relax and do what *normal* people do at least sometimes. I want to go dancing with you. I want to make this work. I don't want us to burn out in all the craziness on a night, we - we need this to be bigger than the masks. And I just need more of you in my life, okay, I just need every extra moment of you I can get, I'm greedy like that, will you-"

Kurt's thumb brushes his cheek again and his hand drops. "I'll think about it." he says quietly.

"Kurt -"

"Blaine. I'll think about it." He shrugs a shoulder, eyes on the wall. "You don't know how little fun I'll be if all I'm thinking all night is *could be helping people, could be out there* -"

"You don't owe that city anything and you give them more than enough already."

"It's not about owing people. It's about - people. Someone doesn't deserve something terrible to happen to them any more just because it's my 'night off' and their bad luck -"

"You are going to completely lose your mind if that's how you think, you can't help *everyone*."

Kurt says, quite calmly, "I can try." and kisses him, soft and lingering. "Are you okay for coming out tonight ...?"

He'll get to see Kurt if he does. He puts a hand over Kurt's hand on his chest, rubs it with thumb and fingers. "Sure. Can we talk about this then?"

Kurt twitches a smile. "Blaine -" He looks at their hands on Blaine's chest, and swallows. "Thank you. For - everything, I've been ..."

"It's okay. It's always okay."

"I've been so afraid for so long. About everything. I just - I just need a moment to think. To let things settle in. But you've just been - amazing, I couldn't, I couldn't have imagined anyone would be so perfect about it all, I know I'm -"

Blaine lifts his hand to kiss it. "You're amazing. Thank you. For sharing that with me."

Kurt closes his eyes. "I know I'm not what you imagined. And I know I'm - difficult, and maybe a lot to deal with, and ...". Blaine settles his arms around his waist, keeping Kurt's body curved to his, and Kurt drapes his arms over Blaine's shoulders and *sighs*. "You just don't want me to get this out, do you?"

Blaine just gives him a smile. "Thank you for taking a chance on a dopey idiot fanboy."

Kurt bumps his forehead off his. "Thank you for not caring that I'm the absolute messed-up opposite of a cartoon *hero*. And I love you."

Blaine kisses him, rubs the shallow bowl of his lower back with his thumbs, palms hooked around the hipbone; he wants him again, wants him always, his flesh feels tender and oversensitive for him, he would like a slow sliding hands-all-over-him in the sheets but Kurt is ready to leave, Kurt wearing someone else's clothes and his own spine-straight poise. So he says, "I love you too." and kisses him again and walks him to the door, gets one last kiss and Kurt's thumb running down his cheek, Kurt's wondering-wide eyes, before he's walking down the corridor in dark grey Ghost boots hidden by Cooper's overlong black jeans, Blaine's red polo shirt swamped in a darker cardigan, arms wrapped around himself, looking nothing at all and entirely just like *Kurt*.

Blaine checks his cell, which has five texts from Cooper (*I approve of your bf excellent taste! / Invite him for dinner one night! / Tell him to bring his friend who loves me too! / Find out if he has other friends who love me?? / We can have a party!!*), and thinks about checking the internet but can't face that madness right now; he just puts his arms out wide and flumps down face-first onto his bed, which still smells of Kurt, and Blaine, and what they did. He curls up on top of the covers and closes his eyes. He can't think of a better place to spend Sunday afternoon, if not actually with Kurt.

*

Kurt closes the door behind himself and Rachel turns the TV off, takes a breath, turns to him. "Hi," she says, and he doesn't know how to read the expression on her face as his own smile twitches on.

"Hi. I, um - need to change."

He heads for his room but Rachel says, "*Kurt*." and he looks over with a wince, says evenly, "Rachel." He knew he couldn't really escape this. He would just have liked another hour's sleep before he had to deal with it.

She stares at him for a moment, drawing herself together, then says, "You didn't answer your cell."

"I forgot it. It's in my room."

"You didn't come home all *night*. Are those even - whose clothes are those?"

"I - someone else's. Don't ask, slightly crazy night. And anyway, I'm a big boy and you're not actually my mom, so while I'm sorry I didn't-"

"Was it even Blaine you were with?"

His mouth is open. He closes it to draw in a very sharp breath. "What the *hell* kind of question - I don't know how you even dare to say half these things to me -"

"I don't know why *you* think you get to act so innocent! Because I don't *know*, okay? I never know what is *up* with you and I *like* him, do you know that? I like him and he's good for you and I don't know what you're doing with him and I bet he doesn't half the time either, I never know how seriously you're taking other people's feelings when you do this! I just - okay, say it was him, let's say you were with him last night -"

Kurt whispers, "If I slapped you right now no-one would actually *blame* me, do you know that?"

"- tell me you're using protection, Kurt, for *his* sake if not yours, he doesn't deserve to pay for whatever the hell you're doing to yourself, it's dangerous and it's *selfish* and I don't want you to have to find out the consequences the worst way-"

God help him he has to do this or he will physically attack her. "Rachel, until I met Blaine I was a virgin."

Rachel stares at him.

Rachel closes her mouth.

Rachel says, "What?"

He presses his teeth tight closed, squeezes his hands, makes them loosen. He can feel the heat of his own face. "Before Blaine I hadn't slept with anyone. Not one person. Not that that is any of your business nor has it ever been. May I now go change into something that actually fits me and doesn't actively aesthetically offend me or is there any other aspect of what I do with my own body that you'd like to discuss? Do you think my diet's okay, should I lose or gain some weight? Would you maybe like to tattoo or pierce some part of me? Because apparently that's something you get an opinion on!"

"Kurt I di- I didn't - know. I . . ." All she seems able to do, really, is stare. "I-" She clears her throat. "I'm so sorry. I'm so - I didn't - know."

He rubs his arms through Blaine's cardigan, shrugs his shoulders narrow. "I didn't want to talk about it. It's . . ." The waking knowledge stirs, low down and guilty; doesn't he go out of his way to make sure that Rachel has no idea what he's doing half the time? ". . . I don't suppose you could have known. I'm - sorry I got angry. Sorry, Rachel."

"But - I don't - all those nights you're out late or you don't - what are you *doing*?"

"All I could conceivably be doing is sleeping with some guy I just met. That is all you can think I could possibly be up to."

"I don't know! I don't - *know*, Kurt, what are you -?"

He looks at the ceiling, swallows, says, "I don't sleep well." That is true. "I - just like to get out of my room sometimes." That is also true. "The city's interesting at night." That is very, very true, for a certain definition of 'interesting'.

"On your own? Out on your own in the middle of the night?"

"I don't do anything dangerous." That is a lie. "I just need some air sometimes. I - mostly I've been with Blaine recently anyway."

True. Half-true; mostly, he's been with Phalanx.

Still all that Rachel looks is confused. "But all those guys. Didn't . . . not once . . .?"

Kurt shrugs again, still trying to avoid looking at her as much as possible, and squirms his tight-folded arms. "If kissing the frog doesn't make a prince out of it, I really fail to see what improvement sleeping with it will make."

Rachel just keeps staring at him, then turns and slumps on the sofa, staring through the blank television screen. She says, "I'm trying to make this make sense."

"May I go get changed while you do that?"

"Not any of them? Not once? Not even - I don't know, *things*, maybe not *that* but hadn't you done -"

"I know how you define sex, Rachel, and no, trust me, I hadn't." He's trying not to let his voice sound too full, he feels embarrassed and over-visible, like Rachel just poked a finger right through him. He doesn't - it was almost better being thought of as someone who has sex too much than someone who has sex too *little*, between the TV and magazines and the way people talk about it he's felt like a shameful freak who must never, never let anyone know -

Rachel looks at him again, for quite a long time while he stands there feeling humiliated and hot-faced, and then - her smile falls loose out of her, like she can't stop it, soft in her eyes. "Blaine's your prince."

He has to look at the carpet, the blood's turned the pink up another notch in his face. He shrugs. "He always was." His voice rasps. "Even the kiss was gratuitous for him, he was always . . . we, um. Blaine - and I -" He doesn't know what to say, blinks a few times and his throat's hurting. "Dad asked him to come home for Thanksgiving. He, he can't, but . . ."

"I want to be your best woman."

He has to swallow and it aches. "Rachel, I've known him for three months."

She looks so serious and so happy and so *proud*. "He's exactly what I always wanted you to have."

A wounded, still-hopeful fanboy with superpowers and a rescue complex? "I just," Kurt says, and can't say anything else.

Rachel glows. "You love him."

Kurt stares through the carpet, and says, very quietly, "I would die for him."

He really doesn't know where the honesty will end, today. He slinks into his bedroom to hide from it all, closes the door, stands there in the wrong clothes, fingers digging into Blaine's soft cardigan, everything's too much, everyone knows too much, he's hardly got any secrets left -

And he's still here, the world is still turning, and when he checks his cell he has a text from Blaine (*Cooper loves you too if you two are planning on eloping now :P*). How is everything still *okay* after all this - ?

Then he remembers the most important thing.

The door bounces off the wall he flings it open so hard, leaning out grasping the doorframe. *"Blaine is Cooper Anderson's brother."*

"Wh- what? *What?*" Rachel throws the remote and he ducks it. "And you wait until *now to tell me-?*"

"I would have told you sooner if you hadn't immediately accused me of being unfaithful to my boyfriend the second I came through the door -"

"Let's forget about that," Rachel says soothingly, "and you can come over here and tell me all about how Blaine is Cooper Anderson's brother and - oh my god does that mean you've met him?"

"I - am wearing his pants."

They both stare at the pants. Kurt draws his breath in hard. "Rachel -"

"You come over here," she says, a dangerous, too-bright light in her eyes, "and you tell me *everything* . . ."

*

I know it's not safe for him and it's not fair for me to want it, but I just want one picture of the Ghost with his hood down. All we get are these fleeting blurry flashes of him. I bet he's gorgeous. I'm just sure he is, and for his sake I know we can't ever actually know that.

Fuck yeah Phalanx plush! Ok so 1) yes I am taking commissions again and 2) you will have to be patient with me, these are harder work than the Ghost plushes, his costume is fiddlier :P [Follow the link](#) to order!

Would I get a discount on a bulk order of say 200 so I could fill my bed with them and then just lay in them all and giggle?

*Echo, Echo, Echo, pt II of II, R, Ghostlanx AU: When you're already dead it really puts eternity alone into perspective, and he just needs a way to haunt the *bones* of him . . .*

Oh fucking hell its Sunday night and Draxie updated and I can't face my heart getting stomped on like that before Monday morning ;_;

read it read it read it trust me <3

Oh god Draxie crying so much I can't even

Keep making ugly honking noises fuck it Draxie the dog's getting all anxious he doesn't know what's wrong with me

Gifset, the Ghost & blue

I pronounce gif as 'jif' the same day I pronounce the Ghost as the 'jhost', wtf

c) Who's your favorite author in fandom?

*Oh god you can't just ask a fanghost that! I mean, Draxie, oh my god, I don't know how she produces so *much* and all of it so good, she's just got more talent than she could possibly use up. But then once in a blue moon Blackbindings will update with something that reminds you what writing is *for*, I don't comment on her stuff half as much as I should because what do you *say*? It's like she knows every way people think and she doesn't *judge* any of us our weaknesses, she's like the Ghost as a fanficcer, she's my hero. And then I have a naughty thing for Spookmehard's smut, can't help it, that's some hot stuff. Unfunfunf.*

Some conservative blog backlash on Ghostlanx now. The hypocrisy of being all for them when they were 'cleaning up the streets' and turning on them as soon as they're potential 'dangerous influences' is apparently completely lost on them. Fuck 'em. We love you, superboyfriends, you just do that awesome that you do <3

I would just like to state that I am an ordained minister and should they require my discreet services one night, I am always, always available to them. Some of us don't and won't forget the debt this city owes them.

omg ghostlanx wedding I can't even

The Ghost's already wearing white! ;)

We could perform a twenty-one throwing star salute for them!

I have some Halloween table-topper ghost confetti we could use . . .

Actually tearing up thinking about this what is wrong with me

They would make beautiful husbands <3

Oh god I wish you hadn't said that, now I have a bunny . . .

Draxie, you need to learn to say no to these things, the addiction is getting to the kind of stage where we're going to have to go through the tedium of staging an intervention. I thought you were taking a break after Echo.

*I was taking a break from *angst* after Echo. Ghostly, I can't help it, think how cute they would be married ;_;*

I need a decontamination shower after all this. Too much sickliness to deal with before Monday morning.

(Are you getting the results tomorrow?)

(Yes. Don't ask. I feel sick.)

(I'll be thinking about you, message me if you need anything okay? I love you, most cynical woman in the fandom.)

(I love you too despite multiple reasons not to, Drax. Go squee with the rest of them, I'm burying myself in meta to heal my blackened, shrivelled heart.)

(Does bb know? Is it alright if I tell her?)

(Yes. She's got her own stuff though, don't get her wrapped up in this too.)

(Silly. She loves you.)

(She's terrified of me.)

(Ghostly. EVERYONE is terrified of you. Best of luck, I love you <3)

. . . so I set up an altar and made little bow ties and bouquets for my Ghost and Phalanx plushes, and this is the result. Losing my mind god help me.

Best. Gifset. Evar.

why no puckzilla plush so unfair

Draxie, I read it. I hate you, I love you, I hate you (I love you).

It's a cold night spooky, hope you two are wrapped up warm (in each other) out there . . .

Chapter Twelve

The Ghost patrols alone that night, since Phalanx will be on his own for the next few nights. He's used to it, he's done this for years, but there was never before an empty space at his side, he was never actually aware of his aloneness before. If you live underwater your whole life then how can you really miss breathing? But now, in the frost-hard night, the whole city metal-cold at the end of November, he feels the gap beside himself. He feels the space where he isn't. He feels the lack, and tells himself that he doesn't mind; Blaine is sleeping safe in his bed, warm and peaceful and in no danger at all, and the Ghost is doing what he's always done.

He moves faster, alone. He doesn't wait in the shadows to let Phalanx deal with a situation, so Phalanx can learn and it can become obvious to everyone what a hero he really is; he deals with it, with the cool efficiency of years of experience. It's strange that people are more willing to put up a fight against him and Phalanx together, but when he appears alone so many people choke their breath in and *flee*. People are scared of the Ghost, they know what he can do. Do they think that Phalanx is his lighter balancing angel, that without him there he's even worse . . . ?

It's not especially nice, being someone people are scared of. But then there's the drunk guys who've brought down a bouncer outside a club and they don't flee, one of them spits, "Go suck your freak boyfriend's freak dick, fag." and throws his bottle at him. Through him. When they're slumped on the sidewalk cuffed to a drain cover and he's helping the bouncer hold a cold pack to his face, over his obviously and bloodily broken nose, the man squints at him through the blood and croaks, "Where's he tonight?"

"He's fine, trust me." the Ghost says, and then, "Could you *please* not do that." to the girl in the queue holding her phone up to take a photograph, fading himself half out of sight.

"You don't have to be an asshole about it," she snaps back, and the bouncer huffs out through the blood, "You get out that queue an' head home, you think he needs his face publicisin' for idiots like them - ?"

He catches the man's eyes, gives a small smile, and as the sirens begin singing closer, he fades all the way out of sight and gone.

Just after two in the morning he ghosts through Blaine's bedroom door. Blaine's asleep on top of the covers, lying on his side, iPad on the covers next to him; he was waiting up for him, silly sweet man. He

loses the costume and folds it away, puts the iPad on the desk for safety, lets himself down onto the mattress *aching* with exhaustion.

Blaine shifts, sniffs, seems to accept Kurt's presence without question and wriggles in closer. He mumbles, "You're cold." and gets an arm over him, then falls immediately asleep again. He might not even have been aware of being awake.

Kurt whispers to his sleeping face, "I love you." and it's fine not getting a reply. The warm arm over his cool side says, *I love you too*.

*

Straight to the airport from Blaine's apartment, so strange to have him there, insistent on carrying bags and humming as he goes, carrying cheerfulness with him too. "Finn must be in the departure lounge already," Kurt says, checking his tickets before checking in. "I really can carry that, Blaine."

The muscles in Blaine's arm flex against the weight of the bag. "How long are you home for again?"

"I am not taking anything that is not absolutely necessary. And three days. Will you be okay -?"

"Kurt." He holds his eye, walking at his side with his body tilted to bear the weight of Kurt's holdall. "I will be fine."

Kurt opens his mouth, closes it again. It won't help to say *Are you sure?* Blaine has to be ready. All those shields, all he has to do is come home safe at the end of the night . . .

(But it's in his throat, in his chest, the horrible sinking dread: he knows he can't *stop* him. But that will never change the fact that if anything ever happens to Blaine, it will be Kurt's fault. The only person to blame for Kurt's sudden stupid death is Kurt, but Kurt's not the only one he's put in harm's way anymore. If anything ever happens to Blaine, if anything ever, ever happens to him, that will be the rest of Kurt's life erased like chalk, leaving nothing but black empty chalkboard space behind, a dull black nothing but knowing what *he* let - made - happen. Kurt didn't ask for Blaine to do this, but there's no denying that he doesn't want to be alone in it now, and if he lets Blaine do this and something happens to Blaine - oh god, all those shields, all those shields, Kurt can't think about this, all he's ever tried to do is teach him how to be *safe* -)

Before the queue for the desk Blaine puts Kurt's bag down and stands up wincing again, and Kurt stops his suitcase upright on its wheels so that when Blaine's arms fit around his sides, Kurt's can slip over his shoulders. "I'll be fine," Blaine says, hands rubbing his lower back. "I'll see you soon."

Kurt says, doesn't even mean to, it just comes out, "I love you."

Blaine comes off his heels to kiss him, and Kurt's fingers get tighter in his shirt. "- love you too," Blaine murmurs to his mouth, and Kurt keeps his eyes closed, and it'll be three days until he has this again, this man in his arms, this body against his, his mouth, his eyes, his warm steady hands. He swallows, and he nods, just a little, but he doesn't let go.

The second time of coming to sex was almost as difficult as the first. Blaine's hands on his body now know his body, there can be a different weight to their kiss, and while all Kurt wanted to *do* after discovering sex with Blaine (astonishing where your hands are allowed, given permission, to roam, across smooth plains of flesh and mossy forests of hair, an entirely new world to explore, Kurt's revelatory Newfoundland) was to have an enormous amount of sex with Blaine, it's not as simple as that. Their lives are exhausting, their schedules punishing, their time together brief and dangerous -

And Kurt is scared and shy and unpractised, and so afraid of looking stupid, so afraid of wanting more than he's wanted back. And admitting to Blaine how much he wants what he wants, *him*, he doesn't know the words, he's never had to learn them, how you're supposed to say, to say -

Please take me like I belong to you, because that is all I want to be true.

So it was three nights later, Phalanx's first night out alone but he was with Kurt, first, he was Blaine in Kurt's room, letting his heavy warm weight press over Kurt on top of his covers while they kissed until Kurt wanted to *whimper*. The waxing of desire, as impossible to fight as the pull of the moon . . . Blaine broke his mouth from his, fingers tangled in his hair, eyes all dazed and mouth all kissed and kissable and Kurt has no idea what *he* looked like, squeezing his fingers into Blaine's sides through his sweater, unable to think anything but *please*.

Blaine had cleared his throat. "Did . . ." he said, too breathy, and cleared his throat again, swallowed. "Did you mean it, last time, you asked me to . . ."

Kurt's body had reacted involuntarily to the thought, heat flushing outwards from his groin, hips trying not to jerk. A noise came out with his breath, and he stared at him, and Blaine was blushing, and Kurt nodded and closed his eyes and kissed him and nodded.

"... can, do you want to ..."

"Please."

But it felt awkward again to undress in front of him, he put an arm around himself trying to shield the line of that scar and Blaine just stopped with his shirt half-open for a second and then said, "Kurt, I, I don't want to do anything you're not comfortable with, but do you ..."

He stopped. He took Kurt's wrist, took his arm away from himself, put Kurt's hand to his own shirt buttons. "I, um. I know you don't see it the same way I do. You don't see you the way I do. But, I ... you know how much I like to look at you." He squirmed his shoulder a shrug, mouth all twisty-smiley, while Kurt flicked his gaze up from his buttons to his eyes, his own face shame-hot with blood at the ugliness of that marring line on his livid-white body. "I want to. Will you just believe me? I want to look. I think you're beautiful."

Kurt closed his eyes, and slipped the shirt down from Blaine's shoulders. "You can do anything you like," he said quietly, and staring at Blaine's chest he wanted his mouth all over it. "May - I - ?"

Blaine's hand in his hair, Kurt trying to learn from the cup of the palm and the pull of the fingers what was good, kiss-and-pull at his breastbone, drag of teeth down the skin, his cheek brushed his nipple first and woke it startled and hard and his tongue *wanted*.

Kurt likes his mouth on Blaine's skin. This is something to retain for future reference.

Kurt wanted the anonymity of the sheets, to be hidden by Blaine's body, covered and shielded like he was while Blaine stroked his fingers into him, Blaine who *does* carry condoms in his wallet. Blaine wanted him on top. "You get to set the pace, and make sure you're comfortable. And I - I like watching you," with the smallest, darkest-eyed smile, while Kurt's heart beat hard in the base of his throat and the heat of his own blood made him feel faint. So Blaine held his hand while Kurt settled himself, shaking a little with embarrassed arousal and horribly exposed, over his hips; held his hand and watched him with dark eyes

while Kurt found the catch of their bodies, the press, the push, the sense of his body not knowing if this was right until -

- until it was the most right thing in the world, an easy slipping slide down like they'd been designed to fit, tilting Kurt's neck back, eyes wide on the ceiling, and Blaine groaned out loud as Kurt's body fitted over his. Kurt felt Blaine's hips rock, brush of their thighs as he moved against Kurt's body, not enough for a - the word is *thrust*. Not a thrust. Not yet. There will be, though. God, these things he can do with him . . .

He bore his weight on his knees, let Blaine's grabbing hand hold his balance, bowed his shoulders back and found the right rise-and-fall of his hips until Blaine couldn't close his mouth. Tautness of Blaine's muscles, slide of that stiff flesh inside and against him, glimmer of sweat on him gold in the lamplight, Blaine said and it was garbled, "Going to, can't not, please Kurt -"

Blaine wrapped a hand around him so Kurt had something to rock *into* now, whining and remembering Rachel in the next room and not being able to stop it, and then Blaine's hips were twitching and jerking and Kurt could feel the pulsing inside, and Blaine shifted up so suddenly Kurt *yelped*, couldn't help it, grabbing Kurt around the hip to hold him down onto himself and working his hand and everything felt so far beyond good that he bit his own hand not to shriek.

And then Blaine was whispering, "God, god, Kurt, god," and kissing clumsily at his throat, messy and needy, and Kurt just slumped on his lap, helpless and heavy and beginning to notice how much his hand hurt from that, bruised teeth marks in the flesh at the base of his thumb. "God, Kurt, you are the most -" Blaine said, and kissed him, rolled him onto his back slipping free from his body (too loose without him, everything all open and too much and not enough *Blaine*) to kiss him more.

And then he showered and left him, to change and to patrol, out on his own in the night. And Kurt was left bereft in his bed, the silence audible in the room, all the air not being breathed by Blaine, all the air filling the space where he wasn't . . .

. . . and now Kurt's leaving him, for three days, not through any real choice of his own but god he knows he owes his dad this. For some time, on the shiny airport floor surrounded by the efficient hurry of people, he just holds him, making himself remember the shape of his body, hugging him close and warm and real, breathing him in. And then Blaine lets him back with a small brows-lowered smile, checking on him, and Kurt finds a smile to return.

He's slightly afraid that he'll come back and Blaine won't exist anymore. Not that he'll - die, not that (not *that*), just that it'll turn out that Kurt only imagined him all along. He is very close to being too perfect to actually be real. Kurt will return to Lima - the returning to Lima is always, always thick in his throat - and wake up to reality again, which is cold and cruel and does not contain Blaine Anderson. Maybe that kiss didn't wake him up after all. Maybe all it did was make him dream . . .

Blaine rubs his arm a little. Kurt - smiles, because he *is* so stupid, and bumps the side of his forehead off Blaine's, and says, "Okay. Thank you for coming with me, Blaine."

"And carrying your bowling ball collection for you."

"Thank you so much for that," Kurt says airily, lifting the holdall and setting it on top of his suitcase, tilted so it sits inside the angle of its long handle. "Clearly I am far too hopeless on my own to manage it."

"Hey." Blaine tugs his hand. "You and I both know how heroic you are. So - text me when you're home safe? And call me, if you can -"

"I will. Of course I will. And you -"

"I'll be careful."

"I love you."

Blaine's thumb brushes his cheek as he cups his jaw, says so quietly, "I love you too."

One last kiss, and it does occur to Kurt that they can do this here but he's not sure it would be safe at the Columbus end of this journey. How strange; he spends his nights as the city's untouchable hero, and in the daytime he isn't even safe kissing his boyfriend goodbye.

He looks back through the gates to find Blaine again, feeling vulnerable with only his carry-on luggage; Blaine is still standing there, smile coming alight as Kurt looks back, and Kurt *smiles* for him, it just takes his face from him, he just *smiles*. And then he heads on, endures security and the enforced removal of his shoes (he curtly informs the guard as he puts them into the tray, "If these get scuffed I'm suing."), and his cell buzzes before he's even got them back on again.

Say hi to your Dad from me!

I will. he texts back. Love you.

Love you too! xxx

Finn's already in the departure lounge, headphones on and listening to music from his cell. Rachel flew out a couple of days earlier - her schedule infinitely more flexible than theirs - and Kurt finds himself glad of the company, he feels the separation from Blaine, he knows he's made Blaine maybe a little too vividly *necessary* in his life and he's a little afraid of a few days left with his own thoughts now, he knows what being alone in his own head is like. So he heads happily to his stepbrother for a distraction, easy to spot him over the rows of seats, and when Finn glances up what Kurt says is, "Oh my *god* what happened -?"

It's the most fantastic black eye he's ever seen on him, one of the worst he's ever seen on *anyone*, black and purple and thickly swollen. Finn pulls his headphones out and Kurt just makes another *oh my god* gesture at it, still staring at him.

"Don't wanna talk about it," he mutters, stuffing the headphones' cable into his jeans pocket. "Flight should be soon."

"What - Finn, it looks like someone hit you with a baseball bat."

Finn's jaw grinds. "Just a fist. I don't want to talk about it."

"About someone putting their fist almost *through* your face? What-"

"I got into some fight with some guy in the locker room about -" Finn bites something back between his teeth, glances around but in the echo and chatter of the airport, no-one's paying attention to them. "- *you*, okay? So can we just not talk about it? At all?"

"About - what about - ?"

Finn folds his arms, mutters, "About *him*." and Kurt's mouth opens before he understands, and he closes it.

The Ghost isn't the most popular guy with the NYPD. Okay, a lot of them seem to respect what he does; he's saved the lives of a *lot* of New York's finest over the years, and probably everyone in the force at least knows someone who knows someone who's been rescued by the Ghost. On the other hand, he's kind of a caped advertisement for why they're not doing their jobs properly. He actually thinks they don't do *too*

badly, given their numbers, and if there were three times more cops out there then there might not even be any need for the Ghost. But there aren't, so there is, and he thinks they should just work together for the same cause, they both want the city to be a safer place, so why not?

Because he shows them up, because he doesn't do it in the right uniform, because he's a super and who trusts supers to do the right thing like the rules apply to them too, because - as one cop even spat at him once as the Ghost backed off from the guy formerly holding the gun now cuffed to some railings, because, "You keep playin' innocent, you got *supervillain* written all over you."

He turns invisible, he walks through walls, he scares the *hell* out of people. He knows he looks scary, he knows people don't trust him, but why would they assume he *chose* to be what he is? And why would they assume that he would choose to do the wrong things with it ... ?

He drops his carry on bag, rubs his arms, eventually sits down next to Finn, too close to the edge of the seat, hands pressing nervously at his own knees. "I'm sorry about your eye," he says, quietly. "But you don't have to defend me to anyone. It's probably better if you don't, you reali-"

"You get what they're sayin' about you now? You get the kind of crap I have to listen to and *not* explode about every single time I -"

"Finn -?"

Finn glares at him through his one and a half eyes, jaw clenched tight. "You know there's videos all over the internet of you and - him?"

"Wh - oh god." His face has gone numb with either too much or too little blood, he doesn't know. "Have you - seen them?"

"What? No! No, Jesus. But they talk about them all the time, keep saying - just, shit, man, you know what it's like, you got it all through high school."

Oh.

Kurt looks at the gleaming-clean airport floor, gripping the edge of the seat under his fingers until the biting-in plastic doesn't even hurt anymore. He wants to say *it doesn't matter* but of course it does. Locker room homophobic banter lays the ground for a culture in which that's okay; in which hate is okay and

expressing hate is okay; in which kids get the shit kicked out of them, kids get killed, because expressing hate is okay and good and righteous. It profoundly *matters*. He just doesn't want Finn getting beaten up over it, doesn't want Finn - Finn who watched Kurt shoved aside and spat at and treated like he was just *less* than everyone else all through high school, Finn who does not want to stand by and let this happen again - skating too close to the Ghost, showing them to be too close, it puts the both of them and everyone else in horrible, horrible danger . . .

Finn works his jaw, shrugs jaggedly. "Not like they're gonna think anything about it. Everyone knows you saved my life that time."

"Which time exactly?" Kurt says, and catches his eye with a little nervous smile, watching Finn's wrinkling sour expression back; his own fingers remain dug in hard to the plastic edge of the seat, anxiety still grips his spine too-straight, fist over fist and very tight. "Just - don't get hurt over me. Please. It doesn't, it can't hurt *me*, them saying anything, you know I don't care-"

"You get hurt for other people all the time, we're allowed to do it for you too."

"I do not get hurt 'all the time' -"

"That time in that sewer? After that fire, that time you got your arm broken-"

"It was my wrist. And those were statistically negligible events all things considered."

"So next time I'll just let them say really gross crap about you and your boyfriend and not *care*, is that what you want? I got a *disciplinary* over this and the best you can come out with is 'don't do it again' - ?"

"I said I was sorry! Jesus I don't even know why I'm apologising, I'm not the one who asked you to turn into an ape-man about defending my honour!"

"So next time I won't!"

"Good!"

"*Awesome!*" Finn stands so suddenly, jerking his bag up in one hand, and strides off for the doors open to let them board the flight. Kurt's fingers let go of the seat's edge and the blood re-enters them hot as white metal, and his breath comes out through his nose.

If Carole hadn't booked their seats, they probably wouldn't be sitting next to each other for the next hour-and-some. Happy Thanksgiving, Carole.

Side by side, he glares through Vogue, while Finn plays aggressively with his phone.

Finn's hands get looser on his cell. It droops into his lap.

Kurt says, low into the magazine, "I'm sorry about your eye, Finn."

". . . I . . ." Finn turns the cell in his hands. "I guess I'm sorry I never help. You get all the hell of it and then people trash-talking complete crap about you too, and I can't do anything about it."

"You have helped," Kurt says, glancing nervously up at him, because while he remembers it only vaguely he knows how far gone he was, how close he could have come, lying in the cold cold dark, fighting his lungs to keep working while the blackness got thicker and thicker until it squeezed all the thought out of him. Finn's eyes dart away as soon as he understands, and he jerks a shoulder, more a nervous twitch than a shrug.

"That was nothing, I wasn't *there*. The rest of us just pick up the pieces afterwards. You - do you get how hard it is on us? Not just - not knowing what's happening every night. Never being able to help, 'cause we *can't*. *Knowing* that. You think that's easy?"

Kurt looks down, at an advertisement for Chanel. "I don't think any of this is easy."

". . . you wouldn't quit now there's him? For him?"

His mouth opens, holds a breath, and he says, too low and it does hurt, "I didn't quit for Dad."

Finn says nothing. Kurt turns a page, not even looking at it. "You still think I should quit."

"I'd kind of like you to live to twenty-five, so, yeah."

"I would like people to stop hurting each other so I didn't *need* to do this. We don't always get what we want, Finn."

"Hell, I'm dating Rachel, you think I don't know that? I haven't eaten where I wanted or saw a movie I actually wanted to watch in four *years* -"

He could almost, almost, laugh. "This isn't something I chose and you know it, being this, doing this, I just - you just play with the hand you're dealt, I don't - I don't think my decisions have been *bad* -"

Finn says, "Have you ever thought about your funeral?"

"- what? Jesus would you like to choose a *more* morbid topic of conversation -?"

"Seriously, dude, haven't you ever thought -"

"I once decided it would probably be better to have *In My Life* as opposed to *Eleanor Rigby* given the gloominess of the occasion but otherwise I really have not put much thought into it, no. I have no intention of dying. Do you actually realise that? I *want to live*. And I don't have the right to do that to my dad -"

"You're still doing it," Finn says, jaw all tight because he can't shout in a small airplane but thankfully there are two noisy kids and their distracted parents behind them, and in front a sleeping businessman and a young woman with her headphones in, but still Kurt's teeth are on edge. "Every *night*. It could happen, you know that? You ever thought about what would happen if it did?"

No. He glares at Finn and feels his cheeks heat. No. He hasn't, not about the afterwards. He's made himself not. It's the only way he can live with himself.

"I've thought about it," Finn mutters, turning his cell in his hands. "If you - if, while you were him. If you got unmasked." Kurt glances at their neighbours again and Finn rubs his eyes hard. "Can you imagine what'd happen? The media an' the mess an' what it'd be like for Burt, burying you with every camera in the world on us -"

"I would rather be cremated," Kurt whispers. "Just. So you know. Decomposition is just a bit disgusting."

"Kurt -"

"I'm going to be fine." He uncurls the edges of the magazine he'd squeezed too tight during the conversation. "I have Blaine now. I'm not on my own. I'm going to be fine and none of this is going to

happen. And if it - if it did." He swallows, and stares at how the light gleams thin on the glossy pages. "Finn I didn't do anything except exactly what I had to do. I'm sorry. I'm *sorry*, okay? This is - it's all just -"

Finn mutters to the back of the seat in front, "I know."

"You're in danger every day too, you do know that? You think I don't worry? Because it's been four times, thank you so very much, *that time*, honestly-"

"I remember, jeez, you wanna crow about it some more?"

"I worry about you too." Kurt's curling the magazine again, doesn't even bother trying to stop doing it now. "I worry about Dad's heart and - Blaine in all this and Carole dealing with all of it and Rachel not having a clue and you getting killed at work, I worry about *everything*, don't act like I'm the only person who gives this family something to be afraid of. I also worry about you living off cheeseburgers and doughnuts and having a massive heart attack before you're forty, by the way, I worry about *everything*, Finn."

"Including the whole of New York."

He starts unrolling Vogue again. "... someone has to."

Finn's tapping his phone off his leg. Kurt says, "People . . . those videos online, did you know - there's a whole little fan club. For him. *They* worry about him. I don't know, sometimes it's quite nice knowing that. Sometimes it creeps the hell out of me, but still. I think it's mostly teenage girls." His mouth twitches. "Teenage girls and Blaine."

"You've got a fan club?"

"I don't know if they call themselves that. But yes, essentially." He wrinkles his nose. "They debate whether I'm too skinny."

"You are too skinny."

"Thank you, Finn."

Finn shrugs. "S'just how you are."

"I'm just saying. I know you worry the most, but you're not the only ones who worry. I sometimes think - a whole big globe of people all worrying about each other -" The smile comes unbidden and a little wobbly, aimed at the back of the seat in front. "Maybe it's the best part of us. The worrying. It's how you know that people love each other."

"Huh."

Kurt snaps his magazine to straighten it. "What are you listening to?"

"Uh, Journey." He tilts his cell's screen to read it in the light and Kurt says, "Hm." and Finn says, "I don't say anything about your - dress magazine." and Kurt says, "This is my *job* and it is not a 'dress magazine' oh my *god*." and Finn says, "I like them." and Kurt says, "You like khakis and polo shirts, your opinion is already suspect in the extreme." and Finn says, "Khaki whats?"

The plane touches down in Columbus and Kurt's coming out of security checking his cell, two missed calls from his dad, he's trying to quickly reply to a text from Blaine one-handed when he hears, "Kurt -"

He looks up. Finn walks into his shoulder.

That old joy, that child's joy clenches in his heart, that that's his dad and he's walking - jogging - right for him and he looks so *happy* to see him and Kurt just drops his luggage to skip the last step into a big squeezey Hummel hug, his dad pulling him briefly right off his feet, he doesn't even care. His dad holds on *hard*. Kurt hugs back just as tight, gripping at his broad back, his *dad*, it's been -

His eyes sting. It's been too long, it's always too long, he's always away too long . . .

Kurt says into his shoulder, "I missed you, Dad." and his dad says, too gruff, "Thank you for coming home."

Kurt digs his eyes into his shoulder until he can suck it all down, and step back a little from his dad's hug, blinking hard. He holds Kurt at arm's length, gives him a look over - "All limbs attached," Kurt says wryly, and his dad gives him a *you just wait 'til we get home* look and then leans over and bangs Finn's shoulder. "Welcome back to you too, hell did you get even taller -?"

Carole is still holding onto Finn's arm. "Unless we got shorter."

"Oh hush we're a long way from all that," Kurt says, trying to catch his holdall back from his dad. "I can carry- why does no-one believe that I can carry my own damn luggage-?"

"'cause you're too skinny, man, you know that." Finn says, striding on past with his backpack while Kurt glares at him, then hugs Carole and they do their little bouncing-for-joy trying-not-to-squeal-too-loud thing because they have so much to catch up on and oh god look at what she's done to her hair Kurt has been away from home for far, far too long -

He finishes texting Blaine while rolling his suitcase out in the middle of his noisy family; *Home safe, hope NY's well*. After a pause, he adds, *Wish you were here xxx* and slots his cell back into his jacket, and realises that his dad is now grilling Finn on Kurt's eating habits in a grim sort of voice. "It was a joke it was a *joke* oh my god Dad don't you dare forcefeed me for the next three days -"

Carole looks at Kurt's hips and says, "I would be sorely tempted to sacrifice my firstborn for that waist."

Finn snaps, "Hey!"

"I wouldn't stand in your way," Kurt mutters, and Finn gives him a look, and Kurt is genuinely half-tempted to stick his tongue out in return.

Home sweet home, nowhere like it . . .

It's a lazy and yet exhausting sort of afternoon. He and Carole head out for more groceries for Thanksgiving dinner is the most that he does, and he keeps realising that he needs to put his cell in his pocket to have hands to do anything with without actually remembering taking his cell out of his pocket in the first place, it's like it's magnetised to his palm.

It buzzes like a steady pulse with texts from Blaine. At ten o' clock Kurt's in his old room - barely changed but for the things he took with him, a shrine to brittle, terrified, cool-as-glass eighteen year old Kurt Hummel, a boy very long dead now - sending the last text before Blaine heads out, **Please* be careful xx*

Blaine texts back, *SHIELDS KURT*. Kurt hides his smile behind a hand, feels stupid, feels the pit of worry inside. Does Finn think Kurt doesn't know what it feels like? All those shields, all Blaine has to do is mess up to the breadth of a bullet, does he think that Kurt doesn't know what worry is like . . . ?

Early nights are Kurt's idea of bliss but he knows there'll be no easy sleep tonight. He looks around the room again but it's strange being here, being surrounded by these things, it's like he stepped backwards into an old life and one he didn't even want when he was living it, a life bereft of Blaine, a life of fear and isolation and the sort of crippling self-hatred that can make you disappear.

He really doesn't want to be here.

He heads downstairs, through the quiet house - the TV's on in the den but there are no voices - and into the kitchen. He puts his cell on the table. The milk pan's all the way at the back of the cupboard but someone's bought a new jar of nutmeg, the seal's not even broken. He smiles, and measures the milk out.

A board creaks in the house. He knows this house, how it responds to its occupants' movements and rhythms. He adds more milk.

From the kitchen doorway his dad says, "You are so much your mom. More every year."

"There's enough for two," Kurt says, not looking up from the steady stirring to keep the milk from scalding.

His dad sits at the table with a little sigh. "So," he says. "How're you doing?"

Kurt shrugs, and stirs the milk. "Just tired. How're you, Dad?"

"Half the time I ask you that question that is exactly what you say, you know that?"

He puts one of his feet on top of the other because the kitchen floor's cold, stirs the milk and stands like a stork. "What do I say the other half of the time?"

"I'm fine'." Kurt switches feet and doesn't look back at his dad. "At least I know you're bein' *honest* when you say you're tired. You know when you were last home?"

"I don't know. Three or four months?"

"It was last Christmas, Kurt."

He opens his mouth, closes it again, watches the slow clean spiralling of the milk. In his head he counts months, long empty months but he can't tell one from the other, insane nights and never enough sleep, and then Blaine and he forgot the rest of the world existed.

"I guess I've been busy," he says, quietly, and doesn't look up from the milk. "Sorry."

"I always knew you'd move out. Knew you'd end up - New York or one of those places, somewhere halfway big enough for you. I just didn't know . . ."

"None of us knew. It was never a plan I had, Dad."

His dad sighs again, and when Kurt glances back he's looking at Kurt's dark phone on the table. "So who's this guy and what's his really good excuse for not meeting your dad? Tell me it actually is a reason and not this weird time-share of risking your ass for that city you two've got going."

"His family's - his brother was stuck in New York for Thanksgiving, he didn't want him on his own for it. His family's - not close, his parents, I mean."

"What're they doing for Thanksgiving?"

"A cruise." Kurt begins grating nutmeg into the milk, grate and stir, grate and stir, to keep it from clumping. He says softly, "I'm glad I have you."

"You know I need to meet him eventually."

"Why is this so important to you?"

"Because he's important to you, and no-one ever has been before, an' that makes him important to *me*. He treats you right?"

"Dad," Kurt says, tapping the wooden spoon off the pan, finding a second mug to pour into. "He's the first real *gentleman* I've ever met. After you," he adds, planting a kiss on his dad's bald head as he puts the mug in front of him and sits opposite him, fingers slipping to fit around the ceramic, heat beginning to bleed through and warm the bones of his hand. "I want you to meet him, I do, I think he's *perfect*. But you know what - you know how crazy things get. It's not always easy finding the time."

"Like a weekend between Christmas an' Thanksgiving the next year, maybe?"

Kurt narrows his eyes. "Was it last Thanksgiving some super tried to hijack the Macy's Day Parade or the one before?"

"Year before." his dad mutters to his mug. "Last year you cancelled last minute because of a serial killer."

Kurt looks at the stove. "That doesn't happen much. That's something to be grateful for, Dad."

His dad swallows a mouthful of milk very hard. "Kurt, you know when - soldiers an' police go through this stuff, they have - they have these support systems an' - I don't know, doctors and stuff. So they don't bottle everything up an' flip out later on."

"That's a really sensitive way of wording it, Dad."

"I don't like the thought of the crap you deal with, okay, you think I don't remember the three day crying *marathon* when that bird flew into the window? An' don't even get me started on *Bambi* -"

"Dad I was *six*."

"Somewhere in your heart I reckon you still are. You think it's easy for a parent knowing their kid gets life worse than they do? This is not the way 'round it's supposed to *work*, Kurt -"

"Dad." He reaches across the table, hand warm from the mug, touches his wrist. "Dad, I'm *fine*. I'm not saying any of it's easy but it's, I just, the hardest part isn't being out there, the hardest part is -" His throat hurts - "coming back here and knowing how bad it is for *you* and Dad please, please, please don't ask me to stop. *Please*. Because it'll kill me because I can't, I can't just leave them -"

His dad's hand closes around his. "Alright, Kurt. Alright."

Kurt blinks at the ceiling, trying to will the tears back in. "I was always scared you wouldn't - approve, of, of. Me. Just, when I was fourteen I didn't think it would be because of *this* -"

His dad's hand gets tighter on his. "You know I'm proud of you. You know how proud I am, best kid in the world, I'd fight anyone who told me different. It's just, it's *hard*, Kurt . . ."

"I know." He quickly dabs the underneath of his eyes with the heel of his hand, and sniffs, and smiles. "I know that. And I know you don't want me doing something dangerous. But I'm as safe as I can be, Dad, no-one can touch me, I'm fine. And I can't leave people to get hurt when I know I can stop it. And - he shields me now, anyway."

His dad watches his eyes. "He's out there now?"

Kurt closes his eyes, swallows, looks down at his cell and knocks it on the table a little with his fingertips, stupid thing that won't go off. "Yes. So, yes, Dad, I know what it's like." He swallows again, because he has to. "I love him. And I know he's out there because of me. And I'm so scared I feel sick with it but there's nothing I can do. He made his choices, same as I did."

Kurt's dad hadn't actually found out about Kurt's choices until a few months after he'd made them, when finally the news that New York had a superhero who walked through walls and vanished into thin air made it back to Lima, back to Hummel's Tires and Lube. There had been a telephone call. There had been stunned, horrified silence. Then there had been shouting and crying and a stubborn, sworn refusal to budge an inch on either side.

That night there had been the first and only time Kurt had ever been drunk in his life, on a date with some guy he hadn't found enough excuses for, miserable, *aching* with knowledge of what he'd done to his dad, trying to numb it all away the way normal people do, normal people, why couldn't he just be *normal*? The guy had walked him home - had had to, in all tight-throated fairness, Kurt hadn't been capable of straight lines or stairs - but then he hadn't left, while Kurt panicked and choked under his weight knowing that he couldn't ghost he couldn't do anything because if someone knew then they would *know* and after the first thumping scuffle and startled *no* - *no* he was too stupefied to even scream (this is not happening to me it is not happening this is not happening it is not it is notitisnotitisnot) -

Rachel really did mace a guy for him once, kicked the door open in the middle of the night and screamed at him to get out because she was calling the cops. Tiny little Rachel in her robe and slippers forcing the guy out of their apartment, Kurt unable to get off the bed, trying to hide himself in his pillow, the room spinning and sick around him, crumpled down to nothing inside. Some hero. Some *hero*. He probably should tell Blaine about him one day (not his dad; he can never tell his dad), except that he doesn't want Blaine to view Kurt's life as a litany of disaster, a patchwork of awful things Kurt largely could have avoided if he wasn't always so frightened and stupid and weak. The worst things always happen to Kurt. His dad worries about the wrong person; the Ghost deals with so, so much less . . .

He does wonder why, sometimes, these things keep happening to Kurt, because it's so hard to turn that thought around, into *why do people keep doing these things*, into *why them* instead of *why me*, weighting the blame the right way around, the way it *should* be, because no-one asks to be hurt. But he does think *why me*, can't help it, and he doesn't know why. Because once someone has made you a target then you are indeed a target and other people can tell that; because Kurt's helpless automatic body language in saying *please don't do that to me* suggests that doing that to him is an *option*, when it might otherwise never have come up; that he has had very bad, or viewed from the other side, very good, luck, that this keeps presenting itself and he keeps escaping it. He doesn't know. Because he has made his secret identity so perfect, made his non-superhero self so *weak*, that other people will always try to use that against him. All he can really do in response to that is fight back ten times harder as a hero: neither Kurt nor anyone else should face this, and fuck it he will never stop trying to help . . .

He wants Blaine to meet his dad. He wants to show his dad off for him, isn't he amazing, aren't I so lucky?, he wants to show Blaine which parts of next season's collection are *his*, he wants Blaine to see all the good things he's been given and he's built from what he does know are some very shaky foundations. They're sturdier, now. The ground is firmer now. Because Kurt told him and the world didn't end, he didn't stop loving him, he didn't flinch away, revolted. Because Kurt didn't, can't, scare him away with everything that's happened to him. Because Kurt's life is not a litany of awful events and, if they can fight for it, everything really will be okay . . .

Kurt has finally found enough space in his life to breathe, finally has the safe space to take stock of himself, to find the fragmented edges where he fractured himself into pieces because he *had* to and now he has the shields around him and the safe space to put them back together again. He can finally start healing all those broken edges, he can finally look at himself and *see* himself; that he is bruised by life, haunted, a little, but he's still here, he never did vanish. He survived. He's a Hummel. That's what they do.

His dad swallows some milk, says, "You do look tired."

Kurt rubs his eye. "I always look tired. The sacrifices I make, it's hell on my skin."

"Kurt . . ."

"I get more time off now than I ever did. Um, Blaine . . . wants us to take a break two nights a week." He picks at his thumbnail with his hand around his mug, eyes sliding off his dad, who says too levelly, trying too hard not to sound eager, "Yeah? You gonna?"

Kurt shrugs at the stove, because, because . . .

". . . you should tell me if you do. Which nights." Kurt looks back at him, at his strained, creased smile. "Means *I* might sleep the night through too."

"I'm safe, Dad. I'm as safe as I could be." He rubs his arm, takes another sip of milk. "So when *are* you going to turn my room into a gym or a home theatre like all the other parents do?"

"When I don't want you comin' back to it. So never."

He breathes, slowly, and watches his dad's face. "I know you wish I didn't," he says, and makes himself follow his eyes. "I know why. But are you - are you even a little bit - don't you at least -" He can't make himself say it. He can't bear to hear him say *no*. "- understand - ?"

His dad says, "You were always gonna do *exactly* what you were gonna do an' no-one else was gonna get any say in it. Since you were in a onesie we knew that." He reaches across the table as Kurt looks down, and he holds the back of his neck, fingers gripped in his hair and oddly soothing, like Kurt is a kid again, like Kurt is a kitten being carried. "I'm not sayin' I like you doing this," he says roughly. "But I know, Kurt. I know you make a difference, I know that. I wish it didn't cost you but yeah, Kurt, I know." His breath pulls in. "Proud of every part of you. Even the bits I don't even know how to understand. Maybe those the most."

Kurt - laughs, it shocks out of him, at the edge of the table before he looks up grinning. "I have some pieces in next season's collection, I can show you the designs if you -"

His dad drinks some milk, and raises his eyebrows at him over the rim of the mug, and Kurt's laughing again, covering it with a hand and just - just here, at the kitchen table with his dad, mutually baffled by each other and delighted by that fact; here, exactly here, he's home.

There really are some things to be so, so thankful for.

*

He'd texted Blaine before trying to sleep again, much later; *Text me when you get back in. I don't care how late it is, I'll still be awake. Love you.*

He is, actually, drowsing when the phone vibrates on the mattress next to him, fingers finding it under the covers, two oh eight and bleary-eyed and Blaine has texted, *Go to sleep, Kurt xxx*

He closes his eyes to the pillow again, and muscles he hadn't even known he'd been holding so tight fall water-loose and pliable and *relieved* . . .

*

It's weird patrolling without the Ghost.

Little things, not even the lack of eyes at his back and a warm body travelling, fighting, alongside his. Little things; he's slower, for one thing. No turning invisible and hitching a ride on a subway train, no slipping through solidity for an easy escape. The slow road. Knowing where the escape from the situation is before he enters the situation (the Ghost made him learn this), knowing where he can run, hide, just move on without being stopped. Knowing which angle danger will come from, because the shields have to come and go, he can't carry them like a turtle's shell . . .

The Ghost taught him all of this. The Ghost taught him *everything*. Sidekick, maybe not. But he's still an apprentice hero, and it's still his first few days alone, and he's still nervous of what he hopes to god he has actually *learned*.

Alone, he can't turn invisible to escape unwanted attention. The Ghost, faced with a fan, fades out of sight. Phalanx has to smile and offer conversation, trying to vet his speech in his own head before he blurts anything too personal (the Ghost is so much better than him at this). But then, if he's really honest, if he actually could admit it outside his own mind - he likes it. The way their eyes light, the **smile** on them, he knows exactly what they feel like because didn't he feel it, when the Ghost crouched next to him and he was picking himself up from headbutting a car? He tries to be polite, tries not to grin like an idiot, tries not to visibly swell. They think he's a hero. He's in a costume on the street at night helping people: he *is* a hero.

He tries to stay off street level as much as he can, tries to travel by rooftop and slides made of shields. It's up on the rooftop that he first notices what looks like a shooting star, distant and bright; he watches it for some time as it swings in towards him, because it's low for an airplane, small for an airplane, and he thinks, Oh.

And he thinks about the Ghost, and everything he knows the Ghost responds to with *visceral* fear. And he knows it's not his fault, and his caution has kept him alive on the streets on his own for five years, but . . .

But Phalanx is Phalanx, not the Ghost, and he's different. The Ghost *meant* for him to be different. He's supposed to be brighter, mellower, more personable. The Ghost takes things very seriously because things are very serious and when he's helping victims they do seem to appreciate that he knows that, but the Ghost isn't here now and Phalanx is cheerier, easier, less inclined to shadows and secrecy and the dark. And the Ghost wanted him to be a hero in his own right, he knows that, and he knows that that means he needs to make his own decisions, not just walk the Ghost's footsteps but mark out a lighter path, parallel but different, and he has thought about this, about the breaks they need, the rest they need, the *help* they need. The Ghost has survived through that core of sheer steel he has, the ability, when deep in the darkest valleys of hell, to *drag* himself on. Phalanx doesn't know if he could do that, yet. Doesn't know if either of them should have to. Not when there is back-up out there.

iBorg touches down on the rooftop in front of him, and Phalanx stands a little back, hands loose at his sides but his mind is full of everywhere a shield could so suddenly be. He trusts more easily than the Ghost does (though Phalanx can't, *can't* judge him his wariness, not now he *knows* him, oh god) but he doesn't trust absolutely. He's got a brother and parents and friends - and a lover, and everyone *he* loves - shielded by that mask as well; it's not only his own life he's playing with. iBorg waves, and gears in his wrist and elbow whirr. "Hey noob. Happy Thanksgiving."

"You too. He's not around, if you wanted to talk to him."

"Ghosts take nights off? Really hard to picture him with his feet up watching TV or something. Or he's not - he's not, like, hurt or anything, my bad if -"

"No. No, he's good. Just - not here, not tonight. Can I help you instead?"

"Actually yeah, 'cause actually it's you I'm here for." iBorg flicks a card from a slot built into his own bicep, and holds it across in two metal fingers. Phalanx looks at it, and doesn't move to take it. "We kind of decided you might be an easier sell than the Ghost on this stuff. Figured you could, you know, maybe pillow talk and all that, uh . . ."

"You want me to recruit him for you."

"You must know how to do some stuff he likes," iBorg says, and if his eyebrows were visible behind the smoked glass goggles they would probably be wagging. Phalanx folds his arms.

"I don't even know what you want him - *us* - recruited *for*. He's right, on how dangerous it is for us, the cops would arrest us as soon as they knew how to get hold of us and if they unmask us - you know he's got a mob hit on him? Can you imagine what they'd do to his *family* if they knew who he was -?"

"All masks intact, believe me, just - this is just a back-up system so far, no-one wants anyone in jail. But there's people involved in this could talk to NY's police commissioner, maybe persuade him . . . you know, lay off the capes a little." He wiggles the card. "It's a phone number, it's not gonna bite you. Just, if you ever start thinking maybe it'd be nice to have someone to call in a tight spot, or *maybe* you'd like to help out further afield than New York . . . nothing bigger than that right now, no commitment if you don't want it. Just, maybe a friend or two with talents you might appreciate now and then."

There's nothing to read from his face, shielded in metal as it is, and Phalanx doesn't really want to unfold his arms. He looks at the card. "I've never heard of any group of supers working together."

"We'll be the original and the best, yo."

"I don't want to do anything that could get him hurt. Not anything. Not ever."

"Then maybe," iBorg says, holding the card out a little further, "make sure you know who to call when things go wrong."

Phalanx stands there, and stares at the card. Excitement eats, a little, low in his stomach, but really when it comes right down to it, really, he's scared.

He's scared of what this might mean. Scared of getting into anything even bigger than what he's involved in now, which is *huge*. Scared of doing something the Ghost will completely flip about when (if) he finds out about it. Scared of -

He has been too scared of too many things for his whole life.

iBorg sighs, bends and lays the card on the rooftop. "I bet you two are a riot at parties," he says, standing up again. "The world's bigger than New York. You can help more people than just this island. And,

seriously, he just needs to get out more and chill the hell *out*, man. He's not the only super out there, he doesn't need to act like he owns the whole tortured protector spiel -"

"Don't." Phalanx says, arms tighter now, voice dropped blacker. iBorg tilts his head a little.

"Yeah. I bet you two throw the *craziest* shindigs. Look, it's up to you, no skin off my metal nose if you two spend the rest of your lives chasing muggers in Manhattan, just - there's other people you could help and other people who could help you. And I have my own city to take care of and I have given up way more than enough time on this, so, sayonara noob, my regards to the other-"

His helm makes a metal *donging* noise as he flies right into the shield above him. Phalanx hasn't unfolded his arms as iBorg drops on his thrusters, cursing, hands over his head. "It's Phalanx," he says. "I can spell it for you if you like."

"Phalanx. Right." He rubs his head, metal scouring off metal. "He's a real good influence on you, you know that?"

He dissolves the shield, grins. "Happy Thanksgiving, iBorg."

"Yeah, yeah, you too. Damn uppity noobs," he mutters, and skims off overhead, high and bright and gleaming and gone, in the night.

Phalanx stands there a moment longer, rubbing an elbow. Then he looks down, traps it with his boot before the wind can grab at it, crouches and picks up the card. Unremarkable white backdrop, typewriter typeface, a number and all in lowercase, 'making the world a cheerier place'.

"If he finds this in my wallet he'll think I joined a cult," he mutters, but he still slips it into his belt, and draws his breath in, lets it sigh out white again in the cold. Okay. Patrolling. Not for much longer, he knows that across the country Kurt is laying awake and thinking of him, Kurt who is so brave but when it comes to *him* is so, so afraid of what could happen. So he stretches, and heads for the edge of the roof, whistling. Maybe head towards the river, see what's going down on the waterfront . . .

*

At the airport again his dad hugs him so hard, and Kurt holds on tight. He doesn't want to let go, it's a long way to New York, he wants to hold on so his dad has to come with him; but he doesn't want his dad there,

in the middle of a huge scary city, a city Kurt is sworn whatever it does eventually cost him to protect, a city he knows gets very dark in the middle of the night.

Yes, it is weird that they both know that it's been a long time since Kurt was more innocent than his father.

So he says to his ear, muffled by his own arm, "I love you, Dad." and his dad pulls him in even tighter, compressing his lungs, and says in that determinedly sturdy, overfull voice, "I love you, Kurt." and lets him go. And Kurt smiles at him, and his dad says, "Come home for Christmas. Bring him. Bring his brother as well if you have to, just - just come home, Kurt."

He hugs him again, nose dug into his lapel, thinks about that city left alone and how it eats at him, people left to suffer over *Christmas* of all times because he wasn't there . . .

Or his dad's quiet suffering at Christmas, because Kurt isn't there.

His dad bangs his back and lets him go, and Kurt finds another wobbly smile for him. "I'll see you soon," he promises, one way or another he has to manage it, and then he hugs Carole while she cries a little bit - "Losing my boys again, god look at me, I need to pull myself together." she says, and sniffs into his shoulder, and whispers, "Be careful for us."

He squeezes a little harder, rubs her back, murmurs, "I promise." and lets her go. He looks up at Finn, who gives Kurt's dad a quick manly one-pat-to-the-back hug, and then Finn looks back at him, and shoulds his backpack again.

"You want me to carry yours as well? Since you're so skinny and all."

"I swear to god Finn Hudson I will break that bag over your head if you don't-"

"What, you got a stepladder in there or something?"

"I know I packed my brother murdering kit." Kurt snaps back, but Finn's already walking backwards for security, waving at him as he goes. "See you after check-in, Kurt!"

His dad says, "See, if you just brought hand luggage you could've chased him an' brained him before security could stop you."

"No security guard could stop *me*," Kurt says with a sniff, and hikes his holdall up onto his suitcase, resting in the long handle so he can wheel both at once. "I'll text when we touch down, okay? I - I really enjoyed being back." He squirms a little. "I did."

Carole says, "We enjoyed having you back, Kurt. You're welcome any time you want to. Any time at all."

Kurt looks at his dad. His dad says, "Look after yourself."

Kurt smiles. Looking after people is actually something he's good at. "You too, Dad."

He will. He has so many reasons to. People really should believe that he wants so badly to live; doesn't he have so, so much to live for?

*

Kurt's wheeling his suitcase and texting one-handed (*Back in NY, skype later if there's time? xx*) with Finn at his side saying, "You sure your skinny arms can handle that, dude?", so he's in the act of smacking Finn in the elbow with his phone when he hears the voice call, "Kurt-!"

He turns. His heart comes open like a closet stacked too full and all the want in the world comes collapsing out, he lets go of his suitcase and Finn yelps as it falls with a *bang* with that holdall on top but Kurt's arms are already open and Blaine's already in them, grabbing him so close, the *smell* of him and Kurt buries his face in the side of his neck and he could *cry* for joy to have him back.

"Missed you I just missed you-" he chokes, and Blaine rubs his face into Kurt's hair and says, "God I was lonely without you on a night it's just -"

Blaine's mouth is on his, Blaine's tongue is in his mouth, before either of them have really thought about it. Kurt's knees wobble, he whimpers into Blaine's mouth, and his body says *oh this is the one I have sex with, yes can we do that right now please* and it's only when a boarding announcement is too piercing overhead, only when he hears Finn clearing his throat for a very long time, that he remembers that he's in an airport, and that that sluicing throbbing *want* hot between his legs really cannot be sated in a civilised manner right now. He breaks back from the kiss and he lost his breath in it, he gasps, while Blaine stares at him dazed and then they both, guiltily, look across at Finn.

Finn is apparently very interested in a poster advertising a paperback novel marketed at fourteen year old girls.

Kurt kisses him again quickly and says, "Um, mine or yours or -" and Blaine says, "Really don't care we just need a cab very, very now -"

Finn says, "So, I'll go, uh, catch a bus. You two . . ."

Kurt untangles his unhelpfully needy arms from around Blaine's neck. "Finn - it was nice spending Thanksgiving with you. It really was. Thank you."

Finn shrugs. "You too, little brother. Um - bye." to both of them, because he clearly doesn't know how to handle the both of them right now and neither does Kurt if he's honest, if Kurt has that lust-spark in his eyes like Blaine does, that over-aroused glitter in the dark, that too-blank smile of the inability to think around *oh god I want his skin all over me*, they are probably really not easy to be around at all right now. Finn hurries away. Blaine kisses Kurt again, once, close-mouthed and hard, then grabs his holdall and his wrist and *marches* for the exit, Kurt barely has the time to duck and snatch the handle of his suitcase as they scramble overfast across the slick floors.

The cab driver keeps his eyes on the road and does not question the two young men bursting into simultaneous babbling conversation, falling into over-heavy silence, very obviously *not touching* each other on the back seat. It is the most agonisingly long journey of Kurt's life. He does not let his fingers cross the oceanic distance of five inches to touch Blaine's thigh. He doesn't, he doesn't know what would happen next. But after half an hour of the agony of *nothing* Blaine's hand touches his and Kurt shocks on the seat like he's been electrocuted, it's all he can do not to yelp out loud - it is too, too much as Blaine's hand fits over his, his fingers slide through his, his palm presses Kurt's hand down hard onto the seat and Kurt thinks oh Christ oh god I cannot come just from him holding my hand that is not physically *possible* -

(Is it?)

Blaine's apartment is closer. They stumble out of the elevator and Kurt's legs are almost too unsteady to run, he wants to curse Blaine's clumsiness with the key and ghost them immediately inside, he wants - he knows what he wants. Inside and Blaine yells, "Cooper *do not disturb me!*" and turns and bangs Kurt back into the closed door, Kurt's bags fall over on the floor and Kurt scrabbles at his chest and arms for grip as he kisses him in a way Kurt doesn't think he's ever been kissed before, all he can do is sink through it, be

kissed, thighs clenching around one of Blaine's, hips arching. Blaine breaks back - the wet smack of it sounds obscene and they're still fully clothed and oh *god* as Blaine pants, "He would've been out here before I'd finished the sentence if he was home."

"We -"

"Come on." Blaine's fingers fit through his again, squeeze, and he drags Kurt for the bedroom with the sort of single-minded determination that Kurt had never known he would find so sexy, his bags left fallen by the front door, Blaine's mind reduced to the single narrow purpose of *fuck Kurt now*. The fact that Kurt has done this to him, Kurt who has thought of himself as as hopelessly sexless as a doll turning Blaine, as mild and well-mannered as a boy scout, into someone who kicks his own bedroom door open because it's faster than reaching for the handle because he needs to be doing things to Kurt about an hour ago already -

They tangle and fall onto the bed, mouths missing each other on the first attempt, Kurt bites the edge of his jaw and Blaine mouths wetly at his cheek before they find each other and Kurt's fingers knot into his hair, Blaine hikes Kurt's body closer by two handfuls of ass. Kurt sucks his breath in and hangs his head back and Blaine *squeezes*, and breathes hot over his throat, "Fuck I can't believe I could forget exactly how sexy you are -" and starts fumbling for his belt while he's sucking hard at his skin. Kurt pulls his fingers through his hair, dragging the gel out of it, and he moans at the head of the bed, "Blaine -"

Blaine makes an inquisitive growling noise, jerking the button of Kurt's pants open.

"- love you," Kurt gasps, and Blaine lifts his head, looks at him with dazed dark pupils, then puts a leg over him, rolling him onto his back, climbing up him again with a hand running around his throat and up to his jaw whispering back, "Love you love you love you Kurt -"

It's touch and go whether they can co-ordinate themselves through the want to actually get as far as getting a condom on and ready; they do manage, luck and insane levels of control, and Blaine enters him hard and a little clumsy, only bottoming out on the second jogging attempt, and Kurt grabs his shoulders and *yowls*. Blaine scrabbles and tries to pull back yelping his apologies and Kurt grabs him down harder, bites his shoulder, snarls at him lip caught against his neck, "Don't you *dare*."

Blaine is still for a moment, half inside him, Kurt can feel the throb of him, breathing hard, thinking this through.

Then he fucks him exactly how Kurt wants him to, jolting of their skin and Kurt whimpers a little on every outbreath and it's too too perfect, Kurt who expected to go to the grave untouched two weeks ago arches his own legs higher and wider around him and watches Blaine choking, eyes closed and mouth open as he plunges his hips, and Kurt chokes out at him, "I didn't want, want to touch myself, I only wanted you -"

Blaine's eyes open and he stares dumb at Kurt like maybe Kurt shouldn't exist, shaking on the point of stillness inside him, then his eyes go and his breath gutters as he comes, making low shuddering noises he can't contain, little shallow sharp thrusts nothing like enough. Kurt watches him and can't think to close his mouth, he doesn't want to touch himself, he doesn't want *this* part to end -

Blaine's voice is low and rough and wrecked and all he's capable of saying is, "Fuck, Kurt." sliding, pulling himself free with a hand around the condom. His hands are too fumbly to knot it so he just stuffs it in a tissue and drops it in the trash. While Kurt's trying to sit up he pushes him down again, lowers himself between his legs again, pulling his thighs open; Kurt says, "Blaine-?" and then his mouth is around him and this time Kurt has to slap both hands over his mouth not to shriek out the kind of high note even he hasn't reached since he was a kid. There is no way in hell he'll last even a matter of seconds, and he chokes through his hands, "Blaine-" and it's hardly any sort of warning but Blaine doesn't seem to mind.

Either it's polite to swallow or else Blaine just enjoys it. From the noise he makes he enjoys it, while Kurt's body tries to sag him right through the mattress, heavier than gravity, heavier than the dark. Blaine comes crawling up his helpless body, licking his lips, panting. "You," he says, which isn't especially informative, and when he kisses him Kurt thinks, Oh.

They're naked and sweaty and wrecked and it's the middle of the afternoon. Blaine says, "Nap." and puts his arms around Kurt and hauls him backwards into his body, and Kurt quite likes sexy caveman Blaine, who communicates in monosyllables and brooks no argument where spooning is concerned.

Kurt - yawns, doesn't even bother to lift a hand to hide it, lets Blaine shuffle him onto his side and sling a leg over his. "Out tonight," he says, without opening his eyes, and Blaine's grunt puffs warm breath against the back of his neck.

The sheets are damp and stuck to him. He really, really ought to care about all of this more.

Blaine's breath gusts the back of his neck. He smiles without opening his eyes, and lets sleep take them both, both knowing exactly, exactly where the other is, safe on the same mattress, and inside Blaine's arms Kurt has two homes, now.

He doesn't even realise that he hasn't yet thought about that ugly scar looping his body, or how pathetically grateful he is that Blaine doesn't recoil. All he does is go to sleep, perfectly happy, and perfectly safe.

*

First sighting of the two of them in what six days?? Finally payout!! :D

Upcloak shot FUCK YES I LIVE FOR THE UPCLOAK SHOTS

No holiday pounds on dat ass, I see.

why do you think no sightings in like a week, do you think we just haven't seen them or maybe they had some kind of falling out? even superboyfriends must have fights sometimes =/

It's the holidays, maybe they had family stuff.

*Do you think their families know? God it must be hard juggling their lives if they *don't* know. How do you keep something like that secret from the people closest to you? Poor boys ;_;*

Have you read Phantomhugger's Ghost of Christmas Past? It's pre-Phalanx, quietly angsty, the Ghost's family don't know. It's seasonally appropriate and it's such an old favorite of mine <3

I wonder if I was a super if I'd be brave enough to do that. I think I'd just want to hide.

it would depend on my powers I think? it must be scary tho.

You would not know that looking at Phalanx's face, he looks like it's Christmas morning and he just got a puppy almost every single shot

If I had my hands all over the Ghost whenever I wanted I think I'd smile pretty much 24/7 too

(Ghostly, have you heard from bb recently?)

(I've been caught up with family stuff, I haven't had the time to be online much myself. She never does update every day anyway, I wouldn't worry, she blogs like a slow loris. 'Is - is it okay for me to do this? Are you sure it's okay? Is it really okay? Okay, I - I did it. Is. Is it okay?')

I have actually made and printed 'Haunted Christmas and a phantastic New Year!' Christmas cards, what has become of my life

Fic: Green's Always in Season, NC-17, Ghostlanx, past Ghostzilla; So the Ghost has a type, so what? Mostly because I love me some jealous!Phalanx. Jealanx! ;D

(She hasn't replied to emails, she always replies to emails. Maybe I should call her.)

(Doesn't she live in England or something? I thought you'd budgeted this month so you could make rent if you lived off ramen, I didn't think unnecessary international calls were included in that. She's probably fine, she probably has family stuff.)

(They don't do Thanksgiving over there.)

(Miserable fucking limeys, god forbid they ever have any fun.)

SWEK;DSHFGJAKL STOP POSTING THAT GIFSET IT MAKES ME CRY he's not on his own anymore stop making me have all these feelings I can't it's the holidays why would you do that T_T

Does anyone remember that fic where the Ghost blows Phalanx down an alleyway with a police investigation just around the corner? Incredibly naughty and hot? I have a craving.

It sounds like Ghostofasmile's kink meme fill, Hush.

Oh my god thank you thank you thank you THANK YOU that's my evening sorted . . .

*(I'm gonna call her. What time is it over there? Ghostly, I haven't heard from her in four *days* and she hasn't been good, anything could have happened.)*

(Holy fuck. Send me her number. I will call her. Fucksake Draxie you have a heart made out of fucking meringue, do you know that?)

(Ghostly thank you thank you thank you please be nice to her <3)

(I'm always nice, I invented nice, 'That's Paleandghostly,' people say as they stroll about fandom of an evening, 'she's one of the nicest women I've ever met, isn't she so nice, oh gosh yes she's ever so nice.')

(That's called sarcasm, Ghostly.)

(I'm just so fucking wounded, Drax, I might never fucking recover.)

Fanart, Ghostlanx, bondage, not remotely worksafe, I just have a thing for that boy in a ballgag <3

Fic, Darker Than Black, established Ghostlanx, R for violence; There's a hallucinogen in the water supply, Phalanx is as dangerous to him as the villain right now, and he is very, very much on his own . . . angst, action, h/c

I hope the Ghost's Thanksgiving was the kind of stupid perfect you see in the TV specials, happy holidays Spooky <3

(No-one's picking up.)

(Shit. I'm calling her.)

(Let me message her first. 'Answer your phone you silly bitch it's me, you're making Draxie shit herself, hope you haven't hospitalized yourself (again!).' Anything else I need to add?)

(Jesus Ghostly this isn't a joke)

(Fucking hell Drax how do you think I cope with my life?)

That shot of the Ghost taking out two guys at once, I can't stop staring at it. He's a BAMF even when he's not using his powers, I cannot even with my ladyboner over this.

Reblog if you've ever been rescued by the Ghost. Let Figgins know what an assbutt he's being. We love you, spooky <3

Reblog if you've ever been rescued by Phalanx. (let the new guy get a look in!)

Reblog if you've ever been rescued by the most courteous gay supercouple in New York, and fuck the right wing media asshats. SUPERBOYFRIENDS ARE SUPER

If I lost that paycheque I would have been homeless by Christmas. You have no, no, no idea how thankful I am, thank you, so much, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you.

Fic: The Stars for Our Candles, maybe vaguely R? Really purple-prosey so the smut's kind of hard to pin down, ahem. Ghostlanx; 'Adrenaline for our wine, the cloak for our blanket, the stars for our candles tonight . . . '

(She replied.)

(Oh fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck Ghsotly)

(I think you'll find that a) I have that word copyrighted, Drax, and b) that is not how my name is spelled.)

(I'm messaging her. Is she ok?)

(I don't know what to say to her when she's like this.)

('I love you and I genuinely want to do anything you need me to do to help you be ok.')

(. . . fuck, you should write a book on this crap.)

*(She must have known we were seriously worried if you were sending her nice messages. Tell me you **were** nice . . .)*

('Blackbindings, I respect you more than pretty much the entire rest of the fandom put together and I hope you do know that. Just send a blank reply if that's all you can manage but please at least put Draxie out of her misery, if she's the only person left producing quality fic in this fandom she'll die of exhaustion. I hope you're alright. - ghostly')

(I love you, Ghostly.)

(You are awash with saccharine sentiment tonight, Drax.

I love the both of you too. You can tell her that. And now I need to go check on Mom, I hope you're both okay after all this trauma.)

(Me too. I hope your mom's good. G'night Ghostly xxx)

(Goodnight, good luck . . .)

ASS ASS ASS god bless the upcloak shots!

God bless this ship and all who sail in her!

god bless puckzilla!!

God bless the superboyfriends, who are, indeed, super.

And god bless us, every one <3

Chapter Thirteen

First snow, and they decline Mr Conti's invitation into the heat of the kitchens. He loans them an umbrella. They sit on the roof, on borrowed seat cushions, leaned together underneath the umbrella's black dome, their world small and misty with steam and their breath pale from the cold.

The Ghost is huddled down quite small in the cloak wrapped around the both of them, very aware of Phalanx's arm through his, the way it shifts as Phalanx takes a drink of coffee and lowers the cup again. "Dad, um." he says, and his fingers play a little on Phalanx's arm. "Wants you to come home with me for Christmas. If you don't have plans. He even said to bring your brother if you wouldn't come because of him."

"Your dad wants to meet Cooper before me."

"That is *not* what he was suggesting and what the hell does 'secret identity' even *mean* to you - ?"

"Okay, okay, jeez, forgot, sorry." Phalanx shuffles his boots of the rooftop a little, shrugs tightly. "I can ask him. Yeah, it'd - be nice to meet your family. Get some time off together."

"I don't . . ." The Ghost watches the snow drop down-down-down, white and carrying silence with it somehow heavier than normal silence, silence like a sound in the dark. "I hate going home for Christmas. Not - not how it sounds. Not like that. I just . . . if I should ever be here helping people it's then. No-one wants Christmas killed forever because one year something horrible happened and no-one was around to help."

"You are not responsible for every person in this city."

He says to his knees, "It's hard."

". . . I know." Phalanx swallows some more coffee, and the Ghost leans his own cup over so he can get both hands around it against the cramping of the cold without loosening his arm from Phalanx's. "My parents are in the Philippines for it, Co- my brother doesn't want to . . . yeah, actually, it'd be nice." The Ghost tilts his hood so he can see Phalanx's little twitching smile. "A normal family Christmas. I'd like to see what that's like."

"I don't know if we're all that normal," the Ghost says, thinking about his stepbrother the police officer, his girlfriend the student reporter, himself bringing home his superhero boyfriend and his famous brother and how that might be less awkward than previous years but god knows it'll be much weirder. Phalanx rolls his eyes, says, "Okay, a happy family Christmas. Normal's pretty relative anyway I guess, abnormal pretty much is normal as far as I can tell -"

". . . is your family really that bad?"

"Secret identity," Phalanx sing-songs, and shakes his head. "I don't know. No. Just - I don't know, nothing ever . . . *feels* enough. Like they just . . . they just don't get excited by things. Don't really - feel things. They're just, um. I guess I'm not much like them."

He shifts his leg closer, pulls Phalanx's arm closer. The thought of lovelessness unsettles him in a way he can't understand, a jarring emptiness in his stomach. He'd once been scared that his father would be revolted by him; he never even thought to be afraid that his father wouldn't feel very much for him at all. I'll love you now, he thinks, the feeling fierce white hot as the snow falls all around them, gripping his arm tight. I'll love you enough. I'll make up for it. I'll love you so hard you'll never feel unloved -

"That first winter -" Phalanx says, and tips the umbrella so they can look directly up into the falling snow, so white against the black like the stars are coming down. "When I heard about you, you must have only just . . . I used to check the weather for New York more often than my town. Hoping you weren't cold." He turns the umbrella to shield them again, and the Ghost watches his face. "I can't believe you never knew so many people cared so much."

"I knew they existed. Some of them. When I checked the news online to make sure I wasn't in it too much they'd show up on searches. I don't know, I thought it was a handful of crazies, I didn't know . . . how could I know? You know I didn't feel like a *hero*. I was a kid in stupidly over my head most of the time, I was still getting in so much trouble, I didn't *feel* like a hero. Why would I think anyone else would think that? How the hell did I know that you were there in Ohio worrying about whether I'd wrapped up warm?"

Phalanx grins, and jiggles the Ghost's arm a little. "I did worry. I lost actual sleep over it."

"Oh my god. You'd never even met me."

"Didn't matter. You were my hero. Are. Still are. Always will be."

The Ghost watches his face and thinks, I don't know where you learned to love like this, if no-one ever taught you.

He leans across, underneath the umbrella. His mouth is coffee-warm, even though the snow.

*

The Ghost is sitting on the edge of a building, legs crossed, propped up on his hands; Phalanx stands behind him, arms folded, the last-fallen snow settled in his hair fine as dust. The Ghost says, "Tell me what's wrong with this situation."

"Midnight is kind of a funny time to empty your warehouse of legal goods?"

"Actually that genuinely does happen sometimes, please try not to assault innocent people going about their unsociably-houred jobs."

"You don't normally need look-outs for perfectly above-board stock transfers."

"Quite a lot warmer . . ."

"That guy has a machine gun the size of a *scooter*."

"Top of the class," the Ghost says, and stands up. "I'm going to get rid of that gun. Don't move in until it's out of the picture. And Phalanx -"

"Shields," he sings, softly at the hood behind his ear, and runs a palm down his back, closes the edge of his waist in the span of thumb and fingers. "*You* be careful."

"Ghost," he sings back, and then he's gone from under Phalanx's hand, gone entirely, leaving behind just the white ghost of his breath from under the hood.

Phalanx folds his arms again against the cold and watches. A group of guys in bulky winter clothes are dragging crates out of the open warehouse doors, and there's that guy with a really just stupidly big machine gun standing there in a black cap, and next to him -

Some blond kid, maybe their age, hands in his coat pockets, rocking back on his heels, watching the snow fall. Phalanx cocks his head and watches him, because he's pretty out of place in all this . . .

Then the guy with the machine gun starts and he's not holding a machine gun anymore, staring at his empty hands, yelping; that's Phalanx's cue. He leaps onto the immediate path of shields, skimming down through the snow. The blond kid has spun to the dark cloak suddenly facing machine gun guy, who stumbles back and swings at him as the Ghost curves his body back as graceful as a dancer, catches the guy's wrist and his weight as his body turns, banging a guy at least twice his weight onto the snowy ground with his knee on his back and a cuff already around his wrist.

Phalanx, curious and distrustful, was aiming for the blond kid.

The blond kid is now gone.

He makes a noise out loud in sheer shock and the Ghost looks up already tensing - and Phalanx sees the blur but the Ghost, startled, has done what he does when unsure; he's ghosted. Something swishes right through him faster than the eye can follow and he *vanishes*, and machine gun guy is groaning and picking himself up off the ground, cuffed hand skidding in the snow.

Phalanx skids to a halt in the street, and a voice he *knows* shouts from nowhere, "Shields!"

He's encased in them in a second, and something pounds off them so hard it shocks his body, but the shields hold. He stares through tinted green as the guys moving crates are cursing and scrambling for the van, ignoring the last crate just dropped in the snow, and in front of his shield he sees for one blurred second the pissed faced of that blond kid staring back in at him.

"*Both* of you are cowards, c'mon out of there!"

"*He's* not in here," Phalanx says, glaring back at him, and he hears the Ghost's soft curse because the blond kid's already gone, and the Ghost flickers into view in front of him, half an inch too slow. Phalanx winces, mouths a, *sorry*.

The Ghost's already turning away but Phalanx sees his whole body flinch as something runs through him, too fast to see and his cloak flaps and flutters, revealing him pale and vulnerable underneath as he grabs at his hood to hold it in place. "Hell are you - *we're* the cowards, slow the hell down!"

"Not part of the plan!" a voice calls, and there's a blur running around and around them, boxing them into this small circle around Phalanx's shields. At the other side of the street the van's headlights come on and its engine roars awake. "Why do you think I'm here? No better insurance against supers than other supers!"

The Ghost says, "I need to stop that van." and lifts a hand, raps over his own shoulder with a knuckle on Phalanx's shield. "Hold him up."

"Will do."

"Hold up spooky, no way you're going - aw, crap."

He's gone. So is the van, tyres spraying snow as they spin, lumbering into movement. Phalanx drops his shields to throw another set up around that rocketing blur that other super is but it's like trying to clap his hands around a fly; he doesn't have the Ghost's crazy kung-fu quickness, and that blur is already far too far -

It bounces off the shield he throws up in a hell of a hurry, stumbling back in the snow and then the kid hits the ground on his hands and ass, cursing. "Hell, dude." he says, lifting a gloved hand to rub his tender-bruised nose. "What point do you think any of this is? Van's getting clean away, I can run rings around you two all night and who the hell're you helping anyway, a city full of people who don't give a crap about you and wouldn't toss you a dime if you were in the gutter - ?"

"Like you're lecturing me? You've got this *gift* and you're selling it to criminals, that's your *body* you handed over for money like a-

His eyes have hardened behind his hand. "You better watch what you say, new kid, I can still put your teeth through your face before you realised it hurt."

No.

Because *no*. Because supers are a fraction of a fraction of the planet's population, they have this amazing thing they can do, this *miracle* thing they can do, and how can any one of them have lived knowing that the Ghost was out there on his own giving everything to make this city safer and that all *they* did with their powers was -

He's taking this kid down whatever it costs him.

The van is speeding away up the street, but it's beginning to make strange noises; both Phalanx and the blond kid look over as it judders and begins to fail, and something hits the ground underneath it, dark on the snow's pale-scuffed surface, left behind as its wheels spin on until the van putters to an easy, gentle halt, and the blond kid mutters, "Oh hell no."

"He's good with cars," Phalanx says so proudly, as the Ghost appears on the hood of the van with its battery abandoned on the road behind it, a sudden flash of that pale bodysuit inside his dark cloak. The windscreen immediately explodes with bullets which blow right through him, and he quite casually takes something from a belt and tosses it back in through where the van's window used to be, before its occupants shot it out.

Smoke bursts back out of the open window, and the Ghost vanishes again. The doors to the van are flung open and its occupants fall out in a cloud of smoke, covering their faces, coughing hard, and Phalanx really is so proud he could burst but -

The blond kid's gone.

He throws the shield up at the last second, close enough to touch his own arm, and staggers sideways from the reverberation of the blond kid hitting it. "The hell he'll screw this up," a voice snarls, and Phalanx skids in the snow and surrounds himself with shields as the blur circles him again. "If I bring you down -"

Blows batter the shields, skidding and squeaking off their slippery surfaces, and Phalanx is on his back foot, doesn't know what to do, can't fight back because there isn't the time that guy's so *fast* -

There's a yell from over near the van and Phalanx glances across at the Ghost arching himself back in a hurry from a swung knife, catching the wrist stabbing at him again, throwing a hand up and the scream of the haunting makes Phalanx's body start and even the blond kid's stopped, staring over at the Ghost with his not inconsiderable mouth dumbly open.

The Ghost looks over at them, still holding that one slumped guy up by his elbow, before he turns his attention back to the task in hand. He ghosts a cell out of the guy's pocket, dials, lifts it to speak, and lets the guy down into the snow, where he doesn't get up.

The blond kid mutters, "... danger, Will Robinson ..."

"He risks his ass to make this city better for people." Phalanx spits at him. "How the hell could you sell yourself off to criminals, you can do *that* and the best thing you can think to do with it is help *them* -?"

"Why do you think I can do this, you think everyone's born *special* like you two, you know what it's like when you got nothing and nothing for your family and all you can sell *is* you -?"

His eyes narrow. "You weren't born -?"

"- if you could come quickly," the Ghost's voice says as he walks towards them, cell held to his cheek in the hood and his other arm wrapped around his body underneath the cloak. "It's a cold night and I don't want 'causing hypothermia in criminals' added to my charge sheet. Thank you." He ends the call and tosses the cell to the side. "You weren't born a super," he says, eyes *fixed* on that blond kid now. "Someone *did* this to you."

The blond kid stands there awkwardly, arms held in close to himself, and shrugs hard. "What's it to you?"

The Ghost's hands are in fists at his sides, and his breath hisses out visible in the cold. "I want to know who."

"Or what? Can't even touch me, how exactly are you gonna make me tell you anything?"

"Someone in this city," the Ghost says, jaw held hard, striding at the blond kid, "is *making* people into supers and if they're choosing to do with their powers what you are then I *need* to know who -"

The blond kid blurs out of sight again. "Yeah, and how're you gonna make me, Casper?" The Ghost turns, cloak flaring around him as something runs right through him again, but his hands are grabbing not for anything attacking him but for his own utility belt. The blond kid's voice calls joyously, "*I ain't afraid of no gh-*"

He blurs in past for a second pass; the Ghost skips sideways and swings and Phalanx yelps, forget the blond kid when *he's* blinded, when the street's illuminated for half a second like the centre of the sun.

"Sorry!" the Ghost yelps, and the blond kid's yelling, "Hell are you -"

Phalanx blinks through the popping bubbles of black and absurd white, and he can sort of see the blond kid struggling, bent in half, and the Ghost leaning all his weight back and hands fisted tight in - he blinks and blinks - the fine rope he's got him snagged in -

"You wanna ride?" the blond kid says. "Sure your boyfriend won't mind?"

"Wh -"

Phalanx is too slow. Unless it's some plan Phalanx has no idea of, *both* of them are too slow, because the blond kid is off like a bullet out of a gun and with a jerk and a cut-off yelp, so is the Ghost.

"No!"

Phalanx skids, drops his shields, stumbles in the snow and his still-stifled vision, and *runs*. He can see up ahead the Ghost swing on the end of that rope at the wall of a warehouse but before Phalanx can even scream his body's gone right through it - god, god, ghosting, he'd be a bug on a windshield at this speed - and he puts on an extra burst of speed, runs like his life depends on it. Like *his* life depends on it.

Around the corner and onto a louder street, cars slower in the slush with headlights on and wipers waving at the snow beginning to fall again. The blond kid is too fast to see, and the Ghost is a dark-light blur dragged after him, ghosting through the cars which screech and honk and two thump into each other in shock; Phalanx runs broken-breathed across the street, vaulting the dented hood of one car, and the blond kid and the Ghost -

Have gone through the doorway of a club with a line of people outside it scrambling back in panic. Phalanx doesn't have the time to stop, look, think, he just runs inside, the bouncer's yell ignored and his grabbing hand striking startled off a slick green shield.

He seriously doesn't have the time to notice the club's name overhead (The Warehouse, in a slick modern font), or that the vast majority of the queue is male, or the discreet rainbow sticker in the window of the door.

Inside there's a bass line jarring under his ribcage and people screaming and yelling, scrambling away from the centre of the lowered, crowded dance floor. Because, on the centre of the dance floor, under scattered strobe lights and a waft of ironic dry ice from the DJ booth, there's a dark cloak picking itself up, unsteady and disorientated by the music, the dark, the intermittent unpredictable light -

A guy takes his arm and helps the Ghost to his feet, saying something Phalanx can't hear as he strides over, and the Ghost's face lifts pale in the dark to stare dumb at the guy holding his arm, his other hand sliding in underneath his cloak, and closer Phalanx can hear through the thudding of the music, "- the real thing? 'cause you can haunt me as hard as you like baby, I bet you-"

The Ghost *shocks*, his whole body jumps, and then he's invisible and the guy's hands close around nothing as he's intangible too. Someone screams; Phalanx can tell by where the guy's right hand closed on the air exactly what it did to make the Ghost startle before he vanished, and he shoves him back with everything in him, the guy staggers almost into the backed-off crowd staring at the empty floorspace where the Ghost isn't and his furious partner very much is. "The hell is wrong with you, the hell did you think you were doing-" he yells at him, he could *punch* him, he could put a shield right through his stupid scowling face as the guy wrinkles his nose and says, "I think you'll find that ass doesn't actually belong to you, sugar, why the fuck are you two here anyway if he's not looking for something -" He glances Phalanx up and down, eyebrows raising. "- bigger -?"

There is no way in hell he is not going to punch him now. "You don't just grab a guy as soon as you - you don't *ever* touch someone like -"

Arms drape over his shoulders from behind, and a dark cloak falls around his sides as a voice says blackly at his ear, "*Phalanx*."

And then he's slipping downwards, grabbing the Ghost's arms in shock, invisible and intangible and sucking a breath in before the floor cuts all air off. There's not far to fall; the Ghost lets them partially into the floor of the basement before he pulls them back up to stand, and a flashlight illuminates their dark low space - a storage cellar, boxes and boxes of bottles, exposed piping overhead, metal kegs against the walls.

"Why did you stop me?" Phalanx spins to him and the anger isn't spent yet, the anger's a pulse in his brain, faster than the rhythm of the music still drumming through the ceiling. "Why did you *stop* me, that guy -"

"You looked like you were about to assault a member of the public."

"Assa- he *assaulted* you!"

The Ghost's back is straight and his head is up and Phalanx can't even *think* around the fury beating inside him, deafening his brain. "I'm fine. You can't go around knocking down idiots in front of huge audiences, do you have any idea how quickly a reputation can get -"

"We should be calling the cops on him!"

"For what? For being over-handsy on the dance floor? New York doesn't have enough cells for a Saturday night, Phalanx! I'm not saying -"

"He should be-"

"*I'm not saying* what he did was in any way right but *you* don't get to decide for me how I deal with it, you don't have to 'defend' me when I've already got myself out of a situation -"

He stabs at the ceiling with a finger. "How can you let him do that to you after - that was an assault and he should be-"

"*Don't tell me,*" the Ghost snarls, "*what an assault is.*"

Silence. The anger is running too high and too fast, it's running out of itself, and now he can blink and blink and see how furious the Ghost is, almost shaking with it, gloves taut over his tight-fisted hands, throat and jaw flexing as his teeth clamp everything in.

The Ghost swallows hard, and his jaw tightens and then forcibly loosens itself as his voice comes rough. "We can't call the cops. How the hell you expect *me* to stand up in court and accuse him of anything I don't know. And don't, *don't*, treat me like I'm - broken. Like I can't cope. What the *fuck* do you think my life is, *I cope*. Don't act like - why do you think I didn't want to tell you? You think *that* is all I ever want to be, all you ever see in me - ?"

"No -"

"He was an asshole." the Ghost says tightly, and folds his arms around himself outside the cloak so the beam of the flashlight swings across the bare walls behind the kegs. "One of these days he will end up with a criminal record if he does that all the time. But it won't be because of me, Phalanx. These masks don't have legal rights the way - people do. Don't - don't. Don't make it worse than it is. Just - let it go."

"Just let it -? *You* can't get help from the cops and - and the other you can't use your powers, who the hell does defend you from this crap if it's not me?"

"Why are you being such a testosterone junkie about this, I don't need defending, I'm not some princess in a tower -"

"Excuse *me* for not being okay with watching my boyfriend getting forcibly groped! What the hell kind of hero am I supposed to be if I can't defend you of all people -"

"The kind of hero who actually thinks about what he's doing before he swings because otherwise he's no hero at all!"

"I don't care about that if it's that or you!"

"I *do*!"

"You don't get to choose what kind of hero I am any more than I get to tell you what kind of hero you-"

"You tell me that all the time! All you *do* is tell me to see myself the way you do, don't even start -"

Phalanx grabs at and pulls his own hair and the Ghost covers his eyes with a hand, squeezes the bridge of his nose, through the mask, in his thumb and fingers. He says, muffled through his hand, "What the hell are we arguing about anymore anyway?"

Phalanx folds his arms, shuffles his shoulders angrily. "That guy was a dick."

"I think we agree on that point."

"I don't like seeing guys do that to you."

The Ghost's eyes flick to the silhouette of the flashlight's beam, nibbled at its lower edge by the rounded shadows of keg rims. "I don't like having it done to me. I also don't like being treated like I'm - like I'm just a walking wound and the whole world's too much for me. Do you *get* how long I've been looking after myself for?"

". . . I don't want to say sorry for wanting to punch that guy in the face for what he did to you."

The Ghost closes his eyes again. "Can we just both let it go. It happened, it sucked, it's over. The end."

He doesn't want to let it go. He wants to go up there and find that guy and just start hitting him. He wants to snap back for being accused of treating the Ghost like he's damaged - the sheer heat of *that* want, he does know, is based in the heat of the shame over how accurate that accusation was, he might not quite have yelled that part out loud but after everything the Ghost has been through, how can he bear - ?

He wants to use up all this emotion, all this ridiculous overheated emotion, throw it at something and the only thing there is the Ghost -

Who rubs his own elbow, standing shoulders drooped opposite him, looking at the wall and not at him. He swallows.

(If you're honest, if you're actually honest, why did your other relationships fail? Because there wasn't enough feeling for you, for one thing. But your last ex even yelled it at you and it stung because you knew it was true, that compromise is difficult for you, letting go of what you want is difficult for you, that you let your feelings override other people's needs if you don't stop and think. So stop and think. You're in a goddamn superhero costume. If you can't act like a hero then at least act like an *adult*.)

He says, quietly and it is difficult, "Okay. So . . . what happened to that other super, anyway, the blond kid?"

The Ghost rolls his eyes to the ceiling. "Oh, god knows. I had to let go of the rope or lose my fingers eventually. Not one of my better ideas, I get a bit, um, single-minded, sometimes."

"I kind of noticed."

"It's - it makes me feel sick when I think about it. How dangerous it is." He finally looks at Phalanx, mouth twitching. "Someone in this city is *making* supers. Puckzilla and him and I don't even *know* how many more - I thought they'd made you, at first. You just seemed too perfect to be real, otherwise."

He - should not smile, not so easily and not so soon but he *does*, and hangs his head to grin at the floor while the Ghost settles himself steadier under the cloak. "I don't know who or how or where or why. But I need to. It could - it could hurt so many people. Us, Phalanx, do you realise how dangerous another super on the wrong side could be to *us*? I can't - I can't let it. I have to stop them. But I don't know *how*."

"I'll help. We'll work it out."

"I'm not a detective. I just - clean up after people. God I'm a glorified janitor -"

Phalanx laughs out loud, reaches for his hand. "A masked janitor with superpowers."

The Ghost lets him hold his hand, squeeze it a little, tips his head to look up at his eyes. "Don't you ever just feel - I don't know, like Atlas, this whole city on my back, sometimes I can't *breathe* under it all -"

He squeezes his hand again. "You're not responsible for the bad things that happen. The only thing you're responsible for is the ways you've helped people."

The Ghost stares at him, then lets himself be tugged a little closer, Phalanx's arm folding around his shoulders to pull him into a half-hug. "I thought I'd be scraping you off a wall somewhere, I was - heart in my *throat*."

"Sorry." He drops his forehead to Phalanx's shoulder, flashlight beam hanging low now from his hand, turning his body into his, arm circling his waist to complete the hug. "You know I can look after myself. I don't know why people think I wouldn't. Don't I have so many things to live for?"

"You do," he says against the hood, and rubs his back. "We both do."

There's a creak and a click overhead and strip-lights flicker on, blinding after the dark. They blink up like creatures shocked by nighttime headlights at the guy with his hand on the lightswitch and eyes wide on them, who says, "I, uh, we - tequila."

Phalanx can already see them both fading out of sight. "Sorry, we'll be on our way!" he calls, and then they're invisible, and the Ghost tugs, gently, at his hand to walk them towards the staircase the guy is still standing stunned on. Phalanx puts a hand on his invisible back through the cloak, follows him as they walk, as they wait at the side until the guy can work himself up to creep down, to grab two bottles and *run* upstairs again, slamming the door on their invisible forms in his hurry to be the hell out of there already.

The Ghost walks them invisible back up into the club and out into the night. They turn the cellar lights off behind themselves as they go.

*

'So,' I don't hear you say because I don't actually listen to the vast majority of you people anyway, 'So, Paleandghostly, why are you reccing a two year old fanfic? We've all already read Triptych, it's been around for two years and it's by Blackbindings, of course we've all read it, we're fanghosts, it's like asking literate people if they've read The Waste Land.'

Please have enough self-respect to not want to publicly shame yourself by admitting to me that you have not read The Waste Land.

*So, why am I reccing Triptych again. Because I did indeed rec it the first time around, the more observant of you may remember. I did not do so incredibly coherently at the time, because I was still in the shock and awe stage of being smashed right in the frontal lobes by what Blackbindings' writing can do. This is my second attempt at explaining why you **should** read it, because what she does in that fic is incredibly interesting and intelligent and will never stop being relevant, not to any of us, and especially not to us as fans. I think it's time we all started revisiting that fic. I think that fic should be on the fucking literature syllabus in college (high schoolers could not possibly appreciate it; frankly, I know that most of you don't appreciate it because there's no porn in it and you're all fucking philistines, but I try for optimism, I really do). That fic is an illustration of why fandom is not a waste of our time and our lives. That fic is why art matters and why people matter. That fic is **special**, and is one of the reasons I respect Blackbindings in ways that you collectively know that I do not respect fandom at large. It's something to be earned, children. Go away and think and write something terrible and beautiful and brutal and guttingly perfect. And then I might give you a raised eyebrow, and maybe not self-medicate with alcohol over the depressingly petty stupidity of humanity at large for an evening. Which is my way of saying I would be grateful. Thank you.*

The fic has little plot to speak of; the Ghost, unconscious from an encounter on the streets (presumably with the Pink Dagger or some similar villain due to his drugged/feverish state, it's not important) has been taken into the care of three - let's not be too precious about this point - prostitutes. They have brought him to some bare room where he's been placed on a mattress on the floor. Let us not speculate about the everyday usage of this room or that mattress. There is no discussion about ambulances or medical aid, again, that isn't what this story is about, plot is just something that gets in the way. They sit over him throughout the night, and in the morning he wakes and he leaves. That is all the 'story' we get.

That is not what the fic is about.

The fic is a fractured account of the characters' thoughts that night, spiralling to center on him. The Ghost is unaware of where he is or what's happened, his voice is tumultuous, careening, chaotic, he may not know

*what's going on but he knows that something is not right in a dangerous way, and his voice is a delirious whirl through his thoughts on existence (had anyone previously considered the utter existential *mindfuck* it must be to be *completely intangible* sometimes before Blackbindings did it for us?) and sacrifice and the will to live and what that means. He is either drugged or feverish; the language *sparkles*, fever-bright, gleams and glistens, delirium-quick. The reader trips over the words, too fast, like taking two stairs at once every single sentence. His sections cut through the piece with only typesetting as warning, blocks of prose which should be dense but aren't, stream of consciousness the reader falls through with him. His mind casts left-right backwards-forwards up-down searching for something to hold onto but there's no solidity there, nothing to grip. His sections make the breath come too quick. As he holds down the panic, the reader's panic rises. And when the pitch breaks and he begins to wake, as the words become embodied in a living breathing body again with a breathing body's rhythms, the sense of relief is almost a further strain. No more, that glorious freefall through the mind. Back to the body, the aching, half-wrecked body, forcing itself to wake. His humanity is centered in the body, in this fic. His thoughts on ghosting and invisibility, on being essentially only half-real, are beautiful and they *hurt*. The painful psychological necessity of touching and being touched by the world, seeing and being seen by the world, fuck me, Blackbindings brings it all in the kind of prose voice Joyce *wishes* he had the self-awareness to write.*

The Ghost's voice ties the fic together, gives its center weight. The three women pull it outwards, away from the center, his center, dragging him in their own directions. The tension gives the fic a feeling of enormous potential, vast reaches of thought inside its limited word count, something huge and whole contained in a single short story.

*It becomes apparent through the fic that it's not their first encounter, any of them, with the Ghost; all three have been rescued by him from something in their past/his past. The Ghost means something to each of them, and what he means to each of them is a matter of their own skewed lens on the world. I do not mean by 'skewed' that their viewpoints are not accurate: **that is what the fic is about**. How they view him is a large part of making concrete **who he is**, because as it's made apparent in his own sections (and in parts of theirs), how we are viewed by others feeds into the construction of **who we are**. The Ghost isn't in the best position to define himself, trapped inside himself, he can't see himself from the outside as they can. But their perspective is no more privileged than his, they only see a fraction of his story. Who he is is, quite literally, plural. He is the way that everyone who views him sees him, and the way he sees himself, spliced together, both at once, sometimes neither, and overall, he is all of those things simultaneously. Personal identity viewed through a kaleidoscope. He is made of beautiful broken fragmented facets coming together to create order out of chaos, symmetry out of scatter. He is so much larger than himself but he can't ever know it, because*

none of us ever really can grasp the sheer size of our selves. That strange sadness of being human and being huge, and yet being so small, inside that enormity.

*The fic isn't only about the Ghost. The meaning spreads outwards, through the voices of the women pulling the fic after themselves. There are three prostitutes, a teenage girl, a woman with a young child she's left with her brother's family out of town, and an older woman who's been on the game a long time. Yes, Blackbindings has given us the Maiden, the Mother and the Crone, who watch over the Ghost while he sleeps. They meditate in their fragmented way on what he means to women, particularly to women forced into society's gutters, in their various given roles. They meditate on what heroes mean to the people who need heroes. They meditate on what heroes mean to *people*: they are so much more than caricatures.*

*The Maiden is trying to kick a drug habit and is antsy and sparky and either coming down or else high during the whole incident. Her voice is an absolute blur of words, even faster than the Ghost's, naïve and breathless and in the moments when her daily reality is thrust right under your nose as you read, shockingly uninnocent. Yet hopeful. She hopes because of *him*. To her, as Maiden, he represents the knight; he rescued her, once, and to her the mask is a shining helm, the hooded cloak the bright horsehair plume. Her too-fast voice reveals the cracks underneath (everything about her life has been too fast and everything in it has cracked), and she needs too much, and never gets any of what she needs, and she projects all that need onto him. Her narrative is all broken bits of fairy tales she half-remembers, swooping off in tangents that can only loop back to him again. By the end of the fic she's stroking his leg (her fingernails are bitten to the quick, in one of those little Blackbindings details you knew almost before she told you it's so of course) and she does, in the midst of all her fairy tale fantasising, kiss him. He is not aware of this when he wakes up.*

*(If you haven't already spotted all the ways Blackbindings has used The Waves in this fic, you're not going to realise how perfectly the Maiden's voice would fit into that novel were Virginia Woolf our drug-crazed contemporary. If you haven't read The Waves then get off my blog. And if you haven't spotted the Maiden as a representation of a large part of fandom, you seriously need to take a long hard look at yourselves. What Blackbindings does with these characters is fucking *genius*, I can't even, she even makes *me* talk like a fangirl...)*

*The Mother offers possibly the most interesting embodiment of conflicting viewpoints in her thoughts on the Ghost. She sees him as a kid (he is a kid, or barely more than one, presumably he's around twenty since he's been doing this a while but probably didn't start when still an outright child; to some of us old ladies in fandom, yes, he is a fucking kid), and sees him through the conflicts with which a child is viewed. Not just that she wants to protect him, shelter and soothe and rock him like an infant, though the *restrained* voice of her*

*meditations on his vulnerability fucking *hurts*. She also views him as saviour. As a child he can represent the new generation, the hope of the parent, to go further, do more, *be more*. The push and pull at the same time, go forth and do what I could not, stay here and let me keep you safe; and she thinks of her own child, and of the Ghost's parents, and her own parents, and him . . . and she does all this in a voice so cleverly manipulated from Greek tragedy I almost wanted to laugh on first reading it because it's *so perfect*, Blackbindings has such an ear for the exact rhythm of it. I love the difficulty viewed out of the corner of the eye in her sections, the tension plucked to vibrate under the words. I love the relative sparseness of her language. I love that she too can't quite not view him as a sex object, despite her role as 'Mother', but her lingering descriptions of the shape of his body under the costume do skate the edge of Oedipus, and that only makes her *more* interesting . . .*

(And yes, fandom, I am still looking at you. It's the Mother who makes the Maiden stop touching him before he wakes up, and the protectiveness/jealousy in that moment is stomach-knottingly powerful, erotic in a very illicit way. The Crone just watches, not a fuck does she give. Ah, the Crone . . .)

*So, finally, the Crone. Who is probably only forty-odd, but we all know how early society stamps sell by dates on women whether we want to believe in them or not. The Crone's voice has got to be my favorite, however much I love them all. It's not just because that woman swears even more than I do, or doesn't hesitate to call a cunt a cunt, or doesn't even think she *should* hesitate before describing her own veiny, sagging breasts and the more fucked up pricks of johns she's seen; it's all of it and the poetry of it, this woman phlegms up Beckett. Her crudeness is *glorious*, it's *beautiful*. It's born out of an unflinching life and a very serious sense of priorities, and social niceness is no part of those priorities. And she looks at the Ghost and she sees youth being used up, youth unacknowledged, a life being used like the briefness of it hasn't sunk in yet, a moth at night passing through a lit room. She sees that strong young body but I don't know if she desires *him* so much as what he represents; she would maybe rather have her own youth back than share in his. Maybe; the nostalgia isn't rose-tinted in her narrative. We find out about the fiance who beat her and the abortions she's had, we hear how she takes for granted that sometimes a john just rapes you. The police are either useless or corrupt, to her. And what does she see the Ghost as, if not knight-prince, if not child-saviour?*

*It's only towards the end of her narrative that you notice the echoes of a sermon in some parts of her speech, so strangely not incongruous at all. It's only at the very end, when he's already gone, that she outright uses the word 'angel'. Because she knows what humanity is, she knows what men are, and she sees the part of him that *has* to be more than we are. Braver, stronger, *better*. Who the hell else could take you through reading all of that and then focus all the poetry, in the end, to pierce at that point, when a foul-mouthed Crone uses the word 'angel' to say that he *can't* be part of this world to be what he is, and yet the world,*

*exactly as broken as it is, *can* still contain an angel in *him*. I know you all think I'm a heartless bitch. When I read this fic I cried. Because the Crone picks up the hardest part of this, the ugliness and the beauty at exactly the same time, of everything this fucked up life is.*

The final scene in that grim bare room with the dawn light slanting in between the three women, I don't even need to tell you how that emptiness makes a silent space in your heart.

*So that is why I am reccing a two year old fic. Because you all know exactly how I feel about fandom, except that you don't; the ways we view each other, the things we 'know', that fic tells us that we never have the full story because the full story can never be gathered in a single place, every outside perspective gives a further perspective that must be incorporated to complete the story and that just gives *another* perspective to incorporate until the chain makes it in its entirety literally *unknowable*. So you don't know how I feel about fandom. But I think that that fic does.*

*What we do ranges from the skeezy to the sublime. There are ways in which we understand what he does more than he ever can, he can't see himself the way we do, no human could; he can't ever know the angel in him. But then we'll never know him, not the whole story, neither the human parts nor the angelic ones. What we can do in fandom is find these ways of understanding. Blackbindings could not have written that as a piece of original fiction. The story's tautness depends on our already knowing the Ghost and already having preconceived notions of the Ghost. It couldn't have worked with original characters, not to the depths that it does. It's only in fandom that we can have *this* conversation.*

*And yes, maybe you prefer some of her porny fic. I am not denying that she writes gorgeous porn. I am assuming that you probably misread her porn as merely porn but that's because this is the internet. But that piece of fanfiction is why I'm still here, day in day out, despite all the absolute cretinous childish fuckwittery of it all. Because that piece of fanfic is a gift. It's one of the few pieces of fanfic I wish to god the Ghost could, would, read. Because it denies nothing of how potentially creepy some of the crap surrounding his image online is, and it respects utterly his individual subjectivity in the midst of it all. It is *about* the space between subject and object. It is *about* the difficulty of fandom itself, the space between gratitude and appropriation. It's about the space between him and us, and the space between every person and every other person, and every person and *themselves*.*

*That fic is one of the reasons I'm still here. Because, sometimes, someone will stand up and do something intelligent and compassionate and brave, and *beautiful*, and I will remember that humanity is not a complete waste of flesh and oxygen. And I will try to find some sympathy for the more stupid people until I*

*run out of energy for forgiving them again. Because it's hard, for me and for them, and for him. Because life is hard, and all we have is each other, and all he and we can do is keep finding the angelic part of ourselves, that messenger of our most *human* part, the part that can't stop *feeling* and can't stop *caring*.*

*That is why I am re-reccing Triptych, two years on. Reread it. Think about it. And think about him, and Phalanx as well now, and exactly what you need from them to cement your own sense of self, and exactly what they might need from you to not feel what you take as a theft, as a violation. Fandom does not need to hurt anybody. If you *love* them then respect them. And don't tell me, blackened-hearted as I am, that I am not someone to preach about love. Do you think I would be such a bitter bitch if I didn't love the world enough to wish people would be what it needs, to wish people would be *better*?*

Blackbindings, thank you for that fic. You have made the kind of difference that you can't understand, I know, taking the place of the Ghost in this meta of mine; my discussion can circle you but never encompass you. But that fic is fucking perfect. And I hope to god you never stop doing this, for your sake and mine, and ours. It might be one very small step further towards the light from out of the dark, but fuck it a step is a step and when it can get as dark as it does, that one small step is a fucking gift.

Now I'm going to go insult people's gif making skills until I feel a little bit more like myself. tl;dr: go read fucking Triptych and stop bothering me with all your shit. As usual, if your comment is misspelled, has no grasp of the rules of grammar, or is merely incredibly stupid, I will ignore it or else reblog it to point and laugh. Type carefully, and goodnight.

*

Alone in his room, his kiss goodbye from Blaine accomplished some time ago - he had thought a boyfriend would make superheroing *more* complicated, and yet no-one questions either of them in their late nights and unexplained absences now, everything can be explained by the other - Kurt is ready for sleep and he should sleep, but something in his mind is still too fast with thought for the pillows yet. It's not his overtired mind gone into paranoid overdrive, as he knows it sometimes does, with everything he hasn't done, everyone he hasn't helped as he's now trying to climb under the blankets and sleep like a lazy selfish child. It's not guilt waking up to slide over-sharp claws along the undersides of all his thoughts, Dad, Carole, Finn, everyone left to worry about him and him unable to stop for their sakes -

It's just thoughts, too many of them. About him and Blaine, and him and Phalanx, and about Kurt and the Ghost. And how he feels different now, and how he felt so like he'd been physically *struck* by Phalanx's

behaviour, shoving him back into the corner he'd sworn to himself he'd already fought himself out of, the victim corner, the helpless corner, the irreparably broken corner. He wanted to protect you, he thinks, tries to think. He wanted you to be safe. He doesn't like seeing other guys touch you. Would you like it if they touched him? You can't judge him, he's *trying*, haven't you given him enough trouble to deal with without looking for more for him?

But he understands the breaks in himself, the pieces of himself he parcelled off because he had to, he had to, he couldn't live with everything at once, hard enough to live with portions of it . . . so he cracked himself into pieces and lived as Kurt (barely, 'living' like he'd only just moved into his life every single day, leaving the floorboards bare and the empty walls echoing) and lived as the Ghost (skating the edge of death every night, draining the hope right out of himself every night) but no-one knew both of them. He felt fractured and alone in both of them, because no-one knew *him*. He lived as a shell and as an image, and nowhere in that was there enough of a person to *feel* like a person.

Blaine knows both of them and it's like the breath finally makes it all the way through his lungs, not just shallow air barely drawn in, they fill like expanding sponges. It's not that Blaine can be the glue Kurt can use to fix himself, because Blaine is Blaine, and his own person, and does not need melting down to stick Kurt's cracked-mirror pieces back together again. It just feels like now Blaine has seen the wreck of it all, Kurt can see it, as if for the first time. Like Blaine walked into Kurt's room and Kurt saw it through his eyes for the first time again, like Blaine looking at it made him realise what was out of place, what needed dusting, what needed changing, moving, fixing . . .

He doesn't feel like who he was anymore. He hardly was anyone, before. He feels - he feels like Kurt is actually grounded enough in his own life now to care about it. And he feels like the Ghost doesn't have to hide, not the way he did. He has to be careful, and he doesn't want more attention than he can help. But he doesn't feel . . . he thinks about the cloak, the depth of it, the darkness of it. He thinks about who he's trying to be, who he would like to see reflected when the shards of mirror make a whole again. He thinks about what clothes have always meant to him, because he understands how other people look at him and how he can control that and how he can't.

And he sits at his desk and draws some paper towards himself, and makes a few thoughtful sketches, until he yawns so hard his face actually hurts with it. Then he turns the lamp out and climbs under the covers, heavy and warm with the night cold outside, finally tired enough, peaceful enough, to sleep.

*

(Ghostly. Thank you.)

(I meant every word of it. Never stop writing. Please. For my pitiful sake if nothing else. How was your day?)

(It was okay. I've been better since the weekend.)

(I'm glad to hear it. Don't let the bastards grind you down. Especially the bastards in your own head.)

(They really are massive bastards, Ghostly.)

(I know. I know it's not easy. But I know that you understand what strength really is because I've read your writing.)

(I don't understand. I only try to.)

(Blackbindings, that's the very best part of you. I need to check on my mom, speak to you soon, okay?)

(Okay. Thank you. I hope your mum's good. I mean it, thank you <3)

(G'night, my very favorite slow loris.)

(?)

Chapter Fourteen

no but seriously can someone tell me why they were in a gay bar???

Um look at that sentence and take a guess

Even superheroes gotta dance! <3

super shitty quality pics but still not gonna say no to a photoset

I love that while he's obviously pissed as all hell, the photographer is focusing on Phalanx's ass instead of his angry puppy face. Like, I'm sure you have a serious point to make there, but then, so does your butt.

CAN ANYONE WHO WAS ACTUALLY THERE TELL US WHAT THE HELL ACTUALL HAPPENED

was it puckzilla??

FUCKSAKE DO YOU THINK WE MIGHT KNOW ABOUT IT IF IT WAS PUCKZILLA HE'S A GIANT DINOSAUR-MAN HE TENDS TO BE QUITE NOTICEABLE fml

You have reached the absolute pinnacle of your fanghost life when Blackbindings reblogs one of your gifs <3

Sometimes when I've had a really bad day I like to read through Paleandghostly's exchanges with anons and just feel chokingly grateful that at least it's not me she's eviscerating.

Depending on what order you view the pics in, you can come up with some sort of story. Like, the Ghost made a new friend who looks like he might be a bit overkeen. Neither the Ghost nor Phalanx were very happy about this and Phalanx got a bit possessive. - oh holy fuck it's actual real life jealanx omg

*I cannot believe that has become a slrfgdkldakda *genre* what is our fandom coming to*

Why isn't Draxie on this one yet?

Because Draxie is not your bitch and the woman has a life outside of supplying you with smut, child.

oh god someone woke paleandghostly

Flee! Flee! Run for your lives! The kraken riseth!!

I actually do not resent a comparison with the kraken. We both suffer under the enormous weight of a cold, stupid, deep-drowning ocean, metaphorical in my case, and dream with a glitter in our apathy-dulled eyes of the end times.

I hope the Ghost's cell never runs out of battery at exactly the wrong moment (fml).

omg but I bet they had the best possessive!sex after that

Kink meme it

Someone beat you to it.

oh FUCK yes

'Kink meme' is not a verb.

It's the internet. EVERYTHING is a verb.

^ True; language has been internetted.

omfg cannot even someone posted a gifset of their cat in a Ghost cloak rotflmfao <3 <3 <3

The Ghost says curtly, "I really fail to see why you need to act angry with *me* about it."

"Beacu- I'm not angry with you! I'm - I'm angry and you're *there*, that is not the same as being angry with -
"

"Well, now you're angry with me," the Ghost says, and flicks a foot irritably from his legs-crossed perch on the edge of the building. "I knew I shouldn't have told you."

"Is - this isn't something *small*, okay, what are you - what else *aren't* you telling me?"

"God, Phalanx, like you've told me *everything*? It wasn't -" The Ghost rubs his forehead under his hood, grimacing his eyes closed. "You're giving me a headache. I'm not saying it was exactly nice when it happened but it wasn't like *him*. It wasn't *personal*. It wasn't - it was just a horrible thing, it wasn't -"

Phalanx has to stand up, walk across the rooftop crunching snow under his boots, trying not to squeeze his coffee cup so hard he bursts it. The Ghost has decided, in his entirely unpredictable way, to wait until a midnight coffee break to tell him about this time a guy in college got him really drunk and tried to rape him. It is, like everything of his life right now, really just too much to take in all at once.

"Phalanx," the Ghost says, turning on the building's edge to face him, sounding *pleading* now. "I can't just tell you my whole life story in one huge chunk and you *know* I can't, we'd be here until we were forty, there must be things you haven't got around to telling me ye-"

"Were there others?" Phalanx turns to face him again, holds his coffee cup out with his hands wide, a whole-body-shrug of *I can't understand this*. "Was that - how many more times -?"

"- don't say that in that tone of voice. Don't say that like -"

"Like *what*?"

"Like you're accusing me of something! Like it's something *I did*, like it's my fault!"

His mouth is open, but all he can do is stare before he shakes his head hard, walks over and sits next to him, puts his cup down to take his hand. "It's not - that's not what I . . . you know it's not."

He looks away and says very low, "Well it would be a lot easier to believe that if you didn't *yell* at me."

"I'm not - god. I'm not yelling. I'm sorry. I just - it was a shock. Sorry. Hey." He squeezes his hand. "Sorry."

The Ghost glances up, closes his eyes for the kiss on his cheek, smiles just a little. "Yes, anyway. In answer to your question, yes. That was the only other time I've been - physically threatened like that. I've had a lot of abuse for not taking my clothes off on command but - no. Not that. I don't know why you get so angry." He turns Phalanx's hand in his, looks down at it, runs his thumb across his palm like he's reading his love line through the glove. "It was all a long time ago and there's nothing either of us can do about it now."

Phalanx swallows, quite hard. "I think I get angry because you don't. I don't know why you . . . don't you just want to - you could've haunted that guy -"

"Secret identity," the Ghost sings, gently, to his palm.

"If it's that or -?"

"I don't know." He closes his hand around Phalanx's again, looks to the side. "I wasn't thinking clearly. I don't know. I honestly don't."

". . . th . . . that night . . ."

The Ghost looks across at him again, head tipped, curious, watching him from inside the shadow of the hood. Phalanx makes himself breathe, in, deep, and out, deep. His voice still comes a little cracked. "That night in your room, when you - measured me for the costume for the first time -" It feels like a cold hand is digging its fingers into his squeezed heart. "I'm - sorry, you must - didn't you - *hate* me, how did you ever trust me again -?"

The Ghost looks like he genuinely doesn't understand for a moment and then *stares* when he does understand. "But - no. No, I've never been - scared of you, not like that, I made you stop and you *stopped*, you're not - you're not them. You're not like that, you're not. Anyway." He shrugs a shoulder, lifts his coffee for a drink. "You already knew, the secret identity wasn't a problem, I could haunt you whenever I wanted."

He blinks before he - laughs, and the Ghost is trying not to smile around the cup before he lowers it, licking his lips. "I'm not afraid," he says, swinging Phalanx's hand a little. "Do you actually believe me when I say that? I'm not - I'm not just always waiting for the worst things, I don't know, things are better, a lot better recently, I really don't think I've had the worst luck in the world. Things look kind of *good* to me right now."

"Even with a numb cold ass?"

"Even with a numb cold ass." he says, and leans in for a kiss. "Finish the coffee. We need to get back out there."

He leans over the building to drop their cups into an open dumpster and Phalanx watches him, squeezing his hands at his sides, trying to make his own stomach coil down and stop rising that horrible sick way, he doesn't understand - he doesn't understand what they made the Ghost's spine out of to keep him upright like this, and he doesn't understand -

The Ghost glances back at him, takes his hands, says, "I'm fine, Phalanx, I'm fine." and Phalanx closes his fingers in his, contains his hands, finds almost a smile for him. The Ghost watches his face and Phalanx has no idea how fooled he is by it; he just lifts a hand, strokes his thumb over his eyebrow to smooth the mask, then turns for the edge of the building, still holding his hand.

Phalanx comes after him, following his footsteps, keeping his own heart quiet and letting the Ghost lead him through the dark.

*

Kurt dreams of them in costume, and Phalanx keeps feeling through the pale bodysuit for that scar - in the dream it's a deeper ridge, he can feel Phalanx's gloved hand stroking its edges - however he tries to push him off, however he folds himself around it. *Stop it. Stop it. Just ignore it, leave it alone. It's nothing. Just stop it, Phalanx -*

It's not nothing. Look at it, how is that nothing?

And when he looks down it's bleeding like it's split open, bright crimson through the suit, scarlet running from the chest down . . .

He opens his eyes in bed, listening to the rain whisper to the windows, hushing like it can hold the whole city in sleep. He squirms his head a little free from where the covers have pulled up and slinks an arm from underneath Blaine's clumsy hug for his cell on the bedside table, lifts an eyebrow, of course. Not much point rolling over and going back to sleep ten minutes before his alarm goes off . . .

He turns the alarm off and just lays there for just a moment, against the weight of Blaine's warm body at his back, Blaine's leg a comforting hairy scratch between his ankles, thinking thinking thinking. Thinking, as the rain murmurs gentle thoughts to the windowpane, that it really isn't a fairy tale, is it? Because you can love him - there is no doubt in any corner of his heart about that, Kurt loves him and will die loving him, whatever might happen between now and then (which, he hopes, will be a damn long time) - but it's

not happily ever after, because 'the end' hasn't been and gone ('the end' will only ever mean that there can never be a happily ever after; in the real world, it really is just a story). It's just the two of you, and making it work, and it's never going to be a fairy tale, it's never going to be as simple as his kiss breaking your spell. Your own life is not something you need waking from. It's something you need to *live* with.

To live with with him.

He carefully, carefully extricates his legs from Blaine's, sliding himself across the mattress to slip off the side of the bed. It's cold, out from under the covers, bare feet on the carpet and catching his robe from the back of the door, slowly-gently turning the handle to click and letting himself out of the room as silent as a cat. Blaine sleeps on. He's tired. Kurt knows the feeling.

Pulling his t-shirt off in the bathroom he glances sidelong at the mirror, at the marks of the Ghost on Kurt's pale body, and then looks away again, shaking and folding his clothes onto the toilet seat. His past is written right into his skin, it's in his blood and bones, his body *is* his past. Was he so naïve that he thought that Blaine had chased all his ghosts away? Ghosts *haunt* people, they're still there, in the corner of his eye every time he turns his head too quickly. They're still there and they're never louder than when Blaine won't *shut up* about them. How can he forget about them when Blaine looks at him like all he can see is *pain* crafted into the shape of a body, like Kurt is scars with a person attached - ?

He turns the shower on, stands nose wrinkled with a hand under the spray until it heats enough, then he pulls the curtain behind himself, wriggles his shoulders out like a cat getting comfortable under the water, closes his eyes.

... does it even count as getting your voice back if no-one actually listens to you?

Why did you even tell him? he thinks, squinting his eyes open to reach for the shampoo. Why tell him any of it, he can't understand, he doesn't even seem to live in the same *world* as you do, his is just so, so much nicer, he can't possibly understand. So why try? Because -

Because I want to be honest with him. Because I want *someone* to know me. Because I want him to hear me when I say something. Because I don't want to act like my own life is some dirty shameful secret and if he knew he would be ...

It was never going to be a fairy tale, you are not some princess in a tower, a kiss was never going to fix *you*. He's not Prince Charming, he's not your happily ever after, he's a *person*, isn't he dealing with enough already? All you do is give him worse to worry about. Just. Just -

Just let it go. He puts his head back, suds and water, eyes closed against the smooth warm flow. Just let it go. You're both fumbling. 'Hero' doesn't mean that either of you are perfect. Just let it go, just let it -

Why won't you let me just be *fine*? Why can't you let me be okay, why do you have to force me back into that corner where I can't cope with it, don't you think I've been there long *enough* - ?

Let it be, he thinks, gritting his teeth and forcing them loose again, conditioner now to work through, let it be let it be let it be . . .

Maybe he'll make smoothies for breakfast.

*

In his dream the Ghost is dead, a real ghost, looking so sadly back at Blaine like he feels so sorry that it's come to this. *Why didn't you tell me*, Blaine chokes at him, *I could have helped, I could have been there* -

Sorry, he whispers, barely a voice, barely the ghost of one. *But what would you have done? It's over now. It's too late now.*

It's not, he wants to cry, *it's not, it's - I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so so sorry Kurt I could have* -

It's fine, he says in a voice Blaine can barely hear. *It doesn't matter. It's nothing.*

He knows, in the dream, he knows that he's never going to see him again, he *screams* it at him, *How is it nothing-?*

It's not like it even matters, the Ghost says, as faint as fading mist.

Blaine wakes up still half-caught in the dream, wakes up feeling sick with so much dream, kneels up in bed and tries to blink it out of his brain. He's in Kurt's room, alone in the bed and curtains still drawn against a raining day not quite light, and he can hear the pipes running; someone's in the shower. Kurt, washing last night on the streets off himself. Blaine runs a hand back through his gel-less hair and then rubs an eye, and

sinks back on his heels, lets himself back onto the mattress again, pressing both hands over his eyes: *god*. He really needed his brain to do *that* to him after last night.

... he needs to find a way of asking Kurt when he and Rachel moved into this apartment without making it obvious that what he's really asking, what he's actually asking, is if it was this bed. If it was this bed some guy - some *douchebag* -

All those times Kurt tensed when Blaine was in this room, all those times he so obviously and silently *panicked* at not knowing what might happen next...

God, he thinks, how much else? There are years of his life before Blaine came into it, years of being *alone* and the worst things weren't happening on the streets in the dark but in his school, in his *home*, no wonder he wanted to disappear into his superhero self, *he* dealt with so much less and at least *he* could fight back. Because isn't that the terrifying thought: Kurt really won't use his powers to save himself. Blaine knows Kurt said that but he didn't know that he meant it, he'd thought that whatever Kurt thought, if it came to it then instinct would kick in, he *wouldn't* think if it came to it, he would just act and save himself. But it turns out he just wouldn't. Not even if...

He tries to make himself stop thinking like this. He tries to stop thinking, Why didn't he tell me, why did he let me not know -? because Kurt is right, there's a lot about Blaine's life that Kurt doesn't know. Part of it is just time, finding the right time to say, I might not have been entirely alone in it and it might not have been *that*, but I was bullied pretty relentlessly before I transferred schools when I was a teenager, and I maybe have spent too much of my life since then over-wary of letting that happen again. Or, When I was a kid I thought Cooper hated me and I guess when he'd grown up over that *I* still wasn't over it, and maybe we're only just finding our equilibrium, maybe after two decades we're only *just* beginning to learn to live with each other. Or, I don't know what my parents want from me and maybe what I'm scared of most is that they don't want anything from me at all.

Or just, Kurt, I'm scared all the time I can't just be brave like you are can't you teach me how - ?

Footsteps outside and the door opens, Kurt closes it behind himself in his robe with his folded pyjamas tucked under one arm. He looks at Blaine and - the smile seems to catch on his mouth, like he wasn't even thinking about it and it just bloomed all on its own, and Blaine - smiles back, crooked and real, holds a hand out of the covers for him. Kurt drops his pyjamas onto the pillow, takes his hand, leans down for Blaine to catch his jaw for a kiss. "Good morning, beautiful."

"Good morning to you too. We've got blueberries, how do you feel about bagels and smoothies?"

"I feel very good about bagels and smoothies."

Kurt laughs, one of his little rippled laughs, happiness more than amusement, and lifts and shakes the duvet over Blaine. "Up, then. I don't care if you are a student, you can't stay in bed all day, you have class."

"But it's waaarm," Blaine groans, and tries a little half-heartedly to wrestle the duvet back off Kurt before Kurt whaps him over the head with a corner of it and he submits with another moan into the pillow, and crawls out into the cold cruel world. "Shower," Kurt says, scratching his fingers through Blaine's hair. "Breakfast in fifteen."

Blaine carries yesterday's clothes into the shower, and avoids the mirror while he's pulling off the t-shirt he sleeps in at Kurt's. He feels like his own body is a threat, like it's ugly with what it could do, with what some guys *do* with it, he doesn't know how Kurt doesn't feel the threat of it sometimes, Kurt . . .

He thinks about all those people online using Kurt's body, staring and talking and prodding and pulling and *staring*. And Kurt says *I'm fine* and Blaine thinks How can you be because *I'm* not -

But he doesn't want Blaine to act like he's not fine with it. With everything. And Blaine doesn't know what the more selfish thing to do is.

Back out in the lounge Rachel's sitting at the breakfast bar swinging her crossed heels while Kurt feeds fruit into the blender, Rachel skimming something up and down on her iPad's screen and saying, "It's not even like they're *efficient*, if they want to bring crime rates down then this one-person-at-a-time method is just *slow*. They should be -"

Kurt looks across at Blaine as he walks behind the breakfast bar for him. "Superheroes," Kurt says, rolling his eyes, ducking his head a little as Blaine comes off his heels so Blaine can kiss his temple. "You talk to her, you actually care about it all."

"You know that you're supporting criminals," Rachel says, spinning her iPad so he can see the news site she's on, the '*Ghostlanx*' *Sighting in Central Park* headline. "You don't think it's hypocritical that they pertain to 'fight crime' by *committing* crime -?"

Blaine sits on the stool opposite her, leaning earnestly forward, forgetting himself in all this: he's been defending the Ghost for *years*. "There's crime and there's crime and it's not *about* crime, it's not about the criminals, it's about the *victims*. One person at a time matters a hell of a lot to that one person."

"What about due process, how do they know they're not beating up some innocent person?"

"Do you have a single corroborated report that they have *ever* assaulted an innocent person?"

"I'm turning the blender on," Kurt sings, "because it's first thing in the morning and I don't want to listen to either of you!"

It's still raining, at the bottom of the staircase and looking out onto the grim street outside Kurt's apartment. Kurt puts up his sleek black umbrella and says, "I'll walk you to the bus shelter."

"My hero."

"Oh, hush." He lets Blaine put an arm through his, and they walk along the shining sidewalk, snow gone dirty and crusted at its edges. "If this freezes then the winter will become even more disgusting."

"No more snowballs," Blaine says gloomily, because last night a mugger took one to the back of the head so Phalanx could get his attention. He looks across and Kurt is giving him a little glancing smile, because he remembers it too, and Blaine squeezes his arm a little. "Hey, what do you want for Christmas? Because, you know, god forbid I get you the wrong thing."

Kurt's eyes drop away from his, and he tilts the umbrella to check on the grimy grey sky for a moment, murmurs, "I want to be able to be in two places at once. Which I don't think comes at Macy's."

"Where . . . ?"

"Home," he says, and looks to the front again. "Here. I - we - have things to do."

"You're allowed Christmas off."

"That's what I'll tell someone when they spend their Christmas Eve in the emergency room, or when they get a call from the police in the middle of the night. Sorry I wasn't there, my night off, happy holidays -"

Blaine grips his arm tighter. "You cannot think like that. You will actually drive yourself *insane*, do you know that -?"

"All I know is that if I go home I will *hate* myself. And if I don't go home I'll break my dad's heart and I'll hate myself then too. And if *you* won't take Christmas off because of me then I'll hate myself even *more* -"

"Hey hey hey let's not talk about hating yourself this much? Because, um. Cooper's working Christmas Eve, so, even if we were going to go to yours we'd get there *late* and I, we really don't want to be enormously awkward guests on Christmas Eve the very first time I meet your dad -"

"Whoever decided the holidays were supposed to be happy anyway?" Kurt says, irritably, to the rain. "I'll - I'll - I don't know *what* I'll do. I'll work something out. I'll have to work *something* out -"

"We'll work something out," Blaine says soothingly, rubbing his bicep with his thumb, he doesn't need to be a physical therapist in training to feel how tense his arm's gone. "It'll be fine, one way or another."

"Is that your bus?"

"I- crap."

He yanks Kurt down to kiss half his mouth and half his cheek, then *runs*. Kurt swings the umbrella back and calls something after him he doesn't hear; he yells back with rain dotting his face, "See you tonight!" and jumps a puddle, skids to grab the doorframe before the door can slot back across and hauls himself into the bus. The cold rain on his skin instantly turns warm in the over-cranked central heating, as the doors swing closed and the bus pulls out with a jerk, so he swings and grabs a pole. He can see Kurt, through the window steamed at its edges, wave at him with his cell in his hand from underneath his umbrella, water droplets hanging from its spokes like bright glass beads.

Blaine's pocket buzzes. He takes out his cell and Kurt's text reads, *Love you xx*

The driver says, "You plannin' on payin', kid?"

"Very important text just one second," Blaine says, texting back in a heart-fluttered hurry, *I love you too!*
xxx

*

Lunch in the campus cafeteria, the windows a fog of condensation, all the air feels hothouse-moist with too much heating blasting at too many rain-damp bodies. *Actually the worst sandwich of my life*, he texts Kurt, *and I am including Cooper's egg and fish paste experiments*.

Kurt texts back, *In huge queue at the bank. Why does everyone want to go to the bank in the rain?*

Paul reaches over to steal a handful of his chips and Blaine flicks at his hand like trying to dislodge a fly, eyes still on his cell. *What're you doing at the bank?*

Cashing a birthday check. Does anyone apart from my more senile aunts even use checks anymore?

Blaine texts back in sudden *gulping* horror, *It was your birthday?*

It was. Kurt confirms. *I'm flattered that she finally remembered the fact. Unless she's just very early for next year.*

Oh god thank god Kurt would pull out his *spleen* if Blaine missed his birthday -

He says to Paul, "I'm right *here*." as Paul takes a swig of his soda.

"Dude, chill, I haven't got cooties. You can have some of mine."

Blaine rolls his eyes, and his cell buzzes again. *Egg and fish paste?* but then it buzzes again almost instantly. *No, actually, don't tell me, I don't want to know.*

Blaine grins, and he's just beginning to reply (*On rye!*) when his phone goes off again, and then *again*, jeez Kurt, let a guy -

Hold up in bank

Held

Blaine stares, and can't make sense of it. What - why is Kurt correcting the tense of - what is Kurt even - ?

He starts texting back, *I don't mean to sound stupid but huh?* when he understands like he's been punched in the stomach with it: Kurt Hummel's autocorrect does not recognise the word 'help'.

He scrapes his chair back so hard it almost tips him off it, and Paul, Blaine's soda in hand, says, "What -?"

"You finish it got to go!" Blaine yelps, grabbing his bag, knocking chairs aside, *running* for the exit as Paul yells, "Dude what the hell -?"

Hold up in bank

Help

Kurt will never use the Ghost's powers if someone might see him doing it.

Shit.

*

They made them toss their cells into a big heap in the middle of the floor - it goes unpredictably off with one irritating ringtone after another - and then they made all the customers kneel in the entrance on a floor slippery with wet footprints with their hands on their heads, so no-one tries to burst in through them and interrupt the robbery. They've been there for twenty minutes already. Kurt kneels in the front row with one wet knee, grinding his teeth; the fury grips his stomach in a cold black hand.

Guys in ski masks with guns, one of the cashiers is still crying, they've taken a supervisor into the back to get at the safes. The floor is cold under the bones, aching with it by now, and Kurt clenches his jaw and can think of thirty ways to take these morons down without even breaking a sweat and all he can do is *kneel* there and people are scared and he can't do a *thing* -

There are three guys in ski masks guarding the customers. Kurt's already noted every item of clothing every last one of them is wearing and could guess pretty accurately at their heights, and now he's staring at the shoes of one of them because he can feel the guy staring at him in the back of his neck. Looking up again is an invitation for trouble and he can't risk - well, he can't risk anything. Which is why he's gritting his teeth and staring at a pair of grubby black Nikes and thinking cartwheel-kick that guy under the chin grab the next guy's wrist pull him into an elbow to the head ghost because the third would have time to shoot by then haunt him through the head dispose of the guns -

The woman next to him shuffles on her knees and he can hear her breathing's gone tight. He lifts his head, just a little, just to look sideways, head down, at her knees. She's probably about eighteen, she's wearing

the kind of skirt she couldn't possibly have imagined she'd have to kneel like this in when she put it on, and two of the guys with guns are sniggering and nudging each other, and she sounds just from her breath like she's going to cry.

Don't, he thinks. Because you can't. Because you're not a hero, you're Kurt Hummel, who doesn't do a damn thing. So just sit there and wait this out because it'll all be over soon and we can all get on with our lives and no-one has to get hurt, no-one has to die over this, no-one has to do anything your dad will regret, not this time.

"Real pretty panties baby, you dressed up for us?" one of the guys with guns says.

The other one says, "You got anything else you wanna show us?" and Kurt can see that she's shaking.

This isn't funny, he wants to whisper, the cold dark whisper the Ghost uses in the blackest parts of the night. How the hell could this be a joke to her, *do you understand what she's afraid of?*

Don't, all sense begs in the back of his mind, they're not going to do anything, don't, don't, just keep your head down and keep still and Phalanx still might get here in time to help and it'll all be over soon either way but do *not* draw attention to yourself -

"Baby, don't pretend like you didn't put it on so people'd look."

"Aw honey, don't cry, no-one's complainin' about the view here."

Fuck everything.

Kurt looks up at that third silent guy, takes his hands off his head and starts taking his jacket off. The two masked morons jerk their guns up at him in a hurry and his heartbeat snaps a thousand times faster but Kurt just stares at the guy not saying anything and pulls his arms free of the sleeves, gets out through his teeth, "You came here to achieve something and I don't think that *this* is any part of that." He swings his jacket over her lap like a blanket and puts his hands exaggeratedly back on his head again, glaring at that guy. "This doesn't have to get any more complicated for any of us."

The girl keeps her head down, eyes tight closed against the tears, and her voice trembles and breaks. "-*tha-nk you* -"

One of the morons says, "Fuck, I thought that was a guy until it opened its mouth." The other one gives a sharp nervous laugh.

"Not like you can tell by looking."

"Maybe it's a bit of both."

"Bet you got something real fucked up between the legs, that'd be one hell of a show an' tell -"

Stare at the disgusting sneakers and breathe and do not say anything do not make this worse but god he knows what people are *like*, he knows how quickly things *escalate*, he doesn't know what he's started and low in his guts, the pulse of honest fear has started up . . .

"You could make a fortune in Bangkok, ladyboy-"

"Stand up."

He looks up, because it's the third guy, the guy who'd been silent until then. The guy's looking down perfectly coolly at him and Kurt's knees hurt and he breathes hard through his nose and for a fleeting second (DadBlaineFinnRachelDadBlaineno) -

"Stand up," the guy says again, motioning with his gun.

He doesn't break eye contact with him. He's very afraid of the second that they forget that he's a human being too. His jaw clenches again at the icy difficulty of unfolding his knees as he hauls himself up without risking removing his hands from his head and then stands there, horribly exposed over the heads of everyone else, three guns and him, and he thinks, Dad, Dad, Dad always did worry about the wrong person -

One of the morons says, "What're you doing?"

"We're taking him. C'mon, two steps forward. You got the tape?"

Kurt doesn't move, and he *feels* the silence behind himself, the hollow silence of absolutely no-one about to help him, Kurt standing out so isolated above them and they just grateful it's him and not *them*. "What?"

"We need a hostage for getting away from here. You just nominated yourself, congrats kid."

He's cold without his jacket and he can't move, and no-one behind him says anything. One of the morons says, "Why him, you *know* that girl wants to come with us -" and the other gives another nervous laugh.

The guy shrugs. "He's not a crier. I can't stand fucking criers. Step forward, kid, I'm not askin' again."

No-one is going to help you. No-one in this room is a hero. Just swallow it all down and do what he says because if he shoots you anyway then it becomes someone else's problem too. He takes two wobbly steps on locked-up knees and one of the morons comes forward with a roll of electrical tape, mutters, "All these girls an' we end up with a fuckin' mouthy fairy -"

He grabs Kurt's hands and pulls them behind himself, and tape unrolling sounds like it's tearing. Where are they going to take him, what do they do with him once they've made their getaway? If he's not here then Blaine won't know how to find him, no-one will, if they drive him somewhere and put a bullet in his head and dump him in the Hudson - god, how many bodies has he found, he knows how long it might be before - god he needs to make his brain shut up why won't it shut up how is this helping *shut up*.

His mouth is almost too dry to speak. "This wasn't anyone's idea of what today should go like, believe me."

Tape pulls and bites the skin of his wrists. "Shut the fuck up already, fag."

He closes his eyes, stumbles as he's shoved sideways, thinks, This is the most ridiculous terrifying -

This could kill him. He's not stupid and his heart's running hard and he knows what the bang and the thump and the splatter of blood would sound like, he feels sick and dizzy with it, shoved to the side wall by one of the morons gripping his arm hard enough to bruise and muttering to himself like this is so fucking unfair on *him* and Kurt thinks, Don't cry because he didn't want a 'crier' and what do they do with you if they change their *minds* -?

At any second he could be invisible and untouchable before they knew what had happened except he can't. A room full of people to see and he *can't* and he can't he just can't he just can't can't can't -

Why don't people believe he wants so badly to live, he doesn't want to *die* -

He realises too late that his breathing's going. Oh god no not here don't don't do this don't but he's against a wall and trapped and everyone can see how helpless he is and his hands are already numb from the tape too tight around his wrists and he blinks and his eyes are damp and he can't *breathe* -

He wants to say, Let go of my arm. Please, *please* let go of my arm. If he's not being touched then he might be able to bear it. But he can't because he can't speak because he can't breathe, panic reduces his lungs, too flimsy to get the air in, he can't *breathe* -

He's beginning to feel too heavy, too limp and leaden-heavy, to stay standing as the moron holding his arm twists his grip and says with such contempt, "Fuck, you were wrong about this one not being a cr-"

Something hits him like a train.

The jerk of the moron being struck off him like a bug flicked by God spins Kurt right around and the floor's rain-slick, he falls with a yelp, can't do anything with his arms tied back, jars his shoulder and his chin hits the floor snapping his teeth together hard, he hears screams and yelling and staccato gunfire and a confusion of thumping and tries to rock himself up on an elbow, all panic cut off by action, head up and eyes still damp and staring at the bank from inside a gleaming green shield of hexagons. The breath drops out of him somewhere between a sob and a laugh, as he struggles to right himself and slips back down again on the too-slippery floor, looks up from his side as Phalanx walks up to the last guy standing, the guy who seemed to be in charge, who levels his gun at Phalanx and just says under his breath, "Fuck."

Kurt closes his eyes and hunches himself smaller on the floor. He hears the deflected bullets and the squeak of the guy's sneakers, hears the grunt of effort in Phalanx's breath and the *thudthudthud* and then silence, and the sound of Phalanx - Blaine - breathing hard, and someone crying, and someone else saying *god ohgod ohgod*.

The doors to the bank burst open and now the cops are running in in their bulletproof vests screaming, "*Freeze-!*" but there's only Phalanx left standing they might have any reason to arrest. Phalanx - oh *god* Blaine - instantly puts his hands up looking guilty but then seems to remember himself, almost-glances at Kurt and then drops every shield and turns and *runs*. More shields flicker into life and vanish behind him, following him like a green Mexican wave as one cop shoots and another grabs his arm.

"- *ricochets*," the cop snaps, and Kurt hears Phalanx's footsteps running away and a cashier shrieking (back exit through the offices?), and lifts his head with a sucked in breath, that was *Finn's* voice -

"Hey," a voice says, and a hand touches his shoulder, and there's a girl there with mascara clotted under her eyes, kneeling upright and holding his jacket. Her voice is raspy with too much fear. "You need this back?"

Kurt lets his forehead thud dully back to the floor, grins a little, wriggles his aching hands. "It's only ASOS," he whispers. "But I am quite fond of it, yes."

She slumps a little in her kneel, forcibly straight-backed in that skirt. "Thank you."

"... I think it's him we need to thank."

"I never thought I'd see ... where do you think the Ghost was?"

The floor is cold against his cheek. "Maybe he doesn't do daytimes."

She laughs, sharp like it hurts, then holds his shoulder, says and it cracks, "*Thank you.*"

And then he hears Finn swear and choke, "- brother that's my brother *fuck* Kurt -?"

At least they might get his hands free from this tape in more of a hurry now. He might as well get some perks out of having a cop for brother ...

*

As soon as they give him his cell back he texts Blaine; *Do NOT return to the scene of the crime. Cops everywhere. Lay low.*

Blaine texts back, Kurt can *feel* the plaintiveness in it, *I need to see you.*

I'm sorry, Blaine, I'll let you know as soon as I get home, thank you xxx

And there's Finn hovering behind his shoulder the whole time, Finn all antsy and anxious which in someone as ridiculously tall as he is is just incredibly distracting. He has to endure paramedics, even though he has nothing worse than bruises, and a long tedious interview with the police during which he has to be actually honest. He would have liked the whole incident with the girl to have been kept quiet but

damn it she's bound to tell them and he has to corroborate the story or they'll only want to talk to him *again* and the whole point is to *not* draw attention to himself . . .

He has to call work, tell them what happened, because there's no way he'll be free anytime this afternoon. He has to sound a lot more upset about it than he feels because his 'work self' is a lot more easily distressed than, well, him. Sophie being so insistent that he take the rest of the week off reminds him that actually, to normal people, being held at gunpoint is terrifying because you might *die*, not because you've drawn so much attention to yourself and someone is *touching* you and you can't ghost and you need to be invisible you need so badly to be invisible and you can't be. His afternoon by anyone's standards would count as genuinely traumatic, and all he can think right now is that he's got dirt ground into the knee of his pants and he's going to have to entrust them to the damned dry cleaners.

He does know that his standards are not as other people's. To be honest, they weren't even before the ghosting started. Where is the point of life if you're not going to do it *right*?

The police let him go, eventually, when all he is is *tired*, all he wants is to *sleep*. Finn walks him home - Kurt refuses flat out to be driven in a cop car, like he needs *that* pulling up outside his apartment building - Kurt hanging off a subway pole and tired, tired, tired . . .

Finn says, "Did the paramedics check your head? Are you dizzy?"

He moans at the floor of the carriage. "I'm *tired*. I am allowed to be *tired*. I don't know if you noticed but I had a *slightly overinvolved afternoon*."

Finn sighs, hard. "You had to pick the bank someone was planning a heist on."

"Yes, this was all part of my cunning plan to ruin a pair of my favourite pants." Kurt mutters, and rests his cheek off his own knuckles on the pole, because he doesn't really want to touch it more than he has to (public transport is basically a breeding ground for bacteria and was possibly designed as an act of class warfare to make everyone who can't afford to drive in New York City repeatedly and disgustingly ill) but he *really* wants to rest his head.

"How'd he know to be there?" Finn says. "You know. Him?"

Kurt rolls an eye to look at him, closes them to yawn, head tucked into his arm to hide it. "I texted him. When they first burst in. I knew *I* couldn't do anything."

"Are you okay, though? Really okay?"

Kurt cracks his eyes open to look at him again, lifts his head and his hand to cover another yawn. "You and I both know that's hardly even the worst thing I've dealt with this week, Finn."

Kurt's standards are not as other people's standards.

Up the staircase, rubbing his eye and still being tailed by Finn like a guard dog, a guard Great Dane, sleepy as all hell and all he wants -

Blaine is sitting on the floor with his back to Kurt's apartment door, arms resting off his bent knees, cell dangling from one hand. As they round the corner from the stairs he looks up, blinks, focuses on Kurt. Kurt walks to him wordlessly as he stands and Blaine grabs him into a very tight hug, inhaling hard at the join of his shoulder and neck, arms crushing him in around his sides. "Kurt -"

"Okay," he says, rubbing his back. "Okay. Everything's okay." He lets go of Blaine with one hand to get the keys and holds them out, holds an eyebrow up, for Finn; Finn unlocks the door and Kurt strokes Blaine's back, murmurs, "Everything's fine, come inside, people won't know what's . . . come inside. Come on, Blaine."

He has to pull him, Blaine really doesn't want to let go, and Finn pushes the door closed behind them over their heads. Kurt rubs Blaine's back and Blaine says into his neck, "I'm never *there*, I thought - everything happens and I'm never *there* -"

"You were there. You saved all those people, you -"

"What were they doing to you? Why did they have you up against the wall on your own, why did they-?"

He strokes his fingers through the back of Blaine's hair, combing in the direction of his barely-gelled curls; he clearly hasn't fixed his hair more than a quick brush since climbing out of the Phalanx costume, despite the time he must have - oh god, he's been sitting outside that door the whole time. He must have been there for *hours*. "They wanted a human shield for getting out of there afterwards. It's fine. I'm not hurt."

"Why *you*? Why is it always -"

Kurt glances at Finn, whose face is fixed confused and scared and rigid, and he rubs Blaine's back a little harder and says, "It was my fault, I drew attention to myself, I know I shouldn't-"

"I'm never *there*!" Blaine pulls back, drags his hands through his own dishevelled hair, looks *frantic* and Kurt doesn't know what to *do*. "Everything that happens, who the hell ever rescues *you* -?"

He reaches for his hands but doesn't quite know how to take them, whispers, "You did," and -

Understands, lips parting as understanding drops inside him, a weight attached to his guts. He understands, and it's silenced him. Blaine gets so angry, Blaine can't let it go, everything that's happened to Kurt, not because Kurt let it happen, not because he wants Kurt to feel like an irreparable victim, not because he wants Kurt drowning in the mire of things he thought he'd fought off years ago but because *he wasn't there*. It's not Kurt he's trying to punish with it, digging the past out of the graves Kurt's buried it in, animating its ghosts all over again. Kurt might be suffering for it but that was never Blaine's intention. The only thing Blaine can't get over is the part he played in all of it: nothing. Nothing at all.

Isn't that what Blaine's even more afraid of than Kurt is, being nothing, nothing at all . . . ?

"You did," he says, and takes Blaine's hands, lowers them and squeezes them, holding his distracted eyes so he has to see him. "You did. You saved me. I'm fine. You know I am." He lifts one of Blaine's hands, puts it onto his chest, over his own beating heart through his shirt. "You were there. You saved me. My hero," he adds with a little smile, and Blaine just stares at him, and blinks, and for the first time *he* looks so tired as well. "Thank you," Kurt says, and lets his forehead hang against Blaine's as Blaine's fingers begin to stop digging in over his chest, and his arm slips around Kurt's waist, tugging him a little closer.

"Love you," he mumbles.

Kurt closes his eyes, nuzzles his forehead into Blaine's. "I love you too."

"Um," Finn says. "So, I guess you don't need me anymore."

Kurt tucks his head over Blaine's shoulder so he can smile at him, hugging Blaine in. "Thank you for walking me home. Because you just know I would have been kidnapped by bank robbers on the subway too."

"Dude, don't even joke about it, you have actually the worst luck of anyone I know."

Kurt lets his hand run down Blaine's back to rub soothingly at the shallow inwards curve above his hips, a bowl dipped just to fit Kurt's hand. "I happen to think I've been incredibly lucky." He smiles. "Thank you."

Finn rolls his eyes, drops Kurt's keys on the breakfast bar and says, "See you guys around." before closing the door behind himself. Kurt strokes a warning on Blaine's back and unpeels himself to lock the door behind him, to take Blaine's hand, to let Blaine run his thumb over his cheek and his fingers into his hair. "Bed," he says, fitting his fingers through Blaine's. "I'm *exhausted*."

"Mmn," Blaine says into his neck, as Kurt walks them for his bedroom door. He opens it and pauses, curls his fingers in the hair at the back of Blaine's neck again, says, "Hey."

Blaine glances up, weary eyes, and Kurt says, "My rescuer didn't get his 'thank you for saving my life' kiss yet."

Blaine looks almost too tired to understand for a second, then just closes his eyes automatically, lets Kurt kiss him, gentle and long and meant. His hand pulls Kurt's shirt taut at his waist.

Then they close the bedroom door behind themselves, kick their shoes off, curl up on the bed. Blaine settles his head against Kurt's chest, hugging him in around the sides; Kurt lets a hand fall into his hair, says, "Blaine."

"Mmf."

His fingers curl into his hair, press soothing at his scalp. "You're here now. Blaine, it's *enough*."

All that answers is Blaine's breath; he's asleep, or very close. Kurt huffs a little smile at the ceiling, lets his head tilt on the pillow, lets his eyes close, and oh but sleep in his arms is what bliss *means* . . .

*

Blaine had pointed out that no-one would object to the Ghost taking a night off but Kurt had been dismissive in his bedroom, plumping the pillows after they woke. "I'm *fine*, honestly. Tell me where you stashed your costume and I'll meet you there. And apparently I'm not at work tomorrow." Little glance of his eyes too bright in the lamplight, peacock green, peacock blue, Blaine hadn't known how to *breathe*. "I can stay up as late as you like."

Which means that he knows that the adrenaline of patrols makes Phalanx a little horny and that's going to be okay tonight. Which is good. In every way, it's good; he wants his body, wants to run his hands all over him, check he's still here, check he's unhurt. Kiss any bruises he might have and make him feel good until there's no pain left. Make things better. *Be* there for him. Be very immediately and utterly *there* for him, nowhere else and no-one else exists when they're together like that, just *them*, and Blaine can hold the whole of him . . .

Phalanx paces the rooftop, where the rain has let off and the sky is dull dark purple, and snow hides in pocked pockets where the shadows have been, stained by the city and crusted with ice. He thinks about the first time he met Kurt, not the Ghost, Kurt, Kurt so sick and scared at the other side of that coffee shop table like he was alone in all the world, all the world to face down and he was so *small*. But he's not alone, not anymore. Blaine puts his arms around him and he's so solid, so unghostly, so *there*. And Blaine thinks, If I'd lived through half of what you've lived through, if I'd lived through *any* of what you've lived through -

But Kurt just holds his hands and says that he's fine, and is so solid, and real, and there. And he's not afraid. Doesn't hide, not from Blaine, doesn't fade away to keep him from looking at him, doesn't rotate his so many masks so Blaine never gets a glimpse of his real face. He looks him in the eye and says *I love you*. He says, *Thank you*. He says, *It's enough*. Like this *is* enough. Like Blaine is enough.

Maybe for him he is.

He hears the flutter of a cloak, and gloved palms cover his eyes from behind. "Guess who."

He reaches up for his hands. "Well, if you're a shapeshifter I'm already screwed."

The Ghost's hands slip from his face, run over his shoulders, tugging playfully to get him to turn. "Tell me if you think I am."

Phalanx rolls his eyes, turns with a grin and - stops.

The Ghost folds his arms around himself, tilts his shoulders, bottom lip pulled in by his teeth. "So . . . ?" he says, and holds his arms out self-consciously, turns his body side to side so his cloak swings with him. "What do you think?"

All he can do is stare.

Maybe he's altered the rest of the costume, maybe he's been thinking of a full redesign for a while, he is *Kurt* under it but - but all he can see is the cloak. All he can see is what used to be so dark, just this side of grey instead of black, a shadow concealing that pale bodysuit, a shadow consuming him and now it's grey like mist in a morning, muted gentle grey like the sky remembering rain, just a little darker than the pale suit it hides and the difference it makes takes his breath away. It's like . . . it's just like, for the very first time, the Ghost is illuminated. It's like, for the very first time, he actually has stepped out of the dark.

"Are you going to say anything?" He pulls a little self-consciously at the pale hood over his head. "I felt like a change, it's been *years*, it's long overdue, I just thought . . . Phalanx . . . ?"

. . . all he can really think is, The internet is going to *shit* itself.

He wraps his arms around his waist, *laughs*, says, "It's *perfect*."

When he kisses him, the paler cloak falls around them both, and when he pulls back the happy flush is so pink on him against the pale, his eyes so blue in the dark, all he can do is kiss him again and the Ghost's hands press his chest, he can feel that his mouth is smiling. Phalanx says, still leaning up into the hood, "So how do I know it is you, then, since you're not even in your usual outfit? What's the shapeshifter safeword?"

"Maybe I don't want to give the safeword," the Ghost murmurs, eyes so bright on him in the dark, smile so barely restrained. "Maybe I want you to investigate me very very thoroughly until you're *sure*."

Phalanx's fingers skim the edge of his jaw, slide up into his hair. "That sounds like something a supervillain would come out with to me."

"Maybe I don't want to give the safeword because I let you choose it, fool that I am, and it's a really stupidly embarrassing safeword."

Phalanx laughs out loud, says, "I'm pretty certain it's you, even with a - pretty serious image change. Which is amazing. You look amazing."

The Ghost gives him a little appraising smiling glance, like he's saving the image of his face for later, and slips out of his arms. "Come on. Patrolling, Phalanx."

The cloak turns with him, grey like mist holding its breath for the dawn. And all Phalanx can do is watch him, and think, Maybe he's the one who lived through it, maybe he's the one who survived and chose to live, maybe he's the one who dragged himself up out of the dark, maybe he's the one who made his own cloak lighter, but do you believe for one second that he would have done it if you weren't there?

(And, yes, he thinks, he knows, that fandom is going to lose its collective mind.)

He catches him up, catches his hand, and the Ghost gives him one bright glance, one radiant smile, and there's all the city spread out in front of them, all the city lighting up for the night.

*

Under a Rising Moon, Ghostlanx fanmix, the romantic remix; [download here](#).

Reccing Phantomphi's silent comic of [Ghostlanx rescuing a kitten from a tree](#) because it actually made my entire week I cannot not be happy thinking about it <3 <3 <3

omg so cute ;_;

Draxie, I know how your diseased mind works, and if you write some vomit-inducing piece of syrup-oozing fluff based on that thing then I am disowning you.

do it draxie do it do it

Oh my god Ghostly LOOK AT THEM I can't even you can't hold me responsible for this!

You have the self control of a baby's bladder and I wash my hands of you. At least Blackbindings - even Blackbindings has reblogged it. There genuinely don't exist the curse words to cover my feelings right now.

Ghostly it's so cute ^^

*The next time I see another 'omg he's so skinny he needs to eat something' post I will not hold myself responsible for my actions. As someone naturally skinny, as someone who has been approached in public by complete fucking strangers and *told to eat something*, this is *exactly the same as telling a fat person to lose weight*. It's about people claiming ownership over other people's bodies, because they don't look how you *think* they should. Being fat-positive does not mean you have to be skinny-negative. Feminist*

*philosophy number one? NO-ONE OWNS ANYONE ELSE'S BODY. Fucking hell he busts his ass every night fighting crime, you think he'd be able to do that if he wasn't healthy? HE'S FINE. HE'S BEAUTIFUL EXACTLY AS HE IS. If you 'love' him then stop fucking him over the way society at large does, fuck if he does read our blogs he must have a complex the size of the fucking Empire State Building and that is *not* what 'supporting the Ghost' *means*.*

^ THIS POST. ALL THE AWARDS.

The etymology of the term 'fanghost' for all the phandom n00bs who turned up with Phalanx: it came from a corruption of 'fangirls of the Ghost' and is also handily non-gender-specific because we invite people with any permutation of genitals and identities into our happy little fold of Ghostly fannage <3 And technically you stole 'phandom' from us (we're the 'phantom fandom' > phandom) but we're happy to share since the Ghost seems to be ;)

I hope the Ghost never steps in a puddle that was deeper than he thought it was because it's like the worst

Reblog if you've ever been rescued by the Ghost. Let Figgins know what an assbutt he's being. We love you, spooky <3

Reblog if you've ever been rescued by Phalanx. (let the new guy get a look in!)

Reblog if you've ever been rescued by the most courteous gay supercouple in New York, and fuck the right wing media asshats. SUPERBOYFRIENDS ARE SUPER

Shit that was scary all I was doing was smoking a joint in a park a guy is allowed to do that without getting harrassed by fuckwads that could have gone like really bad thanks guys!!

Fanart, worksafe, Phalanx in full-on hoplite armor, well that's a very big spear you've got there . . .

omgwtf you guys photo I grabbed in tribeca why is the ghost wearing that has he ever worn it before I can't find any pictures is that like his winter outfit??

what thE LIVING FUCK

Is that him? Is that actually him??

Zoomed in on the ass. Yup. That's him.

WHAT

HOW WHAT

I am not words I cannot what help what???

*It *is* him right, Phalanx isn't cheating on him fighting crime with some other spooky superhero . . .*

God he looks like . . . I don't even know. Like an angel.

I don't know why I'm crying wtf

HOW WHAT NO HOW WHAT

ALL I CAN DO IS CAPSLOCK REGKLAJSRGARKKKEHULGF

!!!!?

He's been to his first gay bar, he's had a makeover, I somehow sense the influence Phalanx has had on him and it is a fabulous one.

Fanfic, The Littlest Rescue, all the fluffy G Ghostlanx goodness in the world so what did I WHY DO I ALWAYS MISS EVERYTHING WHEN I DRABBLE HOLY FUCK

**pets Draxie* Maybe you can drabble this now? ^^;*

Don't even look at me for sympathy Drax, I told you not to.

*Ghostly I cannot believe you are not flailing all over the place at this he *changed his costume*, he's *never* changed his costume. This is ENORMOUS!!*

*I'm thinking before I type. As I wish others would. I'm signing off because clearly there'll be no sanity after this today. I will return with meta, once I have actually *thought* about it. Goodnight.*

G'night Ghostly!

omg he is now ACTUALLY WEARING WHITE someone go find that minister who said she'd marry them stat!
XD

Chapter Fifteen

overdosed on how beautiful they are help I have fallen and I can't get up

Adding to the list of weird memes this fandom has started, cats in ghost cloaks has become a thing. I'm also including the Ghost Cat as animal sidekick drabble series about the cat rescued from a tree in Phantomphi's fanart (original drabble, of course, by the one and only Draxie) which started the whole thing . . .

*NO BUT it makes so much sense because kitty!Ghost **does** make so much sense, he used to be on his own prowling in the dark being badass, he's totally a kitty. And now he has OMG I HAVE JUST REALISED PUPPY!PHALANX*

KITTY!GHOST AND PUPLANX FUCK YES FANART PLEASE

Well, I'm opening the beer early this evening aren't I. Thank you fandom.

(When shall we three meet again? In thunder, lightning, or in rain?)

(Well, I can do next Tuesday.)

(Blackbindings, I knew there was a reason I loved you . . .)

(You do not seem to mind the fact that everyone in fandom thinks you're a witch, Ghostly.)

(I don't mind it. All women who speak their mind get called something that rhymes with 'itch', I fail to see why it should upset me.)

MY DOG IS STRANGELY AVERSE TO HAVING GREEN HEXAGONS GLUED TO HIS SHOULDERS I MEAN REALLY

Holy shit Draxie updated Victoriana!verse oh my god oh my god be cool be cool click the link be cool

STOP THE INTERNET DRAXIE UPDATED VICTORIANA!VERSE

NC-17 rating. I can't. I just can't. I just - I can't.

(It is nice when it's the three of us though, when do we get to do this? Between my jobs and bb's time difference and your mom, Ghostly.)

*(*Your* mom, Drax.)*

(That seriously took me a moment. Ho fucking ho. How's she doing though?)

(We had a bad night last night. She was fixating on when I came out to her at sixteen. Bit of an argument I could have lived without at two AM.)

(I'm sorry, Ghostly =()

(Not your fault, little slow loris. No-one's fault. Just one of those things. Draxie, have you been formatting and posting fanfic during this conversation?)

(Ghostly I have a problem.)

(Jesus fucking Christ Drax, we are talking about Important Things here.)

(Sorry ;_;

(omg Draxie did you update victoriana!verse??)

(And exit Blackbindings from the conversation.)

*(No no I'll save it for later but oh my *god* Draxie! *hugs and squeals*)*

(I hope you like it, bb. There is porn <3)

*I know we don't *know* what's going on with them but oh god I can't even with ghostlanx recently, the Ghost's new costume and how happy he must be and how *together* they look, I just, I'm so, so happy he has Phalanx now ;_;*

*All I want for Christmas is a photo of them kissing, Santa I've been *so good* T_T*

no puckzilla in so long :(

I hope the Ghost gets everything he wanted for Christmas, including Phalanx in (just) a ribbon under the tree <3

(I can't work out if you're that girl's fairy godmother or her pusher, Drax, supplying her with porn all the time.)

(Guys I'm old enough to read this stuff I'm not a kid and I actually am still here ^^;)

(Hush, dear, your mommies are having a Talk.)

(I mean I write this stuff and you read it and it's actually quite a weird relationship isn't it? ^^;)

(Not really, given that most of fandom has a mental age quite far below your physical age, Blackbindings, you fit right in with us.)

Victoriana!verse feels: I CAN'T FIND A GIF THAT COVERS THIS

omg all the hot hot restrained eye contact and not saying anything and then just oh my god oh my god and the and then and help I words

someone to fanart the scene in the study for to please?

Reblog if you've ever been rescued by the Ghost. Let Figgins know what an assbutt he's being. We love you, spooky <3

Reblog if you've ever been rescued by Phalanx. (let the new guy get a look in!)

Reblog if you've ever been rescued by the most courteous gay supercouple in New York, and fuck the right wing media asshats. SUPERBOYFRIENDS ARE SUPER

Thank you for calling the ambulance and sitting with me and everything, you guys are amazing!! Happy holidays!!!

(How's life for you, anyway, bb? How's Christmas break?)

*(It's nice, I missed my cat <3 And I have more time for writing now and we might get some proper snow even.
It's nice ^^)*

(So it's your turn my dear, how are things in Draxieland?)

(Well, I'm working every day until the 30th from tomorrow. So, obviously, that sucks quite a lot, but on the other hand, oh god I need the cash. So.)

*(You doing *anything* for Christmas?)*

(Just me and the bf. I can't get back to my family and you know he's got his weird issues with his. So, us, a bottle of rum and a chicken from the freezer, mmm.)

(I hope you two have a nice Christmas Draxie <3)

(You too, bb. And you too, Ghostly, you don't escape from the merry Christmas wishes . . .)

*(I am so looking forward to all my family coming back and not knowing how to interact with Mom and then fucking off again as soon as possible, yes. It's my idea of *heaven*.*

Sorry, I'm being a nasty bitch again. Like I said, bad night. But no, there are things to look forward to, Christmas morning I'm going to threaten my brother with a kitchen knife to visit more often, the raisin-balled limp-dicked seaweed-spined gobbet of sputum <3)

(Have fun with that?)

(Oh my word you have no idea, I've been looking forward to it all year . . .)

*

Kurt's laying on Blaine's bed, rolled slightly to the side, staring a little confused as he always stares at that poster on Blaine's wall. Blaine offered to take it down a while ago - now there are gifs of *him* all over the internet he genuinely does appreciate how strange being in this room must be for Kurt - but Kurt told him not to; he can't overtly change his personality, he can't draw attention to the changes he's been through. So he leaves up the poster and all the photographs and even clips out more news stories when they come along (only the ones focusing on the Ghost, anything specifically about *him* he still finds, um, strange

beyond understanding) because, after all, he does still love the Ghost, more than ever before. And Kurt still stares at that poster, like he's trying to work it out, like he's trying to remember it, like if he could just . . . think . . .

Blaine runs his hands down his legs, massages the muscles in them, he feels like he needs to put out a warning to the criminals of New York that the Ghost has a kick like a champion racehorse and it is seriously, seriously not worth the pain. He slips his fingers under his thighs and strokes his hands down, long curved muscle, fine bones at the back of the knee, firm shins filling his palms and then his narrower ankles, and the strange horizontal marring standing out against his left hand.

He lifts Kurt's leg by the shin, looks at the scar cut clean across the back, a few inches above his heel. "Where'd you get this one?"

Kurt looks across from the poster, closes his eyes and stretches his shoulder blades into the sheets, blinks sleepily back up at him. "I thought a guy was unconscious and he wasn't. I thought he didn't have a knife and he did." He shrugs. "I told you I didn't want you making some of the mistakes I made. An inch or something and I would've bled to death on the street, it's an incredibly stupid way to die."

Blaine lifts his leg a little, leans down, kisses the mark of it on his perfect skin. Kurt just watches him, sort of sleepy and very pliable post-sex, as Blaine feels how little muscle resistance there is to the raise of Kurt's leg; he presses it up higher, and Kurt raises an eyebrow and a little bit of a smirk, so he keeps on pressing up until Kurt's flexed almost in half and Blaine has to stop before he gives himself a nosebleed.

He lets his leg down again, grins and lays down next to him, shuffling himself comfortable propped on his own arms. "My boyfriend does yoga. I feel like I need that printed on business cards."

Kurt laughs, and runs his fingers down Blaine's cheek. "It relaxes me. You should come along with me some time."

"It's an eight AM class on a Sunday, you 'work' until two or three AM every night of the week and you *are* some kind of masochist."

"It relaxes me." He wriggles on the mattress again, yawns. "God, I should get a shower if we're going out tonight."

Neither of them are wearing anything in the small room, warmed by each other, December kept outside behind the heavy blinds, and Blaine looks at Kurt's flat stomach, pale thighs, the dark hair cushioning his happily satisfied cock. "We could, um. Make this a 'night off'."

Kurt follows his eyes, rolls his own and rolls off the bed. "I'm getting a shower. You will just have to go for five minutes without having sex with me, I'm sure you'll think of something else to do."

"Kurt. Sharing is caring."

"Anyone would think that was the only reason you kept me around," he huffs, striding past the bed for the bathroom door but Blaine catches his arm, presses two quick kisses down towards his elbow, says into his skin, "There are *so* many reasons to want you around."

Kurt's hand settles, after a moment, into his hair. Then he picks Blaine's hand off himself, strokes the palm with his thumb, says again, "I'm getting a shower." and kisses him before heading into the bathroom. Blaine sighs, and lays his body down where Kurt's was, the heat of it still in the sheets. He presses his cheek into the pillow, breathes in the Kurt-smell, shampoo and his skin and god sometimes Blaine just feels *hungry* for him . . .

The water starts in the next room. Ah, gratuitous shower scene, he thinks, it's been so long since I read a fic featuring you. It's been so long since he's read a fic, period. It's just not a comfortable thing to do anymore, not even the ones that don't actually feature *him* - well, especially ones that don't feature him, since they usually end up featuring somebody else and the thought of anyone else touching the Ghost even in fiction makes Blaine's hackles shiver hotly up.

He is not the only person who has ever had his hands on the ass that launched its own tag; he is, however, the only person Kurt has ever actually *wanted* to have his hands on it, and that stirs something in his stomach that he can keep telling himself is about protectiveness but is really and he knows it about *possessiveness*. He didn't know . . . he didn't know this was a kink of his. Would have actually said quite the opposite, he almost made a point of dating guys more experienced than he was, before. But - but -

But does it warm his blood, when Kurt's breath stirs the hair on his belly, when Kurt's fingers are tentative before they're sure, when he presses his back and chokes his name, does it quicken his pulse knowing that he's the only one? He doesn't want to say yes to that question. But, but, but . . .

Maybe it's just this; he knows what sex means to Kurt, he knows the depth of trust involved in it, he knows that Kurt would never want it for less than love. Maybe it's that. Maybe it's the entirety of it. Maybe it's knowing how *utterly* Kurt means it, that it's not just his skin, it's all the way through that Kurt *wants* him and even if he was once afraid now he wants Blaine more than he could ever be scared, wants him more than he could ever care about anything else, Kurt *wants* him and that's what wakes Blaine's blood. What it means to Kurt it's come to mean to him too, and to Kurt it means *everything*.

Or at least that's what he tells himself, because otherwise he's just a walking kink meme fill and Blaine really does want to think of himself as having more depth than *that*.

He startles up as something grinds on the bedside table and fumbles across, picks up and before he stops confused at the caller he almost *answers* Kurt's phone. He realises it's Kurt's and not his because the caller is *Dad* and he can't even understand why his dad would be calling -

Then he just stares at it while it buzzes in his hand, because, oh god, Kurt's father. The father Kurt adores and Blaine does know that, the only other *man* who commands Kurt's loyalty, because Kurt's attention has to be fought over by Mr Hummel, Blaine Anderson, and New York City, and Blaine is never quite sure how he's doing in that competition. He looks at the bathroom door, even shapes Kurt's name to call it but he knows the water pressure and the edge of Kurt's own sweet singing voice will have Kurt deafened in there, he'll never hear him. Blaine weighs the cell in his hand, doesn't know what to do, doesn't know what to do, and it's an impulse he doesn't even understand when he answers it.

(It's Kurt's *dad*; New York he's familiar with, but doesn't he want to know his competition . . . ?)

"Hi, Mr - Hummel, sorry, I'm not Kurt, obviously I'm not Kurt, Kurt's in the -" Shower, because we literally just stopped having sweaty naked gay sex, oh *god* Blaine why are you having a conversation with the doting father of the man you just came on? "- bathroom, um - hi." Why did you answer the phone what is wrong with you Kurt is going to kill you what is *wrong* with you - "I'm Blaine, I don't think I said that yet, I'm, I hope Kurt's mentioned me."

Silence, for a second, and Blaine thinks, Maybe I can smother myself with the pillow before Kurt's out of the bathroom, and then a man's voice says down the line, "*You might've come up a couple times, yeah.*" Blaine swallows, and alone in the room he doesn't know where to look. "*It's good to speak to you, Blaine.*"

"You too, sir, um, Kurt talks about you a lot."

"Hm," Mr Hummel says, and the intonation is entirely different but the *utterly* Kurtish implication of 'I could make you upend the can of worms that that statement is but I'm willing to pretend for politeness' sake that you don't deserve it, and you may feel free to remember at all times what you might owe me for my discretion' jars something in Blaine's vision, he thinks his eyes just crossed themselves in sheer disorientation. *"How're you doing, Blaine?"*

"I'm-" Still a little sticky from the latest sex I've had with your son and by the way Mr Hummel, did you know that he does yoga? "- I'm good, I'm great, I'm, um, incredible." Blaine. Stop *talking*. "How're you sir?"

"You can call me Burt, kid. I'm good. Has Kurt mentioned to you you guys coming for Christmas if you haven't got plans?"

"Yes, he - he has, he -"

Kurt adores his father. Blaine knows that, observes it with an almost aesthetic pleasure it's so pleasing and so strange an image to him, so distant it's like something out of Dickens, Kurt's uncomplicated adoration of his father. And Blaine has watched him, in the last couple of weeks, slip into that quiet, strained place of thinking and thinking and not finding any way out of it, the genuine agony it is for him, caught between the three poles tugging his attention outwards, father/lover/city. Kurt *adores* his father, Kurt knows he's not leading the life his father must want for him, and now faced with a mire of guilt whatever he does, Kurt is tormented over Christmas. The most wonderful time of year Blaine's ass, it's pulling his boyfriend inside himself, knotting him tight on the inside, no wonder he stares at that poster like he can't understand it, what definition of 'hero' includes 'someone who causes someone else pain whatever choice they make' ... ?

Blaine finds himself staring at the poster, the fixed New York skyline, the moving flash of the Ghost, black cloak blooming; solid buildings and fleeting figure, stable city and streak of a Ghost. His mouth it still open. Kurt's father. Kurt's father. How can he possibly -

It's like finding a switch in the dark, and the bulb dazzles him. "I thought, actually literally just thought, um, Kurt's - Christmas is kind of a busy time of year for him in, uh, his line of work. For us. A busy time of year for us."

Silence. The silence of Mr Hummel thinking, *This asshole is keeping my son away from me to put him in horrible danger at Christmas, I hope he gets his brains blown out as soon as possible so Kurt can come home*

and forget the bastard ever existed already. "Because he's really really - I mean you must know, you know Kurt, he's just the most compassionate person I've ever *met* and he just can't stand the thought of bad things happening to people at Christmas when he can't help and it's - sir it's killing him, knowing that it's letting them hurt or letting you down, I - I know it's really, really wrecking him, um, so, Christmas in New York is kind of fixed but I thought what if *we* had Christmas some other time? Because really it's about the people and not like, the date or that's what holiday specials always seem to be about so it doesn't matter if *we* have Christmas on the twenty-fifth or maybe the twenty-seventh or something but we can't really negotiate with New York to, you know, move Christmas, so it'd have to be us-"

"Can I just check what you're suggesting," Mr Hummel says, and Blaine is relieved for the chance to *stop talking.* *"You want us to -"* He's speaking quite slowly, like English might not be Blaine's first language, *"-hold Christmas later."*

He flails a hand like that might help. "I'm just suggesting! Just, it means Kurt can get what he wants for Christmas which is to not let anyone down, I know that's all he really wants, he just, he wants other people to be happy. And he knows - someone's going to be unhappy either way and -"

"Christmas on the twenty-seventh," Mr Hummel says, slowly.

Blaine, you might as well have answered the phone with 'Hi Mr Hummel, I'm Blaine, I'm an idiot!'. "I just - thought -"

"That might work," Mr Hummel says, and then calls to someone in the background, *"Carole, the hospital still want you in on Christmas Day? Hold on a sec, kid."*

Blaine becomes aware that he's gripping the duvet in a way that hurts his hand. He lets go. Voices mumble on the other side of the line, a woman's voice says quite clearly, *"Hold it what?"* but then the mumbling seems to affirm something to itself, and Mr Hummel's voice is back. *"The twenty-seventh would be good for us, might be easier to get Finn out of New York then too. That works for you?"*

"It, um, yes, sir."

"You can call me Burt, kid. You bringing your brother with you? Kurt an' Carole'll be cooking an' they usually cook enough for at least a dozen, so you can seriously bring whoever's around."

"He, um, I'm sure he'd be delighted to, sir."

"You can call me Burt, kid."

The bathroom door opens and Kurt comes out humming, accompanied by a cloud of steam and a towel slung around his hips, squeezing his hair with another. "Do you want to use it bef-" Kurt hesitates as Blaine says into the phone, "Kurt's free now Mr Hummel I'll hand you right over it was lovely to speak to you sir!" and thrusts the phone at Kurt like it might go off at any second. Kurt takes it from him simply *staring*, and says into it, "Hel- Dad?"

Blaine flees into the bathroom and tries to make his shower last as long as possible, but there's really only so clean one can get oneself, even if the soil of sounding like a complete *moron* the first time you speak to your boyfriend's father never quite will wash off.

He has to emerge, eventually. He cracks the door open, lets it inch outwards; Kurt's sitting on the bed, staring at the cell held in his lap, looks dumbly up at Blaine and doesn't say anything. Blaine takes a breath in but Kurt - lifts an arm, in an obviously empty, opening gesture, a gesture for Blaine to come fill up.

Kurt pulls him tight into the hug, cheek pressed hard into his chest, eyes squeezed closed. He says, low and very rough, *"Thank you."* and Blaine - runs his fingers through his hair, tucks an arm around Kurt's shoulders, lets his thumb skate down his lovely skin.

"It's nothing," he says, leaning down to kiss him through his damp hair. "Merry Christmas."

*

It's snowed again, and frozen again, so while Christmas in New York is indeed white it's also as cold as black iron. But it's New York City and it's Christmas Eve, and the lights from store windows flood the sidewalks, lights golden and glittering, and people are determined to enjoy a night so cold that metal blisters the skin.

The German tourists and their little boy are determined to enjoy it, and the mugging that should ruin their evening - their holiday, their year, a portion of their lives - does so less than it should when a man in a white cloak and a Santa hat flips the mugger neatly into the snow, knife clattering away, and a man in green armour and reindeer antlers asks them if they're okay? Okay! with a thumbs up for little Elias and a cheery wave before they vanish. The couple arguing next to a broken down car at the side of the road, baby screaming on her mother's shoulder, were determined to enjoy it and sort of do start enjoying it

when a superhero offers to take a look under the hood and his boyfriend helps push until they're rolling off to Grandpa's again, merry Christmas after all. The girl passed out in the snow outside a bar will actually get to enjoy next Christmas since someone wrapped her in a cloak and called an ambulance, and the Sikh kid running *hard* from setting foot in the wrong part of town tripping and skinning his hands in the snow seriously starts enjoying his evening when a superhero skids down on a green slide of shields between him and the racist fuckwits and as they swear and try to scramble and run back the way they came, there's another superhero there appearing out of the dark like a - well. He enjoys that part quite a bit.

On the edge of a building the Ghost takes the hat off and fans himself with it. "It is surprisingly hot in one of these things."

"You're not really supposed to wear it over a hood," Phalanx points out, and hands him his coffee. "Praline mocha."

"Thank you."

"Is there anywhere in this city you don't get free coffee?"

"It's not exactly free when you pay for it in rescues," the Ghost says, and smiles, and puts his hat back on so he can fold his fingers close around the cup. "Never turn down free coffee, it's one of life's most basic rules. Drink your gingerbread latte and don't ask silly questions."

Phalanx bumps his shoulder and the Ghost sways with it a little, and laughs, fifteen storeys off the ground and both of them swinging their feet to keep their legs warm.

*

Kurt baked them, apartment to himself with Rachel gone home for the holidays, Blaine playing really weird Christmas music covers on his iPad and waiting for them to cool to decorate them with sticky green phis; gingerbread ghosts, packed neatly into little wrapped boxes for delivery. They make a long sweep of the island that night, Phalanx's bag with the presents inside stashed somewhere safe at intervals along the way, the Ghost hanging upside-down through the ceilings of darkened empty rooms, leaning in through cold-paned windows, to drop off boxes. Mike and Tina's windowsill, the kitchens of a South Indian place in Gramercy, a sushi bar in SoHo, the Chinese takeout on the Upper West Side is still open so he slots the box onto the counter and creeps out again, unseen. Mr Conti's coffee shop isn't open but there are lights on in

the kitchen - Sal and his father back from midnight mass, talking quietly in there. And since it was Mr Conti's damned candle that made the Ghost too weak to say no to something he wanted so much, since it was Mr Conti who believed in them before they did, since it was Mr Conti who made the gift that Phalanx is possible to the Ghost, they can't just drop off and take off; they knock on the door.

Mr Conti insists they come in and insists on giving them panettone and a rib-cracking hug each, while Sal hangs back smiling just slightly, and makes some coffee. "You don't take tonight off," Mr Conti clucks disapprovingly, and the Ghost shrugs. "People still need us tonight."

"We get to sleep in tomorrow," Phalanx says, grinning like it's the best present in the world, which it actually is.

"Busy tonight?"

The Ghost glances at Phalanx, who wiggles a hand like the rocking of a wave. "So-so. We've seen worse."

The Ghost says, "Thank you.", taking his coffee from Sal. "People are in a pretty good mood. It's not so bad."

"We heard sirens while we were in mass." Sal says, leaning back on the counter. The Ghost and Phalanx give each other a considering look.

"Could have been -"

"- the guy who went through that window? I mean, *really*. Criminal activity annoys me less when it's at least *competent*."

"Hey, don't knock it." Phalanx bumps his shoulder with his. "I like easy. Easy is good. Easy means no-one gets hurt."

"Apart from the cretin who put himself through a store window."

"He'll be fine. He gets to spend his Christmas in a nice warm hospital bed and his New Year's in a nice warm cell."

"And you guys get to be in a nice warm kitchen for once," Sal says, and the Ghost looks down at his coffee, smiles.

"It's nice being on the inside, for a change."

"You heading home now?"

The Ghost looks at Phalanx, who just looks back, waiting for his decision. "Soon," he says. "Might as well stay out a little longer while we've still got coffee warming us up."

Phalanx says, "It's about minus a million degrees out there and he won't let me have a cape."

"You would trip over it, it would be *humiliating*."

"You just want to be the mysterious one in the cape, you just don't want to share the cool cloak."

"I just don't want to spend the rest of my life dealing with the embarrassment of criminals laughing at you getting tangled in your own cape, it's bad enough when you overskim on one of those slides -"

Phalanx puts his hand over his eyes, kneads at them like he wants to not be hearing this. Sal grins, and sips some coffee, and watches how the Ghost's ankle bumps Phalanx's *a stop teasing because this is not a competition you will win* and Phalanx's elbow settles closer to the Ghost's side, calm again, an easy *I don't mind*.

He was always gentle, the Ghost, always quiet and serious and sure. He didn't let Sal's dad drag him into anything he didn't want but nor did he *ask* for anything more than the barest minimum, like touching people too much, in any way, made him . . . uncomfortable? Like he didn't like putting himself in a place where he could be unwanted. He didn't take crap because he didn't really take anything at all, from anyone at all. Sal had thought it was his secret identity, always that to mind, but now he stands in the coffee shop kitchen weight settled easy on one hip, taking a long eyes-closed sip of coffee with his paler cloak hanging back from his shoulders and a fluffy Santa hat on his head, while his boyfriend's elbow rests against his side, as he gives a yawn, covering it with a hand, and the Ghost gives a little smile and glances up at him again.

Who knew superheroes have a private life to learn to navigate too.

Sal lifts his coffee, takes a sip, smiles. Good for you, spooky.

*

Long way down. Long way down and it's cold in the dark, too-thin sneakers squeaking on the icy ledge and rocketing his heart a thousand beats a second, why does he care so much about slipping? Like you wanna live, what the hell rest of your life have you got? Gonna jump, why does his whole heart *choke* when his foot skids . . . ?

Fuck, fuck, fuck. The view across the city is so bright, so dazzlingly Christmas tree bright, his eyes blur and the tears are *cold* in the air, and fuck this is the last thing he'll ever see. He pushes his glasses up, wipes them off on his wrist, sniffs, looks down -

"Excuse me,"

He jolts and grabs at the scaffolding like he's been *poked*, choking in, "*Fucking hell dude-*"

It's only a narrow ledge at the edge of what will be a skyscraper, some day not so far off, some day he won't see; for now wooden boards slick with frost, icy bars burning with cold, and holding onto the scaffolding with pale gloved hands, the Ghost of New York City is watching him with very worried eyes under the hood, under a fluffy white and red Santa hat, eyes very darkly afraid with understanding of what this ledge means. "I'm sorry, but - do you maybe want to talk about it? Because - it at least doesn't look like it could make it *worse*, at this point."

He stares at him, looks around, sees - Phalanx, three storeys down, hanging of some lower scaffolding and watching them. "He doesn't have to come up," the Ghost, the actual *Ghost*, says. "We're seriously not here to outnumber you or bully you or anything, we were just passing and-"

"Is he wearing antlers?"

The Ghost hesitates, mouth still open, then flicks his eyes up and shrugs. "It was that or an elf costume."

He starts *laughing*. It's in it's stomach like it's clawing to get out, the laugh. The Ghost smiles, shyly and still with a tightness in his eyes under that hood, back.

*

Phalanx sits below them, occasionally humming, swinging his legs and apparently happy down there. The Ghost sits next to him, takes something out of a belt and snaps it in his hand and hands it over; little heat pack thing, *gorgeous* with warmth in the night. "That is not an appropriate jacket," the Ghost observes, and he wipes his nose again on the back of his wrist.

"Didn't have time to grab a coat man, bitch kicked me out. Christmas fuckin' Eve, merry fuckin' Christmas -"

"Do you want the hat? You'd be surprised how warm it is."

"Dude, this is what you do with your Christmas Eve? Hand out hats an' talk down suicides?"

"Wear the hat." the Ghost says like an irritable mother, and pulls it down on his head for him. Still weird feeling anything brush his head where the hair isn't. "Who threw you out?"

"My mom. 'cause I - did this." He adjusts the hat, runs a hand over his shaved head. "Final fuckin' straw, a *haircut*, like she doesn't know - 'cause I 'confuse' my little sister 'cause she calls me her brother, fuck I *am* her brother bitch what'd she know she never even *asks* she never hears me talk she just acts like it's all *me*, like I *asked* for all this, who asks for all this shit? Who asks their bitch mom to kick them out Christmas Eve over a fuckin' *hair cut*?"

". . . why did she throw you out for getting your hair cut?"

He presses the heat pack between his palms, and in the cold of the night even good heat *burns*, and he's run out of words. "'cause."

The Ghost just waits, head tilted to watch him from under the hood, very patient and quiet. He blinks and blinks behind his glasses, fuck, not crying in front of a superhero, *fuck* sake man. "'cause."

It hurts. It hurts to make it into words. It burns the throat, making it into words, like the words make it smaller, like they're not enough, no-one understands what the words *mean*. So he stuffs the heat pack into his armpit and unzips his hoodie and lifts up his t-shirt, and when he lowers it the Ghost is looking very embarrassed at his own knees and saying, "I'm sorry."

Bitter coldness of wind on the skin where the wrappings aren't clamping the things down. "Yeah," he says, jerks his t-shirt down, fumbles with the zip for the hoodie. "Fuck it man, Christmas Eve, she threw me out."

Fuck else am I gonna do? Fuck am I ever gonna do? She won't let me see Lily an' she's my *fucking* sister man, only person on the planet who doesn't give a fuck -"

The Ghost says quietly, "Other people care about you."

"Hell would you know! Fuckin' white boy with your fuckin' white dick exactly where it oughta be, *fuck* would you know about it -"

The Ghost hugs his knees closer, breath white in the night. "I know I don't know what your life is like," he says. "I'm not saying that. No-one knows what other people live through, that's why it's important that we . . . I just, I do know what it's like when people . . . tell you over and over that you're something that you know you're not. I know -" He fades a little from view, semi-see-through so he can see the scaffolding through him, creepy as something out of a movie. "I know what I was afraid of, before I came out. Both times." He fades back into full view again with a nervous little twitch of a smile. "I know that I felt - a lot, I really felt like maybe no-one cared. No-one would care. No-one would ever listen and actually hear what I was trying to say, what I needed them to hear. But -"

Long cold way down from that ledge, he thinks, and a whole world not giving a fuck if he does. "But what?" he mutters, and flexes his frozen toes in his sneakers.

The Ghost says quietly, "But there are people who believe you. Who listen and care and believe that you are *you*. Who believe that you matter *because* you're you. I know there are assholes out there but they're not worth wrecking yourself over, not when there are so many people who *aren't* assholes waiting for you. Because sometimes you just don't know them yet. Sometimes they just haven't realised it themselves yet, that they do care about you more than any other crap. It's just - time, that's all it ever is. How long you can bear it and how long you can wait. But - I promise, the ones who care, they're worth waiting for. I know it's a *long* time, it really feels it when you're living it, I'm sorry, I know, I *know*, but they're worth it. They're worth waiting for. They *help*. They do."

He stares, and the Ghost looks back, head tucked to his bent knees, and underneath them - quite far underneath them - his boyfriend is wearing reindeer antlers and humming *It's Cold Outside*.

He takes in the Ghost's cloak, the pooling pale grey of it around him, running off the edge of the ledge like a frozen waterfall. ". . . used to be black," he says, and the Ghost just watches him, head resting on his own

folded arms on his knees. "My friend, Tim, he's big into you. Listened to him talkin' all the crap in the world 'bout you. Didn't you used to wear black?"

The Ghost closes his eyes, gives a funny little smile. "It was always grey," he says. "But it used to be darker. I didn't even know I was waiting for anyone, but then - there he was. Rudolph the red nosed superhero." He leans out a little over the ledge to check on Phalanx, who's got up to pace a little platform of his own shields, beating his arms against the cold. "I know it - I know what not knowing how you can manage *tomorrow*, even, feels like. But . . . just, if you can just *survive*, just, there are people out there who don't even know what you're going to mean to them one day. You will find them. It's just time, it's only ever time. How long you can cope. How long you can keep believing your side of the story matters, and how long you can cope until other people believe it enough as well."

"Coped seventeen fuckin' years. When's the coping *stop*?"

"I don't think it ever does. Not entirely. I know it's not easy, I know, I'm *sorry*, I know. But some things really do make it worth your while."

"You're like a fuckin' walking 'it gets better' video, you know that?"

His mouth crooks. "It does get better. On and off. Once you've hit rock bottom it kind of *has* to, doesn't it?"

Phalanx does a little spinny jig thing on each turn of his pacing, swinging his shoulders a little with arms wrapped in tight, mumbling a song so the words are left behind him white in the air.

He looks at the Ghost long and sidelong, while the Ghost gives a little fond, nose-wrinkled smile down at Phalanx's head, and he says, "Why'd you come so close to the ledge?"

The Ghost closes his eyes again. "Secret identity. Really, though, does this look like sane and normal behaviour to you?" he says, gesturing at his own outfit, and he raises his eyebrows behind his glasses.

"Looks pretty sane from where I'm sittin'."

"Mm. Some nights I actually do think that too, which is the worst part. Where does your friend Tim live?"

"Two blocks down. His parents hate me. Still say *she*, like nothing changed. Say I was *always a tomboy*. Fuck *sake* . . ."

"Tim doesn't."

"Tim knows I got more balls'n him or any kid in our class."

"So, Tim's on your side?"

He shrugs, and rubs his arms through the hoodie, and when he lowers his head the white pom-pom on the end of the hat flops down between his eyes, and bangs his glasses. "Tim's cool. Tim's my bro. We trade comic books an' play Warhammer."

"Is that one of those online ones?"

"No man, tabletop. My orcs an' goblins *maul* his pansy high elves every - oh, dude, sorry."

He just glances across, gives a little smile. "We've both heard worse than that."

For a moment quiet, and the night. And it's a long way down. And when he was crying and hated his own breath it was hard enough, and now he knows he can't. He just can't. He doesn't want to die and - Lily. He doesn't want to be some memory she has and their mom telling her about how her 'sister' went *wrong* -

"I know a shelter," the Ghost says. "If there's nowhere else. But would Tim's family take you tonight? Someone else, do you have other family?"

"Fuckin' midnight on Christmas Eve? His dad'll flip his shit."

"That doesn't always mean they'd turn you out. People surprise you with their decency, sometimes."

"Dunno man. S'a big ask."

"But Tim is on your side."

"Tim's my bro. No, no way man, he's got this sister, no way, his dad will seriously flip his shit if I'm there all night." He blows his breath out through pursed lips. "Fuckin' hell that girl, she got all the *best* junk in her trunk -"

The Ghost puts a hand over his eyes, laughs nervously. He says, "You seriously don't dig the ladies, huh?"

"I - not like that, I suppose, no." He tilts his cheek onto his folded arms again, gives him a little smile. "The haircut suits you. You have an amazing bone structure, it would be a shame to distract from it."

He snorts, and rubs the heat pack between his hands. "The Ghost gives like, fashion tips."

He's laughing again, flaps a corner of his own cloak. "Well, you know, new season, got to be prepared."

God, he can't stop the grin, and he thought he'd never smile again, wouldn't have any time or any cause for one more smile. He shakes his head and it feels so - strange, so strange and broken and new, like it's New Year's Day and not Christmas Eve. Like maybe he did end it, because it all started again now that superheroes are real, real in all the ways you don't expect. Like maybe he's not got no-one. Like maybe not here now in this huge open cold night but fuck it there's plenty of people out there who think he's awesome, they just haven't *met* him yet.

The Ghost is looking down at Phalanx, eyelids cut clean and low, lips almost touching as if almost around a word, almost on the verge of saying . . .

He's not like he expected. What do you think a superhero's gonna be like? The Ghost of New York, everyone knows him, he's creepy and dangerous and terrifying except he's not, he's really seriously not, he's kind of . . .

"You're pretty cute, you know that?" he says, and the Ghost blinks, looks across at him. "For a guy, I mean."

His mouth twitches, and he shrugs a shoulder. "So are you." He *grins*. "Just don't tell him I said that. Are you okay, though? I mean, really? I know - I know it's not that easy, I know it isn't *easy* but -"

"I dunno about okay. Just - fuck. Don't want my little sister to remember her Christmas present one year was a dead mess of a brother. 'cause yeah." He picks at his thumbnail, around the heat pack. "She's on my side. I got people on my side. Could just use a few more of 'em."

"The secret identity makes it difficult," the Ghost says. "But you know we're on your side, right? It's the only reason we do it. People shouldn't be alone. People shouldn't feel alone. Not tonight, not - not ever, but not tonight."

He wipes his eyes off again, gets out, "Fuck, man."

"Do you want a hug?"

"Just - fuck, man -"

He gives really good hugs. Rubs his back and murmurs, "I don't know if we'll actually see you again, it's a big city. But we will be thinking about you. Okay? People care. They do care. I promise, I promise, they *care*."

Been a while since he had a really good hug. Hard to pull back from it, and when he wipes his nose on his wrist again the Ghost plucks a Kleenex out of his utility belt and hands it over with his eyebrows raised. "Not my mom," he huffs, but still takes it to blow his nose. "Fuck like I can jump now anyway, *Tim'll* flip his shit if I never told him I got checked out by the Ghost."

He rolls his eyes again, but all he looks, really, is happy. "So where are we walking you, to your friend's or somewhere else?"

The wind rattles a tarpaulin, and the metal sheens like ice in the dark, the wood looks polished with cold. "Gotta get down first man, didn't think . . . I didn't think this was a two-way journey, you know? Didn't really think through gettin' down apart from, like . . ." He makes a whistling noise, and dives a finger into his palm, and the Ghost rolls his eyes and stands up, and stretches.

"Getting down is not a problem. This is the fun part. Phalanx!"

He stops humming *White Christmas* and looks up at them, squints through the dark. "You okay?"

The Ghost waves. "Could we get a way down?"

"The fun way or the boring way?"

"Christmas Eve, Phalanx."

"Cool."

It's a wide-spinning spiral of shields, a slide all the way down, he throws his arms out and whoops at the clean brittle sky, black with cold overhead, skidding into the snow of the building site at the bottom.

Phalanx offers him a hand to help him up and he comes up dusting off the seat of his pants with the other, "Dude, can I do that again?"

*

Phalanx yawns again and the Ghost adjusts his antlers for him, laughs when Phalanx takes the opportunity to slump himself into the Ghost's body in a hug. "Bed now. Way, way after midnight."

"It is after midnight," the Ghost murmurs, palm finding his jaw, lifting his face. "Merry Christmas."

He kisses him, once, warmly, Phalanx's hands pulling him a little closer by the utility belt, and then when they break there's a little huff of white breath between them in the air. Phalanx takes a breath in and *grins*; the Ghost brushes his hair back neater under the antlers, and Phalanx says, "Technically, you're two days early."

He makes him laugh too much, makes the joy more than he bear to keep inside, it balls in his chest like a bird trying to take flight. "So we'll have two Christmasses."

"We need to get you another hat."

"We have a whole year for that."

"But second Christmas."

"I am not wearing one of those things out of costume. My *hair*."

Phalanx grins again, with a little hiss of warm breath in the night, and then looks out from the side of the rooftop, the whole city so quiet waiting for Christmas morning, strange for New York to feel so still. "Is - he going to be okay?"

He takes a slow breath in, lets it out. The size of the question, because the Ghost of all people is not naïve about these things, and even besides everything else, can you ever say of anyone that yes, yes they're going to be okay, life isn't going to get them, it's happily ever after all the way?

"I don't know," he says, honestly. "It's - people don't make it easy for other people. Not if they don't understand them, not even when they *do*. I hope he has good friends and he'll find more. People who give the right kind of a fuck."

". . . I wouldn't have known what to say. Like, actually, I know this sounds bad, I wouldn't even know - where to start, I mean, I - pronouns." He looks so, so embarrassed. "Do you . . . ?"

He folds his arms around himself under the cloak, he can feel the lack of heat in his own tired body; god, yes, they need to head to home soon. "I can link you to some educational websites. But it's always just . . . the person in front of you. You just try to talk to the person in front of you. Get them to talk. Work out what they want more, some people just want to be told things will be okay, some people want to be able to vent, some people just want someone to *be* there, you just . . . you just work out what they need from you right then. People don't *want* to kill themselves, not - not without a hell of a good reason. And people, really, *really* make it difficult for other people, they . . ."

He rubs his arms, looks up at the sky. There's low cloud, and there'll be more snow. White Christmas. He remembers, back through the years, they probably think he doesn't, he remembers all of them. Every last face, all the tears, all the screaming. He remembers every shoulder he's touched, every body he's wrapped the cloak around, everyone he's promised *help is coming, it'll be okay*. He remembers. He remembers . . .

He remembers what it's like to be backed into a corner that is nothing to do with you, exposed and silenced there. He's been there enough times. He's been there because of *him*, he *knows* Phalanx loves him but he's still blinked and found he's back in the victim corner and it *isn't his place*, he refuses it, every beat of his heart a *no* because it *is not his place*. If people could just understand, just *listen* when other people talk, just hear how they *need* to be seen and how they desperately need to be *not* seen, how do you make people understand? He knows it's not always easy, he knows ignorance is something society *encourages*, he knows it's a struggle to hear what people need sometimes, but doesn't that only make it all the more important to *listen*?

"That first winter I got into this I stopped a gang of disgusting men chasing a woman down the street, yelling at her. And once I'd chased them off I realised she was a trans woman and that was *why* they were yelling at her and I literally did not know what to do. I was a kid," he says, shrugging, he *was* a kid, nineteen years old and fresh from Ohio, he didn't have a clue. "It was almost a mercy she'd lost a shoe, I had to go back down the street and find it for her, beige satin wedge, it'd gone over in a puddle, completely ruined, but it gave me some time to stop *panicking*. Only she looked at me like she knew exactly what I

was thinking and she said 'you're very young, aren't you'." He closes his eyes. "Which is a bit humiliating when you're wearing a superhero costume."

Phalanx doesn't say anything, just listens. The Ghost rubs his arms, looks across the city again, all peaceful and quiet - just a dog barking and some traffic, a silent night by New York's standards. "I walked her to a bus stop, she said that was all she needed." He's not going to tell Phalanx that she said *if I was twenty years younger I could teach you a thing or two* while he stood there crimson in the cloak with his head down, and she laughed, but not unkindly. "And I realised how little I knew about anything. I thought it was hard enough growing up gay. But there are - a *world* of people out there all trying to be who they are and everyone else in the world trying to push them into boxes they don't want to be in, sometimes they don't *mean* harm because of it, sometimes they just don't get it, they just aren't hearing the other person. But there really are people who will - beat them into those boxes, kill them if they have to and - and there are so many reasons to feel like giving up, and it's all so big and difficult and it is so easy to be a dick when you're not even *trying* to be. But every night, sometimes it terrifies me. Someone trying to help and not helping at all, someone who *means well* but says absolutely the worst thing, that can hurt worse than someone just setting out to be a dick."

... like Finn, who he loves, he *does*, but he'll never forget Finn as a teenager telling him that he should just act differently, be a different person, he'd get less crap then, and Kurt knowing that what he was being told was *It's your fault, you know*. And Kurt not being able to argue with the voice low in his stomach saying, *He's right, you know*. Thank god for the Hummel stubbornness. He could've broken in so many ways through the years.

Phalanx is very quiet. The Ghost sighs, and bristles his cold arms closer. "I can read some books and websites but I'll never know. I'll never know what it's like. All I can ever do is talk to the person in front of me. *Listen* to them. And apologise, a lot, on behalf of the entire species." He shakes himself out. "I know it's not about me, the person with the biggest problem is not me not knowing what to say, it's the person on the ledge because of what people do to them, it's just ... you don't think about this part when you put on the costume, do you? You don't think you could make it *worse* just by saying something, you ..."

"... I think you made it better, this time."

He shrugs. "I think he just needed some time to think. He didn't want to. He just didn't know what else to do."

Phalanx says, thoughtfully, not really meaning anything by it, "When I didn't know what to do I had you." The Ghost blinks at him, and Phalanx rubs his nose, realising what he's said, grins a little and wriggles his shoulders. "You know. I felt like there was an enormous hole in my life. And then you came along saving the world one person at a time and . . . yeah. Then I had you."

"You'd never even met me."

"You don't always need to." He reaches for his hands. "I'm *so* glad I did, though. I like you even more than when you were just like, my nightlight in the dark. You're so much more real than that. *So* much better than just that, and that was pretty special anyway."

The Ghost holds his hands out and Phalanx squeezes them, and smiles at him, and the warmest part of the Ghost in this cold night is his heart, like it's cupped close to Phalanx's chest, shielded in his snug protective hands.

"I . . . I get that I haven't always . . ."

The Ghost presses his hands. He doesn't want regret or apology. All he wants is *them*. "I know that you love me."

"I know. I *do*. I just - I'll love you better. I will." His smile quirks. "All this superhero training, you've been really patient about letting me practise this part too."

". . . everything I know about love I learned from you."

"We can help each other out. That's what superheroes do!"

He laughs, and Phalanx kisses him, oh, cold of his skin but warmth of his mouth before he says, "Merry Christmas to you too, by the way."

"Merry first Christmas."

"Still second Christmas to go!"

"So much to look forward to," the Ghost murmurs, and watches him as he lets go of one of his hands to look to the side of the building, to make gleaming shields appear underfoot for them; he thinks, When I didn't know what else to do I waited for you. I just didn't know I was doing it, then.

The snow begins to fall again. He wraps himself around Phalanx from behind to keep him warm, as the shields tilt them into a slide.

*

Internet's really quiet, you'd think it was four AM on Christmas morning or something.

Merry Christmas spooky & soldier boy, I put cookies and milk out for you last night! <3

Do I win the 'earliest woken parent' award? Hard to stay angry though, my little ghostlet loved her plushes, she says she wants to grow up to be a superhero too!

I hope the Ghost gets everything he wants for Christmas, and all the things he didn't even know he wanted, and all the mistletoe he could ever ever need <3

I hope the Ghost never steps on a Lego he forgot was there fUCKING HELL

Listen to the Fireplace Roar, ghostlanx Christmas snuggle!art, perfectly fluffily G <3

Considering Phantomphi just posted the most adorable anything ever I'm following that up with uh Christmas-themed bondage (what), Ghostlanx, nothing like worksafe. Happy Christmas! ;)

Oh lookit I got ghostlanx bondage for Christmas my very favorite thing! :D

Sitting under tree, staring at presents, waiting for the house to wake so I can find out if one of those contains a plush because if not I will actually throw a Christmas morning tantrum like srsly

Fic: Lonely This Christmas, Ghostzilla/Ghostlanx, NC-17, Puckzilla thinks of Christmas Eves past and Ghosts of Christmas past as Christmas morning dawns in his cell. Angst, smut, more angst, more smut.

HAPPY FUCKING CHRISTMAS ALL YOU BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE >:D Like seriously I consider the phandom my second family, have amazing, amazing days everyone who celebrates and everyone who doesn't, however you spend it so much spooky love to you <3

merry christmas puckzilla i'm sorry you're in jail for it :(

Fic, Batteries Included, ghostlanx humor-smut; Phalanx's present for the Ghost vibrates, the Ghost is not convinced. Until he is.

Fanart, Phalanx and tinsel and not much else, worksafe if you have a fairly liberal workplace due to discreetly placed decorations.

Merry Christmas to the both of you, superboyfriends - all the good wishes and all the good things, you deserve the lot <3

*Can you people stop sending me happy fucking holiday messages, it's five AM on Christmas morning, do you *think* if I'm here I want to hear it. Where's the fucking eggnog, no way am I surviving today sober.*

... happy Christmas to you too Ghostly ...

FUCK YES PLUSH OH MY GOD BB I LOVE YOU I LOVE YOU I LOVE YOU I LOVE YOU

It's rude to capslock at someone when they're not even online, Drax.

*Ghostlyyyyyy look what she diiiiiiid ;_ (and btw, thank *you* for the books, which I'm sure will improve my mind greatly ;) No seriously, thank you, most cynical woman in the fandom.)*

Assume I'm offline for the rest of the day, I have relatives to baste and roast.

*Happy Christmas to my favourite spook and his favourite soldier, I hope you both have the *best* day <3*

Reblogging Ghost with mistletoe hanging from his hood fanart because there's Phalanx's Xmas present right there ...

Reblog if you've ever been rescued by the Ghost. Let Figgins know what an assbutt he's being. We love you, spooky <3

Reblog if you've ever been rescued by Phalanx. (let the new guy get a look in!)

Reblog if you've ever been rescued by the most courteous gay supercouple in New York, and fuck the right wing media asshats. SUPERBOYFRIENDS ARE SUPER

Thanks for the hat, dude.

Interlude: Christmas Yet to Come

Finn wakes up and the world is oppressively quiet, the way it is very early in the morning, or after snow. It takes him a while to want to move. The blankets are warm and the room is dark, and being back in Lima makes him feel younger, safer, smaller inside. He's not in New York and he doesn't have to be a grown-up. He's at home, and it's Christmas morning, and he can be as young as he actually feels if he wants to be.

It's Christmas morning; suddenly he does feel like a kid, sits up and puts a hand to his head because *whoa* upright too quickly, his blood has way too far to travel to reach his brain. Christmas morning and he pulls a hoodie on over his pyjamas, cracks the door open - colder in the hallway beyond his sleep-stuffy bedroom - and shuffles downstairs. He can smell coffee and the fairy lights are already lit up the banister but he can't hear voices or the TV, who's up in all this silence -?

Kurt, sitting in the lounge with his feet tucked up on the sofa underneath his robe, coffee cup cradled in his hands, drowsily watching the Christmas tree glow. Finn blinks at him as Kurt looks over, because they might've lived together a few years now but it will never stop being strange, seeing Kurt in a t-shirt with its neck crooked from sleeping, bedhead and unguarded eyes, Kurt just woken and uncomposed. "There's coffee in the kitchen," he says, and Finn gradually makes the sentence make sense - really sleepy still - and mumbles, "Cool, thanks, man." and shuffles on again.

The kitchen floor's cold and finding a mug and measuring sugar out wakes him up a little more, especially when he spills and glances guiltily over his shoulder and scuffs it quickly to grit on the floor before Kurt can find out. He heads back into the lounge and Kurt is yawning, has lifted a hand to half-hide it, then settles a shoulder back into the cushions and just watches the tree again with sleepy low eyes. Finn sits along from him, looks at the presents underneath, says, "Do you think they'd mind if we just opened one?"

"They'll still be there when they wake up," Kurt says, rubbing his eye. "Merry Christmas, by the way."

"Oh yeah, you too dude. Have a good one."

He lifts his mug, and Kurt looks at it for a moment before he understands, lifts his own for the clink. Finn grins, drinks coffee, begins to wake up some more. Kurt's huddled down in his robe, hanging open over that black t-shirt and sweatpants, wrists propped off his bent knees as he cups his mug. He says, "Finn."

Finn says over the mug's rim as he drinks, "Mmn?"

"You know this thing I'm doing."

Finn swallows too-hot coffee.

This thing Kurt is doing. This thing they're all collectively not talking about when Finn knows it's all his dad can *think* about, silence heavier than snow hanging over this house. This *illegal* thing Kurt's doing, this thing Finn should totally arrest him for doing (he can actually like arrest people now which would be so much cooler if his *brother* wasn't on the list of people to arrest, it kind of kills the buzz), this thing Kurt's doing that could get him locked up, hurt, he knows - he knows - killed . . .

He says, very guardedly, "Yeah?"

Kurt shuffles his feet a little on the edge of the sofa cushions, toes briefly curling inside his socks. "It's not currently as efficient as it could be."

All Finn can really think is that being 'efficient' is exactly the sort of thing Kurt would worry about. ". . . no?"

Kurt looks at the tree, and he draws his breath in, and then he faces Finn. "Right now I can only help out with some isolated incidents I'm lucky to be there for. If I had access to - statistics, police operations, if I knew where the crime hotspots were -"

Finn would butt in with *if you're suggesting what I think you're suggesting then no way in all of hell Kurt* but he doesn't know if Kurt *is* suggesting that and Kurt is just *faster* than Finn, Finn never has been able to cut Kurt off in time . . .

"- I would be able to help a lot more people. I don't want you to potentially get into trouble but I would appreciate your 'inside knowledge', I . . . I need to know where I'm needed. I need to know what I should be focusing on and what I need to *do*. I know you're only just starting out and I don't want to damage your career Finn but - do you understand that we could help each other here? If you could let me know when you're going to be involved in a big - drugs bust or hostage situation, anything I can help with, I can make you safer as well -"

That's the part where Finn cuts him off, because this is actually, all of this, this entire thing, it is *utterly insane*.

"Are you *crazy*? You want me to tell you where the most dangerous places are so you can go stick your neck out in them? You want me to actually ask you to come along to stand between me an' the bad guys and it's my *job*, Kurt -"

"It might help if you think of this as being my job?"

"You're wearing a mask and tights! I - actually cannot believe you're doing this, do you - I can't - *get* - do you know what it'll do to Burt if you get arrested for -"

"It's a bodysuit," Kurt murmurs, and drops his eyes from Finn's again, looking gloomily at the rug. "Not tights. And getting arrested is kind of the least of my worries, *you* know handcuffs aren't a problem for me."

"You are gonna get *killed*." Finn spits at him. "*That's* the problem, okay, that is the *problem*, okay, Burt is gonna have to *bury* you an' don't you *care* -?"

"I have no intention of dying. I have things to do."

"Jesus you need to-"

"If you're not going to help me then fine," Kurt says. "It was only a suggestion. I can always ghost into a station and find out what I need for myself. I just . . ."

"Just *what*?"

Kurt's eyes slip away from the rug to the tree again, even further away from Finn. "It just gets lonely, sometimes, on my own."

Finn stares at him, and Kurt looks at his coffee, closes his eyes, takes a sip.

What the fuck do you do when your stepbrother becomes a superhero?

Finn doesn't know how to tell him what it's been like, ever since he found out, ever since he asked Kurt about these rumours about a hero who can do what Finn knows Kurt can do and Kurt looked shifty and embarrassed and mulish. It's like getting left behind. It's like watching Kurt a mile ahead and Finn can see from this distance that he's sailing into danger but all Kurt cares about is catching the wind. It's like being

so *slow* all the way behind him, because Finn can't do the things Kurt can do and Finn can't help him and Kurt can't just keep his head down and pretend like he's normal -

Normal. Kurt stays still, zen-like with thought and coffee, eyes closed and folded small on the sofa on Christmas morning. Kurt's never been 'normal' and Finn knows it. He remembers high school and the guilt gluts his throat; he remembers Kurt eating alone in the corner of the lunch hall and the guys sitting with Finn laughing and shoving each other and aiming spoons of ketchup at him, he remembers hearing a bang in the corridor and looking up but it was only ever Kurt getting locker-checked again, he remembers -

He remembers that Kurt never went to his own prom.

Just, fuck, that one. Senior prom, Finn *knew* Kurt by then, their iciness towards each other had had to melt to make their parents happy, at least while they were in the house they hung out sometimes and Kurt would help him with his homework and Finn learned that Kurt was smart and funny in a sharp dry way and - and a good guy. Didn't just tell Finn to suck it after all Finn had done to him and let other people do to him, he helped him with his homework and didn't bring it up. Didn't bring it up in front of his dad, that, *that* would have wrecked *everything* and they both knew it, if Kurt ever said the once to his dad what Finn had done and in his silence allowed to be done. Kurt couldn't make himself happy so he kept his mouth shut and let everyone else be happy instead. And Finn accepted that gratefully, until prom night, until he stood in front of his mirror in his tux before he headed out to pick up his date and he couldn't do the damn bow tie.

He hadn't even thought about going to ask Kurt. Kurt knew this kind of stuff, it was just natural to go ask Kurt, so he knocked on his door and the hum of the sewing machine stopped, and Kurt looked over from his desk, looked at Finn in his tux, and his face so carefully blanked. Finn said, "Dude, can you - how do you tie these things?"

Kurt had visibly inhaled, exhaled through his nose, which Finn had taken for a sigh of restrained frustration. In retrospect, he thinks Kurt just couldn't move until he'd made himself get one breath in.

Then he stood up in his artfully scuffed-up jeans and the t-shirt with the moustaches on, and he fixed Finn's tux for him, and it was only as he said a little shakily, "I'd almost advise clip-ons given your *level* of incompetence except that I would die before I'd ever advise clip-ons." that Finn had realised what a massive, massive fuck up he'd made.

Maybe it's fine to go to prom with all your friends and a cheerleader on your arm while your stepbrother stays at home because if he went he'd have to go alone and he'd probably only get shit for daring to turn up anyway. Maybe you can both be okay with that. But there is no way in all of hell that it's fine to walk into his room in your tuxedo and rub his face in it.

His face had got too hot, his hands had gone all strange, he'd felt *sick* with the shame in that moment, of what he couldn't be to Kurt. Kurt had read the stiffening of his body and stepped back, quickly, arms folding around himself, looking up at him with his face doing that blanking thing again but something like *panic* in his eyes. "All done," he'd said, too rushed, and Finn had swallowed, and thought -

Fuck it. Invite him. He must have the right clothes, he's got all the clothes in the world. He can come with you, no-one'll mess with him if he's with you. Senior prom, man, shouldn't Kurt get *something* from high school he'd actually want to remember - ?

And then the whisper from behind had come, the cold whisper low behind his ear: do you know what they'll do to *you*?

His friends, his date, everyone in the school: what exactly did Finn think would happen if he brought the school's resident queer to senior prom with him? He would be - it would be social lynching. It would be - he thought of their faces and his stomach shrank in on itself - it would be -

He would have nothing. It would take everything away from him. It would leave him with *nothing*.

And that vile little voice whispered to him, He's not losing anything. He doesn't have anything to lose. He doesn't know what it would be like, if they turned on you he's not the one who'd pay for it . . .

And he knew that it was cowardice, prickling under the skin of his face, flushed and floundering on his shame. He knew that it was cowardice, finding a smile with a heavy jaw, saying, "Thanks, man." and hurrying out of the room. He knew that was it cowardice, hearing Kurt stand still for some time, before his footsteps squeaked a floorboard, and the sewing machine started up again.

He knew that it was cowardice, and he'd felt quiet and out of place all prom, knowing Kurt was in his room keeping himself busy on his own. Knowing Kurt would never remember anything of high school as something he'd actually enjoyed. Knowing that Kurt, in all his quickness and wits and contained, adult clarity, knowing that *he* knew so exactly and adult-precisely that it was cowardice too.

And now Kurt sits there in his robe on Christmas morning, huddled up small and cradling his coffee, Kurt the superhero still on his own and maybe it'll never get out of Finn's throat any other way, it's like the guilt's got *barbs*, it's stuck in there like an arrow . . .

"Sure," he says, and has to clear his throat a little because it comes up rough from his straining throat. "Sure. If it - if it means you're not on your own the whole time, I mean, if it makes you any safer, you know Burt . . ."

Kurt looks across at him, sort of wondering-confused, then his mouth - twitches, this little small smile, the tiniest little smile, like he genuinely had not expected to have anything to smile about. He says, right to Finn's face, "Thank you." like he's got anything in the world to thank Finn for.

Ignore the shame, because you've got good at ignoring the shame, and maybe, for the first time, you can start actually doing something to make up for it. ". . . I'm not saying I like it."

"No-one likes it," Kurt says mildly, like this isn't a problem to him. Probably it's not, no-one's liked anything about Kurt for most of his life, he's got a lot of practise at sailing on by not giving a fuck.

"And - don't tell Burt. He'll -"

"I know. I won't. I promise."

"- Kurt."

He's looking at the tree again, much happier huddled over his coffee now. "Hm?"

". . . look after yourself. Okay?"

Kurt looks back at him, then just closes his eyes, shakes his head smiling away. "You too, Officer Hudson."

Finn swallows coffee, slowly, thoughtfully. Christmas morning, coffee and quiet, presents under the tree and for the first time it's like there's a thorn out of his throat, he can actually *talk* to Kurt again now, only, he's a guy, and he doesn't know what the hell to *say*.

So in the end, after mulling over his shame and the million apologies he could make, after turning over and over in his mind the bloody barb he's finally spat out of his own throat, what he says is, "... you sure we'd couldn't open like, one of them? What about the ones we got each other?"

"The presents aren't going anywhere, Finn." Kurt says, and sips his coffee, and flicks his eyes at the ceiling suddenly all alight with evil. "We *could* 'accidentally' put the TV on a little too loud to help them up ..."

Chapter Sixteen

They broke in through the skylight. Phalanx climbs over the edge of the building's roof as the Ghost appears again next to its cracked-open frame, crouching with a gloved hand on the glass to look down through it; he glances back at Phalanx, puts a finger to his lips, then swings himself through the skylight already fading from view again.

Phalanx pads over. Underneath him, there's a muffled thud. He crouches, shields flickering nervously in front of him, but there's a dragging noise and the Ghost appears again on the floor underneath the skylight, holding an unconscious guy in a bandana by the scruff of his hoodie. "The rest must be deeper in already," he says, very low, as Phalanx lets himself hang down by the arms before dropping to the floor inside.

"Why an office block? What are they stealing from here?"

"Data, probably." The Ghost ties the guy's hands to a radiator and then pulls his own bandana up and, not unkindly, gags him with it; they don't want him waking up unexpectedly and alerting his friends to their presence. "Personal information. It takes less than you'd think to clone someone's identity."

Phalanx looks around the dull, lifeless corridor - god the idea of an office job makes him want to whimper a bit, he likes *people*, he likes talking to people and helping people, a cubical and a computer screen would crush him inch by inch - and says, "It'd be nice to do this without trashing the place too much."

"That's what I thought. So. Nice and quiet. And follow them down . . ."

*

Burt's wearing the robe Kurt got him for Christmas so he can say he wore it (he doesn't have to add out loud 'the once') and be honest. It's got some designer's name sewn in the neck, it's probably an incredibly fancy one, Burt doesn't get why you need a designer robe. The clothes thing he can kind of get, he's lived with Kurt and with Carole long enough, he gets that they like to look nice. A robe, though? Who sees you in a robe?

"You don't want to look nice for me?" Carole had said before leaving for her shift, all sparkly-eyed smiling, straightening it on his shoulders and tugging the belt right.

So Burt sits in front of the TV in the robe, channel surfs, his mind's on the clock more than the screen. Nearly eleven o' clock the night before New Year's Eve and he knows Kurt'll be out there now, Kurt and his boyfriend, doing god knows what. He tries not to think about it, but when he tries to think about other things - Kurt sitting cross-legged under the tree doling presents out on their strange late Christmas which felt all the more festive for it, in his pyjamas and hair not even combed and organising everyone very particularly to get the presents into the right piles - he thinks about that kid, out there, facing god knows what. He thinks about Kurt's boyfriend trying to pull the Santa hat he got him for Christmas (some little in-joke judging by Kurt's scowling-delighted-helpless face) onto Kurt's head and Kurt yelling at him about his *hair* and their scuffled little slap-fight and the way they were *laughing*, and he thinks about them out *there* ...

He tilts his beer, drinks, puts it down again, realises he's staring through an ad for women's razors. He channel hops some more.

Kurt's boyfriend, in a way that Burt really should have expected, is nothing like Burt expected him to be. Why would *Kurt* date someone in any way predictable? Burt had stood in the airport waiting for them with Carole holding his hand in both of hers to keep it from clenching, trying not to be obviously visibly amused by his low-churning wrath, because he wanted to like this guy, he didn't want to be *that father*, he *isn't* that father, anything that makes his son happy must be a good thing to Burt Hummel and he's not *that father* -

There had been guys before, Burt knew that, Kurt had ended a few phone calls with 'I have to go, I'm seeing someone tonight' like it was an afterthought. He'd never seemed very into any of the guys he dated, never seemed especially enthusiastic about any of it, was never very specific in relating their details to his father; 'some guy', every time. Some guy he met on the subway, in a coffee shop, just some guy. Burt suspects that his son is very bad at saying no to people - that Kurt can't say no to the whole city of New York is the problem, of course - and hell, he's a good looking kid, Kurt. Of course guys notice. And of course Burt wants him to be happy, Burt only and always wants Kurt to be happy, he's not *that father*, he has no problem with Kurt liking guys, it's just part of the whole bright and shiny Kurt package. It wasn't that there's a guy that Burt had a problem with. The problem, the problem ...

Kurt just had to go and fall in love with a superhero.

He drinks some more beer, swallows.

Not 'some guy'. A superhero. Kurt went out and found a *superhero* and fell in love with him so hard Burt's surprised his heart still has the capacity to beat, surprised it can manage to do anything but love him, so hard he *struggles* with it and Burt knows how he feels, of course he does. He knows how the Hummels fall in love; rarely, and truly. They don't fall in love to come out of it again. For better or worse, this is something Kurt has to live with now.

So part of the problem was just that Kurt is in love so head-first hard that if the guy turned out to be a douchebag, Burt was going to have to employ some pretty drastic measures, measures that might not be confined to threats. There was that. But more than that . . .

A superhero. What do you think about when you think about superheroes? Not Kurt, not someone so innocent and loving and gentle. Even amongst superheroes Kurt is *special*, Kurt stands out, Kurt isn't just one of them, Kurt is different, Kurt is *special*. What you think about when you think about superheroes is some enormous guy made out of muscles and Burt did not want to be *that father* but he was horribly afraid that Kurt would introduce him to some massive walking steroid factory who looked like he could bruise Kurt just by petting him and Burt's first words to him would be *if you so much as touch my son I will pull your throat out with my bare hands*.

"Please at least try to smile," Carole had said, squeezing his hand in hers. "You're going to terrify the poor boy right back onto the plane."

Burt worked his jaw. He didn't know that that would necessarily be a bad thing.

Only then he saw Finn through the crowd of people in arrivals and Carole rocked onto her tiptoes and squeezed his hand in excitement, and when Finn made his way over enough that they could see the little group he was with -

Well first of all there was Kurt to hug and Burt forgot everything else. Kurt hurried to him with that *smile* on him like he couldn't stop it and just dropped his bags to throw his arms around him and all Burt could do was pull him in tight in return, close his eyes, try not to choke on it. Every night he has to close his eyes on the thought of losing his son. Presented with Kurt, Kurt in front of him and safe and unhurt and *safe* he just wants to hold him so hard he'll never be able to leave again. So Burt hugged him close, pressed his body in hard, while Kurt said into his shoulder, "I missed you, Dad." and Burt doesn't really do big emotions in public but sometimes he really could cry.

Kurt's hands slipped a little on his back, Burt made himself relax his shoulders and let him back, first just holding him at arm's length to check - he doesn't really know what he looks for, just some confirmation he's real, alive and unhurt and really there, and Kurt always looks back just wryly amused and patient about it with his eyes still all alight with affection - and then he looked across at their travelling companions. One guy, tall and smiling crisply and professionally bright, held his hand out and said, "Mr Hummel, it's a pleasure to meet you!"

Burt had shook his hand and given him a narrow-eyed look, but it really could have been a lot worse. He disapproved of the guy's height (though he always forgets that Kurt is taller than he is in Burt's head, forgets that Kurt ever did grow bigger than a kid, he doesn't look *so* small next to this guy) and his air of overconfidence but at least he wasn't built like an aircraft carrier, so he said gruffly, "You too. And your brother - ?"

This anxiously-smiling little guy who looked nothing like him, barely looked more than a kid, dark-haired and dark-eyed and lifting his hand to shake overeager with nerves and blurting, "Mr Hummel I hope we're not intruding it was so generous of you to invite us -"

And before Burt could reply Kurt had taken the cuff of the brother's jacket between thumb and finger and rubbed it, just a little, just a bare tug, such a weirdly intimately subtle *calm down* gesture, Burt hadn't known what to say, Burt hadn't known how to *blink*. Kurt said like nothing had happened, "So is someone going to help us with the bags? It's your presents that make up all the weight, it's only fair."

The brother was still looking a bit too intensely at Kurt, like Kurt would show him what to do next, this was all pretty messed up, when Burt heard Carole saying, "- call me Carole." as the tall guy shook her hand and said, "I'm Cooper Anderson, Carole, I can write out autographs as soon as we're out of the public gaze -"

And Burt had had to do a moment's what-wait-whatting before his brain could catch up, because - because -

Because that almost-kid looking anxiously at Kurt like a dog waiting for its next command, very alert and very *happy* in obedience, that's the guy? That's the superhero Kurt's swooning over? That guy? He's -

Absolutely nothing Burt expected.

Which, from Kurt, is absolutely what he should have expected.

Kurt met the guy's, the kid's, eye, and a quick little smile flitted the corner of his mouth, sudden cast of sunlight through a windowpane. And then he lifted a bag and measured the weight on his arm, looked dubiously at Burt, said, "Are you okay to be carrying anything heavy? When was your last check-up?"

"Kurt, I lift tyres all damn day."

Kurt had that uneasy look in his eyes. "Careful," he said, the kid who goes out in the dark looking for guns to jump in front of, handing it up like he might hurt his dad with a holdall.

His boyfriend the superhero said, "I can carry -"

"You have two hands, Blaine, not six." Kurt said, and Finn said, "You want me to carry anything dude? Since you're too skinny to lift anything-"

Kurt went *crimson*, must have been Finn doing this in front of Blaine, the kid, who glanced across alarmed as Kurt grabbed his suitcase handle like he was going to swing it up and batter Finn's brains out with it. Finn backed up and put his hands up in a grinning surrender and the taller guy, the real brother, Cooper, started laughing Burt thinks out of sheer surprise. That was when Kurt put his embarrassed head down and started hurrying on out of arrivals, Blaine tripping to catch him up, and seriously, why did Burt ever think that Kurt would find the boyfriend Burt *expected* . . . ?

He takes a pull of beer, checks the time. Eleven. Could be anything happening out there, New York, could be any kind of craziness. And Kurt - Kurt who has the gentlest soul, his mother's caring soul, Kurt who breaks his heart for other people out in the middle of it all; and that kid, that hopeless happy kid he's in love with, do people *know* that's who they've got guarding them on a night? What do people think superheroes are? Like it's a job, like there's training? They're just kids trying to pick up the pieces the world leaves behind, they're just - they're just *kids* -

He thinks about 'Christmas Eve', the night before their Christmas anyway, the house full with Finn, Rachel and Cooper on the sofa with Rachel *leaning* this weird way towards Cooper, who didn't seem to mind. Carole and Burt took the armchairs leaving Kurt and Blaine the rug and some cushions to prop themselves up on, Burt trying not to notice the practised way they slotted themselves side by side, arm hooked almost through arm, fingers flexing and playing together, Kurt's ducked head and Blaine's little glance. They

watched *The Muppet Christmas Carol*. Rachel kept asking Cooper questions and smiling so glassily while he answered, which he seemed pretty happy to do. Kurt unfolded and stretched his legs out, and Blaine, apparently not thinking about it and not especially aware of doing it, raised Kurt's hand fingers woven through his and kissed the back of it, absently, eyes never leaving the screen.

Burt's seen the movie a million times, Kurt always did love it. So he'd had plenty of time to notice Kurt's thumb so gently stroking the side of Blaine's hand, and the way their shoulders leaned together like their collective centre of gravity was somewhere between their bodies. The way Blaine looked at Kurt when Kurt laughed, grinning wildly, like what was so great wasn't the movie being funny but Kurt laughing like that; the way when it got sad Kurt blinked quick and too hard, and Blaine's fingers tucked tighter through Kurt's without him even needing to check his face to know.

All Burt has ever wanted is for Kurt to be happy. All he's ever wanted is for Kurt to be safe and happy, to feel exactly as loved and precious as Burt knows he is. But the whole time he'd wanted it, he'd just never thought he'd see anyone else wanting exactly the same thing. He'd thought, yeah, there were guys, there would be guys, but he'd never actually thought that they ever would understand what Kurt means, that they would love him enough, Kurt is *special*. They couldn't love him as much as Kurt deserves, not as much as he needs, how could they? Burt didn't expect anyone else to ever understand him the right way, not how special he is, not that they'll never know anyone else like Kurt, not that they need to care about him the right way because he's *special* -

Why does Burt ever expect anything around Kurt, who doesn't even seem to *notice* the things the world expects . . . ?

While the credits rolled Carole said, "We should go to bed. It's a big day tomorrow."

Kurt and Blaine were both looking sleepy, drooped together on the cushions, keeping themselves from tangling completely, Burt suspected, because he was still there. They live off late nights, he knows that, it's not fair to make them feel they have to be more awake than they should be on their 'break'. So he'd made himself stand up and say, "Happy fake Christmas Eve, g'night guys." and Kurt looked up, sleepy and happy in the Christmas tree's lights, said, "Goodnight Dad." and Burt could hear the 'I love you' behind the words.

And Blaine had said, suppressing a yawn but with manners as manicured as Kurt's nails, "Goodnight, Mr Hummel." and he'd already given up on *call me Burt*. He just said, "You too, kid, sleep well."

In my son's bed.

His son, his son, his son. He'd had to walk upstairs with Carole hiss-whispering at him, "He seems nice." and his mind just a daze, leaving Kurt in the hands of some guy - some guy - he's not just some guy, he holds Kurt's hand like he understands it *matters* -

Burt blinks from the memory, finds he's looking at the Christmas tree still up instead of the TV. The lights are on, and all the glass ornaments from years ago, Kurt's mom's ornaments, they had maybe the only baby son in Lima who could be trusted not to break them. Burt had thought as Kurt got older he'd come to despise those ornaments, the glittery gaudy colours of them while Kurt so loves discreet adult neutrals in décor (he does listen when Kurt talks, even if he doesn't always know what the words mean), but while Kurt always rearranges the tree to be more aesthetically pleasing when he gets home for Christmas, he never takes them off, never replaces them. Some things are sacred. They still have all the original boxes. They wrap them in cotton wool when they put them away.

His son. What're you supposed to do? Like you're supposed to love them any less, like you can do that? All you can do is bear it, try your best and *bear* it, the knowledge of how fragile they are. His son who has handed himself heart and helpless soul over to some barely-more-than-a-boy, his son who almost disappeared once, his son who Burt *knows* has been desperately lonely and trying so desperately hard for a long, long time. What is he supposed to do? No-one ever said that love was easy. His son. He'd thought Kurt would play the same position on the high school football team he did, he'd thought he'd break girls' hearts the way clumsy teenage boys do, he'd thought - he'd been so stupid, once. To expect anything, when Kurt is to expectations as a lit fuse is to a firework.

His son who puts a mask on and swears that he won't stop, not when he can help people. Worst fight they ever had was when Burt found out about it, Kurt sobbing down the phone but refusing over and over, he won't stop, he *won't*, he's *helping* people. It'd been a bad time. Maybe one of the worst times. Burt hadn't been able to talk to him properly for weeks after that even though he knew every conversation could always be the last. He'd come back home at the end of that semester thinner, and he's never looked like he's caught up on sleep since.

Fake Christmas Eve, Kurt went to bed under Burt Hummel's roof with another boy, and his brother on a fold-out in the room because Burt hadn't known if he wanted to trust Kurt's boyfriend or not. Burt heard their quiet voices as they creaked down the corridor to his room. He imagined hands held, and how maybe it wasn't the Christmas tree, maybe Kurt just *glows* when he's with him.

He takes a pull of beer, and wonders what they're doing now.

*

The alarm was *their* fault, stupid criminals. Shooting in panic, walls torn up by bullets, Phalanx forced back in his shields by the fury of them and the Ghost threw a flash-bang into their midst. Blinded, one of them swore and staggered sideways and *banged* shoulder-first through a door that rang the whole building with the alarm, shrill enough to hurt.

The Ghost's pissed faces are really surprisingly sexy, Phalanx can't even explain it. Maybe it's because it's an expression Kurt would never wear, Kurt puts on a polite, eerie little smile that means *oh my god, you really shouldn't have done that, I am now going to make you wish you'd never been born just so you didn't have to live as far as hearing me say this to you*. The Ghost just looks *pissed*.

Things that make the Ghost this particular kind of pissed: loud and annoying noises, criminal bombast (don't tell him you're going to fuck his shit up, he will make you eat sidewalk), stains on the suit, criminals who think they have a plan (the amount of criminals who just do not seem to grasp the *ghost* thing is ridiculous), people who keep trying to take photographs when he's asked them not to, criminals with dogs ("Why bring animals into it?" he'd said sounding so *aggrieved* about it, wasting quite a few utility belt tricks knocking them out unhurt), criminals who spit (oh god don't *spit*, seriously) . . .

There is the other kind of pissed. There's the kind of pissed he gets when someone is shocked and crying and what's happened is worse than a stolen purse. There's the kind of pissed he gets when people take hostages. There's the kind of pissed he got when those guys didn't just mug that old man with the stick but kicked him down and kept on kicking. He gets really, blackly, *coldly* pissed, the kind of pissed that gets people haunted, that makes the screams ring off the walls and he doesn't even flinch.

It's a bad world. Sometimes he gets pissed. Phalanx doesn't especially blame him.

So the cops are on their way and the Ghost is wearing one of his sexier pissed faces, and they're running out of time for bringing these guys down and getting out before the cops arrive in all these stupidly confusing identical office corridors. Phalanx is running fast and hard, chasing a guy with a gun around the corner of a corridor where -

He only gets a fraction of a second to work it all out.

Two of them have pried the doors to the elevator open, maybe looking for a quick way out, though with the alarm ringing the elevators aren't working. Their guns work just great; a flung shield knocks one of them sideways but he has to throw a shield up to save himself from the other's bullets in a hell of a hurry, co-ordination shot even if he isn't; he trips, hits his own shield with a yelp, dissolves it and tumble-rolls through where it was -

Right through the open doors where the elevator isn't.

He hears the Ghost's voice cry like *he's* in pain, "*Phalanx-!*"

He does what he does; he makes shields.

*

oops I tripped and wrote ghostlanx smut, untitled showersex drabble, very NC-17!

*Sometimes I wonder why all the superhero fandoms are so obsessed with bondage, it's some really weird collective kink of ours, what do you think the people who like supers but *don't* like bondage do? They can probably only read like 10% of the fic :/*

Some people don't like bondage? I. I . . . what if the handcuffs were fluffy?

Just show them madalichelane's Ghost in leg spreaders, it could convert the Pope.

oh god you shouldn't I can't that art it makes me I can't

Glad to see that fandom is having its usual nuanced, mature discussion of profoundly important matters this evening.

*sometimes I have this nightmare that I'm back in high school and I'm naked and my teacher is paleandghostly and I *haven't done my homework**

Ghost cosplay! The mask's the hardest, seriously. Anyone wanna dress up as Phalanx so I can bend you over something? ;)

Dating: the phanghost way! XD

*Reccing one of Blackbindings' old ones, I can't help it, yes I'm rereading through her entire masterlist again: Restless. I know it's like the angstiest thing ever but I'd forgotten what it *does* to me, I feel like she just pulled my intestines out through my navel. I know a lot of people have done the 'the Ghost's a real ghost' trope but the way this one creeps up on you, how you have to *work out* how he was killed and what happened to him, it seriously made me want to throw up everything I'd ever eaten and then the end is just all the feelings, all of them, it's agony and it's ecstatic and how can you come through all of *that* and end with that much hope? Read it. Read the warnings, but do read it. Pre-Phalanx. God if she'd write a sequel with Phalanx in it I might never stop crying out of sheer pathetic gratefulness ;_;*

Prayer circle for photos of the Ghost and Phalanx making out. Fandom powers ignite <3

Pretty Gritty City, ghostlanx!fanmix, the action remix.

does anyone know which prison puckzilla is in so i can write him?

'Dear Puckzilla, so sorry you're banged up again and the Ghost is banging someone else, HO HO'

Please don't bait the ghostzilla shippers, fucksake like we need another flame war

Fic: Good Girls Do, cisgirl!ghostlanx, PG-13, action, romance, a little angst

Fic: It's In His Kiss, R, the Ghost has a weakness and Phalanx knows it. Oh look, makeouts <3

I hope the criminals all get flu and Phalanx gets NYE off.

*Gifset, the Ghost then and now. Spooky. You just - I can't even. You just *glow*. The happier he gets the more I cry it's like our feelings are on a see-saw ;_;*

Angel!Ghost and devil!Phalanx chibis, Phalanx is still stupidly cute it's hard to make him not =/

I still worry about him (them, now) getting enough sleep, like, all the time. Spooky, don't hurt yourself over us, rest when you need to. You two take care of each other <3

New username > Theghostwearswhite

*Swear to fucking god if they get any cuter they'll kill me. They'll kill all of us. Mass fangirl murder. They'll become accidental supervillains through the sheer power of their *cute*.*

We were discussing bondage, I assumed that meant people wanted more bondage. Easy on the Chains Darling, Ghostlanx, NC-17, bondage, oral, toys, anal

*Okay I caught this earlier on the roof of my apartment building oh my god oh my god okay so I went up to um dispose of some cat litter that got too stinky to wait for garbage day don't tell my super I do that but when I got up there THEY WERE THERE like just WALKING ACROSS THE ROOF talking and they didn't see me so I whipped my cell out and really shitty quality recording I'll post a transcript too but *SCREAMING*:*

(Pre-recording) Phalanx: [didn't catch this until] a mob hit? Why can't they put a hit on me too?

*Ghost: You are *ridiculous*.*

*(Recording begins) Phalanx: I'm worth a *little* hit, just a few thousand dollars, how come you get all the cool mob hits?*

Ghost: [laughs]

Phalanx: [teasing] What?

Ghost: [still laughing a bit] You are so -

Phalanx: Ghost - [Then they like, JUMPED OVER THE EDGE OF THE BUILDING and I nearly screamed but I heard their voices moving off I think they were on one of Phalanx's shield-slides?] (Recording ends)

So, basically, I give you a world exclusive: that's what the Ghost laughing sounds like. I don't think that's actually ever been recorded before. SPOOKYYYY ;_;

DYING WHALE NOISE

I have a new ringtone!

oh my god that is actually the cutest thing fucking ever fuck that's me done nope all over

the MOST PRECIOUS

*I know we take the good times and the bad, this is the fandom that holds its vigils, but oh my god, it is a *good* time to be a fanghost <3*

My babiesssssss ;_;

I swear to fucking god ELVES laugh like that is anything about him not just absurdly flawless?

*oh my god I've never heard him sound like that. I'm so glad he has Phalanx, they are *so* incredibly beautiful together and he's just a million times happier than he ever seemed to be before idk I know we don't like know his life or anything really but he just lights up now he was always an angel and it's like now he finally knows it*

crying

Reblog if you've ever been rescued by the Ghost. Let Figgins know what an assbutt he's being. We love you, spooky <3

Reblog if you've ever been rescued by Phalanx. (let the new guy get a look in!)

Reblog if you've ever been rescued by the most courteous gay supercouple in New York, and fuck the right wing media asshats. SUPERBOYFRIENDS ARE SUPER

Hey I just met you

and this is crazy

but here's my number

so threesome maybe?

No?

Can I just bring a camcorder?

No seriously, guys, thank you. That was - that was bad, thank you. But seriously, here's my number? :)

*

He hits his own shield hard, and starts trying to pick himself up still dazed; he fell maybe a floor and a half before he stopped himself, and he'll have a hell of a bruise but *hell*, when does he ever not have bruises anymore . . . ?

Overhead he can hear yelling, gunshots, screams, thudding confusion. Then quiet, apart from that howling alarm. He puts a hand to his head and looks up as a pale-hooded face peers through the elevator doors and the Ghost's relief closes his eyes for a second, he just holds the doors and hangs there like he can't breathe right. Then while Phalanx sits up, starting to say, "Sorry, my b-"

- he swings himself through the doors, braces a boot on either side of the elevator shaft and scrapes his hands down the walls for balance as he lets himself slide down towards Phalanx.

Whatever Phalanx expected him to do next, it really wasn't that. The Ghost brings himself to a stop just above him, says, "Are you okay?" and Phalanx can't make words. The Ghost looks at him so confused, then his face changes as he understands, goes blank and eyes-wide the way it does when he realises that Phalanx finds him sexy like it's *news* to him that he's sexy. Then a little smirk twitches at his mouth and he says, "I can get them wider, you know."

"- *fuck*, Ghost-"

Running feet overhead, they both look up - the Ghost landing neatly next to Phalanx on his slippery net of shields, Phalanx grabbing his hand and arm to balance him - as a cop looks down through the open doors, stares, aims a gun down at them -

Before she's even opened her mouth the Ghost has pulled Phalanx's hand and leapt for the closed elevator doors next to them; they pass straight through them, land on their feet already breaking into a run, hand in hand down the corridor and flickering out of sight as they go.

*

He heads into the kitchen to see if there's anything unhealthy left over after Christmas to snack on or if Kurt surreptitiously tossed it all in the trash before he left. There's still some of the joint from Christmas

dinner left so he pulls out mayo (light) and mustard and some bread and makes a sandwich, even though what he's really thinking about, really, is just a mug of warm milk and the way Kurt moves around this kitchen like it's the place he's most comfortable in in the whole world.

He doesn't watch the news so much anymore. Not if something might happen in New York. Not if he might find out that something's happened to his kid through the TV. If he doesn't watch, he doesn't know; until Kurt tells him, things haven't happened. How else do you cope? His kid turns invisible and walks through walls, Burt had to leave reality behind a long time ago now; his kid puts a cloak on and goes out in the dark every night, he had to forget optimism and pessimism and just live with his head in the sand as much as he could, because either of the other options are just asking for his heart to break.

It'd been hard to get them alone to talk over 'Christmas day'. Finn and Carole he could talk super-stuff in front of fine, but neither Rachel nor Blaine's brother know, and nor do they need to know (he likes that Rachel girl well enough but she couldn't keep her mouth shut to save her - or Kurt's - life, and he doesn't really know if he trusts or likes Cooper, who wears a smile and looks somewhere through you when you're talking to him, like he's only listening enough to know when he can start speaking again). He'd eventually caught them in the kitchen on the evening, since Rachel was in the lounge practically leaning into Blaine's brother's lap and Finn was sitting there arms folded, scowling, not willing to leave them alone. So Kurt went to fix Blaine a snack and Blaine followed him like a Christmas morning puppy and Burt followed them like a half-trustful father, and found Kurt doing exactly what Burt's doing now; fixing a sandwich, only with Blaine hugging him from behind, arms sturdy around his stomach, cheek propped on his back and eyes all distant and thoughtful.

"Of course you keep it in the fridge," Kurt had said, slicing the sandwich in half and then sucking mustard from the side of his thumb. "It gets that crust."

"But then it's cold."

"What on earth difference does that make? Put it back for me."

"The fridge is for cold things," Blaine had mumbled, lifting a hand to take the jar from Kurt and peeling himself from his back, then spotting Burt in the doorway. "Oh, um, hi, Mr Hummel."

Kurt had glanced up, Kurt all mellow-happy-bright in a way Burt hadn't seen him in - well. Maybe ever. "Do you want a sandwich too? Inside the door, Blaine."

Blaine had closed the refrigerator behind him, gave a little shy shrug. "He makes really good sandwiches. He makes really good, well, everything."

"I'm good, Kurt. Just wanted . . . just wanted to talk a little. While you're home."

Blaine had said, "Um, do you want me to . . ."

"No, kid, it's about time I talked to you too. Right?"

Kurt just smiled, and carried the plates to the kitchen table. Blaine sat politely next to him, funny to see anyone with fussier manners than Kurt right there next to Kurt but then, Kurt's fussy in public, safe from judgement in his own home he speaks with his mouth full and leans across the dinner table to smack Finn in the arm when they're squabbling. Maybe he's the same. Maybe it's all about comfort, and he can't quite sit comfortable opposite his boyfriend's father. Nice to know Burt does have some authority in this relationship.

He carries his sandwich back through to the lounge, not that there's anything on the TV and he knows it. Nice being near the tree though, all lit up like that. Makes the place feel warmer. Cosier. It's nice. It was a lot nicer when it was crowded around with family and almost-family, but they can't be at home all the time, Burt knows that, Burt knows he doesn't own his son anymore, but the quiet of the house without him, there's too much room for memory and regret and worry, all the space where Kurt isn't, the lack of him in his room, all the ghosts he leaves behind . . .

At the kitchen table Kurt had said, mostly to his half of the sandwich, "I do want to come home more, Dad, I know - I know I haven't been good about it. I'm sorry. I just . . . I lose track of time."

Burt didn't look at the boyfriend's lowered head, though he did remember, *it's killing him, knowing that it's letting them hurt or letting you down*. He'd thought that the kid got Kurt, the stuff that really goes on in Kurt's head, the fact that Kurt is *special*. He'd wanted to *know*, though. "I know you're busy. But you know why I worry, Kurt, I am not bein' some paranoid stifling *dad* over this, you know -"

"I know." He looked up, gave a guilty little smile. "Sorry."

He'd sighed, gestured between them. "So. How's this shift pattern of yours work? You actually *sleeping* any nights now?"

Kurt looked at Blaine while he chewed but Blaine had his mouth full too, and Kurt flicked his eyes to the ceiling, swallowed, said, "We work best when we're together. But yes, Dad, at least one night a week I go to bed ridiculously early. It's kind of hard to sleep, though, knowing -"

"Shields, Kurt." Blaine sang quietly, to the table.

"Oh like you don't wait up for me when I'm out."

"We're working the system out," Blaine said to Burt, aiming to be diplomatic, while Kurt snorted and folded his arms.

"It's a twenty-four seven job, Dad, it's no-one's fault. We don't know when people are going to need us."

"I-" Blaine said, and stopped when they both looked at him, and took a little steadying breath. "I know you worry, sir, and I know you have good reason to worry. But he is - incredible, out there, he is - they honestly can't lay a hand on him. He's just - he's just incredible."

Burt chews his sandwich, looks at the tree glowing away like all the world is safe and warm. He's so desperately earnest, this kid Kurt fell in love with. He means things so desperately much. He talks about Kurt like the most important thing in the world is understanding Kurt properly, like it matters *so much*. Burt swallows his mouthful. Well. Yeah.

Kurt had touched the side of his boyfriend's hand on the table, just a little press of the fingers, then said, "We look after ourselves. We know there are people counting on us to do that."

Burt had remembered - Burt remembers now, Burt will never forget - a telephone call from Finn, his rasped, struggling voice, "*Burt, hi, it's - he's okay, he is okay but um - something - happened.*"

And how Burt had closed his eyes, and his knees had folded him to sit.

Things happen. He knows that. That photograph of that fire, Kurt looking like he should've been *down* already with that firefighter holding up oxygen so he could breathe - Jesus, it was on every newspaper, it nearly killed Burt even if it hadn't killed Kurt. *People counting on us* - damnit, Kurt, do you get how *much*? Do you *know* what it's like watching you do this, do you understand -

The kid had said to his own left knee, "I, think of my job out there as primarily shielding him." He flicked his glance to Kurt, who was watching him evenly back. "All the rest is . . . he's the most important part. You are," he said, shrugging. "Kurt, you know you *matter* to people, I know you know that and I don't want anything happening to you but -"

"Ghost, Blaine." Kurt sang, quietly.

"- you're not a ghost, you're a *person*. And you mean *so much* to *so many* people. It's like protecting the president or something," he said, giving another grinning shrug this time. "Because it's not only him we'd lose if anything happened to him, we'd lose - Kurt there are people who just . . ."

"I have seen your website, Blaine."

Burt said, "What website?"

Blaine took a shifty bite of sandwich. Kurt rolled his eyes. "'He' has a fan club. They draw pictures and write strange - things. I do not advise you to google for it. I know, Blaine, I know, the Ghost represents more than I do, I do get that."

Blaine swallowed his mouthful. "I don't know if you do. They *love* you, Kurt. They seriously just . . . they *love* you. They worry about you and they care about you and they manage their own lives better just because they know *you* exist. I do take my responsibilities very seriously, sir." to Burt again, so earnest again, while Kurt just watched his face quiet as a cat and as hard to read. "I won't let anything happen to him, I would let them take me first. It's like -"

"Blaine," Kurt had said, something of the quiet pull of his voice pulled on something in Burt, having to face his so-poised son so acutely, utterly vulnerable.

"- it's like I just had to have shields, of course it was shields, because they're for *him*. Like they always were. Like they were meant to be. For you."

Kurt was playing with his sandwich, head down. "I'm about as safe as I'm ever going to be, Dad. I really do mean that."

Burt looks at the Christmas tree and remembers that phone call, a few years back now, Kurt's slurring low voice, the rubble in it like the burning scarred his throat; *"I'm fine, Dad, just told Rachel I have flu. Should be fine in a couple of days."*

"Should be fine or are fine? What the hell happened to you?"

"Building went down. I got out. I'm - I'm fine now."

"You don't sound fine t'me Kurt, you sound like a kid who just put himself in a building on fire -"

"Dad I'm fine. I saw a doctor, m'fine, just, I'm tired."

"You don't sound right, did this doctor check your head, you're not concussed or anything - ?"

"It's not my head it's the, I think it's the painkillers, I just need to sleep, Dad -"

"Why the hell've you got painkillers?"

"Dad I need to sleep."

"Kurt what the hell happened to you -"

"I'm sorry, Dad," sounding so plaintive and wrecked and *young*, exhausted to the edge of tears, *"Dad, I'm sorry I just . . . Dad, I need to sleep . . ."*

Does it help, knowing he's not alone? Knowing that if he goes into a burning building someone will go in after him? As hard as it is to entrust him to someone else, as much as it *hurts* that this Blaine kid will have something of Kurt that Burt never will, that he *can* protect Kurt like this - as much as it hurts, isn't it better knowing that there's someone there for him, at the end of the night . . . ?

He remembers the kid saying to him, quite seriously in front of this Christmas tree while Kurt was still upstairs packing to leave, "Thank you, sir, for inviting us, now of all times. I - really don't know how to say how much I appreciate it."

They're not close, he remembers Kurt saying. His parents. He'd drawn his breath in, around the closed ball of hurt inside, the hurt that too much love is, and he'd made it sound almost normal. "You're welcome any time, kid. You're important to Kurt, you're important to us. Thank you for -"

Bringing him back, the whole of him, not leaving half of him stranded in New York and *old* with worry this time of year, because I could always bully him home for Christmas but all I ever got was a ghost.

Keeping him safe, in the blackest parts of the night, when he shouldn't be in danger but he just refuses to believe that anyone should be, if he can help it.

Treating him right, because I don't know if you know how deep it runs in him and how much you of all people could hurt him, and nothing I do could ever make him love you any less.

. . . making him smile like that, because I don't think I've seen my son this innocently happy since he was a kid and his mom was still here and Christmas never had a hole in it and he never knew it even could have one.

Blaine had just nodded, serious and sincere. "Thank you, sir."

What can you do when your children grow up, which you never really did believe could happen? What do you do when they move off to the big city, become a superhero, fall in love . . . ?

If you're Kurt Hummel's father then you just find a way to bear it, because all those things you didn't expect, all the things you couldn't have planned for, not for *him*, Kurt will always find a way to do every last one of them.

The Christmas tree glows, like a tiny distant city at night, lights and lights and lights.

Kurt never does what he expects. And he had never been able to bring himself to believe that Kurt could *survive* this thing he does. Only now, now he's not alone, now he's got a shield at his back . . .

Burt shuffles his shoulders in his new robe and it's warm and comfortable and he'll wear it more, maybe. He finishes his sandwich, and wipes the mustard spill off the sleeve, and turns the lights off on the tree as he heads to bed.

New Year's Eve tomorrow.

Maybe for the first year, his one and only resolution won't be to finally find a way to talk Kurt out of this thing before it kills him . . .

*

"All I'm saying is, it's a waste of police resources." the cop says, the female cop, while her sergeant rubs the back of his neck unhappily. "We have nearly two dozen crooks to cuff and bring in, half of them are whining for medics whether they need 'em or not, and we do not have the on-scene resources to go chasing capes all night. You know what they're *like*, they're either a mile away already or invisible, no way in hell we'll even find a hair -"

"Commissioner Figgins -"

"With all due respect, Sergeant, Commissioner Figgins isn't here, and *neither are they!*"

The sergeant nods gloomily. "If anyone at the station asks -"

"If anyone at the station asks then our resources were used to the optimum whatever, we brought in all the criminals we could." She stops, and looks confused. "I just got a really strong whiff of coffee. Did someone go on a coffee run an' not ask 'round -?"

The Ghost stays invisible until he's right around the corner into the alleyway, where Phalanx is sitting on top of a knocked-over trash can, humming quietly. "Street's still stuffed with cops, they're not much interested in finding us." the Ghost says, handing him his cup. "Move up?"

"Could sit on my lap," Phalanx says, but fails utterly to keep a straight face, and does shuffle up for him to sit beside him. "It's weird being a 'criminal'. I've never even had a speeding ticket."

"Mm. Some of them don't care. Some of them are very sweet and helpful." The trash can isn't the most comfortable seat in the world and he shuffles a little, his thigh bumping Phalanx's until he gets settled in the least-uncomfortable position he can manage.

"You've saved a lot of their lives."

"*You've* saved a lot of their lives. All those shields." He tilts his cup, and hot coffee on a cold night, with a warm body beside his, is a pleasure unstifled even by the scent of garbage. "Some of them hate us," he

concedes, and it - fades a little of the warmth in him, remembering how much, how specifically and venomously some of them do hate them, some of the things he's heard them say. Phalanx's hand finds his, squeezes a little, and he looks across, puts a thin smile on, looks down at his cup again and sits holding hands with him. "It's strange."

"I find it strange that everyone doesn't love you."

"Well, you're biased, aren't you."

"I think I have a perfectly objective viewpoint on the matter."

"Which you would, being biased."

Phalanx has managed to duck his head down, squirm it upwards so he's inside the hood with him, nose tips brushing, the Ghost keeping his head down and twisting an ankle a little, trying not to smile too much.

"Hey," Phalanx says.

"What?" the Ghost says, and his mouth is very close.

"Could we maybe head home early tonight? Since tomorrow night's likely to be crazy and, um. I want to . . ."

He lets go of the Ghost's hand so he can instead slide an arm around his back, underneath the cloak, tucking his body closer in one pull. And the Ghost -

Should say no, we're patrolling, we took 'Christmas' off, we have work to do.

But his body's all warm and hard and real and there, and his mouth is a little dry.

"Okay," he whispers, and Phalanx settles his cheek on his shoulder, keeping him held close around the waist. The Ghost takes another sip of coffee, and closes his eyes, and tilts his cheek into Phalanx's hair; he's tired, whenever he actually does stop and think about it, he *is* tired. Going home with him now, going back to a bed, would be so close to his concept of paradise that it feels a little dreamlike that it's actually going to happen . . .

He keeps his head over Phalanx's, eyes still closed. "Could we maybe sleep first and have sex in the morning?"

Phalanx makes a little noise that might be a laugh, and the Ghost sighs into his hair, and doesn't raise his head.

Chapter Seventeen

He tries to draw it out. It would be so easy to just plunge and plunge to break but it feels so *good*, he tries to draw it out. Mouths Kurt's neck, pauses to tongue the taste of his skin from the side of his throat and feel Kurt's body *roll* underneath his, Kurt's fingers tightening on his ass where he's got Blaine pulled as deep into himself as he can; draws his mouth down his flesh while Kurt whispers little nonsense pleadings of his name at the headboard, and Blaine licks a nipple into his mouth.

"Blaine fuck Blaine -"

Neither of them are much given to swearing unless they *really* mean it.

Kurt's hands claw up his back, drag of his arms up Blaine's sweat-tacky skin, wrapping clumsily around his head, forearm cool with sweat pressing his cheek, fingers pulling deliciously in his hair. Blaine circles his tongue and sucks hard and Kurt *gasps*, squeezes his fingers in his hair, curses and gasps and starts *laughing*, and the jogging of his body is too much, rich and restless, desperate pleasure, Blaine can't bear it, his hips have to *move*. Kurt hums his approval, stroking at his hair, pulling him closer by the shoulders, "Blaine, Blaine -"

Blaine lets go of his nipple to shush him because Cooper's in the apartment but Kurt is just *laughing* helplessly, Blaine gets dragged along with it, broken breathless laughter at his chest before he hauls himself up, rocking Kurt backwards, hiking his legs up with him so he can lean down to hiss to his mouth, "Sssh." and Kurt can pull him in closer into a kiss.

Rocking, rocking, rocking. Kurt kisses him again and closes his fingers in his hair, and nuzzles the side of his forehead to Blaine's, Blaine feels his eyelashes brush his cheek to close. "Blaine."

Kurt, Kurt, Kurt.

Afterwards Kurt lays small kisses along his shoulder before Blaine tucks him closer, folded into each other side by side, hearts beating their hard way down. Kurt's feet slip to fit over his ankles. "Blaine."

Gravelly and slow because *oh* fuck he comes half his IQ out when he's with Kurt, "Nmh?"

Kurt nestles happily closer. "Love you."

Sweet warm happy safe perfect boyfriend in his bed. The smile takes his whole face as he hugs him, as tight as they can get now, skin to skin the length of their bodies. "I love you too."

This will be the first year he'll spend the entirety of with Kurt. This is going to be the best year *ever*.

*

Showered and getting ready to head out, Kurt in that clinging suit on the bed pulling his boots on, Blaine dressed but for the mask, sitting at his computer drumming his fingers over replying to a question from another fanghost; *You never seem to reblog much of the Phalanx stuff, you used to reblog *anything* with the Ghost in it, do you just not like Phalanx? He makes the Ghost really happy :(*

It seems kind of existentially troublesome to say that he doesn't 'like' Phalanx, sitting there wearing his armour. He doesn't really know what to say, because it's true, he doesn't reblog much stuff about Phalanx. *Any* stuff about him, really, unless the gif is mostly the Ghost. It's just . . . it's just so strange. Sometimes he does see things about himself that make the blush of the joy *burn*, people - people really love him. Phalanx. They *like* him. It makes him so *happy* in his heart, it's this proud-fast flutter, but, but, but it just feels like that step too far into narcissism to actually put it in his own blog. Kurt still doesn't want to know most of what his fans get up to (Blaine sends him the gifs of cats in cloaks because Kurt can say he doesn't think it's funny but he does), and he knows what Kurt means. It's strange. When people start - attributing things to you. Suggesting how and why you might be who you are. It feels -

It feels strangely like something being taken. No, he wants to say, grabbing after what someone's said. No, it's not like that, I'm sorry but it's *not* -

Kurt's right, though. Blaine of all people really didn't come into this innocent of how the internet would react. He has completely blacklisted anything tagged non-con or dub-con by now; the thought makes him feel sick. The thought of - he just doesn't want to think about it.

On the bed Kurt is snapping his belts into place, adjusting the shoulder one to not cut in, then stretching his arms up and arching his back, clicking his bones into place, eyes screwed up and looking very happy.

Blaine drums the mouse. What can he say? 'It would be an exercise in absolute egotism to reblog that stuff?' 'If my boyfriend found out I was reblogging it he might actually die from laughing?' 'I disapprove of the camera angles, I should always be shot from the right'?

Kurt stands clipping the cloak on, shaking it straight, and picks up his mask and that little pot of glue, leaning into Blaine's mirror to work. He looks up, sudden and startled, when Blaine *laughs* at the screen, and looks over eyebrows raised. "Do I even want to know?"

"Just - nothing." Blaine says, grinning. "No, you probably don't, it's fine."

Kurt rolls his eyes, and turns back to the mirror to fix his mask.

Blaine responds, *I guess I just don't ship them :/*

Then he stands up and kisses Kurt - suddenly the Ghost, mask on and cloak falling around himself as he stands - as if to wipe out what he's just typed (it's not true, not at all, they are Blaine's one and only five-ever endgame OTP) and lets the Ghost fix his mask on, lifts the Ghost's hood for him, watches him smile back from the shadow inside. The Ghost takes his hand, and Phalanx watches him, the both of them, fade from sight.

They walk out of the building hand in hand, as invisible as thought, and down into the subway to start the night.

*

They're heading to their warehouse to spar, for at least the first part of the evening. Phalanx would object, sometimes, that he doesn't still need to be treated like a superhero with training wheels, that he's actually done this on his own before now, that he's not the *sidekick*, but - but when they do spar, which they do because the Ghost likes to keep an eye on his progress, the difference between them shows up within seconds. It's the scale of difference between four months and five years of intensively learning how not to get killed. The Ghost teases him about how he hates 'losing' but the truth is -

The truth is there is a great deal of astonishment and some certain *relief* in how good the Ghost is. He doesn't use his powers when they spar and Phalanx still can't even touch him, it's actually ridiculous. He'll sway back with his punches, always quickly swooped out of the way, occasionally batting a hand off with the back of his wrist, eyes on Phalanx's - hands, shoulders, he seems to know how he's going to move next from how he breathes -

Once, genuinely frustrated by the Ghost skipping sideways and letting Phalanx trip himself staggering clumsily forwards with too much force and nothing to connect with, he turned and skimmed a shield at

him. He regretted it instantly, and as soon as the Ghost tucked his head out of the way and *stared* at him, he regretted it for a very different reason.

Phalanx hates to lose. The Ghost's the one who flipped him onto his back, holding his arm twisted by the wrist with a boot over his neck and a pouted glare down at him just to prove he could.

(Actually he's kind of sexy when he gets like that, even if *Phalanx's* ass would really prefer not being slammed into a warehouse floor, please.)

They're approaching their warehouse - still occasionally combed over by the cops looking for more evidence against the slippery Mottas and not yet sold on, if it even would find a buyer given the economy - when the Ghost stops *Phalanx* with a hand to his chest, and *Phalanx* follows his gaze to the cars parked all around it. They're not cop cars. They're kind of clunky for the kind of cars the Mottas use, and they're too smart to come back to this warehouse anyway. So who's in *their* warehouse? *Phalanx* scowls at the affront, as the Ghost puts a finger to his lips and presses him into the shadows of an alleyway, and fades out of sight.

He's back three minutes later, fading pale and dazed-looking back into view in front of him. He starts to say something and his voice rasps; he clears his throat, says like his mouth's been anaesthetised, tongue clumsy and words fuzzy, "They have a bomb."

"They - what? Who is it?"

"They, um. I think they're what you'd call terrorists. They have a bomb."

"So we need to shut them down before someone gets hurt. How many of them are there?"

The Ghost swallows and says, voice softly rasped, "*Phalanx* they have a *nuclear bomb*."

That makes him stop. He opens his mouth and the closes it again. He tries a second time but it doesn't really help. His brain, his ever-chattering ever-chirpy brain, has been silenced. It can't process that information, or else it doesn't want to, so it's simply ceased to function. He eventually manages, because time is moving and he has to say *something*, "Oh."

The Ghost stares some way through *Phalanx* for a moment longer, then says, "This is." He shakes his head, opens a compartment on his belt and takes out the cheap throwaway cell he has - they both have - for

calling the cops, when there's no other phone around to use, no 'civilian' cell they can borrow. "Someone must know how to, um. I. My hands have gone really weird." He presses the cell between his palms, flexes and folds his fingers a few times. "I just, Phalanx, that - this whole *city* -"

"- I know."

"I don't even know - this isn't what I -"

Phalanx might not have even the spark of an idea how to really deal with the fact that there's a nuclear bomb in the hands of terrorists a hundred feet away, but he does know for a fact that he doesn't want the Ghost to look so *lost*. He closes his hands around his, around the cell, says, "Hey. You can do this. This is what you do. You save people."

"One at a time. From muggers and occasional idiot supervillains. Eight *million* people, Phalanx -"

"They're all going to be fine, because we can do this."

The Ghost stares at him looking *dumb* with this before something in his eyes, something in his jaw, hardens, and now he looks stronger, and pissed. "Blow up my city. The *hell* they will." and he takes a hand back to dial, and lifts the cell to his ear.

Phalanx holds his hand while he talks, thumb stroking the Ghost's glove nervously, because - because a nuclear bomb. Because he doesn't know how big it is or how much damage it can do but he knows how *insidiously* evil those things are, that surviving the blast - which, at this distance, they won't - means only that you walk with Death's hand on one shoulder, waiting to see what he'll do next. So he swallows, and strokes the Ghost's hand, and the Ghost says eyes closed into the cell, "It really is me, and I really don't want to be calling this one in, believe me. We need a bomb disposal squad. We need a nuclear bomb disposal squad, I don't know if they're different, this is seriously not my *area*. You think if this was a prank this is what someone would pick? While we're having this argument they have a *nuclear bomb*, can you *prioritise* a little here, if it's a prank it wastes some police time, if it's real it *wipes this city off the map* - where are you right now, by the way? Okay, so, don't send a bomb squad, let us do it on our own, enjoy your nuclear fallout. Yes. *Thank you*."

Phalanx strokes his hand. The Ghost stares at the cell for a moment, frozen, and something changes in his eyes; he hangs up, and -

It's like he unfolds. His back straightens, his shoulders go back, his head raises, and Phalanx can't take his eyes off him. He says, "Do you think that your shields could contain the blast, if this went wrong?"

Phalanx sees in his eyes the calculation at the forefront and the horror behind it, the horror he can't let himself feel because there isn't the time for it. He finds he's shaking his head before he's even found the words, and makes himself stop. "I - don't know. It, it would depend on the blast, how strong it was. I think. If the shields did hold through that, maybe, but - not forever."

"Long enough for people to evacuate."

"I don't know. Yes, maybe. Some."

"You would die," the Ghost says, stating a fact, and then his jaw twitches, and at his eyes Phalanx has to clench his own teeth for a second.

"Everyone would. If I didn't."

"You can leave now. I'm not even asking you to-"

"No way in hell, on your own, Ghost, *no*."

"I wish you would," he says, voice cracking, suddenly helpless again, but then he squeezes his hand and draws a breath in, and forces the brightness in his eyes down. "We need to shield it off in there. We need them to not be able to set it off before the cops get here. I'm going to get you close enough to throw a shield around it, I can try and take them down. Can you - leave the floor unshielded, for now? So I can get inside if I need to?"

"- yes." Phalanx blinks, finds his own back is straighter, it's something of that authoritative organisational *efficiency* the Ghost has when he's determined that drags Phalanx right into line alongside it, caught in his current and sailing straight. "Yes. I can."

The Ghost says, "Whatever happens, you won't be on your own, I'm not leaving you."

"If it - went wrong -"

"I'm not leaving you."

He whispers, "I wish you would." and the Ghost wraps his arms around his shoulders, kisses him. Phalanx's hand gets in underneath the hood, fingers folding in his hair, clamping him in hard by the waist and kissing back urgently, tongue and teeth for half a second's pull and then the Ghost finds his hand and turns him after himself, fading from sight, towards 'their' warehouse, very much no longer theirs.

Inside -

They've rigged lights circling the work area and there are maybe sixteen white guys, packing things away, getting ready to leave. The - the device, the thing, is squatting in the middle of the floor like some malignant squid, clumsily spilling wires, and it actually has an actual timer like something out of a cartoon. It's currently being set by one guy with an older man at his back, loosely holding a gun. The guy on his knees *beeps* it through a series of numbers while everyone else - does what they're doing, and keeps their distance, heads turned a little away like the bomb exudes some evil aura. It sort of does.

The Ghost walks them over, invisible, holding Phalanx's hand tight. The guy on his knees says, raspily, "How long?"

"Well now," the man with the gun says - he's middle-aged, wearing a blue shirt, gun in one hand and something about the lines around his eyes suggests that he's not able to stare any less intensely than he is, even if he wasn't currently staring at a nuclear bomb. "How long for you young'uns to get out?"

"Better give us a few hours for the driving, traffic in this city's hell."

"Not for much longer." the man in the blue shirt says, and pokes the shaking guy on his knees with his gun. "Six hours. That get 'em outside the radius?"

The man on his knees pushes his glasses up his nose, where they slip again on the sweat. His teeth are chattering, Phalanx can hear them. "I can control the blast, I can't control the *gridlock*."

"Six hours." the man in the blue shirt says evenly. "You boys drive fast."

"Can't be out fast enough. This city, you c'n *smell* the sin."

"Smell the sin burning out of it soon enough. Come on, doc, the boys need to be going."

"Might program faster," the man on his knees shivers out, "if my *hands* weren't shaking -"

"Don't think he's with them," the Ghost's voice whispers, close enough his breath touches Phalanx's ear. "And he's the one who knows what he's doing."

He says back, low as he can, "Get him inside the shield and maybe he can defuse it?"

"Or just hold on for the cops. I don't know what's *safer* -"

The beeping has stopped, the man's no longer pressing buttons. "Jesus," he whispers, dropping the timer to clatter from its wires on the warehouse floor. "Jesus, Jesus -"

"He'll have no time for you," the man in the blue shirt says, and shoots him in the back of the head.

Phalanx *yelps*, the shock of the *bang* and the blood, and at his disembodied shout there are a lot more guns and a lot more nerves in the room, the old man grabs up the timer instantly, and the Ghost squeezes his hand and says, "Shields." and lets go. Phalanx is suddenly, horribly, visible; all the guns turn on him, and he surrounds himself with shields and squeezes his eyes closed without thinking.

He can't hear anything through the *noise*, doesn't know what's happened until idiot shock wears off enough to let him realise that he can't just stand there being shot at with his eyes closed inside his shield during *this*. He looks across to where the Ghost is visible again, standing there hands raised in front of the man in the blue shirt, who's holding the timer to his chest and Phalanx realises that neither of them really knows if he can alter the time on it now. The guy in the glasses is dead and Phalanx's heart beats *fast* but there's no time, no time to focus on him, only to notice how red and black and white the growing puddle is under the lights.

The Ghost says, now the shooting has stopped, "You don't want them in the explosion."

The man in the blue shirt says, "It's all God's will," and - like a grandparent with a Playstation - starts crazedly button-mashing. The Ghost kicks him *hard*, timer clattering down again even as he snatches at it, the man in the blue shirt staggering and dropping away; someone shoots and a bullet goes *through* the Ghost all of three feet from that bomb and Phalanx nearly gags his heart up in fear, throws his hands out: shields surround himself, the Ghost, and the bomb, leaving everyone else outside.

The Ghost is holding the timer in his hands and he says, "Oh," small helpless sound, like a puppy confused. Phalanx hurries over, stares over his shoulder, at the flashing time counting down 7:56, 7:55, 7:54 . . .

Phalanx says, and it must be his own blood rushing like the sound of the sea in his ears, "How long until - the bomb disposal -"

"I don't think quick enough," the Ghost says, and he's still for only a second before he takes the cell from his belt again, and dials.

Usually they toss them immediately, these incriminating, one-call-only cells, and Phalanx - realises, as the Ghost licks his lips and lifts it to his ear, why he didn't toss this one: he knew that this might happen. He knew when he asked Phalanx if he could contain the blast that he might need to. Because he knew -

"Hello, I'm the Ghost, again, I just called in a nuclear bomb threat." he says, far too calmly, into the cell. "It's now going to detonate in seven minutes. I need to speak to someone who knows how to defuse it. Now. Please. Really, really *now*."

Phalanx says, "You can't."

The Ghost says into the cell, "No, I don't, but it's not like we have any better options right now, *seven minutes*, we *seriously* do not have the time to argue about- thank you." before he swallows and looks at Phalanx. "You need to make two sets of shields. Me and the bomb shielded and you outside shielded. Please."

"No way in *hell*-"

"If this goes wrong then you need to be outside the blast to hold the shield for everyone else, and you don't need them shooting you in the head before then. So two sets of shields, Phalanx, *please*."

"N - I - *no* -"

"I'm sorry. I lied, I didn't think, I didn't mean to." He closes his eyes, swallows hard. "If this goes wrong you will be on your own. I'm sorry. I'm *sorry*. There isn't the time, we just have t- yes, yes, I'm here." into the cell again, and he throws an arm at Phalanx. "*Please*."

Phalanx shakes his head but the Ghost is listening to whoever's on the other end of the line, looking tight-faced at that bomb, saying, "No, I don't. There isn't the time. Just tell me what to do and be precise."

Phalanx wants to say again, No, because this isn't what was supposed to - this isn't - the clock shows six minutes forty-two - this wasn't -

The Ghost glances at him with the cell to his ear and his face drawn pale and his eyes, in that second, *plead*. Phalanx . . .

Phalanx would lay down on a highway for those eyes.

He mouths, *I love you*. and sees the Ghost's mouth twitch like it hurts and he turns, can't bear to have to watch his helpless response, makes a set of shields beyond this one and steps into the space, and then closes the inner ball of shields again, cutting the Ghost and the bomb off. And through the gleaming green, he faces the men who set this in motion.

They're gone, all but one. Panic sent them to their cars, racing, fighting for the driver's seats, shoving to get in and get gone. Only the man in the blue shirt is still there. He's picked up a couple of dropped guns, stuck one in his belt and he's cocking the other now, aiming it at the shield.

Phalanx says, his voice edged too dry, "It won't work."

The ricochet hits the wall and the ceiling shakes down a little dust, pluming off the domed surface of the shields. Behind him the Ghost is saying, "How would I know if it's booby trapped? There are wires. Am I supposed to not cut one of them? They're mostly black, is that - okay, you know what, that tone of voice is not going to make me suddenly remember that degree in nuclear physics that I don't have."

Maybe what 'hero' means is this: you do what you think you can't, because you have to.

"The whole city," Phalanx says to the man in the shirt. "How could you - a whole *city* -"

The man in the blue shirt says, "Nothing but immigrants and faggots and whores. Whole country's nothing but immigrants and faggots and whores now."

Phalanx, who, if 'whore' is defined by 'someone who enjoys sex' rather than simply being used as a catch-all term for 'women of this century' as he suspects it might be, has at least some claim to all three of those groupings, and chokes back, "*Children*, and innocent people who never hurt anyone -"

"The Lord will care for the truly righteous, and the rest only get what they deserve."

If this goes wrong, rationality tells him, steady and implacable, this is what will happen: *he* will die without you ever so much as touching him again, instantly. The only mercy is that he won't possibly have any time to feel or know it. You, if you do survive the blast, if your shields do survive the blast, have to hold it in for as long as you can, as long as you possibly can, while it does *god* knows what inside your shield, he has no idea, he's never tried to contain something of that force before, what does an explosion with nowhere to go do? You have to hold it. If it pulls your bones apart from the inside you have to hold it. Him gone, you have to hold it. Oh Jesus with him vaporised against the walls of the shield you still have to hold it. And when you fall -

He'll die without ever so much as touching him again.

He'll die.

How can they die, how can everyone die, like *this* - ?

His voice should shake, and he doesn't know why it doesn't. ". . . you are actually the single most evil human being I have ever met."

"No." the man in the blue shirt says. "That's how they'll remember you two. Why do you think we're here, when it could've been any sin-filled city in this country of heretics and whores? They're all dying 'cause of you two. 'Cause this is the city where they flout their faggots for *heroes* -"

"Flaunt," Phalanx says, and stays upright, and his voice is steady. "I think you mean 'flaunt'. Not 'flout'. Those two words are often confused. By idiots."

The man in the blue shirt has the bitter glint of *hate* in his eyes and behind his back the Ghost is saying, "Just tell me what it looks like. Oh well that's just perfect. That has just made the last three minutes of my life, thank you so much. Tell me what it *probably* looks like -"

I love you, Phalanx thinks, listening to him complain about the irritating inefficiency of the world while a nuclear bomb counts down. Darling, I love you, and if we survive this, oh god, *marry* me -

But facing that man it chokes inside him, the agony of not understanding, it's like it's filling his lungs with helplessness, drowning in how baffling the world is, how can anyone be *this*? "I don't know how you convince yourself this is right, how can you - do you know how *many* people -"

The man in the blue shirt chants through his teeth, "Immigrants, faggots, whores."

Phalanx breathes, "Every last one of them is a better person than you, because not one of them ever tried to kill an entire city."

Outside sirens are whooping as cop cars arrive, and behind him the Ghost says, "*Oh* - my god -"

Phalanx's head snaps around but the Ghost is holding - parts, parts in his hands, what looks like a car battery and that timer, and the amputated wires spill over the floor. He's on his knees next to the pool of blood of the man who built the bomb, cheek clamping the cell to his shoulder, saying so shakily, "- no. Believe me, if it had - blown up, you'd know."

Phalanx chokes, "Is it - ?"

The Ghost says, struggling to say it into the cell, "The timer's stopped, the battery's disconnected. The cops are here, can I -? Oh god. Oh, god, thank you -"

Phalanx drops the inner shields and drops to his knees, arms around him from behind, squeezing him in and stuffing his face into the hood while the Ghost starts laughing but it sounds like sobs, helpless hanging in his arms, dropping the cell and that dead timer to clack and skid away on the floor one last time. "Oh, god -"

"Love you," Phalanx chokes into the back of his neck. "Love you, I love you -"

Behind them -

It's too fast. Phalanx hasn't even turned, the Ghost hasn't even lifted his head, when the man in the blue shirt has already fired three shots and been hit twice by return fire. He hits the shield before the floor, and Phalanx stares at the smear of blood across the green, as the man on the floor wheezes, "Immigrants - faggots -"

The Ghost squeezes Phalanx's arm. "Drop the shields."

"The cops -"

The Ghost yells, "*Stop shooting there's a bomb!*" and Phalanx hears - sudden swearing activity in the entrance to the warehouse. The Ghost stands, taking something from his belt, slipping loose of Phalanx's arms. "Drop the shields."

He does. He doesn't understand. He doesn't understand as the Ghost kneels down next to the man in the blue shirt, and with a glance of annoyance ghosts his gun down into the floor and gone when he tries with a trembling arm to lift it at him. He holds a pad over the gunshot wound to the right of his chest, blood soaking immediately through the white.

The man wheezes out with the blood, "Immigrants-"

The Ghost starts pulling more bandages from his belt, and says, "Shut the fuck up."

*

The Ghost is pretty good by now at spotting a lost cause when he sees one, but here's what 'hero' means: a lost cause is still no reason to give up. That bastard died under his hands in a shirt purple with blood, which he knew he would and still kept pressure on the wounds, still worked at his unmoving and ruptured chest knowing that his lungs were already full of blood and stilled forever. He worked until Phalanx took his shoulder and physically pulled, lifted him back to his feet - blood-splattered suit, blood-dipped gloves, even with soaking he'll have to bleach and redye what he can - and they left before the cops could care about them more than the bomb squad pulling on hazmat suits to deal with the nuclear device no longer about to blow but still very much in need of dismantling.

They stopped two alleyways down, within scenting distance of the river, so the Ghost could take in his own ruined costume, and Phalanx - looked scared and young and shaken, and the Ghost couldn't even properly touch him looking like he'd walked blindfolded through a slaughterhouse . . . so he took the canister of water from his belt and rinsed his gloves, and tucked his cloak around himself to hide the worst of the spattering, and then he felt more able to take his hand. Phalanx hugged him in by the shoulders, clumsy and too close and he couldn't care. He closed his eyes, rubbed his back, murmured, "We're okay. Everyone's okay."

"How can anyone - a whole *city* -"

Hate is not more powerful than love, the Ghost knows that. It's just that love is less showy, less loud, love is slow and steady and everyday, love is every smile and every gladness for someone else's sake. Hate is easier to enact. Hate is obvious and shrill. Hate is the easy way out. He has never respected the easy way out.

"I don't know," he says, quietly, into the mask over Phalanx's cheek. "I think most people don't. I think that's something to be grateful for."

Phalanx pulls him in even closer, cheek dug close into his jaw. "I can't . . ."

"I know." He strokes his fingers through his hair. "I know you can't. Neither can I. God . . ."

His legs feel over-elastic still, they might yet dump him on the ground. He strokes Phalanx's hair with wet and sticky gloves and he can't really process, yet, what almost just happened. He knows that he knelt down in front of a bomb with barely any idea what he was doing and had to take every life in the city into his hands doing what *someone* had to do; he thinks at some point this week he will fully understand what he just did, and he might need to throw up. But for now there's just Phalanx not understanding, Phalanx who doesn't only have that bomb sending him reeling but two men just died in front of him and the Ghost never forgets the difference between them: those are the first deaths Phalanx, even if not Blaine, has ever seen.

The Ghost has seen some pretty horrific things. Maybe it's no wonder he still ghosts in his sleep sometimes, maybe he keeps the horror too deep down, maybe dreams are the only spaces it gets to breathe. Maybe, like a Tupperware box of rice Rachel left at the back of the refrigerator, the horror grows ugly blooms in the dark, expands, garish and alive, all the more sickening the longer it's stifled. It's not the first time he's seen someone killed in front of him. It's not the first time someone's died while he's fought the blood escaping their body, dizzy with the smell of it. He's seen some pretty horrific things. Some really horrific things. That serial killer. The way the glistening gives way to clot, and clouds of black flies.

He finds that he's holding Phalanx, hand cupping his head, thumb stroking his shoulder on automatic pilot, and he's staring at a black trash bag in a pile of black trash bags at the side of the alleyway. It's weirdly-shaped, odd angles inside it, pressing out against the plastic. He stares at it, amongst its innocent companions showing the shapes of cans and lumpen waste, and strokes Phalanx's back. He knows the shape inside it, contorted as it is. He does know that shape, even if he doesn't want to. He stares at it for a

really long time, making the slow realisation and then slowly trying to talk himself out of the realisation. He thinks, It can't be. It can't. It's not big enough.

Then he thinks, Oh.

He kisses Phalanx's forehead, over the mask, panic a low but rising beat in his chest, his heart over-urgent with this. "Can you go check on the cops? I need to rinse off . . ."

Phalanx makes his back straight, clears his throat, says, "Of course." and squeezes his hand, his eyes all over-bright and anxious and unsure, and the Ghost has gone entirely numb on the inside, he can't feel a thing. He finds a smile. While Phalanx walks to the entrance of the alleyway, the Ghost stares at that bag.

Then he takes the little knife from the belt around his leg - the blade is barely longer than an inch, it doesn't need to be any longer - and holds the plastic taut to cut, and makes a careful incision.

Then he closes his eyes and backs away, quite quickly, the numbness wearing very quickly into nausea. Phalanx is at the alley's entrance, murmurs to him, "They'll be there a while, they've got a barrier up now. I guess we need somewhere else to train for a bit," he adds, aiming for light-hearted and the Ghost stares at him and doesn't know what to do. He doesn't want Phalanx to see. He doesn't even want him to know. Not tonight of all nights, he shouldn't *have* to, but - but what can he -

He looks at the crowd of cops busy around their cars, the police tape flickering in the wind. And he thinks of his own gory suit and walking up to them and telling them what he's found, tonight, after that, looking like *this*. And he's too tired to *think*. It's all hit him, all of it, all at once, he feels like he should be *down* already. Phalanx takes his arm, says, "Are you okay? You've gone -"

He swallows, says, "May I borrow your cell? The throwaway."

"I - sure. What do you . . . ?"

Phalanx finds it in his belt and hands it over, and the Ghost stands between him and the depths of the alleyway, the thing he's found, so he can't see. "Could you maybe. Wait around the corner or something. I just need to . . ."

". . . why am I waiting . . . ?" He looks suspicious, and he's too tired as well, the Ghost can tell, that one incident has worn them both out worse than a full night's patrol, they're exhausted and irrational and he'd really wanted to avoid this. "What are you going to do that you don't want me to know about?"

He closes his eyes, he's too tired to *think*, says, "Phalanx, please, I just have to - please don't make this a fight -"

"A 'fight' about what, what are you *doing*?"

"I have to call the - cops. Again."

"Why? Why can't I know about that?"

There might be a way around this, maybe there's some lie he could tell, lying has never come *naturally* to him and now he's too fucking tired to *think*. "I found - something in this alley. They need to know. Please just let me -"

"Found-" He tries to push past him and the Ghost gets an arm around his chest, says, "You don't need to see."

"See *what*? You always have to *baby* me, what the hell can't I -"

"There's a body. It's been there a while. You don't need to see."

Phalanx stares at him, wild and too far gone on too much emotion, neither of them are thinking clearly and he knows it, all he wants to do is call this in so they can go *home* -

Phalanx forces him to the side even as the Ghost grabs at his arm. His eyes flit across the alleyway and the Ghost says, "Phalanx *no* -"

All he looks is confused, and angry like maybe this is some really sick joke being played on him, before he spots it. His face just stops when he spots it. Like he's just stopped. Like who he is can't exist in the same world as this.

Hanging out of that black bag is such a small, dirty foot, still and pale and so, so small, not even as long as the Ghost's gloved hand.

The Ghost sucks his breath in, pulls Phalanx behind himself again. "Please just wait around the -"

"I - how -"

"*Please*, Phalanx, then we can go *home* -"

Phalanx starts trying to get past him again and the Ghost struggles, doesn't understand why they're *wrestling* over this, "What are you -?"

"- out of there. Need to get i- *him* or *her* out of there -"

"You can't. You *can't*, it's a *crime scene*, they have forensics teams, you can't disturb -"

Phalanx stops, stares at him, says, "We can't *leave* - like *that* - in the -" His voice cracks the worst way. "- in the trash like -"

He blinks but he doesn't let himself cry. "We can't help them. We can't, there is *nothing* we can do. All we can do is call the cops and let them do what they can, Phalanx, we're not detectives, we can't find - DNA evidence and - there is *nothing we can do*, *please* don't -"

Phalanx stares at him, breathing in this weird tight shaky way, and the Ghost touches his chest and his hand wants to shake. "Please. Just let me call this in and -"

His face *breaks*. "That's a *kid*. That's a - *baby* only -"

Jesus, Jesus. "Please, Phalanx -"

"What the *fuck* is this world -?"

He grabs at his hair, face too pale, turns and strides off. The Ghost calls helplessly, "Phalanx," but he's out of the alley and walking away, up the street away from the cops, and the Ghost puts his head back to hold the tears in and swallows at the starless sky, then draws his shaky breath in, and dials.

*

He made his way onto a roof a block down, and kept moving up there until he the distance might feel like enough, only it didn't. This is the rooftop he gave up on, because there's not enough distance on the planet to put between himself and that alley, himself and tonight, and he hunches down and puts his arms around his legs and puts his face in his knees, and the shields gleam around him.

Nothing gets through them. Nothing. Good. The world can stay outside, he doesn't want anything to do with it. It's all of it bad and wrong and *evil* and he doesn't want *anything* to do with it -

That little foot, that tiny little foot, Jesus, how could anyone - look at a *child* and -

He squeezes his legs in closer, and breathes, tightly, pressed in against his own knees. He doesn't want anything to do with it. Fuck. *Fuck*, why did they even *save* this city if all it's full of is -

No no no -

He doesn't even know what he's *thinking* anymore, he just wants his shields between himself and the entire world, he doesn't want *any* of it. Of course he has shields, why does he think he has shields? To keep everyone else out, to keep everything else out, if he stays inside then he's *safe* -

That's the difference between him and the Ghost, him and Kurt. Four months against five years of managing to cope. He can't. He's not Kurt. He can't. He can't live in a world where people put murdered children out with the trash. He can't and he won't. He can't. *Immigrants, faggots, whores, no*, but, muggers, rapists, murderers. Everything they deal with, he just feels *battered* by it, stunned by it. Of course he has shields. How the hell else could he survive this life?

You can't stay like this forever, rationality murmurs to him. You can't keep those shields up forever.

He huddles into his knees, thinks, I can try.

It's some time before he hears - footsteps, tapping quickly closer, and the Ghost saying, "*Phalanx*," so relieved. He doesn't lift his head. He thinks, I don't know how you can, I don't know how you do it, I don't know who you *are*, I don't want this anymore -

And then he remembers that the Ghost is covered in someone else's blood right now, and he closes his eyes even tighter.

"Phalanx," the Ghost says. "Can you - you know I can't -" He stops, then says quietly, "Please drop them." and Phalanx just breathes into his knees, thinks, I don't want this to be what the world is like. I don't want to know if this is what it's like. I don't want it to be *my* world, I don't want it, I can't, can't do it -

He was better off not knowing. He was better off before he had to know, when it was just something in the news and he could always switch it off. He was better off when he was an ignorant kid. He was better off before he started *this* because it hurts too much, facing it all, it's too *much*, Kurt can do it but he can't -

"Phalanx," the Ghost whispers, and Blaine hears the soft sound of his hands settling on the shields. "Please ..."

His voice sounds raw-edged, like he's either crying or trying not to, and Blaine *can't*. He's not a hero. That's the difference between them, Kurt can do this even on his own, Blaine can't do it even with him to help, he can't, that - kid, that *baby*, what the hell world is it where this can happen, what is the *point* if they can't even save that kid, he can't - his eyes are filling, he needs to blow his nose and he can't move, he doesn't want to, he just wants to stay like this inside his shields with the whole world on the outside because he can't *bear* it and he can't -

The Ghost takes a little breath, overhead.

- he can't, he can't, he can't, he *can't* -

Arms close around him and he starts his head up but the Ghost whispers, "Ssh. I've got you." He's kneeling next to him, pale cloak falling around Blaine's shoulders as he cradles his head closer, presses his face to his hair. "I've got you."

"How - how did you -"

"Don't I know you better now?" the Ghost says, quietly, and his thumb strokes his cheek. "Don't you know me better, now?"

Blaine doesn't understand, doesn't understand except -

He's not alone in the shields anymore. There's someone else, there's him, holding him, kissing him through his hair, slowly like he means it. The Ghost swallows, and his voice cracks but he still speaks. "I've got you. I know it's awful. I know, I'm sorry, I *know*, I'm *sorry* ..."

He unfolds an arm, his nose is wet and his wet eyes squeeze closed but it's more important to hug him back than to find a tissue. "Not," he croaks, his throat's broken *open*. "Not your fault -"

"I know it's awful," he whispers, fingers stroking through his hair. "I know it is, I know, I know . . ."

Blaine grips his arm, gets out, "How do you . . . ?"

The Ghost cradles his head, swallows again, and Blaine can feel the too-much in his body, the thrum of his exhausted heart. "You just have to. You just do. You just have to remember all the good as well, you have to remember - no-one should go through that. No-one. What else can I do? Let people - because it's hard on *me* -"

He opens his eyes, damp and cold, and stares over the Ghost's arm at his own shields. The Ghost strokes his hair. And Phalanx thinks, It was always as real when it was on the news as it was tonight. It's just that you can't change the channel in this costume. Is that the difference, the only difference, not reality but how you face it?

"I didn't want this to hurt you," the Ghost says, his voice so tangled and wrecked. "I'm sorry, Phalanx, I'm *sorry*, I didn't want this to -"

"It's okay," he says, and sniffs, and finds a tissue in his belt to blow his nose. "It's okay. I'm okay."

He sits up, unfolds his legs, looks at the Ghost kneeling there - shivering, his suit's stained dark with water and blood, he must have tried again to wash the worst of it off himself and he's freezing now. "Idiot," Phalanx says, rubbing his arms hard, taking a heat pack from his belt. "Idiot, it's *January*."

"I'm sorry. I looked like a ghoul." He looks so tired, and so strung out and *worried*. "You don't have to do this," he says, and his voice breaks on the *this* but he swallows and gets out, "You don't have to, not if-"

"I do." He puts the heat pack into his hands, closes them and presses them to his chest, under the hang of the cloak. "You do. So I do. So."

"I don't want it to hurt you, I don't want it to break all the good in you -"

"I'm okay," he says, folding the Ghost's arms around himself for him, lifting a hand, brushing his hair back under the hood. His thumb skims his cheek, the bottom edge of the mask. "I'm okay. I have shields."

The Ghost holds his wrist, strokes his own thumb over the pulse in Phalanx's wrist. "You were good tonight," he says, watching his eyes and quiet, shaky but sure. "No-one could have asked for more from you. You were brave, and you were strong, and you did the right thing. You were *good*."

Phalanx draws him closer, kisses him, once, and hugs his cold body in.

Here is what hero means: I will love, even when it would be easier to hate. I will be brave, even when I really don't want to be. And I will remember that those shields aren't only for me, that what I am is what I do with my life, and what I choose to do with my life is to serve you, and them.

He murmurs, "You're freezing. Let's get you home."

*

Before Blaine can put the lamp on in his bedroom Kurt, still in costume, turns to face the window, to close the blinds. Blaine catches his arm, quickly, and Kurt glances back but Blaine reaches up, holds his jaw, gently tilts his face back into the New York light coming through. Blaine *stares*. Light casting the curve of his cheek, shadow shaping his throat, his wide confused eyes and the parting of his lips, around words he hasn't yet found. Blaine says, unable to look away, "I want to photograph you."

"- Blaine," Kurt says, staring at him from behind the mask. "You kn-"

"Not in - not like that. Out of costume. Just you. I don't have any photographs of *you*, you know that? And I love you, you're my favourite thing to look at, of course I want photos. And I just - you're just so beautiful. I can't hate humanity. If it wasn't for them I wouldn't have you."

Kurt stares at him when he finally lets his face go, takes his hands back so Kurt can lower his jaw down from the light a little, and just stare at him. Blaine knows Kurt's strange relationship to being on view, Kurt who will wear glorious shouting purple and a perfectly cocked hat and then try to look away, try to make himself small enough to be invisible, when he feels the wrong eye on him. He thinks that Kurt has absolutely no idea what he actually looks like, Kurt who pays obsessive attention to his hair and his clothes like there's nothing in between them. The parts of himself that he can't control he just wishes away, like he doesn't *have* a face, like he finds himself invisible. "Some time," Blaine says, and quirks his smile at Kurt. "When you're free."

When you're ready.

Kurt folds his arms around himself, cold more than shyness, twitches his mouth. "Maybe when I'm not covered in blood."

"Come on." He takes his hand. "Shower, warm up, bed. What do we do about your costume, will that come out?"

"Cold water and baking soda for now, I'll take a proper look when I get it home. Blaine."

"What?"

Kurt's arms close around him from behind, his cold nose-tip brushes the back of his neck. He doesn't say anything. His hands stroke his stomach and then wrap around it, and Blaine tilts his head to rest against Kurt's, and folds his fingers through Kurt's, wrapped around him.

He says, "We'll feel better once we've slept."

When Kurt kisses his shoulder, he even sort of believes it.

*

Well look at that, I have an anonymous troll. Is it my birthday already?

ho shit Ghostly's got a troll

*EVACUATE THE FANDOM. PALEANDGHOSTLY HAS A TROLL. THIS IS NOT A DRILL, REPEAT, THIS IS *NOT* A DRILL. EVACUATE NOW. DO NOT STOP TO COLLECT YOUR BELONGINGS. DO NOT PASS GO, DO NOT COLLECT - ahem, JUST **RUN***

*Were they not *there* for the greatest shitstorm of abuse any fandom has ever seen, also known as the time some moron trolled Blackbindings and Paleandghostly metaphorically punched them so hard in the face that she pulled their intestines out through their eye sockets? Why would you put yourself through that? Why???*

*(btw Blackbindings didn't so much as reblog anything for like four months after that, if you're going to be a scum-spewing troll how about you think first if maybe you're really hurting someone with it and *don't be a dick*, fucksake :P)*

Ghostly has a troll: hide ;_;

popcorn.gif

I know I shouldn't look but oh god I can't help it it's like watching a four year old watch Bambi for the first time, I can't look away

Fly, you fools!!

Ghostly, please, there are children present . . .

As Draxie has pointed out, there are indeed children present, and thus I am going to make this as educational as possible. Because oh, little troll, you have so much to learn . . .

[Read more]

*Why oh why, my brave, stout-hearted anonymous troll bewails, do I support 'those 2 faggots' who insist on saving people's lives? Why indeed, bold and *noble* anonymous troll, would I spend time thinking and caring about 'cocksuckers' 'pevrerting the whole City [sic]'? My anonymous troll, anguished yet courageous in the face of evil, fears that I too must be some kind of 'dyke bitch' and must be stopped from spreading my malevolent influence through the powerful, society-corrupting medium of a superhero blog. Because, as we all know full well, every time we reblog a Ghost gif, Satan kills a kitten.*

*I think sarcasm might be a bit beyond you so you'd better ignore that first paragraph, anon, and let's get down to the real business here, which is that you are a spineless, pathetic waste of humanity's resources. You have actually *chosen* to spend some of your time sitting in front of a keyboard leaving anonymous messages to people you've never met whose lives will never meaningfully overlap with yours. Your spiteful intention was to hurt and intimidate me, and to change my behavior because you don't like my behavior. Here's the kicker, anonymous troll: I don't give a flea's fuck what you want. No-one gives a flea's fuck what you want. You don't intimidate me. You are a feeble, craven, dismal excuse for a sub-human. Why would anyone respect you enough to alter their behavior, why would anyone respect someone who behaves like you, cowardly, dumb, and Neolithic?*

Now, Draxie and other kind souls will disapprove of me telling you this, but the fact is, anon, that when you die, humanity on average will be just that little bit better off. That must be a weird thought to live with, knowing that you are so stupid and so ugly in your actions that you drag the whole species down. But the

thing is, anon, oh the wonderful thing, anon, is that you can **change**. You can stop and think. You can take a look at your behavior and **change** it. Isn't life just so rich and thrilling with all its possibilities? You could investigate news sources not written by dribbling right wing conspiracy fucknuts and learn something with at least a handful of actual facts in it, imagine if the news you read actually corresponded to real life! How novel and charming! They use statistics and math! They deal in facts! O brave new world!

You could also, anon, if you are actually incapable of enacting enough minimally socially acceptable behavior to make a friend who would be happy to proofread for you, use a spellchecker! Crazy sci-fi times we live in but I don't think you're aware that you don't **have** to type like you're doing it with the end of a crayon. And hey, if you at least didn't misspell 'prostitute' (three Ts, anon!) while using it as a term to insult someone, people might not dismiss you without doing more than just skimming your spelling and assuming that a troubled twelve year old wrote your messages, and you might not feel like such an angry screaming infant all the time! You see how these small actions can have such beautiful blossoming effects, making all the world that tiny bit better?

To float a really fantastical possibility, if you **could** make a friend, if someone could be convinced to give a shit that you continue to use up oxygen better served on better people, maybe you might even start making those baby steps to **becoming** one of those better people. Maybe you won't feel the need to piss all over the internet as the only way of ever getting any attention from anyone, since your personality is so entirely repellent that I'm assuming most people avoid eye contact and in extreme circumstances cross the street to avoid you. Maybe you can stop behaving like a chimpanzee flinging its own feces and people will be less repulsed by you and may be persuaded at least to **pity**, and the positive feedback loop might continue until you are actually a borderline acceptable specimen of humanity. And maybe people might then **give a shit** if you were on fire on the street corner! Who knows. I'm not an optimist when it comes to people, which is why I went to the trouble of locating your IP address and I will rain unholy shit on you if you ever come back to me or any of my friends, because here's a thought, anon, here's a little thought to make you think, if you are actually capable of it; 'slut' and 'whore' and 'dyke' and 'stupid bitch' do not unduly upset me, no woman and no queer woman walks through this life never facing that kind of hate. But the next time you intend to call someone 'white trash', as I'm sure **you** will: **make sure that they're actually white first**. Because that insult gave me such a **complex** kind of rage, anon. My rage had movements and harmonies, I had a **symphony** of rage over that. The rest I could ignore. That, I won't. I would explain irony to you but fuck, I don't think you're capable of grasping **sarcasm** so let's not even go there. I am not some narcissistic fifteen year old consumptive-looking white girl who named this blog for perceived physical attributes of herself. Have you actually **read** this blog? Christ, why am I asking that question to someone who's functionally illiterate...

I did promise that this would be educational, so I had better fulfil that, for Draxie's sake if for no other reason since she's probably kneading her forehead right now resisting the urge to moan out loud. So the very basic question you have for me, anon, is why I support the Ghost and Phalanx, given their sexuality. This is a non-question and is rather like asking me why I support them given what color their eyes are. Nevertheless, I will try, anon, in the smallest words I can manage just for you, to explain why I support them. Do try to follow. You'll get a gold star for effort.

This world fucking sucks. I know that you're particularly aware of this because you go out of your way to try to hurt other people, so you're very aware of the phenomenon of the world fucking sucking, on the small scale. On the larger scale people get mugged, they get harassed, they get beaten up for a multiplicity of reasons or for no reason at all. They get assaulted, verbally, sexually, psychologically, physically. They are intimidated, hurt, raped, maimed, murdered. Every last one of them is a person just like you, anon. There are twenty-four hours in their every day. They breathe, care, fear, hope. They bruise and they bleed. Every person. Every person on this planet. Me talking to you now. Everyone on the internet. We're not just words on a screen, we're not just names, not just faces in a crowd. We have lives, connections, concerns. We have duties and careers and family. We have communities and pastimes. We eat, drink, sleep, and shit. You and I, anon, are of the same species, despite all appearances. All the grief and rage and helplessness you are capable of, so am I.

So why do I support the Ghost and Phalanx?

*Because they recognize that, and they recognize what it means. Because they *care*. Because they go out in the night putting themselves in danger to get other people out of it. Because they know that not one person deserves the shit, the pain, and the horror of it, and they do everything they can to help them not face it. Do you understand, anon, *exactly* what they do, *exactly* why I admire them? Because they're better than me. Because I look at you and I see a shit in human shape, a waste of human flesh, couldn't your parents have tried to encourage some different sperm/egg combination so we weren't stuck with *you*? But *they*, anon, *they don't care*. They don't care that this is what you do with your life, that *this*, too pathetic even to be truly evil, is all you can manage. If they found you in trouble on the street, they'd help you.*

*They wouldn't ask for your stance on gay marriage first. They wouldn't run through a quick ethical questionnaire on where you stand with regards to Roe vs. Wade or the death penalty or fucking social security. If they saw you needing help then they'd give it to you. All they care about is that you're a human being and you need help. Why do I support them? Because they're *better* than me. Because they can *not care* about the things I need to care about less and I know it. Because they can make themselves forget hate*

*and focus on love instead. You and I, anon, we both know how hard that is to do. To look at another human being you disagree with on a fundamental level (you believe that I am a liberal dyke bitch who deserves to be raped; I believe that you are too belligerently stupid to merit even the condescension of contempt) and see first and foremost the fact that they are a human being. To look at someone and see twenty-four hours in a day. To look at someone and *care*, despite anything else. To remember humanity in the face even of fury. They don't know that you think they're 'cocksucking filth corrupting our Country [sic]' - they don't care, they wouldn't stop to ask. If you needed help, they'd help you.*

I would want to stop and ask. I have rage issues. I'm not a very nice person. If I knew it was you I would want to stop and watch you get the shit kicked out of you, fuck, I'd bring popcorn.

*No. I wouldn't. The thing is, I would *want* to feel like that, but I know that in their position I couldn't. They are better people than me and I couldn't do something that I know would be shameful in their eyes. Those of us who aren't good enough to simply be good can at least aspire to mimic those who are. I even regret telling you we'd be better off if you were dead, I'm sure you contribute or might one day contribute *something* to the world, maybe you're kind to cats, who knows. So anon, this is what I'm telling you: I support them because they do something hard, we have no idea how hard it is on them, how dangerous and ugly and painful it might be to them. They do something *hard*, because it's the right thing to do. And in doing so they make me want to be a better person too, to do the hard things, the things I don't always want to do, just because I know that they're the right things to do. They make me want to care the right way. And as soon as I start *trying* to care, as soon as I start trying to remember the humanity of a person, I find that I do care. I find it impossible not to. I'm not saying I wear a fucking 'WWTGD' bracelet, I'm just saying that thinking about them has changed *how* I think, and I know that. They have genuinely made me a more decent human being than I once was, and we've never even met.*

*The reason I support them, anon, is that they even make me want to forgive *you*.*

*So I guess what I'm saying, at the end of all this, anon, is not that if you were on fire I wouldn't even cross the street to piss on you. What I'm saying, anon, what I'm struggling here to say, really fumbling through all these thoughts to try to say to you, anon, is that if you were on fire, I *would* cross the street to piss on you.*

Given a few more years admiring them, I might even want to use water or something instead.

Life is difficult. There is suffering and misery and so much pain. And they do what they can, in the middle of long cold nights, to reduce the pain that little bit. To make the world a tiny bit gentler on people who don't

*deserve the grief, because they know that *no-one* deserves the grief. There is so much of it, even when life is being relatively kind. Is this honestly what you want to do with your life, to add to the misery that little bit, to tip the balance even a tiny part of the wrong way towards grief? You get up in a morning and make a cup of coffee and think, 'Right, the best way to improve the world today is to abuse someone on the internet, *that'll* fix this hurting planet of ours'?*

*They go out in the dark and they face blood and pain and potential death to make the world a little bit less harsh. They get nothing in return. They get bigots hating them; *we* love them, but there's nothing we can do *for* them, and sometimes we really do go about expressing our love in pretty weird ways. But they keep on doing it, because it's the right thing to do. Because people are hurting, and why would you *ever* think that could be a good thing.*

*That's why I support them, anon. That's why I would encourage you to support them as well. Because they're human beings doing the right thing for other human beings, and the right thing for us to do in response is to care about them the way they care about everyone else. Through them, I understand humanity and what we're capable of, what we *should* be, that little bit more. I'm grateful for them. They've helped me without every physically rescuing me. Of course I'm grateful for that.*

*I am, however, not an optimist, not when it comes to people. You have the capability to become a better person but I can't for one moment trust that you will do so. So I do have your IP address. And if you ever come back, if you ever come near anyone in this fandom and it gets back to me, I will unleash unholy hell on you, you have *no* idea. Go away and *think*. Think about other people as well as yourself. Twenty-four hours in all of our days, anon. We breathe and sleep and worry and want, just like you. All of us. Including them.*

tl;dr: You're not a good person. Neither am I. Luckily the world has them, to give us something to work towards.

Look, spooky, you'd be proud, I didn't even call them a cunt. Oh, oops <3

Chapter Eighteen

It's a cold January night and in Kurt's bedroom Blaine is dropping little kisses along the back of Kurt's neck to try to distract him from the catsinghostcloaks site, to try to tempt him back towards the sheets; Kurt's fingers curl in his hair at the back of Blaine's neck, like catching a puppy up before it can chew at the *important* wires, and he says, "No. Going patrolling."

Blaine stops kissing, and breathes there with his nose jammed into Kurt's skin for a while. His hands shift and resettle at Kurt's waist, around the desk chair's back. Then he says, "After last night?"

Kurt says, slowly, "It's always going to be after last night. Tonight or tomorrow or next week, it's always going to be after last night, Blaine."

He tilts his head back and Blaine lifts his, so they can meet each other's eyes. Kurt says, "I always make a point of it the night after something awful happens. I always go right out again. Because - because if I didn't put the cloak on again *then*, I don't know when I would be able to do it again. I'm not saying you have to -"

"No," Blaine says. "If - if you are then I am. I don't want you . . . on your own. It's a bad world."

Kurt's gaze flicks downwards. He confirms, quietly, "It is a bad world."

Blaine settles his chin on his shoulder, stares in silence for a while at the gif of a tabby rolling manically onto its back, scrabbling to dislodge the cloak it really doesn't seem to want to be wearing. Kurt swallows, and his fingers pull at Blaine's hair a little. Gelled-down he can't stroke through it, can only stroke *at* it, so the fact that he's beginning to pick the flatness to pieces says that he knows Blaine's coming out with him tonight, and he's just, quietly, talking them through it.

"Three weeks after I started doing this, when I was nineteen and stupidly naïve, I called an ambulance for a homeless man I found outside a subway station. He died before they got there. I - it absolutely wrecked me. I'd never held anyone's hand while they died before. They wouldn't let me, when I was a kid, with my mom, um, they didn't want me to be there. I didn't know if I wanted to, I didn't understand what was happening. I was scared by how upset everyone was." He swallows again, and Blaine lets go of his waist to wrap his arm around it instead, and Kurt's head tilts a little to his. "The man by the subway, I didn't know his name, he had some kind of - I don't know, sore. Open sore. In his stomach. I could - smell how wrong it

was. I couldn't even - peel his blankets out of the way to check, they were, um, they were stuck - in it." He wets his lips. "He was cold and fading and I guess commuters had been stepping over him for a while already. He didn't seem to mind me being there much either way. I knew - I didn't know what to do, I knew what was happening. I didn't carry the heat packs then, I didn't know, I could only put my cloak over him and try to warm his hands, I didn't . . . he tried to open his eyes a couple of times but his breath just wore out. Just got longer and slower until it stopped. And when the ambulance got there I, I just . . . disappeared."

Blaine turns his cheek a little closer to Kurt's, eyes open, waiting.

"I went home. I washed my costume and cried, pretty much the whole night. And the next night I put it back on and I went out there again. I went out again after the first night someone shot at me, after the first night someone *got* shot in front of me, after - after the first time I had to walk a woman to the rape crisis centre, and I think she only trusted me at all because I was almost as upset as she was. After the time that guy, um." He swallows again. "I just go out again, I have to. I think if I stop - if I ever think *I can't do this* for just one night - I'm scared I won't ever be able to again. And it's not like the world's going to get any nicer if I don't. So." He gives a small breath of almost-amused laughter. "It's not like it's anything to do with *courage*, really. I'm just scared of being too scared."

Blaine says, doesn't even think about it until too late, just murmurs out loud the thought always there, "I'm always scared."

Kurt says, "Then that makes you the bravest person I know."

And then he kisses his cheek, and stands up, opens his wardrobe and leans to clicks up the fake base he set in it. And Blaine closes his eyes, and sighs his breath out, and gives one last glance to the gif of a cat flicking its baffled ears inside a Ghost hood, and turns to help him.

*

There's a Take Back the Night march on, candles and glowsticks and flashlights and lanterns through the streets. They're heading for a street rally, where amongst the planned speeches, Commissioner Figgins is going to talk about police initiatives to make the streets safer for women, though there's speculation if he will give a statement about the rumours surrounding that bomb last night by the docks. There's chanting, there are whistles, there's singing. And this isn't just any city's Take Back the Night campaign, this is New

York City, where some women's shelters keep selectively silent or else openly refuse to let the police know when the Ghost turns up, as he regularly does walking people in, and the atmosphere's high, buzzing at the edge of anger, and it might not be Hallowe'en but there are still plenty of people wearing Ghost cloaks - dark and light ones, now - carrying their placards; *We're ALL the Ghost*.

He's told Phalanx that he understands that the Ghost represents more than he as a single human being could possibly *be*; Phalanx knows that it's still a little uneasy for him, being used as someone else's metaphor, even a metaphor he's on the same side as. The marchers, particularly the male ones, use him to show all of society's responsibility to each other in the dark - right under the noses of the cops they march past, the cops under orders to arrest him on sight. Phalanx holds his hand, while they watch from a rooftop, the atmosphere from below raising to stir the hair on the back of Phalanx's neck, but -

The Ghost squeezes his hand to get his attention. "Do you see that . . . ?"

*

"- twenty-eight."

"It's one in thirty-two."

"Where are you getting these statistics from? *Obviously* it's underreported -"

"Two, four, six, eight!"

"Shit, I dropped my chapstick."

"- all those rumours about that bomb threat?"

"Stop the violence, stop the hate!"

"Who knows, maybe Figgins'll explain it."

"Like Figgins knows anything about anything."

"You okay?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm good. It's really -"

"I know."

"Oh you *throw* the egg dickwipe, you're getting it back up your ass!"

"Real men don't rape!"

"Shit, Figgins is getting up to speak."

"Stop picking on supers, asshole!"

"The Ghost is a patriarchal symbol of female oppression!"

"You tell him that when he saves *you* from an assault! He didn't *ask* to have a penis, at least he gives a fuck!"

"Sorry, can you give my gramma room to set her stool up? Thanks. Here you go, Grammy."

"Second wave, ma'am, props to you."

"Shit, I *stood* on my chapstick."

Commissioner Figgins taps the microphone a couple of times. The crowd talks on.

"Two, four, six, eight!"

"Is one in four the completed assaults or the attempts?"

Figgins intones through the feedback and the crowd's anguished groan accompanying it, *"Thank you for attending this year's Take Back the Night march, ladies and some gentlemen. First an announcement, please remember that subway stations are not to be used as restroom facilities."*

In the pause a number of voices this time call out, *"Stop picking on supers you asshole!"*

"The New York Police Department takes sexual assault and violence against women very seriously." Figgins continues in a monotone, while on the stage behind him, a professor due to speak after him is rubbing her eyes underneath her glasses. "Just this year our rape conviction rate has climbed point three of one percent. Achievement!"

Silence, until someone in the crowd yells, "Assbutt!"

"We will continue working with the community to-"

The first bullet sparks off the green hexagons flickering up in front of the podium and Figgins starts back a step, every cop in the area drops a hand to their gun - and Phalanx skids in on a slide of shields, skipping to land on the stage and surrounding it in shields as more bullets strike harmlessly off them, and the crowd collectively ducks, there are screams, Phalanx says, "Excuse me sir-" and grabs the microphone, calls through the *squeal* of the feedback, *"If you could please not panic, stay low, and help each other out if someone needs it, everything is under control!"*

Then he glances behind himself, where one of the speakers is helping up another who fell from her chair, and Figgins is drawing his own gun, in shaking hands. Phalanx says, "I really don't advise that, sir. There's not much I can do about ricochets inside the shields."

He couldn't hit Phalanx even without the shields, his hands are shaking so hard. "Where is he?" he says, eyes flitting around Phalanx, the green-tinted world outside the shields, the stage they're now all trapped on. "The - the Ghost -"

"He's taking care of the situation. Everything's under control. Sir, if you could please put the gun down -"

"I have holy water."

Phalanx stares at him, as Figgins fumbles in his jacket pocket. "... okay?"

He brandishes the little bottle at him. "I'm not afraid to use it!"

"You ... do you ... oh my god you think he's a real ghost."

"There will be *no ghosts* haunting *this city*!"

"You think he's a real ghost." Phalanx rubs his hair, doesn't really know what to say. "Is that . . . that is why you want him arrested."

"I am working very closely with my church's exorcist!"

"You have no idea the kick he's going to get out of this, seriously."

*

The figure in the dark cloak *swears* when the shields gleam around the stage, cranks the rifle and fires three more times but it's hopeless, no shot's going to make it through. But the attention of all the cops is on the direction the bullets came from, this rooftop, so the job's been done, mission so almost accomplished, all that's needed now is a witness for an ID -

"You realise that you're a season out of date already." a voice says, and the figure in the dark cloak scrambles up, spins to face -

Itself, in pale grey, eyes narrowed and mouth pouted. The Ghost says, "The Honey Badger, I presume."

She glances him up and down, touches her hood like a salute, pale grey spreading from that touched patch until her costume matches his exactly. "Well that's easily fixed, isn't it?"

"You realise that framing someone for the Commissioner's assassination is a really low thing to do. *Almost* as low as using *his face* to shove me off a building."

She shrugs with his arms, grins with his mouth. It's quite disturbing, he'd easily admit that, he doesn't know what to make of his own face like this. "A girl's got to eat."

"I assume the Mottas are paying you for this?"

"As far as anyone down there knows, this is all you, spooky."

Those creepers who write fanfiction, he thinks with a wince, are going to be all *over* him wrestling with himself on a rooftop. On the other hand, after years of dragging himself down, years of facing more brutality from his own mind than from anyone on the streets, years of viciously, contemptuously *loathing* himself and never even knowing he was doing it until someone else actually knew him and actually *liked*

him, a chance to quite seriously get revenge on himself doesn't exactly unappeal. He stretches his arms out, popping his knuckles, saying, "You've miscalculated your disguise. I have reasons to *enjoy* a chance to punch that face."

"Well," she says, and - changes, morphs in front of him, shorter, sturdier, darker, and almost, by now, more familiar. "I already know you don't want to hurt *me*, now, you wouldn't hurt *me*, would you, Ghost . . . ?"

He sets his jaw, says to Phalanx's image, "Clearly you've never *dated* you."

The first cops on the scene report the Ghost banging Phalanx into the rooftop, arm pinned behind his back, yelling that the mustard goes in the *fridge*, how many *times*, before snapping the cuffs on him and backing off, hands raised as the cops swarm up. "Hands where I can see 'em," one of the cops yells, and the Ghost says, "Technically, they are." before he vanishes.

On the ground, Phalanx groans, and suddenly he's a woman. There's a rifle set up at the edge of the building aimed at the stage, and no-one can see the superhero sliding down the side of the building, hands and feet semi-solid in the brickwork, concentration all already on his partner on the stage . . .

*

Phalanx keeps his eyes on the Commissioner's gun, but they keep drawing of their own accord to the holy water, and he's struggling to keep the grin down. He's impatient for the Ghost to get there, he's so stupidly excited before he realises and it's like a foot on his stomach that *he can't blog about this*, it's absolutely crushing, he knows exactly how hard it would make the phanghosts laugh and *he can't tell them*, oh *god* -

"All safe," a voice says beside him, and when the Ghost fades into view Figgins gives a little shriek. The Ghost glances at him, eyes wide with surprise, and he's even forming a word - some retort, Phalanx thinks, because he knows how much of a pain it is for the Ghost keeping one step ahead of both the criminals *and* the cops -

When one of the women on the stage stands up and the movement catches the Ghost's attention, he glances and then he stops, and Phalanx sees his face go still. He looks across, at the woman standing there - short dark hair, large gold earrings, wearing one of the march's official t-shirts, and the way she's staring at the Ghost, the way he's staring back at her, Phalanx doesn't know what's behind that.

Then he takes Phalanx's hand, and touches his hood for her, that silent, respectful salute of his, and fades them both out of sight just as the noise of the crowd starts up again, a rising ripple of voices.

By the time they're ghosting down through the stage for a safe route out, the applause is *deafening*.

*

"He had *what*."

He's almost giggling too hard to get it out again, as they cross a rooftop and the Ghost is giving him that *look*. "Holy water. He wants to exorcise you."

"He did not."

"Seriously, Ghost, cross my heart, he *does*."

"He does know that I'm not an *actual* ghost."

Phalanx can't keep the glee down. He shakes his head. The Ghost stares at him before it bubbles and - *bursts*, out of him, sharp shocked laughter, folding his arms around himself. He staggers a little with it until they sag into each other's sides, both of them instinctively backing *away* from the building's edge, giggling helplessly through it.

"That's why he's got all the cops out chasing after my cloak? Because he's afraid of *ghosts*?"

"What you should do -"

"Phalanx -"

"- is find out where he lives -"

"Phalanx, we are very serious superheroes -"

"- and creep into his bedroom one night -"

"Don't, don't, don't -"

"- just to say -"

He sounds like he's in *pain* from how he's laughing.

"*Boo.*"

The Ghost sits down, pulling Phalanx with him, sits and laughs until he's *crying*. When they've managed to stop rocking back and forth, hooting softly through the tail-end of the hysteria, the Ghost dabs at the underneath of his eyes with his gloved knuckles and lets his breath shudder out of himself. "Oh. My. *God*. Oh my *god*. That man is in charge of our whole police service, no *wonder* people need us . . ."

"They were really happy to see you." Phalanx smudges at the laughter-tears under the Ghost's eyes with his own thumb, smiles at him under the hood. "You got applause."

"Silly. That was for both of us. And I think everyone was mostly happy that no-one got shot."

"'Silly' yourself, that was for you, they didn't do when I was standing there -"

"They didn't know what was *happening* when you were alone up there, they were probably glad for some cue it was over."

"Why can't you ever just accept that people think you're awesome?"

He sighs, and scuffs Phalanx's hair a little to settle it, then picks himself up and offers his hands to help Phalanx up. "I don't know, Phalanx. It's not like that and you know it's not, it's not that simple. It's all just - strange. It's not like that's why I do it, for big crowds to -"

"I know -"

"It's only ever about the person in front of you. And then something like that, it's just . . ." He shrugs, looks away. "You know me," he says, quietly. "And people looking at me. It's . . ."

He watches his face, wets his lips. "You knew that woman."

He turns his head further away. "I've met her before. She seems . . . I'm glad she seems okay."

"So when you help someone . . . you feel a connection with them. Right?"

"I don't know. It's usually a pretty intense occasion, yes, I suppose - there's a reason I tend to remember people, yes."

"And every person you help out has a family. Right? And friends."

"Where are you going with this?"

"You've been doing this for five years. You think if everyone who's grateful got together to *tell* you that, it wouldn't be *more* than that crowd?"

He stares at him, Phalanx sees in that second - the rawness of the confusion, something so incredibly open behind his eyes, understands the hood and the mask because oh, *Kurt*, everything's always so *much* to him, like his vulnerable heart always beats exposed -

Then his leg collapses.

He yelps the cry, the Ghost grabs his arms as his leg folds him down, crouches holding him to kneel, choking, "Phalanx-"

Stunned, shocked, putting his hand to the back of his leg and finding it hot with blood, shields are around them both instantly, instinct more than thought, the instinct of fear and protection. "I," he says, and his teeth clack off each other, and the Ghost looks at his leg and whispers, "Shot you've been shot they must have a silencer it's okay, it *is okay*, hold on to me -"

"Ghost -?"

"We're not far from Mike and Tina's here, I'm going to take you to them, okay? But we have to move quickly because I don't know where the shooter is, please hang on to me, *please* trust me, and I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm *sorry* if this hurts -"

"Ghost -?"

"Take a breath."

He does, instantly, but not enough of one, his lungs don't seem to want enough of one, as they slip through the roof like it's not there. He feels himself slow a little, stares through the black and his chest is trying to burst his breath out again but he *can't*, and then he's pulled down by the Ghost's hand into the air, hauled with a clumsy swing to drop into his body before they fold, him on top of the Ghost, onto a cold floor in the dark. The breath leaves him in a hard grunt of pain, the pain's really beginning to wake in his leg now, before it felt like he'd been hit by a hammer, now it *really* feels like a bullet, now it *really* hurts -

The Ghost snaps a flashlight on and sets it upright next to them, whips a tourniquet from his belt. "You're okay," he says, and Phalanx stares dazed around them, they're in someone's kitchen. They just ghosted into some poor sleeping New Yorker's kitchen, he hears creaking from another room.

"Getting," he says. "- blood on the f- floor -"

"Don't worry about it, it's okay." The Ghost grabs up the flashlight as soon as the tourniquet's tight, gets an arm around Phalanx's side. "Try not to put your weight on it. Hold onto me."

"- hurts."

"I know it does, I know, I'm sorry sweetheart please hold onto me, let me -"

The Ghost bears his weight, fades them invisible, walks them - Phalanx's clumsy swinging hop is *noisy* - for the apartment's door. The light snaps on and Phalanx blinks around, startled, but the Ghost just keeps walking, and the woman in her robe holding a baseball bat stares around, not understanding the sound passing right through her wall and into the corridor. The Ghost walks them through the apartment building, bangs the call button for the elevator. "You're going to be fine," he says, and Phalanx's leg is shaking.

"It really hurts."

"I know, I know, I'm sorry." His hand's on Phalanx's face, thumb rubbing his cheek, his eyes close automatically. "You're going to be absolutely fine."

He says it half as a reassurance, half like an *order*, and it's actually the most reassuring thing he could do for Phalanx in that moment; maybe he knows it, how much Phalanx needs to know what's expected of him, how much he needs to know what he's supposed to do. What he's supposed to do now is be reassured, so that's what he does. He leans into him, steps into the elevator with him, lets him bear his

weight and tell him where to step when the doors open again. "I'm so sorry," the Ghost whispers, as they're leaving the apartment building. "We can't even try to get a taxi, they'd know where Mike and Tina lived then, it's not safe for them -"

"S'fine. I can walk."

The Ghost's fingers run almost mechanically through his hair. "Brave soldier," he murmurs, and hikes Phalanx's weight against his side again, and walks them. It's not so bad, when they get the right rhythm going. The pain numbs itself, it's like a shout at the bottom of a cave, he gets echoes more than the white-hot centre of it. His whole body feels strangely beyond pain, it's too heavy and solid for pain to get into it. And the Ghost bears his weight and leads his step, all he has to do is follow. In the weirdest of ways it's quite nice. He's in good hands. He's in the very best hands. He's being rescued.

The Ghost's voice murmurs by his ear, soothing as a lullaby, and between that and his warm body holding his, and the rhythm of their walk, despite the dumb heat of the pain he could almost, almost sleep . . .

The Ghost fades them visible underneath Mike and Tina's fire escape, ducks enough to grab a can rolled out of the trash, throws it up at their window. Phalanx leans into him, dopey with pain, as a light comes on above them and the window - opens, and Mike warily emerges, Tina holding a hairbrush like a weapon at his side. The Ghost calls up, plaintive in the night, "I need your *help*."

Mike's eyes widen, and he climbs out of the window, lets the ladder down, begins his descent. Phalanx leans into the Ghost's chest because everything's fine now, and the Ghost kisses the top of his head, whispers there, "I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry."

"S'okay," he mumbles, everything oddly distant, oddly dizzy.

*

There's no operating table in the apartment; they use the sofa bed. Phalanx lays face-down and the Ghost kneels by his head, stroking his hair, whispering to him, which seems to keep him calm; Mike has already snipped the thigh of his costume open, injects something for the pain into the bared skin, and when the Ghost looks up to check the wound he says, "Don't."

"It's not bad," he whispers, stupidly, like that if he says that then it *can't* be bad.

"I don't think so." He drops the needle into the bowl Tina's holding, takes another gleaming silver tool from it. "Just don't look, I'm working. Keep him calm."

"I am calm," Phalanx mumbles, and his ungainly hand swings up, swipes at the Ghost's face in an attempt he thinks at *stroking* his cheek. "You're so beautiful."

He catches his hand, swallows the pain down - oh it will hurt later, what has happened, but he can't let himself feel it now - and strokes his knuckles. "And you're quite drugged and dopey, dear. You're okay. Everything's okay."

"Know everything's okay. You wouldn't let 'nything happen t'me. You rescue people."

He combs his hair back, holds his hand. *Everything* hurts. "I try. Just relax, everything's okay."

"You're so beautiful."

"Just relax, sweetheart."

"Why'd you pick 'the Ghost'?"

"Everything's okay." He strokes his hair, and tries not to notice how Mike's arms move as he works. "Very brave soldier."

Phalanx pulls at his hand so he looks at his eyes like it's very important that he listen to this. "Why didn't you pick 'the Angel'?"

He stares. He doesn't know what to say. Phalanx just says again, giddy with - pain, bloodloss, shock, anaesthetic, "You're so beautiful it's jus' silly, jus' like, shouldn't exist, K-"

Panic and pain will kill him. "Ssh. Everything's okay. Just - everything's okay -"

Mike says, "Wh -" and hesitates, and the Ghost looks over with his heart clenching small.

"What? What's wrong?"

"- nothing, just -" He takes a breath, presses Phalanx's leg down and - lifts the tweezers, extracting -

It is a bullet. It's a bloody, blunt-nosed bullet.

With a red flashing light on one end.

Mike says, "It should not be doing that."

The possibility of an explosive timer is instantly rejected and replaced by the probability, drying his mouth even as he snatches it out of Mike's hand, of a tracking device. "Look after him." he says, running onto the back of the sofa, using his body's momentum to spring up at the ceiling, to ghost and grab through it, to get a foot up and kick himself upwards. Into their upstairs neighbours' apartment in the dark and he runs for the edge of the building, not the fire escape - it can be noisy, the rusted joints - grabbing through the brickwork itself, climbing the solid wall like it's a ladder. Upwards, upwards, upwards -

On the roof he stands invisible and lifts his own cloak over his mouth, hiding the hot running of his breath into the cold air while his heart beats hard and he thinks.

Tracking device. Their co-ordinates will have been steady on this building for the last few minutes, but how high *up* the building probably doesn't show. If he flees now, to another location, whoever is tracking them is going to wonder *why* he stopped so long at this building, and Phalanx, Mike and Tina's location is in danger. So he doesn't have a choice; he has to make it look like he *chose* this place, for whatever confrontation this might be. He has to make it look like *he's* been on this rooftop this whole time, not like he's been lower in the building, bringing Phalanx to safety. He just has to wait, and see what happens.

He stays invisible and cups the bullet closer in his hand, feels the clot of it against his glove; Phalanx's blood, Blaine's blood. He breathes slowly, drops his cloak from his mouth. Whoever took aim at Phalanx thought this through. Worked out that they needed to incapacitate Phalanx (he's the one who can attack, defend, from a *distance*; the Ghost needs to be close-range to take people down), worked out how to do that and track their movements at the same time, had good enough aim to clearly have been aiming to *lame* Phalanx, not kill him, they needed him *with* the Ghost with this bullet still in him: this is about him. They shot Phalanx to get to the Ghost. They hurt *him* to get to *him*.

You didn't think all of this through, he thinks, hand squeezing hard around the bullet. You didn't think this through at all. You didn't think through what I would do next.

You did not think this through.

A woman's voice calls out of the dark, "Now we are not gonna get anywhere if we're both playin' hide-an'-seek all night, spooky."

He stands, still and straight-backed, head a little bowed. And then he fades himself into sight, stays intangible, says to the dark, "I'm right here."

A bullet - buzzes, that horrible way they do, right through his head. He doesn't even let himself flinch. He says, "You didn't think this through."

"Think you'll find I did, spooky." she says, but he knows where she is, now, he knows where that shot came from; he's invisible and slipping downwards immediately, swings through the roof and rolls back onto its surface a little distance away, watching the taser-lines spark viciously at the roof's surface where he isn't. He stands up again, fading back into sight.

He says again into the night, "You didn't think this through."

Then he vanishes and slides down again, because of *course* there's a second taser.

He doesn't become visible when he's back up on the roof, just waits, listening to the silence. She's on the next roof across, he's facing her now, sees the shadow where she is. He tosses onto the roof that bullet, so it can flash-flash-flash out its lonely little red light into the dark. He eyes the distance between buildings, he could risk the jump, but he wants to know what she's going to do next.

He doesn't goad. He doesn't tell her again that she hasn't thought this through. He waits to see what she'll do next.

She calls, "None of this is personal, child, this is business, an' I am not beat when it comes to business. You wanna spook muggers in your spare time, not my concern, but you went and made your head worth serious money and I intend to collect."

He waits, in the silence. The anger is hot inside, horribly hot, a little fire of Hades in his belly, but he holds it in, holds it down. Do something stupid and you'll have no chance to take her down. Wait. Be patient. You're good at being patient. There are things you've waited all your life for. Wait and be patient, because she has not thought this through.

"You are surprisingly laid back right now Slimer, seeing as I just popped your boyfriend in the leg. Word I heard was you two're soppo in the way gets the Tea Party all frothy an' troubled."

Hold it down. He makes himself breathe as if this is a yoga class; do not mind it, there will be time to mind it, but that time is not now. Now is the time to wait for her to make her mistakes. He says, "I assume by 'business' you mean that you take money to kill people."

"The work is interesting an' the money is good."

There is not enough money in the world for what she has done. He says, "This could be a very long night, if you're going to stay all the way over there."

"You ain't gonna come over here at me? When I went an' shot out your pet puppy's back leg? Would it help if I told you I was aiming for his ass?"

Breathe. She has not thought this through. "Then I would tell you that you're a pathetic shot."

"*Hell* I ain't got the patience for this crap." she snaps, hikes up and shoots what looks like a grenade launcher, not at him. It shoots a metal bar that slams into the side of the building, *thunks* itself in deep and hard, and when she sets the launcher down and activates it, the metal bar sprouts small metal wings all the way along itself, widening it, a thin but passable bridge between buildings.

She stands up, out of the shadow - a black woman, blonde hair worn flat to her head - lifting another gun, presumably another taser if she's learned her lesson with the bullets, and flicking out what looks like some kind of adapted cattle prod, he can hear the electricity hum. He just stands and waits for her to cross that bridge. He has no intention of fighting her *on* it. He has no intention of *killing* her.

She hasn't thought this through.

*

Officer Hudson has had a weird text. He's only ever had one text like this before, from an unrecognised number and very specific in what it requires that he do, clipped, practical, and worrying as all hell. He can kind of tell it's Kurt even *without* knowing.

He makes his excuses to his partner, forgot to pick up dry cleaning for his girlfriend, she'll kill him, it's an all-hours place, he'll run in quickly now, and heads to the street specified. He parks, walks along, looking for the right alleyway, looking for . . . that pale cloak in the dark, head down, lifting when his footsteps approach.

There's a woman at his feet, handcuffed.

"So," Finn says. "I, uh, take it you want me to - Jesus, Ku-"

Flash of *rage* in his eyes and Finn shuts up instantly; he doesn't think he's actually *ever* seen Kurt angry like that.

Not Kurt. Seriously nothing to do with Kurt right now. The Ghost.

The Ghost with a bloody lip he tests with his tongue, before he flicks his irritated gaze away. "I need you to take her in. I need you to find something to charge her with. She's a hired assassin, there must be *something* in her history that you can pin on her."

Horrible seeing him hurt, brings back too many bad, shocking, always-almost-buried memories. "- she go for you?"

"She shot Phalanx in the leg."

"- is he -?"

"He's okay. He will be okay. But I need you to take her off the streets."

Finn's mouth shapes a few words, a few ways he could attempt this sentence. Then he looks down at the woman - not a mark on her - and looks up at the Ghost again, steadily. Noting his one bloody palm, dark against the grey of the glove, the gloved hands he keeps squeezing and relaxing, very obviously *forcing* himself do so. Finn takes in his face again - the bruise is already beginning to form against his mouth, and his eyes are hard and cold and very un-Kurt-like - and he swallows, says, "Are *you* okay?"

He draws his breath in, lets it out hard. "I will be as soon as I can go check on him. But I need you to find *something* to put her away with. Anything. Say you found her fighting me, breach of the peace or something if nothing else, they can add it to my rap sheet, it's hardly like it *matters* anymore -"

"Um, Ghost . . ."

"*Please* do this for me."

". . . what'd you do if I didn't? Just. Asking. But - you don't look right, man . . ."

He swallows, shivers his arms in around himself like he felt a sudden cold. "I can't do anything," he says, hard to the wall of the alleyway, head down. "You and I *both* know that. The only thing I could do I would never do, so you *have* to find something to put on her, *please*. It's not - *justice* I do this for, but I still - I can't stand thinking that he got hurt for nothing. Because of *me*, but nothing happens to *her*, I can't stand it. *Please*. Get her in jail, one way or another, because I can't *stand* it."

"Hey. I didn't say I wouldn't. You help me get her to my car without being seen? I'm gonna look pretty weird dragging a cuffed unconscious woman down the sidewalk . . ."

He closes his eyes, nods. "Thank you."

"You okay, seriously? She - hit you, or -"

He almost touches his mouth, stops his hand and licks his swollen lip instead. "She was good."

"Not as good as you."

"Not as angry as me." He looks down at her, and his shoulders lift, drop with his breath, a little too hard. "She didn't think it through."

*

He climbs back up to Mike and Tina's fire escape when Finn's gone, puts his hands on the window but -

Light on the inside, falling out onto his grey gloves, warmth on the inside and cold out here, and Phalanx . . .

Blaine.

He turns, sits on the cold metal fire escape, wrapping his arms around his knees, tightening his hands in their fists until he's not going to cry anymore.

The window opens behind him, and someone steps out onto the fire escape, and Mike's voice grunts softly as he sits down next to him. "You okay?"

He says into the dark cave of his knees, "Is he?"

"He's fine. Sleeping, Tina's watching him. It wasn't deep, it should heal nice and clean if he's easy on it for a few weeks. Replenishing his fluids, he didn't lose that much blood, he's mostly just sleeping it off. He already woke up a couple of times. He asked for you."

He holds his knees, and keeps his head down in the hood.

Mike's silent and still for a while, while the Ghost feels his breath run slower, slower. Mike says, "I gave him the Talk too once, you know. He's a grown-up. He makes his own decisions."

Into his knees, "He hero-worships superheroes."

"I don't know if you noticed, he's kind of super himself."

He shuffles his knees a little, cold now the adrenaline of earlier is just chilled sweat under the suit. "His leg's going to be okay?"

"Ghost. He's fine. He's young and healthy and it's not even that deep, he'll be fine. And he'll be a lot happier if you're there the next time he wakes up, he worries about you."

"All we do is worry," he whispers. "All we do is *worry* and worry other people -"

A hand touches his arm. "Hey -"

He shouldn't shock up the way he does but - he looks away, immediately embarrassed, flushed and shaken himself by how violently he reacted; is he *ever* going to respond like a normal person to just being touched? Overreacting, again, always, how do you trust any of your reactions when all you seem to *do* is overreact - ?

But Mike takes his arm more firmly this time, pulls until he faces him, frowning at his mouth. "Are you okay? Did they - I should take a look at that."

"It's nothing. I was slow." Electricity hurts. It's distracting.

"It doesn't matter how you got it, what matters is whether your *face* goes septic or not. Come on and let me clean it up at least -"

"It's *nothing*. It doesn't even -"

He stops himself, hearing himself, horrifying himself. Mike pulls at his arm again.

"Come on. He'll want you to be there, if he wakes up again."

Phalanx is asleep on his side on the sofa bed, his back to the Ghost and a blanket over his shoulders, and Tina stops watching his face, stands up when they walk in from the bedroom. Her face - folds into a scared question but then her eye catches Mike's, over the Ghost's shoulder, and she stops; the Ghost walks over, begins to feel the ache in all his limbs now, the exhaustion of the night. He sits, carefully, at Phalanx's back, touches the blanket, settles it higher over his shoulder and brushes it smooth there; whispers, voice so small, "Thank you."

Tina twitches a nervous smile, says, "We got your Christmas cookies. We guessed they were from you or a *really* weird neighbour."

He makes his mouth smile and blinks at how it hurts, lifts his hand and remembers again not to touch the stinging heat of his lip. Mike pops open the medical kit on the coffee table pushed to one side again. "Let me clean that up. Is there even any point in asking what happened?"

He closes his eyes, swallows and it hurts, and his voice comes as rough as a raven's. "Maybe we shouldn't come here anymore. Maybe -" His hand curls on Phalanx's shoulder, as he sleeps a steady, heavy sleep. "We - it's dangerous, and if anyone - if anyone knew -"

Mike snaps the kit shut, walks over with cotton wool and a grimness to the set of his forehead. "Where would you go if not here? I know you won't walk into a hospital dressed like that. You're going to patch yourself up? Out on the street, or wherever's home? Exactly what kind of medical degree do you *have*, out of curiosity?"

He stares at his grey-gloved hand on Phalanx's armoured shoulder. "If anyone - knew you two helped us -"

Tina says, "You helped us. We're allowed to make the same choices you make."

Mike takes his chin, turns his face to him while the Ghost wants to bite his lip to hold it in and he *can't*.

Mike says, "This is going to sting."

He can't look at his eyes. He holds Phalanx's shoulder, stares up at the ceiling and closes his other hand so tight by his thigh that his knuckles hurt, and he's not going to cry, because the Ghost doesn't.

*

Blaine wakes in the grey light of almost-dawn, because someone kisses the side of his forehead - Kurt kisses the side of his forehead - the Ghost kisses the side of his forehead, hood brushing his face, whispering, "I need you to wake up, sweetheart. I'm sorry."

He looks up at him drowsily, tries to sit and the Ghost stops him, combs his hair back, strokes his cheeks. "Take it slowly. It's okay."

His leg hurts.

He hikes himself slowly to sit, remembers where he is, remembers last night and - there's an ugly purple bruise, broken-veined and angry-coloured, on the corner of the Ghost's mouth, he stares and doesn't understand. "Are you -"

"I'm fine. I need to get home, I don't know - do you want to stay or - I can bring your clothes back here later. They, um, they already know your name, it's not . . . it's not ideal but it's not the end of the world if you leave here without a mask on."

"No. You hate that. You don't want overlap."

He takes Blaine's - Phalanx, you are still in costume, Phalanx's - hands, presses them in his. "I can wake them up if you want Mike to give you something for the pain right now. He gave me, to take with us -" He looks at the coffee table, picks up a little rattling bottle, and he says to the bottle rather than to Phalanx with his voice pitched carefully flat, "Does it hurt?"

"Just - a bit, yeah. What happened to you?"

His mouth twitches, his poor hurt mouth, and he flicks his eyes back to Phalanx, smiles. "She was good. The woman who shot you. If it helps, she was no amateur, she was *good*."

He grins, shrugs a shoulder. "Nice to know I didn't get creamed by an idiot at least. Are you okay?"

"Phalanx," the Ghost says quietly, "you're the one we just took a bullet out of. So please don't worry about me, just - we just need to concentrate on getting you home."

"Subway?"

"They should be quiet, this time in the morning. I can get you sat down somewhere someone else won't try to sit on you."

"I dreamed . . . I was having a dream."

The Ghost stands up, begins putting things neat on Mike and Tina's coffee table, picking the blankets from Phalanx, leaning to kiss his cheek before folding them. "What did you dream?"

". . . I don't know. You were wearing . . . you were wearing the other cloak. Hey." He catches the corner of the Ghost's cloak as he turns to lay the folded blankets on the sofa's arm. "Ghost -"

He looks back, along the stretched length of his dawn-grey cloak, at Phalanx's face.

"Don't go back to the other cloak. Okay? I like . . . I like this one better. It suits you better."

Something in his eyes, too dark in the strange not-yet-light beyond the windows. "Let's get you home."

*

In Kurt's room he helps Blaine undress, helps him stop being Phalanx, checking the ruined leg of the costume and quirking his mouth and setting it aside. Blaine says, sleepy sitting on the side of the bed - his leg's shaking a little, very hard-hot with pain, "Can you fix it?"

"I'll sew a new leg on. It's fine."

"Sorry."

"It's fine, fine, fine, it doesn't matter at all. Into bed, Blaine."

He gives him one of Mike's pills, settles him under the covers, unclips his own cloak and begins undressing. Blaine dozes off; when he wakes, the sun's over the edge of the world now, actual light casting long in the room, and Kurt is showered and adjusting his cravat in the mirror, immaculate but for the broken-bruised purple *shouting* on the side of his mouth, the echo of whatever hit him so hard. Blaine mumbles from the pillow, "What're you -? Where're you going?"

"Work." He smooths his vest, takes a jacket from the back of the desk chair. "You go back to sleep. If people ask, you went to the gym early this morning and you sprained a muscle in your leg while you were boxing. That's why you missed class."

The pillow is so warm and his head is so heavy and his leg, so fuzzily, thumps with pain. "Okay. What about - what are you going to tell people about your mouth?"

"Oh, I'm just clumsy." Kurt says, one quick last comb of his hair in the mirror. "Everyone knows that. I'm the clumsiest person alive. I'm always walking into things and tripping over things and falling down staircases, I shouldn't be allowed to stand up unsupervised." He leans down, tucks some of Blaine's hair behind his ear. "Just sleep, try to be quiet until Rachel leaves, okay?"

"Okay," he says, and tries to kiss back very gently because his poor mouth, it looks so swollen and tender. "Did you get any sleep last night?"

"A little."

"Is that a lie?"

"No. A little. I'll be fine, coffee gets me through."

He wants to whine, he tries not to, he knows he can't, *stay with me*. Kurt smooths the covers over his shoulder and says to him, "Go back to sleep." and lays a kiss in his hair, then picks up his portfolio and bag and quietly closes the door behind himself. And the bed is warm and smells of Kurt, and the room is small and so safely full of Kurt's presence, Kurt's touch, Kurt's protective ghost all around him; he goes back to sleep.

*

It feels so strange watching him get ready to go out, and Blaine not going with him. It's not like the nights when they take their turns alone, not at all, because tonight it's not that Blaine's not going out but that he *can't* go out. He's a physical therapist in training, he knows exactly how he needs to look after his own leg to be back on the streets as soon and as safely as possible, he knows he's not going out when the wound's still only a day fresh, and it will be a while until the Ghost has company again. But it feels so strange, not being able to go with him, like the city's about to swallow him whole. Kurt pats the edge of the cover-up over his bruise to smooth it, wipes his hands, pulls his gloves on. Then when he raises his hood, he's the Ghost, and Blaine remembers the first time he ever met him, lone and untouchable and awe-inspiring superhero; he reaches out, and catches his hand.

The Ghost looks at him, lets Blaine tug him closer to where he's sitting on the bed and get his arms around him, get his chin over his shoulder, hug him close. The Ghost's hands rub his back and then settle in, warm and tight around him. "I love you," Blaine says.

His voice struggles a little on, "I love you too."

"Do you have to go out tonight?"

He kneels down between Blaine's feet so he's not bent so awkwardly low, arms settled around his waist, and he lays his head on Blaine's shoulder. "I always do," he says, quietly. "When something shakes me. Unless - you want me to stay, do you need me to -"

"No, Kurt, I'm a bit clumpy and awkward, I'm not *dying*. I can limp my way to your refrigerator if I want a drink. I just . . ."

The Ghost lifts his head, watches his eyes nervously. "I just feel weird that I'm not going out with you. I hate when you're on your own out there."

Something in his eyes. "You don't have to do this, Blaine."

"You're not retiring me just because I got clipped in the leg, *neither* of us knew she was there, that could've been you just as easy as me-"

"It could have been your head just as easily as your leg. Have you even thought about that?"

"- it wasn't. I'm not quitting over -"

"Neither of us were even paying attention, she could have *killed* you. Do you get that it doesn't - *matter* if you tell me you chose this, we *both know* you wouldn't be out there if it wasn't for me, we both *know* that if anything happens to you - do you think I could bear it, if you, *you* were dead it was because of *me* -"

"So what's the alternative? I never go out again? You go back to doing this on your own until it gets *you* killed on your own? Or we both quit, sorry New York, sorry all those people we should be helping -"

The Ghost closes his eyes, hides his face against Blaine's chest, still hugging him in around the waist. "I don't know what to do. I don't know what to - I can't stand it, anything either of us chooses, I can't - I don't know how to - you *know* I'm not that *superhero*, I *don't know what the best thing to do is*. Every option's just awful -"

"No." He rubs his back, runs his hand over his hooded head. "Hey, Kurt, look at me."

The Ghost keeps his head buried to his chest. "I don't know what the best thing to do is, I don't even know what the least *worst* thing to do is . . ."

Blaine murmurs again, "Look at me, angel." and kisses him on top of the head, through the hood. The Ghost swallows. And Kurt raises his face, Kurt kneeling there in front of him very, very maskless in his full costume, Kurt nakedly *scared*, as Blaine cups his cheeks, brushes them with his thumbs as his eyes close, skimming the bottom of the mask.

"I knew it wasn't easy when I said I wanted to do this. And - yes. You were right. I've seen some *things*, since, it's been hard, it's been - some nights really hard. Some nights it's genuinely scary and I don't know if we're both coming through it and I worry about *both* of us, Kurt. And some nights I - I don't know why we do this, when people don't seem to deserve it. Except they do. And it's weird that you feel guiltier when you're out there trying to help and you fail than you would if you'd never gone out to try to help at all, if it was just something that came up on the news, I get that, it hurts, it's hard. But -"

He looks so helpless, kneeling in front of him, eyes closed and back a little bowed. Blaine brushes his cheek again, to get him to look up at him, sad-scared-*lonely* eyed, how can he still feel so cut off, still feel the responsibility, the guilt, so heavy like he's the only one bearing it . . . ?

"But . . ."

It was only two nights ago the whole city could have been - god, it would have been a ghost town, what was left of it. The thought is enormous, it gives him vertigo, it's like standing on the edge of a pit. It was only that night there was that body, that child, and no-one was around to help *them* when it happened, and no-one, no-one should be on their own like that. It was only last night all those people applauded. It was only last night that he said to him, If everyone who was grateful got together . . .

"But we're doing the right thing. I believe that. *You* taught me that. Because no-one should be on their own when the worst things happen. No-one. Not them and not you. Because I know you *hurt* yourself trying to be there for people and Kurt, you will have to cuff me to the bed to stop me coming out with you again as soon as I can. I know it's hard. I know it's - it's a difficult choice and it's not like there are any guarantees for either of us that it won't end the wrong way. But I'm not leaving you on your own. Not you or any of them. We're doing the right thing. I know it costs us, I mean, yeah, my leg hurts like a bitch, but I'll get over it. It's a relatively minor thing to get over. There are people out there facing things that *aren't* minor, and - you. What you face. And I'm in this with you until the end." He runs his thumbs back over his cheeks, watches his lovely hurting eyes, how he's *not* crying. "Be safe, for me, tonight, so I can go out with you again, when I can. Go help people, and look after yourself. Okay? For everyone who loves you. Because I know I'm not alone, because you are so, so easy to love."

Kurt croaks, so horrible to hear his voice not birdsong-clear, "None of this was some plan I had. It's not like I ever knew what I was doing."

"You're doing the only thing you can do, because you're *special*, and you care about people, and you can't let them hurt on their own." Blaine quirks his mouth, strokes Kurt's cheeks again. "Hey."

Kurt lifts his eyes to his again, a silent, *what?* Blaine says, "My rescuer didn't get his 'thank you for saving my life' kiss yet."

He tries to be gentle, his poor hurt mouth, but Kurt's arms wrap higher around his back and he presses back so *needing*, so Blaine cups his face and gives him it if it's what he needs. All the love he can, mouth to mouth, Kurt on his knees and never broken, letting Blaine see him openly struggling and not lost, not yet. He will always, always be Blaine's hero.

The Ghost turns his face away a little after the kiss, eyes still closed, twitching the hurt corner of his mouth. Then he blinks at Blaine's face and - his breath drops out a laugh, and he says, "Cover-up," and smudges at the corner of Blaine's mouth with a thumb.

"I love you."

The Ghost leans his forehead to his, closed eyes and the gentle bump and the material of the mask to his skin. "I love you too. I won't be out too late. Get some sleep, Blaine."

"I'll be here when you get back."

"I know." He opens his eyes, smiles. "I'm looking forward to it."

He stands up, tugs his gloves right, smooths his cloak. And then he smiles his lovely smile, and turns for the window, and he's faded out of sight before he's taken a full step.

Blaine sighs, reaches into his bag by the bed and pulls out his iPad. Then he lifts his stupid clumsy pain-hot leg onto the mattress, and settles himself down for some blogging about how amazing his perfect boyfriend is, while he's out there making the world a better place, the best way he can.

*A fanghost has blogged, Unofficially official from an anonymous police source: that totally was a nuclear device that got defused by the river two nights ago. And they totally were there <3 And I feel a bit weird that, um, me and everyone in this city just almost died and never even knew it? So, seriously, everyone in NY needs to be reblogging this now, *seriously*, if it wasn't for supers this city would be *gone*:*

Reblog if you've ever been rescued by the Ghost. Let Figgins know what an assbutt he's being. We love you, spooky <3

Reblog if you've ever been rescued by Phalanx. (let the new guy get a look in!)

Reblog if you've ever been rescued by the most courteous gay supercouple in New York, and fuck the right wing media asshats. SUPERBOYFRIENDS ARE SUPER

*Thank you for saving my life even if I never even knew you were doing it. Thank you for saving lots of my favorite people who live here and I love them and I'm glad they're still around to be awesome. And thank you for saving my city. Because I love it here. And all my stuff is here <3 Thank you, guys, you're *amazing* <3 <3 <3*

The very first reblog of the post adds, *Mother. Fucking. Seconded. *standing ovation**

Blaine's quiet, for a while, reading through everything. There's a lot of it. That night already feels like a long time ago, that night with the Ghost covered in someone else's blood, that child he'll never forget, that night when Blaine felt *nothing* like a hero. That night . . .

He reblogs it, and he adds, *Thank you. I hope you do know how we appreciate you.*

Then he sends the link to Kurt because his press guy needs to let him know that people know, and they do appreciate him, and for once they're not even talking about his ass . . .

Chapter Nineteen

Blaine wakes up because Kurt wakes up, sucks his breath in and lifts his head, and from the kitchen Rachel says, "Well, excuse me for wanting a cup of herbal tea in my own apartment. How was the first half of your movie?"

Blaine blinks, looks at the TV screen in front of them rolling its credits. He's resting mostly on top of Kurt on the sofa, where Kurt puts a palm over his eye, digs the heel in a little, his body shifting comfortably under Blaine's. His voice is a little heavy from sleep, quietly, warmly sexy; "Hi, Rachel."

Rachel picks her mug up, pressing the teabag's string to its side with her thumb, and walks to stand behind the sofa. "So did you two originally bond over your weird erratic narcolepsy or did you *infect* your boyfriend with it at some point along the way, Kurt?"

Blaine shifts his leg with a little wince, and wriggles his chest closer along Kurt's stomach. "Naps are *amazing*."

"You two even injure yourselves simultaneously, you're turning into one of those couples who do *everything* together."

Couples who fight crime together stay together. Kurt's hand settles into Blaine's hair and he slumps his head back on the sofa's arm again, making small drowsy noises, while Blaine nuzzles his cheek closer to his comfortable, sturdy warmth. Rachel says, "I want to watch the news."

"It's miserable," Kurt supplies in a sleepy almost-purr, without opening his eyes. "All those ridiculous new security measures after that bomb threat and endless salacious digging up of that cult-thing behind it. You'd think the rest of the planet didn't exist."

"This whole city almost got wiped out."

"Supers saved it!" Blaine crows happily into Kurt's chest, raising a triumphant if sleepy fist.

"That doesn't mean war, politics and *people* the whole world over stopped existing," Kurt mutters, and scuffs his fingers through Blaine's already-scuffed hair. "Come on. My room."

"More napping?"

Kurt smiles, kisses his forehead, supports his shoulders to bear Blaine's weight while he hauls himself off him; Kurt has been the epitome of an attentive boyfriend since Blaine 'pulled a muscle', and he doesn't know how much of that is just Kurt, and how much of that might be guilt. He doesn't want him to feel guilty. He doesn't ever want to be the thing that makes Kurt feel bad.

Rachel just watches them unamused. "It doesn't make what they do right. Some - good consequences don't mean it doesn't stop being *illegal* -"

"You are actually upset that superheroes stopped us all being blown up." Kurt says, holding Blaine's wrists now he's sitting up properly, wriggling himself upright again. "You *really* have a problem with them, don't you?"

"They think they're *special*. They think the rules don't apply to them because they're *special*. The rules apply to everyone! Why do they get away with doing what they want? Why do they get to go around being *special* -"

Kurt looks away from her, and Blaine doesn't know what to say, feels such an odd weird twisting guilt-resentment, says, "They didn't ask to be born like that, they're just doing the right-"

"They act like they can do what they like, like they should get different rules to the rest of us, *no-one gets to be special*." Rachel *snarls*, and Blaine's seen her pissed a few times - she and Kurt squabble pretty much daily, over who took the last bagel and left their hairdryer in the bathroom - but he's never seen such a spark of *hate* in her eyes, never seen her fists get tight like that. "They don't have the right to act like they're *better* than us."

"Come on," Kurt says quietly, pulling at his hand, standing up.

Blaine says, feeling like he's in a corner, "They're only -"

"Careful," Kurt murmurs, as he takes his weight on one leg to stand.

"They don't know what it's like for us. They don't have the right. *Rescuing* people, like we're so much less than-"

"If someone needs *help* they're hardly going to argue who's-"

"*Both* of you," Kurt snaps, "shut up. *God* why can't *someone* in my life not be obsessed with superheroes -"

He bangs his bedroom door closed on Rachel, and locks it while Blaine sits a little awkwardly on the edge of the bed, all thrumming-angry-startled-upset, like he's been smacked with a newspaper and he doesn't understand why. "What is her *problem*? Why does she have to be so-"

"I shouldn't have poked that fire, it's my fault, sorry. Just - ignore her."

"How can *you* ignore her, saying all that - complete *crap*, she doesn't have a *clue* -"

"Rachel's got her own life, she's got her own reasons. She's not a bad person."

"She's a bigot. She just hates supers, no-one *asks* to be born a super."

"She's always wanted to be special." Kurt stands by the door, rubbing his arm, speaking quietly to the leg of his bed. "She wanted to be on Broadway. The biggest star. Only she was rejected by the performing arts school she wanted to get into and - and she's never really resigned herself to that. She's spent her whole life believing she's good and then someone told her she wasn't good *enough*. So, yes, she hates superheroes. No-one ever tells them they're not good enough. No-one can." He shrugs, tightly. "We do get different rules, don't we? We make our own, because we have to, because we're *different*. Do you honestly think we'd be doing this if we weren't supers?"

"No - but -"

He doesn't even know what he wants to say, he just feels rattled and he doesn't know what to *do* with himself, how to make himself feel less -

Kurt startles him out of it by clapping his hands around his face and kissing him, and saying, "Speaking of which, I need to get out there. Are you okay amusing yourself in here until I get back?"

". . . yeah, sure." Kurt smiles at him, brushes his cheeks with his thumbs, kneels down to get at the bottom of his wardrobe. Blaine resists the urge to touch his own mouth, then resists the urge to scratch the back of his leg where the wound itches through the glow of healing heat, then says, "Is your mouth okay? You didn't hurt -"

"I'm allowed to kiss my boyfriend." Kurt stands up, begins unbuttoning his shirt.

"I'm allowed to worry about my boyfriend."

"It's a little bruise, I think my worrying about my boyfriend's shot leg is slightly more proportionate."

"I'm still going to worry," Blaine murmurs, watching him pull his undershirt over his head, not even especially ogling, really, just noticing the way the lamp's light runs over Kurt's side as the muscles flex and shadow smudges the scar wrapping around it. "I mean, you're going out, I'm staying in, we both always worry -"

"Blaine," Kurt says, wriggling his naked shoulders against the cold and pulling on the long-sleeved underlayer of his winter costume, skintight grey, "I'm going to go out, yes, and then I'm going to come back, safe and sound, and I'm going to get into bed with you, and I'm very sorry but at that point I'm probably going to wake you up a little because I imagine I'll want to cuddle. Plus it's cold outside and you're kind of a radiator. But that's what's going to happen this evening, no surprises, no bad news. Just a normal night. A 'normal' night."

Blaine swings his one painless leg on the edge of the bed. "Promise?"

Kurt leaves his belt half-open, leans down with his palm on Blaine's good knee and murmurs to his mouth, "Promise." and kisses him again. Blaine catches his hand into the back of his hair to hold him there for a moment, a good meant moment, and then lets him up to glance down at him, checking him, before Kurt goes back to taking off his pants and Blaine thinks wistfully, How long until I get to do that for you again . . . ?

Mask on, fading bruise camouflaged, the Ghost kisses him again threading his fingers into his hair before he leaves. "Get some sleep," he says. "Early nights are your silver lining, Blaine."

He smiles at him, because he doesn't want the Ghost worrying about *him* when he's supposed to be focusing on not getting killed by criminals, and the Ghost smiles back, one of those real and a little shy smiles, the smiles that mean too much, a very Kurt smile; and then he disappears even as he's turning for the window, and there's not even a sound to indicate when he might have slipped through it, insubstantial as a dream.

Blaine sighs, snags his iPad from his bag by the bed, hikes his leg onto the mattress and settles himself back on Kurt's pillows for some blogging. The one thing he can do, while he's 'grounded', is keep up with the internet, because he never before realised quite how full-time an occupation that is . . .

If you actually go looking for it, the wank is daily and it is absurd; all someone needs to do is take the wrong tone and it can deteriorate in the space of two posts. There are people in fandom he follows specifically to be aware of what current topic is particularly volatile so that he can steer clear of inadvertently whipping it up, but the people he actually counts as friends are, like him, not exactly large causes of contention. Not people who write the fic everyone talks about, not people who post the gifs everyone reblogs; just those happily milling around in the middle, enjoying what they enjoy, reblogging and chatting and keeping the fandom rolling. Without them, there wouldn't *be* a fandom.

Mostly everyone's still preoccupied with that bomb and what it could have meant for the city, which Blaine understands; even a week on that was not a minor incident, it's been practically the only thing that even the national news has talked about since then. Commissioner Figgins (*He thinks he is the genuine undead, Blaine aches to blog, he thinks he's come back from the grave to haunt this city, he wants us arrested because he's scared of *ghost stories*, *seriously**) released a statement not even mentioning the Ghost and Phalanx's involvement, only unconfirmed eyewitnesses, anonymous cops, have placed them there. It only takes that to completely explode the always-touchy debate around supers again.

*Look, Draxie has posted amidst all the clangour, people do actually have their reasons for standing against vigilantism besides just being anti-super, ok? You do not help this argument by immediately calling them a bigot. The ones who are bigots, go ahead and call them bigots, if they didn't want to be called a bigot then they probably shouldn't have, you know, been a bigot. Otherwise maybe at least *listen* to them first? Please? That way you can actually *respond* to them if you want to defend the superboyfriends. Which, naturally, I encourage you to do <3*

He hasn't read Draxie's fic in a long time now, but he reblogs that. He wonders if he could read some fic, there must be something someone has written that wouldn't, on some level, sit wrong (it isn't like that/it's wrong to look at him like that/it's wrong to look at *me* like that/it's really, really just not like that). In the end, he just finds himself wandering the internet, uploading some new photographs of New York to his blog, meandering through the Ghost sites, reblog, reblog, reblog, not really thinking, smiling now and then.

He doesn't think he's ever read a piece of fanfic where they find in the trash . . .

People don't think about what superheroes do, what they spend most of their time doing. Blaine didn't before he actually was one. Do any of them even realise that their utility belts are mostly full of tissues and bandages and heat packs and cold packs and they even have *candy* in case they need to comfort a child, don't they realise that it's not just the fight, it's the before and the after, it's not just action but *people*? He does realise himself, now, that the reblogs there are on *Reblog if you've ever been rescued by the Ghost* . . . rely on the person rescued actually already being online, on the blogging sites, already in some way connected to this community which is in its own way quite isolated; god, that thing has so many reblogs and they're a *fraction* of the real number, they hardly represent anything of what the Ghost does, what *they* do. The tip of an iceberg, and all the rest down there in the dark. And no-one ever reblogs anything when it goes wrong. Sometimes there's not even anyone there to do the reblogging, when it goes wrong.

- don't think about it going wrong when the Ghost's out in it alone. Don't. Don't.

An Australian fanghost has asked, *So are you ever going to post photos of the world's most perfect boyfriend? We need evidence ;)*

Am I going to post photographs of my boyfriend online and specifically for the consumption of people who spend their days minutely scrutinising photos of the Ghost? Well, um, no. Because I'm not *that* stupid. Even though I do want all of you to know that I actually do have the most perfect boyfriend in the world, seriously, I am going to have to get shot more often, I get a bagel in bed and fresh squeezed orange juice every morning . . .

That, he silently tells any karmic agents who might be listening, was a *joke*. I would really rather be unhurt enough to help him out. He doesn't have a shield at his back tonight, and seriously, if anyone in the world deserves that, it's him. I need to be out there with him again. I know there's been - things, bad things, I know it's been hard, but -

(That little foot, that little foot . . .)

But he's out on his *own*, and . . .

He replies, *He's kind of camera-shy, you'll see them if I ever get them!*

Blaine's still waiting for Kurt to come to him and say, I'm ready for that photograph, if you want it.

He has actually taken that photograph a thousand times already, without ever having a camera in his hands. Kurt leaning over him in bed, naked arm outstretched for the lamp, drowsy eyes on what he's doing and drowsy mouth relaxed, ready for sleep; Kurt waiting for him in a coffee shop, ankles crossed beneath his seat, head propped on one hand, eyes elsewhere through the steam from his mug, dreaming-green; Kurt walking through his apartment for the kitchen, stretching his arms broad and backwards, eyes closed and head high, satisfaction in every long-drawn muscle; Kurt tilting his head to attend to Blaine speaking, all cat-like curiosity focused on him, wearing a perfectly angled maroon hat to make his eyes so blue; Kurt seen through the steam-edged window of a bus, holding a rain-spangled umbrella over his shoulder, cell in his hand like a salute. Blaine flicks through them in his mind like a slideshow and it's too much in his stomach, the thought of how perfect he is, the amount of love hems him in like cliff faces, feels shocking in its proportion, how can he feel so much when once he thought there were walls that his feelings would never scale - ?

Kurt bought him a copy of the Iliad for Christmas, mostly to make him laugh, Blaine thinks. He has been reading it, though. It's nothing like he thought it was, the idea he had of it just from how people talk about it, and movies. It's brutal and merciless, there's a horrible riptide feeling to it, the feet can scabble to slow but they can't stop the unrelenting approach of the end. Every death, and there are *lots*, belongs to a person, a person with family and friends and a *life*.

Helen of Troy, he'd once thought of, as a symbol of all feeling in love - beautiful beyond rationality, lives on lives sacrificed for that passion; but now he thinks, White-armed Andromache, and he kisses Kurt's shoulder in bed. Loyalty and love, and strength in the face of all horror. We might be caught in our own strange war, but please, please, *we'll* be okay, if we look after each other, won't we . . . ?

What a strange Andromache to choose, because the last thing the Ghost is in the world is helpless.

Kurt would ask him why he gets to be Hector.

Blaine would concede that Kurt has a point.

My brave soldier, Kurt says, and kisses him. And Blaine sometimes doesn't know how much of a soldier he feels like until he remembers that people don't become soldiers because they want to kill people. They become soldiers because they want to protect something. And what Blaine wants to protect is

(Kurt lit by his family's Christmas tree, all softened and rosy in that glow with a thousand fairy lights like fireflies in his eyes, leaning on Blaine's shoulder while they watched a good, happy movie on a good, happy evening, safe and warm; Kurt walking with him beside the river on a Sunday afternoon, arm in arm with a steel-grey sky overhead and a steel-grey river alongside and Kurt wearing the bluest blue there's ever been, glorious eye-stopping ultramarine, Kurt the most dazzling thing in sight; Kurt in Cooper's fancy spinny armchair, feet on the seat and coffee cup in his hands, wearing a throw like a cloak and his eyes so full of thought, and the clean cool daylight noted the strength in the set of his jaw; Kurt at the airport, glancing up at Blaine's shout, the second's startled *need* in his eyes, all for him, all for -)

him.

He'll be out there in the cold now, protecting someone else.

He lets the iPad droop a little on his chest. It's warm in Kurt's bedroom, and the pillow smells so distractingly of Kurt, like a dream . . .

"You are terrible for doing this," someone says, taking the iPad from his hands.

Blaine says, "What?" and blinks, struggling to prop himself up on his elbows, and Kurt *yawns*, very hard, and pulls at the covers underneath Blaine's body. "Get underneath. How late were you up until?"

"I - what time is it?"

"It's nearly three. I'm *so* tired. Come on, Blaine . . . careful, your leg, do you need -"

"It's healing, I'm fine. Come here." He runs his hands around Kurt's hard sides through his t-shirt as he wriggles under the covers with him. "You're cold."

"Mm," Kurt says, nuzzling his cheek into the pillow, eyelashes flickering but not rising at the kiss on his brow. "Tired, Blaine."

"Sleep, then." He runs his fingers through his hair, and turns the lamp off, and with his teeth gritted he slides his legs down the bed to join him on the pillow. "Just go to sleep, Kurt . . ."

In the dark, just the ever-glow of a lit-up New York night through the blinds, Kurt's breathing steadies and settles, long and easy. And Blaine thinks, Kurt with his cheek to the pillow, his eyes closed, perfect framing lashes easy and low, Kurt looking so wearily sweetly *peaceful* beside him in bed; one more for the album.

He scoops his arm around Kurt's sleeping side, and closes his eyes to sleep.

*

He's walking his new hitch-legged walk across campus when he hears -

He turns like a dog on hearing a whistle, head up, looking left-right-confused -

And the girl striding past answers her cell and says, "Yup? No, ugh, Saturday night *sucked*, don't even wanna *talk* about it -"

It takes him a moment to close his mouth. Ringtone. Not Kurt's laughter, not Kurt across the city in his high-rise office making beautiful things out of nothing but his imagination and intelligence and innate aesthetic eye. Not Kurt. Somebody's ringtone. Some fanghost's ringtone.

January-grey sky and a pigeon, head bobbling like a rocking horse, walks past his foot.

The world is sometimes crazier when he's *not* in costume and using superpowers to save people's lives.

*

Kurt in his bedroom, yawning before he puts his hood up, covering his mouth with a gloved hand. Blaine says, "You could make it a night off. I know I can't exactly cover for you right now, you're still allowed nights off."

The Ghost blinks sleepily, lowering his hand, and shakes his head. "I'll be fine after the first cup of coffee. Cold air wakes me up anyway."

Blaine sits on the edge of his bed, and resents his stupid leaden leg, his stupid hurt leg, the idiot leg keeping him inside. The Ghost reaches for his hair and Blaine ducks his head away, and Kurt takes his hand back, says in a small voice, "Are you okay?"

"Just - you'll mess it up."

"You're going to bed, Blaine."

"You don't -" He stops himself. He's snapping at a boyfriend he's about to watch walk off into the night alone to do something stupidly, stupidly dangerous, and stupidly, *hatefully* necessary. He swallows. "Sorry. I'm -" He gestures at his own leg. "I'm just getting tired of this."

Kurt's gloved hand settles, a little uncertainly, on the back of his neck. "I'm sorry, Blaine."

"Don't - don't be sorry, hey, Kurt, don't. It wasn't your fault. The only person I blame is the one who shot me, seriously."

Kurt wets his lips, and doesn't say anything. Blaine says, "Kurt, I don't. I don't - you're not responsible, you know you're not, which one of us actually stalked the other one across the country to get into this gig in the first place - ?"

"But it's not what you thought it was. If - if it's not what you thought it was, no-one -"

That little foot. He shakes it out of his head again; he has too much time to think, recently, he should never be allowed to *think*. "No. No, that . . ."

That little foot. The people they can't save. Blood on his shields and the Ghost sodden crimson trying to fight the life back into a man who just tried to wipe the city off the map, a man who would happily have killed *millions* of people for hate's sake. How can hate be *so* powerful - ? When he closes his eyes it's still there, that little foot, and he knows they've both seen the single quiet story in the local news about the kid they found, the arrest, the statement from the teacher who'd been the only person to report it when he vanished three weeks before . . .

Not enough love. That was what killed that kid. The people who should have loved him the most just didn't. That was what set that bomb up, in the end, just that people couldn't love other people despite difference, they let hate take over instead. That was what made a woman take a shot at his leg to get a chance to kill the Ghost, she just put money before people; not enough love, people going around thinking that something, anything, is more important than other people. Not enough love. In a world like this, you do what you can.

"People need us. I know that now more than I ever used to, I *know* that." Blaine watches Kurt's eyes, nervous and dark in the low lamplight. "People need people to care. I'm not saying it's easy. I'm just saying - I do care. I know you do too, that's why we . . . I don't go out there to give you something else to feel guilty about. All you're doing is *caring*."

Kurt says, very quietly, "I care about you the most. You do know that, Blaine, I - I didn't - there's never - it's only you. Just you. It's always you."

He touches Kurt's mouth, very carefully, where he knows the bruise is. His voice comes smaller, breathier than he'd known it would; "- you. I've never felt like this about anybody. I didn't know I could."

Kurt's arms fold around his shoulders to kiss him, his cloak falling around them like a veil; Blaine kisses him carefully for his mouth, letting his fingers slide gently back into his hair. It's a cold dark world out there, and nothing like enough love in it. Keep it burning, keep it bright. Share it around, as much as you can; everything else, all the other crap life is, none of it can matter as much as other people. Share it around. Everyone needs to warm their hands sometimes.

Kurt breaks the kiss, slowly, and stands up, takes a breath and raises his hood. And -

Blaine doesn't know how he does it. Something about his shoulders and the set of his jaw, but he's the Ghost, now, and he looks down at Blaine and smiles just a little. "I'll be back soon."

"I know."

"I love you."

He tugs playfully at his hand. "I love you too. Go be super."

He - grins, a small bright grin, and tugs back at Blaine's hand, then vanishes and Blaine's fingers close on air. He grins at the emptiness, hears laughter in the room and then silence. And he picks up his iPad, hikes his leg onto the bed with a grunt. See what the internet's been up to today . . .

*

OK, so, had like four Ghost incidents caught on camera in two weeks? And no Phalanx at all T_T

what if he's like hurt or something

I feel sick what if he's dead

o_0 Well, that escalated quickly.

The Ghost seems remarkably unflustered if he's dead, he's all business as usual re: kicking wrongdoing ass.

v v much business as usual, that video a girl put up where she asked him where phalanx was & he just vanished?? its just like the bad old days when he was sad again :(

*God, phandom n00bs, you can tell they only got here recently when they're crying over no sightings in three weeks. I ask everyone to remember the Great Ghost Drought of four years ago when we spent three months not knowing if he died in that fire. This is the fandom that holds its vigils. *Patience*, people.*

Prayer circle for Phalanx maybe he has the flu ;_;

Draxie wrote speculative fic of Phalanx on sick leave. The Ghost brings him chicken noodle soup at three in the morning, it's their special brand of abnormally-normal domestic adorkableness <3

Have those two ever like sneezed w/o Draxie ficcing it?

Speedwriting queen of the fandom! \o/

Count your blessings; we still have dat ass

Gifset: Ghostlanx and invisibility

Seriously what if he quit or something

He wouldn't do that. He wouldn't leave the Ghost on his own like that.

oh god I'm having all these feelings I can't why would you

do you think I could do some kind of voodoo magic with my plush to bring Phalanx back?

*I think you don't quite understand any actual form of Vodoun. You know, the ones that *aren't* in B-movies.*

Reblog if you've ever been rescued by the Ghost. Let Figgins know what an assbutt he's being. We love you, spooky <3

Thank you for chasing them off and calling the ambulance and loaning me your cape. I hope you're somewhere warm right now, I'm sorry you got wet because of me. Thank you xx

SOMEONE LINK ME TO SOMETHING FLUFFY I AM ACTUALLY CRYING ABOUT THIS RIGHT NOW

saalfkgjsdu[Ghostlanx sharing an umbrella??](#)

YES THANK YOU I NEEDED THAT STILL SOBBING LIKE I GOT PUNCHED IN THE FEELS DON'T MIND ME

The fandom that holds its vigils seems to be having something of an anti-sex riot tonight. I'm used to you people tearing the walls down and screaming, this moping in corners thing is depressing and unseemly.

Ghostly, we miss him ;_; It was like having a new puppy underfoot and always wanting to play, and now it's like he's at the vet's and the house is too quiet.

You're making it sound like the Ghost is having him neutered.

... I have the weirdest urge to write fic based on that... not like you think!! Oversexed!Phalanx, frustrated!Ghost. Is it inappropriate to write this when he might actually be hurt or something?

no draxie no do it do it <3 <3

*I know you didn't hear the *depth* of that sigh, Drax, but I just know someone is now going to draw him in one of those damned cones because it's '*cute*'...*

Fanart, G, [puplanx in a cone](#), poor puppy!! <3

*Ghostly. *Ghostly*.*

I hate you, Draxie. I just hate you.

havent seen puckzilla in longer :(

*He wouldn't leave the Ghost on his own, he just wouldn't. Something really awful must have happened. Something must be *keeping* him away, he would never, never leave him on his own . . . all the prayers for Phalanx, and the Ghost all alone ;_;*

*

On Saturday morning Cooper's out, so over breakfast at the breakfast bar, sharing a newspaper laid out flat between them, scent of coffee and toasted bagels, Blaine says, "How was last night?"

Kurt's holding his coffee mug cupped under his nose, like he's waking through the slow inhalation of pure caffeine. He says without opening his eyes, "Carjackers, two muggings, caught a drug stash moving locations - pure luck, that one - police brutality. Nothing especially exciting."

"Police brutality?"

Kurt breathes in, a long and slow coffee-laced breath. "Okay, arrest a guy if he's dealing drugs, you don't need to kick the crap out of him when he's already got the cuffs on."

Blaine grins and picks up his own mug. "You're rescuing criminals now."

"Don't tell Finn. The guy was less pleased when he realised I might have ghosted him out of being kicked but I'd also ghosted his cuffs into a lamppost so I could talk to the cops without him running." He rubs his eye, takes another quick sip of coffee. "Did you get up to anything last night, before I got back in?"

"Um, the internet."

"Of course."

"They think I'm dead."

Kurt opens his eyes, blinks over his mug. "Excuse me?"

"The internet thinks I might be dead. It's kind of weird, it's like reading your own obituary."

"Why do they think you're *dead*?"

"No sightings in three weeks."

"So you must be *dead*? Exactly how dramatic are these people?"

"They're fangirls," Blaine says, but Kurt apparently doesn't understand that as an explanation, so he rolls his eyes to the ceiling, wraps his fingers around his mug. "They don't know why you're still around and I'm not. You could, you know, tell them when they ask that I'm okay."

"I'm not you, I'm not - good with - what would I tell them? You got shot, it's fine! You're fine! It's -"

"Just tell them I'll be back soon."

Kurt's fingers tighten, relax, on his mug, and he looks to the side, at the edge of the breakfast bar. "It's different when you're not there. Dealing with . . . it's just different." Quietly, "I don't like it."

"You don't like what?"

He jerks a shoulder. "People pointing cameras at me. All I feel is exposed."

Blaine reaches across, puts his hand warm from the mug over Kurt's tense knuckles. "I'll be back out soon. I'll be watching your back again soon. But they only ever mean *good*, your fans, even if they're a bit . . ."

Kurt says, "It just feels different when you're not there." and lets go of his mug with one hand, so Blaine's fingers can slip through his. They squeeze in their grip, a little. "I know it's selfish because I know it's dangerous, but I miss . . ."

"I miss it too. Weird as that might sound. It's still -"

"- still . . . ?"

"Fun."

Kurt takes a sip of coffee, eyes agleam on his. "Mm," he says, swallowing. He smiles. "When you're there, it does have its moments."

*

Kurt in costume, Kurt as the Ghost. He tugs his gloves straight, bruise gone now, healed to nothing, just his perfect skin and perfect mouth. He glances over at Blaine on the bed, gives a twitched smile. "Plans for the evening?"

Blaine waggles his iPad at him, and the Ghost smiles a little broader. "I did tell someone," he says. "When they asked where you were. I just said you'd be back soon, I don't know if . . ."

"Hasn't made it onto the internet yet." Blaine taps his browser open, flicks up and down his inbox. "I'll keep an eye out for it. They will *survive*, they're just kind of - emotionally volatile."

"Hm." The Ghost leans down to kiss him, and Blaine puts the iPad on the covers to catch his face, to hold him in the kiss; he misses . . .

He misses so many things. He misses laying comfortably without forgetting, rolling over, unexpectedly hurting his leg; he misses boxing, which was *fun* and he was actually getting really good at; he misses sex. He misses that a lot. All they've managed in the last few weeks has been hands, and Kurt's mouth - Blaine has offered his own but Kurt couldn't think through a position for it that wouldn't wear on Blaine's leg. Blaine's suggestion, which had been perfectly innocent, that Kurt kneel over his face had been met with a white-faced silence, a sort of hollow horror. Blaine shelved the idea. Evidently not happening.

He knows that Kurt has very particular sense of what he actually finds sexy. While Blaine could say to him - it's not *like* that, I'm not asking you to - do anything to me that I don't want you to do - he knows Kurt just can't view it like that, Kurt sees what he reads as the imbalance of the position and recoils instantly. Kurt likes mutuality, eye contact, he likes fluidity and fun, he likes to feel *connected* when they fuck. In a way it's a relief that Kurt does make his boundaries so very clear, because the alternative would be that Kurt just did whatever Blaine suggested whether he was comfortable with it or not, and - no. Never. Blaine is *never* making him feel anything bad in bed. If he's the only lover Kurt's ever had, he actually has the opportunity to make sure that Kurt never feels *anything* but good. It's a gift. He's not fucking it up, not for Kurt.

Blaine doesn't have a problem with the thought of doing that, but Kurt does, so how Blaine sees it becomes irrelevant. So.

The Ghost kneels between his feet since the kiss isn't apparently breaking, and that bend of his back can't be comfortable. His gloved hands squeeze in Blaine's sweater, and when Blaine lifts his head a little he looks up, dark eyes under the hood, dizzying blue, kiss-dark lips against the pale of him. Blaine swallows.

"How much longer?" the Ghost says, not quite casual, tugging a little at his sweater. "Until, your leg . . ."

. . . be rational about this, Blaine, because while the thought of writhing with him that way they do dries his mouth, if he fucks this healing process up then that's even longer the Ghost's on his own, out there in a vicious city and no-one shielding him at all. He swallows, again. He says, and his voice comes a little rough, "Soon."

The Ghost looks up at him, patient and watchful, always, and Blaine -

He's kneeling between his knees, looking up at him out of the hood, masked and ready for the night. Blaine becomes aware too late of what's happened to his breath. And he watches the Ghost become aware, slowly, smallest tilt of his head, and his gloved hand slides down to squeeze the thigh of Blaine's good leg.

Blaine clears his throat, "So, uh, are - you -"

"Is this something you thought about? Before, before we knew each other. Did you think about me like this, for you?"

Blaine's knuckles go *white* on the edge of the bed. "I. I-I -"

His eyes, under the hood, are so very dark. "I'm telling you that it's okay to tell me."

Blaine stares at him.

The Ghost, in full costume, kneeling there between his legs looking up at him. Before you knew him, when you were just one of them, when he was just joy and concern and *hope* in the form of a person and fuck, *fuck*, how is anyone supposed to not notice his ass? He swallows, again, god it's like his throat's full of cotton wool, he swallows and doesn't dare to look away and really needs to look away and doesn't need to look down to know what's happening in his sweatpants. "I." The Ghost's hand spans his thigh, thumb stroking, pressing a little. He swallows, swallows, swallows. "I tried not to."

There is - something, in his eyes. Some little low glitter, amusement or - something, something, he doesn't - "How did it work?" the Ghost says, hand sliding higher, thumb running around the waistband of his pants. "Did I rescue you?" His mouth twitches its smile, watching Blaine helplessly watch him. "Did you rescue me?"

"I -" He is embarrassingly and obviously hard already, and the Ghost has done no more than brush his leg. "I didn't - really think through that much -" He has to swallow. Again. "Detail."

The Ghost's fingers curl in the waistband, his other hand slipping around to press at Blaine's ass; he rolls with him without thinking, to slip his pants and underwear down at once and he has to flutter his eyes to the ceiling for a second at cold air and the Ghost wets his lips, murmurs, "How did you want me? What detail did you think through?"

Blaine does start a word but his tongue's on him and it gets lost in a sharp-started *whine*, and his hands spasm and clench on the sheets. "I - you. I didn't - think. I only wanted -"

The Ghost breathes over the skin on the side of his dick, "What?"

How did this happen so quickly? Jesus it's like being a teenager again, he swallows and swallows and still can't breathe. "You. To see you. To - anything. Anything. You. Just to *see* you -"

He holds his eyes with his, and sinks his mouth over him.

Some part of Blaine is aware of the *strangeness* of this, which is part of the reason he's so undone with the whole thing, he can't hold himself together, he feels like the Ghost is slitting open his stitches, everything coming open and exposed. Because - because he knows what Kurt is comfortable with when it comes to sex, he knows -

Mutuality. It's all about mutuality, it's the most important thing to him, it's always mutuality, he's only interested if it's about both of them. Which means -

Blaine isn't actually the only one getting off on this.

He has to put a hand over his mouth to keep the whining in, as the Ghost's hands squeeze his thighs to hold his hips to the bed and he only uses his mouth, he only needs to, Blaine's not going to last. Because he

knows what Kurt is comfortable with, when it comes to sex. He knows how Kurt feels about other people's fantasies of him.

The Ghost is still doing this to him. Which means . . .

When it comes to Blaine, he doesn't find it creepy. When it comes to Blaine - he wants it. Fuck. He wants Blaine to look at him like this. He wants to be Blaine's fantasy. He *wants* it.

"I tried not - to -" Blaine pants, through his own damp palm. "I just - you just -"

His eyes watch his, and quickly blink, and refocus dark-pupilled up at him. Blaine *groans*.

"You're just - too - sexy, I couldn't -"

His head jerks back as his hips try to jerk up but the Ghost holds him hard, swallows around him as Blaine makes a noise he'll be embarrassed about later, a twisted whine wrenched out of his throat, and the Ghost's thumbs dig into the creases of his thighs before he lifts his head, breathing a little too quick, and reaches across to pluck a tissue from the bedside table to wipe his mouth. Blaine stares at him, can't look away, panting helplessly while the Ghost kneels there composed, tongue flitting to lick the corner of his mouth. "Do you . . ." Blaine's hand is a little shaky when he reaches for his face, he feels *high*. He swallows, a couple more times. "What do you want . . ."

"I want to go patrolling." He leans up, kisses him - Blaine sucks his tongue into his mouth and does not whimper - and then stands up, his cloak falling around Blaine like a curtain as his hands brush Blaine's face. "I'll see you later, Blaine."

. . . this is what you get off on? Me being an absolute shivering wrecked *mess* over what you do to me, this is what you find sexiest . . . ?

It's not like he's arguing, that was one of the most amazing things that's ever happened to his body. And Kurt, Kurt who first came to him humiliated about his lack of experience, hating his own body, like all he felt when it came to sex was *shame* -

Blaine says, voice still orgasm-raw, "You are the sexiest thing that has ever happened to me, you know that?"

And the Ghost watches his eyes, and the sexiest thing about his smile is just how *sure* it is.

*

He's a physical therapist, nearly. He's pretty much the best person to get shot, at least he knows what to do about it.

He begins the gentle stretches, keeping the muscles pliant now he's not going to open the wound again. He does his assignments and goes to class and the patients at a placement joke about his stiff-legged walk, and he grins. Pulled a muscle, no, yeah, he really should've known better, shouldn't he?

Kurt goes to work, attends to Blaine like an anxious mother, goes out on a night. Blaine worries about that distance between them, five years against a few months, worries about it growing even wider while he sits in his room and Kurt does *everything*. And Kurt's tired, Blaine knows that, even more so than usual, worry and he *knows* Kurt still feels guilty however often Blaine tells him it could never be his fault, and Blaine knows how wearing patrolling alone can be. He tells the both of them that it's not forever. His leg's nearly healed, he'll be back out again in no time. All Kurt has to do is wait a little longer for him, and he's so good at being patient, he won't be alone out there for much longer, Blaine's brave boyfriend, Blaine will catch him up again . . .

It's strange how much of a rhythm they've reached, though, the acceptance of this new state of affairs. It's amazing what becomes 'normal'. It's amazing how you can forget what's actually happening, through normality's numbing gaze.

In the dark Blaine's woken by a body shuffling under the sheets, huddling insistently to his back; he doesn't think, just turns and wraps his arms around him, satisfied by the presence of Kurt without questioning it. He's in his own bed and Kurt didn't come over earlier tonight; they were going to spend tonight apart. But it's dark, he's barely awake for it, all he does is settle happily into the shape of Kurt's body, feeling Kurt's heart thumping against his arm.

He wakes up in the morning, peels his eyelids open, blinks at the way the room is dimly lit even with the blinds closed, smiles imagining the bright cold wintry sky out there. It's cold outside but he's inside, and the alarm hasn't gone off yet so he can stay like this for longer, the luxury of bed and boyfriend. This must be the happiest place in the world, where the bed is warm and Kurt is here. He shuffles closer to cup Kurt's body in and - pauses, palm slipping around Kurt's arm. What is he wearing . . . ?

Maybe he's already been a superhero too long. Some internal sense opens a space inside him, a hollow *knowing*. He leans over Kurt's still body to turn the lamp on - and sees over the side of the bed, on the floor, there's a cloak discarded like old newspaper, boots kicked over, utility belts dumped on top of them. He looks down at Kurt, Kurt still in the Ghost's clinging pale suit, he's still got the mask on, his eyes are still closed, and his hair's stuck to the pillow with blood.

He doesn't scream. Maybe he has been a superhero for too long already; he doesn't scream.

*

"- should have gone to Mike and Tina's," Blaine says, jaw very tight, hand under the shower head while he gets it to the right temperature, just warmer than skin. "Should have woken me up, should have - *something*, Kurt -"

"Sorry," Kurt mumbles, Kurt very groggy and slow, kneeling next to him with his head inside the shower cubical, gripping the door. "I'm sorry, Blaine. I wasn't . . . I wasn't thinking right."

Blaine touches, very gently, the back of his head, then murmurs, "Close your eyes." and so so gently cups, turns his head to run warm water through his blood-spiked hair. "You're not on your own anymore. You don't have to do anything on your own. If you get hurt there are people to *help*."

"Sorry," Kurt says, still too sleepy, to the wall of the shower, as the water flows rust-mottled into the drain. "I wasn't thinking, I only . . . all I remember is wanting you."

Blaine runs his fingers through his hair, so so carefully, like petting a day-old kitten, encouraging clumps of blood to loosen and rinse out. "It's okay," he says, a little mechanically, to give himself time to think when his thoughts feel *crazed*, he can't get them to line up in any proper order, his thoughts are having a riot inside his skull. "It's okay, you're okay now. Everything's okay."

It takes a while to wash all the blood out, it's dried in pretty hard. Kurt keeps his eyes closed but gives no real indication of it hurting, his face is just sort of grim and tired anyway. Blaine thumbs some water from his brow before it can run into his eyes, leans down and kisses him there where his skin is warm and wet as he turns the shower off. "It's just a graze, I think. Your hair should cover it. But Kurt, if it's your head, you *have* to go to Mike and Tina, head injuries -"

"I know, I just wasn't thinking. I just wanted you."

Blaine wraps his hands in a towel, begins so gingerly petting his hair dry, brushing the water from his face. He will get this out, however much it over-fills his throat, however uninflected and alien it sounds. "I'm sorry I wasn't there."

"Don't mean that. I don't mean that, I just wanted - you." Kurt blinks his drowsy eyes open, finds a wavering focus on him. "It was a gang, they were only kids, harassing some other kid. They - one of them threw a firework at me."

Blaine gently, gently, squeezes the water from the ends of his hair. "A firework?"

"It - threw me. I just - it just threw me. Startled me. I tripped. Headbutted the kerb. It's my fault."

Blaine dries his hair, trying so hard not to hurt him, not to draw fresh blood from that wound he still needs to clean. I should have been there, he thinks, grimly. I should have been there. They would never have got near hitting him. Even if they did I would have taken care of him. I should *be* there. I have shields for a *reason*.

"Sorry," Kurt mumbles, and Blaine whispers, "Don't be sorry, sweetheart." and rubs his back for a moment, then leans across for the first aid kit on the floor.

"I'm calling you in sick at work," Blaine says, holding his head steady by stroking his cheek, dabbing like the touch of a butterfly with anaesthetic at the still-damp wound through his hair. "I'll tell them your idiot boyfriend took you to a really bad restaurant and got you food poisoning, it's his fault. Your boyfriend sucks, Kurt."

"No. I like him."

"You even know that I'm the one saying that?" Blaine checks his eyes - he looks incredibly *tired* more than obviously and worryingly concussed. "You've been working too hard. You always work too hard."

Kurt closes his eyes again, says automatically, "Sorry."

"Don't be sorry, don't be sorry. Just look after yourself, Kurt . . ."

"Sorry."

"Everything's okay." he says, like a mantra, eyes on what he's doing, dark glisten of the wound under his hair. "Everything is absolutely fine."

He gives Kurt one of his painkillers and lets him sleep for most of the morning, wakes him now and then to check on him, Kurt sleepy and drained but he follows Blaine's finger and smiles at his stupid jokes, closing his weary eyes again. By midday he's up, accepting a cup of coffee and sitting up with his legs curled underneath himself in bed, looking still so tired but not obviously hurt. "Just a headache," he says, eyes closed, breathing in the coffee steam. "My own stupid fault. Remind me not to panic at a firework in the future."

"It wasn't your fault." Blaine says quietly, from the desk chair. "You weren't the one who threw the firework."

Kurt gives a wry twitch of his smile, opens his eyes and watches Blaine, sleepily. "How's your leg?"

"Fine, it's fine. I can be out again next week."

Kurt takes a sip of coffee. "Would your doctor say that or is that just something you've decided?"

"I practically am a doctor, Kurt."

"'Almost a physical therapist' is not the same as 'practically a doctor'."

"I'm fine, I'm going back to the gym this weekend, some gentle boxing exercises, I'll be *fine*. I can always stay out of the worst of it for a while if you want me to but you can't be out there on your own, not for weeks on end, you're *exhausted*. It's no wonder you got hurt, you're completely wiped."

Kurt shakes his head, smiling a little. "I've just gotten spoiled. I did this on my own for years."

"And that was fun for you? I'm coming out with you again, no way in hell-"

"I didn't say no."

"Your face is saying no."

"My face is saying 'oh god I wish I could sleep for about two more years', Blaine."

Blaine watches him drink coffee in bed, legs neatly curled up underneath himself under the covers, arms pale against Blaine's dark red t-shirt, and Blaine feels the pull, the ever-pull, the current that is his life now, the *drag* of feeling. White-armed Andromache, he thinks, as Kurt lowers his cup and blinks his perfect, perfect eyelashes, and his tongue licks his lip so quick and clean.

That ever-pull inside, the choke of all that feeling, too much of it. How can it be this much, how could love ever have evolved, it's so much it's *stupid*, it can't be healthy - and he would think he was wrong, he would think he'd gone too far into excess after the drought of love in his life before, except, except, white-armed Andromache, and Kurt looking across, sleepily curious, at Blaine's camera on the bedside table.

People have felt this for thousands of years. It's not just Blaine. It's not a lie, it's not just *wanting* to feel it, the feeling is more real than most of the rest of his life, the little lies you use to get through the days - the meaning of money, the irrelevance of the people you pass on the street, the separation between you and every other life - but this is the most real thing he knows, because for thousands of years people have been acknowledging this, the too-much of it, the helplessness and hopelessness of it. Kurt puts his mug on the bedside table and picks up the camera, turns it, unscrews the lens cap, finds the on switch, and Blaine thinks, white-armed Andromache; you are everything, to me. You are all comfort and all love. The lack in my life without you, I couldn't *bear* it, Kurt.

Our story will be different. Our story won't end unhappy, I won't let it, not for you. I won't ever let what you feel for me be the thing that hurts you. I know there are awful things out there, I know that, we both know that. But isn't that only more reason for us to do this, and to do it together?

Kurt aims the camera at him, and Blaine sits there watching him, hearing the click. Kurt checks the screen, smiles a little. Blaine says, "No fair without warning."

"You don't need warning, you always look perfect." Kurt's smile at the screen is fond, at whatever image he's just caught. Blaine says, quite carefully, "Does this mean I get my photo of you now?"

Kurt looks up, then holds the camera out. Blaine takes it, keeps his eyes on his, but all Kurt looks is sleepy and peaceful, picking up his coffee again with his hands free. Blaine checks the last photograph taken and gives a little laugh, his hair looks *insane*, and he lifts the camera, focuses on Kurt, who takes a sip of coffee and blinks at him, cupping his mug close, tired and open and unafraid in Blaine's bed.

In a few thousand years people could look back at these photographs and they would know that people have been feeling this for as long as there have been people.

He takes the photograph. Kurt smiles a little secret smile, and drinks his coffee.

Chapter Twenty

FUCK YES PHALANX

sobbing

asKFDHFSJLASSALKFD still stupidly adorable together! <3

*LOOK AT HOW THE GHOST WATCHES HIM askldfasghfjaadlghjkf good times to be a phanghost like srsly *_**

*WHERE WERE YOU DID YOU NEED TO GO REPLENISH YOUR POWERS OF CUTE FROM THE SOURCE OF ALL
PRESH THINGS?? never leave us again ;_;*

Oh god so relieved so relieved so relieved

*My *babies* ;_;*

I don't even ship it, I'm still glad for the Ghost. So long as someone's got your back, spooky <3

lololol mom just ran upstairs to find out why i screamed

*Fly, my pretties, *fly* <3*

Oh, this calls for a celebratory drabble . . .

I'm so glad, I was worried ^^

*Looks like we're back to business as usual, with fandom keysmashing, capslocking, and crying, while I get
myself a drink.*

still no puckzilla :(

Stay safe, superboyfriends, take care <3

During the couple of days Blaine made Kurt take off after hitting his head, during which they mostly bummed around Cooper's apartment while Cooper was amused that the two of them could never seem to stay in one piece for more than a week at a time and Kurt hid in Blaine's room, blushing, Kurt murmured - quietly, looking out of the window over New York from Cooper's fancy spinny armchair while Cooper was out - "Maybe it would be nice, sometimes, to do more of the things that normal people do." He rolled his eyes. "'Normal' people."

They don't do much when they're not fighting crime, they're *tired* when they're not fighting crime, they nap together and fall asleep in front of the TV together and stay in bed together. And they're young, and very stupidly in love, and Blaine does want to do the things that people do; he wants to hold hands in a movie, go ice skating together, he wants to take Kurt dancing, *god* he wants to take Kurt dancing. But going dancing is not as simple as it sounds.

For one thing, there are clubs and there are clubs. There are the clubs people go to to dance and the clubs they go to to talk and the clubs they go to to find some flesh to rub against. Clubs have crowds, and Blaine doesn't know the New York scene well, and he wants it to be *right*, for Kurt. Then there's always the problem of straight clubs vs. gay clubs, which shouldn't be a problem but a night out with part of the mind always on edge, of what *might* happen if you press just a little too close to your boyfriend . . . he just wants it to be perfect, for Kurt, he wants everything to be perfect for Kurt.

But then, gay clubs do come with their own issues. The main issue being the problem of Kurt Hummel's beauty, and how utterly oblivious of it he is.

Blaine wouldn't rate himself a bad looking guy; he's never struggled to find company when he's wanted it, he's turned down advances from other guys while he's had a boyfriend before, and Kurt took the time to look twice at him so he can hardly not be worth looking at. So maybe it's that Blaine is biased but he doesn't think it's that, when he looks at Kurt and sees a problem, the problem of just how unaware of himself Kurt is, and how if Blaine takes Kurt into a room with his pick of other men, does Blaine know that he'll be the one Kurt walks out of it with . . . ?

And he's being stupid, and he's being paranoid, and he's being unfair, because Kurt is as loyal and loving as a child, it's *Blaine* he looks at, not anyone else. But Blaine looks at Kurt, Kurt who hasn't got a clue how lovely he is, Kurt who has all along attributed other men's attention to only one thing and he's never thought that thing was just his being *worth* people's attention. A guy gives him the up-and-down on the subway and Kurt's body leans, subtly, to Blaine's, Kurt's hand is so slightly tighter gripping the pole. Blaine

puts an arm around his side and acts like he hasn't seen anything. It's not fair, Blaine thinks, Kurt not realising it. It's not fair that Kurt can't attribute attention to anything but aggression. It's not fair that Kurt has for so long wanted to be invisible, just to keep himself safe.

If Blaine ever meets the guy who did this to him he's scared of what he might find himself capable of doing.

He doesn't want any trouble, he doesn't want their 'night off' to be spent paranoid of even a dirty glance across a bar. He just wants to go dancing with him, to see Kurt looking *young*, flushed with fun and life. He just wants to make him *smile* like he's not aware of a single bad thing in the world.

He does his research, he picks a club. He's just going to have to trust that Kurt doesn't have a dance floor revelation about his own absurd hotness and wander off with a harem of besotted guys; he's just going to have to make sure that his boyfriend's dance card is all him all the time.

It should be okay. Blaine has some pretty attention-holding moves.

*

Kurt calls him as he reaches Cooper's apartment building, so Blaine's opening the door as he walks down the corridor and Blaine thinks, articulate as he is, *Fuck*.

He doesn't move anything like the Ghost when he's Kurt, though the Ghost is beginning to pick up some of Kurt's fluidity, beginning to work the way he moves like the most comfortable thing to wear in the world is his own muscles into his authoritative, composed, straight-backed poise. But Kurt, Kurt's all quickness and curves like a bird's wings, and in black jeans so tight he must have pulled them on inch by inch his hips look completely lethal. "Okay?" Kurt says, his cheeks bright from the cold outside, his hair casually, perfectly swept up, his jacket fitted close to his slim sides, and Blaine's tongue feels too big in his mouth.

He finds a smile, says, "Yeah, everything's okay." and kisses him his greeting. Kurt tugs at the lapel of Blaine's jacket, runs his hand down it, murmurs, "I love this on you." and steals one more smiling kiss, then pulls at his hand. "Come on, then. Where are we going?"

"Ah, um, this place I heard about. I haven't been dancing in *months*."

They stop for the elevator, hand in hand. Kurt says, "You like dancing?"

"It's fun. Do - you?"

"I don't know. I, um, I don't know if I've ever actually *danced*, like that. I know how to waltz. Just, I've never, you know, just, in a club . . ."

"How'd you learn to waltz?"

"I had a teacher." Inside the elevator Blaine glances in the mirror, and keeps his hand in Kurt's, notes the contrast and complement of the two of them side by side, paler and darker and taller and shorter and poised and relaxed. Caught unaware by the sight of them he thinks they make a handsome couple, blinks and that's what he'd like other people to see when they look at them, not *damn that guy is hot* but the two of them, very much together, and very much fitting together. Kurt's tongue presses between his teeth with amusement as the doors close. "Madame Mop was very tender and patient when I was a clumsy *jeune homme* learning the difference between *a gauche et a droit*. How did you learn?"

"God, at far too many cotillions. Don't even ask."

"I know what a cotillion is, Blaine. Madame Mop ensured I was properly educated for all areas of polite society, for which you can reap the genteel rewards."

Blaine can't not smile at the image of a solemn young Kurt teaching himself to dance with a mop because well-bred young men know how to dance, shaking his hand in his a little as the elevator doors open again.

"I think you'll be a great dancer. You really know how to *move*."

". . . I don't think it's like being in a fight. Is it? That could get nasty."

That's not the only way Kurt knows how to *move*; his hips genuinely are lethal, he makes Blaine beg and babble and whine, Blaine happens to think that Kurt might turn out to be almost *too* good at dancing . . .

In the short queue outside the club it's biting spring cold, and Blaine huddles his arms around Kurt from behind, puts his hands into Kurt's jacket pockets. Kurt laughs, nose bumping Blaine's cheek pressed over his shoulder, slipping his hands in over Blaine's and knitting their fingers together. "You need gloves."

He can smell Kurt's cologne, warm on his skin where he nudges his nose closer. He doesn't wear it in costume, that scent is all Kurt. "Mm, you're warmer than gloves."

Kurt just tips his head against his, closes his eyes, stands quite happily being held in the queue, and Blaine wonders if other guys can smell his own rising possessive *Mine* pheromone, secreted into the night as a needy, angry warning. People mostly just keep on talking. Every time the door opens a gust of a bass line swirls out into the cold, and Blaine feels it rise a little in his belly, excitement like walking into a funfair, because for once it's Saturday night and the worst they might face is a hangover . . .

They have to disentangle to enter, after shuffling like caught crabs down the line together, and Blaine takes Kurt's jacket to the cloakroom because he's a gentleman. He looks back to Kurt standing near the entrance still, Kurt in a very carefully casual t-shirt cut some clever way across the shoulders, Blaine doesn't even dare to ask the intimidating origins of some of Kurt's clothing, one arm crossed across his chest to hold his own bare arm, head warily low, watching the dark interior of the club. Blaine has watched Kurt stride right into the middle of a gang fight and send people scattering in terror, and now he looks at a thumping-lit roomful of dancers like he's completely out of his depth, and when Blaine walks back he slips his fingers between Kurt's, and squeezes. Kurt presses back.

He has to raise his voice for them to speak now, as they wait at the scramble around the bar, over Lady Gaga thudding loud. "When did you last take a Saturday night off?"

He raises his hand in a shrug, eyes genuinely clueless. "College?" he suggests. "Freshmen year."

Blaine squeezes his hand again. "Thank you for doing this for me."

Kurt leans closer so he doesn't have to yell so much; "Thank you for doing it for me."

He's going to miss yoga tomorrow, they're going to sleep in. They are genuinely having a normal night out like normal people. All those people Kurt's helped heading to and from clubs over the years, going about their happy ordinary business, this is the first time he's ever been one of them. Blaine squeezes his hand again, and Kurt squeezes back, and eyes the bar uncertainly.

"I don't really . . ." he says, and Blaine tips his head to hear better, he forgot how *loud* clubs get. "What doesn't taste awful?"

He knows Kurt's taste by now. "I'll get you a cocktail. Trust me."

"What do you think I'm doing?" Kurt says, and it's sort of a joke but he has one eyebrow raised a little too wry, and Blaine does know that Kurt is trusting him with a lot, tonight. Because Kurt doesn't drink and

Kurt doesn't go out and Kurt certainly doesn't put himself in a room full of people who might be interested in him. Or he didn't. It's only become safe to do so because Blaine's there.

Shields, he thinks, and holds his hand as they shuffle to the front.

There's nowhere to sit already, the place is packed, so they lean over the railings above the dance floor, Kurt playing with the straw in his drink and watching everyone dancing with his cat-quiet eyes, looking genuinely curious about this peculiar anthropological phenomenon of people enjoying themselves. Blaine bumps his hip off his, calls, "You okay?"

"Mm," Kurt says, not taking his eyes off the dance floor, plucking his straw from his mojito to suck the end of it. Blaine doesn't think not to stare. "I don't know if I can do that."

"What?"

"I don't know if I can do that!"

"Do what?"

Kurt gestures at the dance floor with his hand and his drink. "Like nobody's watching. Like *they* are."

"Nobody will be watching."

"We're watching right now."

"Okay, but, nobody's going to be . . . Kurt, it'll be *fine*, the only person who's paying *attention* to you is me."

Kurt glances across, at Blaine's hands before he reaches his eyes. Blaine strokes with his knuckles at Kurt's bare arm for a second, twitching his smile, and Kurt twitches one back, eyes dropping again. "Did you do this with, um. Other guys?"

"Two boyfriends, Kurt. Two."

But Kurt just looks at the dance floor, and nothing Blaine ever says to him can convince him that Blaine is not incredibly wisely sophisticated in the ways of men, because to Kurt two actual boyfriends is practically Casanova. It feels very weird sometimes to be treated as some kind of dating Jedi master when Blaine

knows that really he's a fumbling over-lucky Ewok at best. "They weren't you." he says. "It wasn't the same."

Kurt leans his forearm on the railing, licks his lips. "How do you just let go like that?"

"Kurt, you know that half of them are completely wasted and the other half are on their way there, right?"

Kurt's glaring at them, now. "I'm not getting drunk."

"I know. I'm not asking you to."

". . . I like this one though." He lifts his glass and gives Blaine a little grin, and Blaine leans across to kiss him on it because he has to. He tastes of sugar and lime, Blaine wants to lick his lips for him. "Blaine," Kurt says, and Blaine says, "Mm?"

But Kurt just smiles, eyes almost closed, mouth a little open and ready, so Blaine just kisses him again.

They finish their drinks, and their arms nudge now and then on the railings, their hips bump now and then as they shift, as Blaine moves unconsciously to the beat and Kurt's intent eyes follow the dancers like he's trying to learn simply by staring hard enough. The fact of sharing this with Kurt makes Blaine feel drunk already, one beer and everything he's ever wanted and this is the best evening *ever*. "Come on," he says, bumping Kurt's side harder this time. "They're playing our song."

Kurt looks at him, listens looking confused and then - the way he grins, god Blaine *adores* him, as Rihanna sings, "*SOS please someone help me-*"

Blaine takes his hand to lead him down the two steps to the floor. "Blaine, I don't -"

"Forget everything else. Okay?" He tugs Kurt in close to his body, so Kurt has to look at his eyes, and puts his hands on Kurt's hips as his own find the beat. "Just the music. Okay?"

Kurt's hands are anxiously tight in the sides of Blaine's polo shirt. "I don't know if I -"

"You jump off the side of buildings, you can do this."

"No-one sees me doing that!"

"Don't look at them." Blaine says, harder, as Kurt's eyes attempt to rove. "Look at me, and focus on the music. It's not even the beat, listen to the *rhythm*, like - this."

Kurt is awkwardly self-conscious, though his eyes do stay on Blaine's now, looking mostly sort of mystified. Blaine lets a hand slip around to press his lower back closer, trying to lead his body to flow with his, to the heart-heavy pulsing of the beat. "It's supposed to be fun," Blaine points out, illustrating this by a more forceful left-right swing of Kurt's body on the song's *boom-boom*, and Kurt grabs harder at his sides for balance and - laughs, more shocked than anything.

Blaine leans in, sings up under his ear, "*I'm out with you, you got me head over heels -*"

"You are -"

Blaine wraps his arm properly around his hips, bops Kurt about with his side-to-side swagger and Kurt's hand closes in the back of his shirt, he says right to Blaine's ear over the deafening music, "You are ridiculous, Blaine Anderson."

"Yes?"

"Yes." Kurt says, and his hips swing of their own volition under Blaine's arm, *boom-boom*. "I would not do this for a single other person on the planet, just so you know."

Sometimes when he understands how much of an exception Kurt has made for him, how much of an exception he is for Kurt, he doesn't even know how to understand what he feels. But he's really glad he did pick this club, where no-one is going to mind how he kisses his boyfriend on the dance floor, Kurt's fingers dug into his shirt, Blaine tucking Kurt's body still closer in his arm.

Kurt's heart beats quick close to his, and he's not looking at anyone but Blaine. Why did he think it was dangerous to show Kurt his other options? He can't conceive of Kurt looking at anyone else like that, Kurt staring at him like he doesn't know how he does this, like Blaine has shocked the ground sideways, like Blaine rewrote the world, like he's only just realised that Blaine is the centre of his universe. He doesn't know what to do, to be looked at like that.

So he holds him, and he dances, and wiggles Kurt's body for him to make him laugh, and takes what opportunities he can to catch in every breath that smells of his skin, silvery under the stream of the lights.

*

Blaine has to go to the bathroom, leaving Kurt with a fresh drink - Kurt requested soda, said he was hot and thirsty and Blaine didn't question him, just left him holding a diet Coke and his beer while he squeezed through the crowd for the restrooms. With a tiled wall between him and the immediate pounding of the beat he hears its reverberations deep in his ears, and he feels how hot he's been in the cooler air of the bathroom. He also feels drunker than he should on a beer and a half. He hasn't been drinking much, recently - Kurt doesn't so he doesn't, and he's missed it less than he should. Plus he always was a lightweight, which is why he doesn't tell Kurt most of his college stories, which usually start with 'so at this party once' and end with his own humiliating need to cringe into a ball and never meet another human being's eyes again.

A guy comes to pee right next to him and Blaine stares very hard at the tiles and doesn't really know what to do - he's not aware of the explicit etiquette for how to politely say, 'Hi, I couldn't help but notice you staring at my dick, could you please not' and it's feeling that other guy's eyes on him that reminds him that he just left Kurt alone in a room full of drunk and horny men, like a moron.

He washes his hands in a hurry, doesn't even check his hair, hurries out again. He left Kurt *somewhere* near the bar, but it seems darker now after the bathroom's stark lighting, and the music - Katy Perry, too perky for his mood - is almost harsh enough to hurt after the relative quiet. He tries to look for Kurt but it's hard to see over the heads of everyone else, where the hell -

The bright scatter of roving lights focus for one second, then wheel off again, on the guy leaning down to talk to Blaine's boyfriend, whose face is raised and white and utterly rigid.

Blaine bumps his way over between bodies, he feels like his *brain* is throbbing with *no no no no no no no* -

The guy standing opposite Kurt takes a drink and raises his eyebrows at Blaine over the rim of his glass, while Kurt sucks his breath quickly in and says, "We should go."

"So this is the boyfriend?" the taller guy calls over the music, grinning a designer white smile, eyes creased with his smile behind designer glasses, offering a hand. "I'm Ryan, I knew Kurt back in college."

"We should go." Kurt says again, and Blaine can see how tight he's gripping those drinks, but automatic manners have already put his hand in Ryan's, who says before Blaine can say anything, "He tell you a

couple of us had a bet on over who could actually get a crowbar into his pants and no-one ever claimed on that? You're still in the phase where you hope you can drag him out on a night and squeeze some fucking fun out of his frigid ass, huh?"

Blaine says, doesn't even know where it comes from, the words come too-deep out of his throat like they were just supposed to exist, "You need to shut the fuck up."

Ryan's looking back at Kurt, who stares frozen and flat-faced back up at him. "You tell him what we called you in college? He had a nickname," back to Blaine, whose fists are forming so tight they hurt. "'Cocktease Kurt', no-one ever did find out if he actually did walk around with a stick up his ass since no-one ever -"

Kurt spits out, "You know what, not wanting to fuck *you* doesn't make anyone frigid, it means they have *taste*. You don't *get* to decide what sex other people have. And your shirt's a knock-off." then he turns too quickly for Blaine to even say anything, shoves the two drinks into the bewildered hands of a passing guy, while Ryan looks confused down at his own shirt and Kurt's already gone through the crowd, hurrying for the exit.

Blaine says, "Excuse me," to the guy Kurt just shoved his drinks at, and takes the Coke back. "Thank you," he says, and tosses it in Ryan's face, and gets, "*Asshole*." out through his tight-clamped teeth because *fuck* but he can't punch the bastard gasping and throwing his hands up at his glasses and hair because *Kurt wouldn't like it*. Instead he storms after Kurt, swerving at the sudden memory of fuck their coats -

By the time he gets outside the queue's shorter than earlier, and Kurt's at the corner of the building where the people have tailed off, his back to the bricks, crying into his hands; in a reversal of most evenings of his life, someone else is offering him a tissue, a woman in hand-span high heels, leaning down to his face while her friend pets ineffectually at his arm.

"He ain't worth it, honey, forget the bastard." the woman with the tissue says, dabbing at his cheek. "You gonna blow for me?"

Kurt takes the tissue, shudders a breath in for his, "Thank you." and blows his nose, while the other woman rubs his shoulder, and they both look up as Blaine approaches.

"Um," he says. "I have your - coat."

They're both glaring at him like he's the antichrist. They - fuck. They think Kurt's crying because of *him*. Blaine stops, mouth still open, holding Kurt's coat and not knowing what the hell to say to defend himself from everything in the world and nothing at all.

But Kurt looks up, gives a wet and wobbly half-twitch of a smile and wipes his eyes off, while Blaine warily shuffles in between Kurt and his new guardian angels, reaching around him to get his jacket around his shoulders even if not properly on him. "It's okay," he murmurs, and Kurt blows his nose again, nods with his head very low. Then he looks up at the women, makes his sad mouth curve up, says thickly, "Thank you."

The women look at Blaine again, who rubs Kurt's arm - his skin is cold under his palm - and he says, "There, um, we . . ."

Kurt says, "Someone I didn't want to remember was in there." and sniffs again.

One of the women says with a pouted mouth, "We all got asshole exes."

The other woman says to Blaine, "You look after him, okay?"

He rubs Kurt's cold arm. "I promise. Thank you, for your help."

Once they've walked off, arm in arm and heels clattering on the sidewalk, Kurt leans into Blaine's body and shivers, and Blaine tugs his jacket closer around him. "You're freezing. Let's go home, forget that guy. Just forget him."

"Hated him," Kurt breathes at his shoulder, and chokes. "*Still* hate him, I thought all that *shit* stopped with high school, I didn't think once I got to college -"

Blaine gets his arms around him, rubs his back. "He's not in your life anymore. He's a bad memory, he's gone."

"I'm not even - *upset*, I'm just so - so - *angry* -" Kurt pulls his hands up through his hair, stares at Blaine, shivers again and they both work to shrug his jacket properly on, and Blaine buttons it for him. Kurt swallows, and smudges off his damp eyes again, and doesn't look at Blaine. "Do you know how much of my life -"

Blaine puts his arms around him again, because he's still cold, and rubs his sides. Kurt closes his eyes, swallows like it hurts, grinds out, "Do you know how much of my life I *believed* people like him - ?"

Blaine runs his fingers into his hair, cups his head close. "He's a moron. He's a *moron*."

Kurt's breath comes out in a hack of laughter. "What does that make *me*?"

"No - Kurt -"

"No. I have been so, so *stupid*, I do know that." He dabs the balled-up tissue underneath his eyes again. "He hasn't changed, I just wanted to put my foot through his face, he's just so - so *pathetic* and I let people like him *wreck* me. I don't even remember what I said to him, I was just . . . what did I say to him?"

"Um. You told him that his shirt was a knock-off, for one thing."

"Oh god, it was. Nasty cheap *ugly* thing."

"And you said you had too much taste to ever sleep with him. Did you . . . did you -" He narrows his eyes, can't picture it, Kurt even having a conversation with that man - "date him, or - ?"

"*God* no." Kurt brushes his jacket down and folds his arms, canting his hip to really *glare* at Blaine. "How much taste do you credit me with? He was just around, he got drunk at a party once and tried to grope me, I shoved him off and left. I told you I've had enough abuse for *not* sleeping with people, little boys have very easily wounded egos."

Blaine says, "I threw your Coke on him. You weren't around to do it," he adds when Kurt blinks, and then - *bursts* out laughing, puts a hand over his shocked, delighted mouth, then the laughter wrenches the wrong way and Blaine catches his arms around him, supports him while his back jogs again.

"I'm sorry," Kurt pants into his shoulder, through it. "You wanted a fun night out and, and -"

"No." He rubs his back. "No, you're more important."

"I just wasted so much *time* -" Kurt gets out, muffled into his shoulder, and Blaine hugs him closer, in the cold night at the back of the queue to a club, ignoring New York all around them, because in all the city right now the only person he can help is Kurt.

"It's okay. You don't ever have to see him again. All that crap -"

"Not ever again." Kurt grinds out. "Not ever, ever again -"

Blaine doesn't think he means ever having to face that asshole again. Kurt chants into his shoulder, "Never, never, *never*." and Blaine knows what he means, holding him while he *growls* his way through the last of the tears.

All of it. All the years of his life he was made to feel ashamed of the last scraps of respect he had for himself. Everything he suffered for more secrets than he should have had to bear. Ever letting anyone convince him that his claiming his own body ever made him *less*.

"Never." Kurt chokes, and Blaine presses him closer to kiss the top of his head, and Kurt is always his hero, but he doesn't think he's ever been this throat-closed *proud* of him before.

He says, "Let's go home.", and rubs his back. "Come on. It's cold. Home . . ."

*

Kurt's calm by the time they're back at his apartment, making their quiet way in through the lounge, hand in hand in the dark. They push Kurt's door open, tiptoeing and whispering their *sshhes* the way they don't when they're in masks and wearing different names, just like they're young, and it's late, and they can't wake up Kurt's roommate . . .

Kurt turns the lamp on in his room and takes his jacket off, sighing, just softly. Blaine skims Kurt's laptop awake by the mouse pad, clicks onto his iTunes, quickly scrolls for some appropriate music and Kurt looks over at the gentle opening bars, hisses, "Rachel -"

"It's quiet enough." Blaine folds his jacket over the back of the chair, holds a hand out to Kurt. "May I have this dance?"

Kurt stares, Kurt a little tear-drained and tired and still so beautiful, blink of his perfect lashes in his surprise. Blaine wiggles his fingers a little more insistently. "We were supposed to be dancing tonight," he says, and Kurt's face softens into a fondly *helpless* look, like Blaine is always beyond him in the most wonderful way, and his smile flickers a little as he puts his hand in his.

Body to body, arms keeping them close. Kurt murmurs, "This wasn't what you had in mind."

Blaine settles his cheek to Kurt's shoulder as they settle into their rhythm, and it turns out that Kurt really does know how to dance. "It's fine. I'm exactly where I want to be."

Kurt's breath shivers a little, and his hand slips a little further around Blaine's waist. He says, very quietly, "So am I."

Their feet move, their bodies move, like they know. And Blaine's been dancing, sure, he's danced with other guys, he's stumbled home with them at the end of the night and the start of the morning sticky with sweat and muscles thumping with joyous exhaustion and the oncoming hangover . . . but with Kurt coming home late in the night means something else, they've done enough whispering in the dark, hushed pillow talk before dawn breaks. They have the wild times every night, so they do it under another name and for the sake of saving lives, does it matter? Because - because, because -

Because he's been dancing, but - Kurt pressed close and eyes closed, Kurt's cool cheek against his so his tired head can fall a little, and how their bodies move like they *know*; Blaine's been dancing, but he's never danced like this.

"I seriously want to be with you forever." He raises a hand, rests it in Kurt's hair, palm to the soft skin on the back of his neck. His breath's too quiet, he doesn't know how to make anything *mean* enough for what he feels. "I really . . . I really mean that. I really . . ."

Kurt's breath catches a little on a laugh, and his arm tightens around Blaine's back, his fingers pressing in his shirt. He swallows before he says, "Good. I'm glad. *Good*."

"Are you . . ."

Kurt takes his hand, lifts his head little, fits his palm over the back of Blaine's hand and his fingers through his, opening their bodies just enough to put Blaine's palm on his own chest. And Blaine feels his heart beat, slow-slow, slow-slow, slow-slow, and his lips part, at Kurt's low eyes on Blaine's throat, and how bright and how dark they are in the lamplight, and the perfect, perfect cut-low lashes . . .

"I didn't think there would ever be anyone," Kurt says, to Blaine's breastbone, while the song plays so soft and their bodies slow dance like that's what their bodies are for, and they've only just worked it out. "I

didn't think I would ever . . . I knew I couldn't risk anyone knowing, and who the hell would want me anyway - ?"

"Kurt -"

"And *you*. And the first time we met - and you took my hand, and -" Blaine sees the blush rise on his cheeks, and the curving smile rise on his mouth. "And that shouldn't have meant anything, except - I don't know if a cute guy ever wanted to just take my hand before. It's . . . it shouldn't mean that much. Should it? Except it does. Just offering - I don't know. Just, hands." Blaine's fingers flex through Kurt's, and Kurt's palm settles more snugly over the back of Blaine's hand, and his heart beats, beats, warm with blood beneath the skin. "And I didn't understand . . . everything that should have scared you away, everything that should have made you see me . . . the way I saw me. I couldn't understand why you didn't. And I didn't understand why after I made myself *helpless* against you, Blaine, you know what - you know who I'm risking when someone knows who I am. You never used it against me. That was so difficult for me to . . . you didn't want anything but . . ."

Blaine closes his eyes, touches his forehead gently to Kurt's. Kurt's head tips to meet him, and eyes closed, they dance.

Kurt whispers, "Things like this don't happen in real life. Not like this."

"Love?"

"You."

"Love," Blaine confirms, and runs his hand down Kurt's back to settle there low, spreading his fingers to touch as much as he can. "I love you. I've never met anyone like you. I've never felt anything like this."

"Love," Kurt says, almost like he's testing the word. Blaine opens his eyes, lifts his head to see Kurt's low-lit gaze, that blue-green like the warmest part of the ocean, and Blaine says, he can't think to say anything else faced with Kurt, "There's no-one like you."

Last night, in cloak and armour, the sound of a car crash brought them down from roof level. Phalanx had helped a couple out of their SUV, shaken but apart from a bloody nose unhurt; the Ghost had to ghost into the smaller car, its front crumpled unrecognisable, and the only person he brought out was a small boy,

maybe four years old, who'd survived in his booster seat in the back. Presumably the couple in the front were his parents; there was no point in bringing them out in any hurry.

He hugged the boy in under his cloak, sat on the edge of the sidewalk with the kid on his leg, bent over him and just held him. And as the sirens approached Phalanx wanted to tell him that they couldn't stay there, they had to go, but that kid kept his face hidden to the Ghost's chest and he just held him, his own hooded head low, whispering to him over the shocked noises of the street, the bystanders and that couple from the SUV, standing by stunned.

So Phalanx stood by him, while the cops and the ambulance came, and the fire service was sent for to cut the child's parents from their car, and a police officer approached them and the Ghost didn't even look up, just said flat and dark over the head of the boy, "Don't even *think* about it." Phalanx stood by him, uncertain and determined not to show it, ready to shield them from arrest if he had to but that kid . . .

They were there for over an hour while the Ghost just held the boy, talking to him very, very quietly now and then, and Phalanx just waited. He hadn't known until he'd met the Ghost what patience can mean, that patience with another person can be the greatest gift you can give. To give your time without counting the minutes because someone else needs it and nothing else could matter. He'd just waited, until eventually a social worker arrived, and the Ghost stretched his legs under the boy - his muscles must have ached with stiffness by then - and lifted his head a little, looked at Phalanx. "Can you reach the belt on my leg?"

There was a little knife in there, which he handed the Ghost on trust, because he didn't really know what the hell he wanted it for. The kid lifted his head, damp-dark eyed in a too-pale face, and the Ghost bit the knife in his mouth while he found a tissue in his belt to wipe the kid's eyes with. "Blow," he offered through his teeth, holding it to his nose, passing it to Phalanx to toss in the trash while he tugged his cloak out from underneath himself, knife in one hand. "Can you hold this taut for me?"

Phalanx had *literally* no idea what he was doing, when he sliced his own cloak half-off, then, keeping one arm around the kid gripping the belt slung over his shoulder and watching him very intently, he made a couple more slits in the scrap of cloak, and began making some strange elaborate knots. And then -

And then he fluttered a rough-edged cloak around the kid's shoulders, and tied it at his throat, and hooked up a little scrappy hood over his head. The kid looked up at him, and the Ghost said, "It doesn't mean you're not brave if sometimes you're sad or lonely or scared. The bravest thing in the world is being able

to tell someone you're sad or lonely or scared, so they can help you feel better." He reached for his cheek, thumbed the welling tears away before they fell again. "Okay?"

The kid's face crumpled and he hid his face to the Ghost's chest again. He hugged him and rocked side to side a little, swallowing hard, and Phalanx blinked away so he didn't start crying himself as a cop narrowed his eyes at them, and Phalanx glared back. The cop worked his jaw and *glared*, and the Ghost closed his eyes to the hooded top of the kid's head, then stood up, and handed him to the social worker, the woman who took him nervously in her arms while the kid caught the Ghost's hand, and he stood there in his shorn-off cape, and let him.

He tugged a little at the kid's hood with his free hand, said, "I had a blanket when I was a kid." and the kid just watched him, sad shocked eyes. It was a while until he let go of the Ghost's hand. Phalanx stepped to the Ghost's side, touched his arm, they needed to be *out* of here before the cops moved in, but the Ghost was watching the kid, until he turned and hid his hooded head against the social worker's shoulder now.

And then they vanished, because they were finally allowed to.

Would Phalanx have done that, if he'd come to this gig alone, not at his side? Would he have known what to do? The size of that kid's grief and horror would have *scared* him, maybe scared him too much to do anything about it; but the Ghost . . .

Maybe he knows what a scared shocked kid in a whole new empty world needs. Because he says that he doesn't want to know the way the world looks at him, but maybe he does understand what a hug from a superhero can mean. Or just what a *hug* can mean, the moment in your life when you need it the most.

Blaine lays his cheek to his shoulder, curls his fingers over his heart. "You're the most incredible person I've ever met. That guy didn't have a *clue*. You are the most incredible person on the planet, don't let any idiot ever tell you different."

Kurt says, gently mocking into his hair, "Even when that idiot is me?"

Blaine lifts his head and kisses him. Their dancing stops, Kurt's fingers press more urgently through his, his mouth opens for him; Blaine kisses him, and when he breaks back Kurt doesn't open his eyes, whispers too tight, "I can't go back to what I had before. I can't. I can't, Blaine, don't leave me. Don't ever -"

"No. No no no no no." He pulls him in closer, presses his nose in close by his, foreheads bumping. "No. Never. Never never never."

Kurt's breath shudders a little as it leaves him, and he nods, eyes closed. Blaine keeps his eyes closed, breathes him in. Then he murmurs, "You still smell really good."

Kurt starts laughing, against him, silent shaking of his body. Blaine squeezes his fingers over his heart, and opens his eyes to watch him, and smiles.

*

*Ok ok ok oh my god so, slightly flustered, not posting fic for once, how to make this not sound crazy . . . me and the bf finally had the same night off for once and we were watching TV drinking beer and he said, "You know how I hate my family?" and I was like, yeah I know how you hate your family, the whole of New York knows how you hate your family, and he said, "If we got married I could take your name and fuck 'em." And I was like. You know what. There is no reason I can think of not to. So, fuck 'em. So, basically, I'm now engaged, and not entirely *just* to spite my bf's - fiance's - fucktard parents. I will one day soon be a married Drax. And after my parents you guys are like the first family I've really *got*, you know? Insane as that sounds. And we are completely broke, this wedding is gonna be like barefoot in the park BYOB but if any of you are in the NY area *please let me know* and fuck it Ghostly I know you probably don't give a shit but if we can fly bb over I really really want you guys for my maids of honor or whatever crap you're supposed to have, I promise not to put you in awful meringue dresses 'cause we can't afford them, I'm just kind of - I'm just kind of feeling slightly high right now? But you guys, you guys, you guys - the bf isn't one of us but he's totally supportive of all my crazy, and fuck it, I'm not wearing white, I'm the one who gets to pick my goddamn wedding dress, I'm wearing *gray* <3*

confetti for draxie

omg phandom wedding!!!

GHOST DRESS will you have a hood?? Congratulations! :D

*Draxie! *squeals* It's the best best news I'm so happy for you, congratulations! <3 <3 <3 I'll see if I can fly over, I've never been to America, it'll be really exciting, when's the wedding? If it's summer I can try to come! I'm so happy for you!! ^^*

Fuck me. Drax and Mr Drax.

Ghostly, say you'll coooooome . . . Ghostly please it'd mean the world to me ;_;

Draxie my dearest, of course I have to come and toast the lucky fuck who's getting your name. Let me know dates, I'll work stuff out with my family. I feel really bizarrely proud and I don't know why. My god, Drax, I think you actually managed to locate my heart.

*omg Draxie's getting married and she invited all the phanghosts that could get a bit insane?? I'm sorry I live on another continent! But congratulations! *confetti**

*The *hours* of joy her fic has given me, I wish them all the luck and happiness in the world ^_^*

Draxie I'm a professional dressmaker and I read your fic like, a lot, seriously if I had to pay for it I'd have spent a fortune, I can help you out either adjusting or just making a pretty simple dress. NGL, this wouldn't be my first Ghost cloak if you want one . . .

draxie will you make him dress in green? XD

cracks open a drink for Draxie

Oh my goooooood I always cry at weddings ;_;

Draxie does this mean we'll get wedding!fic? :D :D :D

I do all the cakes for my family, Draxie! What kind were you thinking of? I do a killer red velvet <3

**cracks knuckles* If we're having a phandom wedding we're doing it right; my cousin's in a NY funk band, Draxie, if that would help? They'll do the gig for a bottle of Jack :P*

I'm like, crying. I fucking love this fandom.

Hell, if the superhero fandoms aren't gonna step up for each other, who will?

*Raising a toast for you Drax, have an *excellent* life together <3*

I feel very, very good about the world tonight. Very best to wishes, to Mrs and Mr Draxie.

(Draxie, Draxie, Draxie. The one that got away.)

(Ghostly, I feel so happy I feel like a moron.)

(You deserve it, Draxie my dearest. And god, if you can get Blackbindings over for it then we can set her on the path to righteousness in person, and also get her drunk which I would dearly love to see.)

(I just. I don't even know what I feel like?)

(The joys and pains of the internet; I really do wish I could hug you right now. I feel very, very happy for you.)

(I thought you'd think marriage was one of those dumb things.)

*(Are you kidding me? Tax breaks, Draxie, *tax breaks*. Plus, you know. I'm a cynical shrivelled husk of a woman but I still think that people loving each other is a good thing. Not that you can ever tell anyone that I said that.)*

(I love you so much Ghostly, I really really want you here for it <3)

(I'll be there, if I have to bring Mom with me. I'll get a cousin to cover, I can bully at least one of them into it. Are you seriously going to wear a Ghost cloak for this thing?)

*(I thought a nice one. Something in satin? *Now* you think I'm being stupid.)*

(Hell, Drax, if you're doing it, do it the way you want to, I have no objections.)

*(I saw these *insanely* *amazing* little utility belts for eveningwear online? I think it might be the single thing I will actually want to spend money on, just, Ghostly *_*)*

(You'll look gorgeous, Drax. I am going to be jealous as fuck of your soon to be husband. It's your wedding day. You should feel like a fucking superhero if you want to. Hell, the way you're patient with all these cretins, you're already kind of my hero.)

(I actually think that's the single nicest thing you've ever said to me, Ghostly. Maybe the nicest thing you've said to anyone. Since, you know, you and nice . . .)

(Fuck you, Draxie, fuck you so very very much <3)

Oh wow. Congratulations, Draxie :)

oh my god why am I crying??? congratulations!!

Shit a phandom wedding you do realise everyone will have so many FEELINGS we might all hyperventilate (btw congrats Drax xx)

*You guys are actually the best fandom in the world. Thank you all so, so much, I'll be in contact with everyone who offered to help, you have *no* idea how touched and grateful and just fuck look at me I'm already crying. But you guys, you're like, to me? Right now? You're as close to superheroes as I've ever met <3*

FANDOM POWERS IGNITE my uncle has a bar near Central Park if you need a venue!

So proud of phandom I can't even <3

Still got that ghost confetti from Halloween, fuck yeah \o/

Chapter Twenty-One

It's so good, having Phalanx back on his feet.

Someone at his side in the dark, someone at his back, someone who will do the talking when he needs to disappear. Someone who puts his arms around him and puts his head on his shoulder while listening to him talk, the ease of affection, he wants to close his eyes and stop and just *be* like this when he's mid-sentence on where they should probably patrol the city next. Someone -

Not someone. It's not about 'someone'.

Him, with the rain caught in his hair and his grin alight with elation at his own shields, a dart-fast vicious-joyous green blur; him, sitting with a happy sigh next to him on the rooftop, taking his coffee and smiling his thanks; him, catching his arm to point something out to him, like the world is full of these small magical things to share. Him.

Him catching Kurt's arm, hand running up to his hand in bed, shuffling forward on his knees to rock Kurt's body back with him, placing Kurt's fingers around the back of his own thigh, where the press of the wound's scar stood out against his palm. He'd said, dark serious eyes and Kurt could see the mid-sex pulse fluttering fast in his throat, "Does it make me ugly?"

"- no. *No*, what -"

"No," he'd said, running a hand around Kurt's side, around that scarring, marring line circling his body, "it doesn't, does it?"

Then he bowed his body down for him, cupped his head up to kiss him, while Kurt settled his thighs against him and let him rewrite the laws of the universe, again.

*

First encounter of the evening, he's swallowing his first post-coffee mint on the way there, clinging to Phalanx while New York flies by below. Sudden scent of hot pretzels and a voice raised in laughter amidst the chaos of noise outside a bar, cars honking through the black smell of their fumes, the evening's spring sky low and full with cloud against the city's waking lights and god, even on his way to a bank robbery,

even when storeys and storeys off street level and letting go would mean messy splattered death, god, he does *love* his city.

He murmurs into Phalanx's ear as they swing around in front of the grand entrance to the bank ringed in flashing cop cars, "I'll ghost us through, just aim right at it." and Phalanx nods, and, invisible, they turn and flash right through the wall, out of the cold night and into the bank.

There were no customers at this time of night; security guards are knelt near the entrance with their hands on their heads and guns aimed at the back of their necks, and they only have a second, the Ghost and Phalanx, still overhead, to take the scene in. Heavy bags are being dumped in a pile in the centre of the marble floor by a bunch of guys in black, there's some enormous guy in a football helmet - it can't just be padding, he has to be a super, he's the size of a *bear* - and that blond super is standing by with his hands in his pockets, swinging a little back and forth on heel and toe. Someone in this city is making people into supers who work for criminals, and this time, there's more than one to deal with . . .

"You take the blond kid."

"You okay with that massive halfback?"

"Hostages first," the Ghost says, as Phalanx aims the slide at the blond kid, and the Ghost skids down with him until he can hop off. Phalanx is instantly visible and there are shouts of shock too late, the blond kid looks up *almost* too late, *just* zips back before being hit by a superhero on a slide of shields. Phalanx skims across the marble floor of the bank, not a great deal less slippery than his own slide, little shields rippling alongside him as he goes so bullets from the rest of the crooks' fired guns spark off them. Flung shields knock a couple of them off their feet instantly, as the two guys holding the security guards - find their guns are suddenly intangible, starting back stunned as the Ghost appears in front of them, holding a gun in either hand, poised to spring.

Elbow to the head of one, using his shoulder as he drops to spin up and knee the head of the other. "Cops outside," he says to the security guards, crouching to ghost the guns into the floor and out of the game. "Please take yourselves out of danger, we've got this."

Phalanx is having trouble with the last armed crooks and the blond kid at the same time - he can either shield himself or throw shields at them, he can't do both. The blond kid is a *blur* and bags from that pile keep simply disappearing - he's getting their loot out, damn him. But as the Ghost turns to stop him -

In his way is the ape in the football helmet, eyes hidden in its shadow. He lowers his own head in the hood. The guy's bigger even than Puckzilla, though he doesn't have his tail or that frill making him look taller, just the padding on his uniform; it's his breadth that's worrying, he's the size of a silverback gorilla. Is there more to him than size and strength? If he's nothing but muscle then the Ghost can just walk through him like he isn't there, he doesn't even need to acknowledge his presence, but if he's got another trick to call on . . .

The guy in the football helmet grabs up one of those heavy bags of cash by its neck and swings it around, letting it fly at him. The Ghost just lets it sail through his intangible body and runs at him in response. He hears the bag *boom* off the wall behind him - the guy's strength might mean nothing against a ghost but *god* Phalanx needs to be shielded if he's around, he could crack bones like dried spaghetti - and he runs right through the guy, who tries to grab him in a bear-hug; the Ghost just leaps through him, throws a smoke bomb at the pile of loot, grabs the gun and kicks under the chin one of the last 'normal' crooks. Hard to see through the smoke, but he can hear the blond kid yelping as he skids on spilt money and flies arms-flailing across the bank's slick floor, hears Phalanx take down another armed crook with a shield to the stomach -

Hears someone huge pounding up behind him, spins himself immediately out of the way, a fist whisking past his face so close his hood fills and flutters with air. There's nothing to do but haunt him, he can't take down a guy six times his size, but he hates haunting people unless there's no other option, he knows what it's like, he *hates* it. The guy's wrists are too big for his cuffs; he has cables . . .

He ghosts right through him, and behind his back he grabs for the right compartment on the utility belt. By the time the guy's turned - he's slower than him but not that much slower, his agility's increased to match his size - the Ghost is ready to lasso his wrist, jerking the cable tight, letting loose some slack so he can run through him again, flicking the line around him, the guy turns after him twisting himself in the cable, jeez his *brain* hasn't increased in agility any . . . two more dashes through him and his clumsy spins and the Ghost's got a bound-up gorilla parcel, he can easily slip close enough to knot it off.

The guy's shoulders flex under the padding and the cable snaps like tacking cotton.

Okay. One option down. He can hear Phalanx cursing, dealing with the unpredictable zipping of that blond kid as the smoke's clearing and it's only the supers left standing, but Phalanx has shielded the cash off and they're clearly not going anywhere without it. The blond kid could cut and run whenever he wanted, they'd never be able to stop him, but he's not going anywhere without his money. The Ghost keeps one ear

on Phalanx, listening for trouble, but he faces the gorilla, backing off just a little, watching his body for how he'll move.

The gorilla lowers his head, draws his breath slowly in as he crouches, hands on the floor, ready to run at him. The Ghost stands and watches, alert but not afraid, because strength alone doesn't mean very much to him. The guy's muscles bunch and he throws himself up with the force and shocking speed of a landslide, and the Ghost narrows his eyes at him, what does he think he's going to achieve -

He's not running at him, he's aiming *past* him. He's running at Phalanx's shields.

The Ghost doesn't know how hard a hit Phalanx's shields can take, but this guy could probably pick up a tank and bash a building in with it, and it's not something he's going to risk Phalanx's neck in experimenting with. Not like this.

The Ghost's flash-bang hits him in the side of the helmet barely seconds before the Ghost hits his back. "Leave him out of it, you're fighting *me*." he growls against his helmet, balanced on his shoulders to snap the handcuffs through its shielding face-bars, riding his back as he staggers and bangs so heavily to the floor, shoulder-first, that the Ghost doesn't know if it's the jolt of falling on top of him, it feels like the *building* shakes. He just ghosts the other end of the cuffs into the floor, trapping the guy face-down while he vaults off his back again, getting some space between them. The guy in the football helmet scrabbles his hands at the slippery floor, can't get up, knocks his helmet off the floor in his frustrated panic, and the Ghost takes his chance to check on Phalanx, who's just given a sharp crow of triumph; he's got the blond kid in a ball of shields.

It picks up, quick in the Ghost's heart, the excitement of it, the jolt of the hope of it, they've got him trapped, he knows who's making supers and how and *where*, he *knows* and if they can get him to tell them -

Behind him, the ape has finally managed to wrest his helmet off, staggering upright again. The Ghost spins to face him, no choices left, just haunt him and they can deal with the blond kid, he can't risk -

The gorilla has his back to him, still one hand on his helmet as he rips it out of the floor, bright metal of the snapped cuffs hanging from its faceguard. He lurches and turns with the momentum of coming upright to clock the Ghost with his own helmet, and as the Ghost gets the first sight of his face uncovered but for stripes of black paint under each eye -

Everything stops.

The blond kid's yelling stops.

The sound of sirens outside stops.

His own dumb heartbeat stops.

His life, the part of him that actually lived for the last seven years, stops.

He says, barely whispers, no strength in his whole stupid body to do anything but stare, cut off from everything solid in the world except for his face and what it's always done to him, "Karofsky."

- and for a fraction of a second, too late to stop his own body's furious momentum, he sees the recognition in *his* eyes.

He's not ghosting. It hits him like a truck.

*

Phalanx had been waiting for him to do something. He always does something, he's the *Ghost*. He was buzzily distracted himself by the super-fast super zipping around inside his shields, battering at them from the inside, but he'd turned to see the Ghost, to see him face that big ape in the football padding - and what he saw was the Ghost, for the first time Phalanx has ever seen it, falter.

He's seen him scared, and anxious, and stressed. He's seen him hurt and seen him angry and seen him exhausted but he's never seen him *stop*, never seen him not fight back, *never* seen him hesitate like that. It unsettles something in him in a way he doesn't have the time to understand, he feels like the bottom of his stomach just stopped existing, the world is different and it is *wrong*, even as he hears him say that name.

That name, the name he blackly cherishes in the dark when he can't sleep, thickly, mulishly, furiously contemplating that name and what it means to Kurt, what it will always mean to Kurt, and what Blaine will never get the chance to do.

That name, of all names in the world; that name, here, that name, superpowered and enormous and lethal, that name *here*, in New York and in front of him and swinging at him, *that name* but -

Despite everything he's still expecting him to be ghosting, and it just doesn't make any sense that he's not.

Phalanx *yells* too late, everything's too late, as he's struck across the bank - it's sickeningly like something out of a cartoon, seeing a human body just *flung* like that - and he hits the marble floor *hard*, rolls and thumps to an ungainly dropped halt far too far away, and he doesn't get up again. Phalanx stares at him, pulse throbbing in his ears, voice stolen from his throat, *staring, waiting*, but he doesn't get up. He just lays there, with his cloak tossed over him, unmoving as . . .

He hasn't even noticed that the blond kid has stopped trying to fight his way out of his shields, is as still as he is, staring with him, face drained pale and mouth still open.

The gorilla in the football padding also hasn't moved, though his helmet's still swinging, slightly, from his hanging hand. He stares at the Ghost, who doesn't move, his eyes all full of - confusion, increasingly desperate *confusion*, and he takes a step towards him like he's not even thinking about it -

And Phalanx remembers, 'Karofsky'.

He roars, "*No.*" and hits him with a shield in the back of the head, thinking far too late that if he'd thrown that at a normal person he would have killed them instantly, broken their skull and their neck. All he can think is Kurt not getting up and - Karofsky, *Karofsky* -

Karofsky -

The guy who threatened him with the worst things Blaine can think of, the guy who *tormented* him to keep his own secrets safe, the guy who taught him what fear means, the guy who made Kurt wish that he didn't exist to the point where he almost *didn't* - Karofsky, here, in front of him, Karofsky smashing him into the floor and then walking at him *again* like he's going to -

No, no, no, no, no, no, *no*.

Karofsky staggers forward with the force of it, the second shield punching his shoulder from behind, he turns and swats at the next and is struck back under the force of it, falls clumsily onto his side. Phalanx has forgotten the shields around the blond kid, forgotten him, he doesn't matter, he strides at Karofsky yelling, "-touch *him* -"

Movement out of the corner of his eye, he turns and sees the blond kid kneeling next to the Ghost's shoulder, hands held over him not daring to touch him, croaking, "Dude -"

"- the hell *away* from him -!"

He looks up, blurs out of sight at the shield striking through where his head almost was. Phalanx can't *breathe*, can't *think*, Jesus he's not *moving* he needs to get him out of here he needs to get him to *help* -

Karofsky's up again, behind his shoulder, breath heaving in his chest. "Out of the way," he mutters, and Phalanx - almost senses more than sees the swinging arm, flinches and the shields are instinctive, but the blow weakens his knees. He stumbles away, catches himself upright on a tall pale pillar holding the bank's ceiling up. Karofsky's still staring at the Ghost's still body, chest moving hard, before he looks at Phalanx.

He looks at Phalanx like *he's* the one who's touched something he had no right to.

At that point Phalanx pretty much does completely lose it, he can't care about anything else, he wants him *dead*. He *batters* him with shields but it only manages to slow him down, as Karofsky bends an arm over his face and forces his way through them, body rocking with each blow but not going down and not going backwards. There's nowhere for Phalanx to back off to, the damn pillar, he waits until Karofsky's almost on top of him - arm over his face he can't really *see* him - and dives right between his legs, while Karofsky punches the pillar to crack in two. It shifts, and Phalanx backs away quickly, sees the cracks running through the ceiling with a hiss of spilling plaster-dust; a few more blows like that and this whole building will crumble.

Karofsky turns for him again, panting, and his knuckles are bloody. "Puny little asshole," Karofsky spits. "Fuckin' little *nothing*, and - *him* -"

"Don't you even dare *talk* about him, don't you even *dare* -"

Karofsky takes two running steps to him and he barely gets the shields up in time, his legs unsteadied by the blow like a bus just dropped onto them. Karofsky pulls his hand back, curses and flexes his bloody knuckles, and Phalanx drops the shields around himself to throw another one at him so *hard* it smacks his head to the side, he swears and there's blood over his eyes, his brow's cut open, Phalanx throws another but a wild blind punch has him toss a shield around himself in a hurry and knocked backwards, stunned at the force with which it's hit -

And there's something pale between both of them, whirl of grey cloak throwing an arm out, choking, "*Both of you, quit it -*"

They both stagger back, startled by the Ghost standing there, hood fallen back, half his face masked in blood. Phalanx can't close his mouth. And then he sees - a wobble, to the Ghost's ankle, his arm drops to so gingerly cradle the other hanging arm closer, he sees the weird staggered way his breaths are coming as he glares up at Karofsky, each one taking three ungainly little jolts in like it's catching on something inside -

He lurches to reach forward, to catch him, to support him. His breath sucks in hard as he sees Karofsky do the same.

Karofsky's the one who freezes, and it's Phalanx who - catches his arm, so carefully, as the Ghost's step stumbles and his mouth is tight, Phalanx can see the terror in his eyes of *falling*, realises that he's upright because he's the single most stubborn human being alive; he's in *agony*, and he knows that if he falls again it'll only be worse. Phalanx catches his weight against himself, arms gingerly around him, whispering to his ear, "Okay it's okay I've got you it's okay -"

For one second, shivering in his arms, the Ghost hangs there stunned. And then he pulls his breath in, lifts his head, stares at Karofsky again and Phalanx sees . . .

His eyes are so blue through the blood, no green at all. And inside them, wide and lost, a thousand questions, before they all break and there's nothing there but *loss*.

He says, and his voice is small in an echoing bank empty now but for them, "This is what you did with your life? This is what you -" He stares at him like he can't understand, he can't, like he's trying so hard and he *can't*. "After everything, after - after everything, after I kept your secrets for you, you didn't have to go through it, you didn't have to face any of it, you *never had to face it* and you got out and came here and all of that and *this is what you did with your life?*"

Phalanx should say something, but his throat feels like it's stopped working. Kurt is *shaking* with pain in his arms, and Karofsky is staring at him with his mouth a little open like he doesn't know what to -

"Do you have any idea - all the things you could do, everyone you could help and you chose *this, this*," nearly sobbed at him, with a pile of unclaimed bags of money still in the middle of the floor, with more

sirens whooping outside as more cop cars arrive, and Phalanx's arms get tighter around him, it's taking all of his control not to *hurt* him, he doesn't know how badly he's . . . "Everything you could *be*, I can't believe I - I hoped you were *happier*, I hoped you were *okay* and *you* -"

Karofsky says so small, it falls helpless out of him, "Kurt . . . how . . ."

"How could you?" Kurt stares at him like he's hardly even looking at a human being. "How *could* you, everything you put me through, everything you made me - every way you *used* me to protect yourself and I kept my mouth shut for you and you turned into *this*, I . . . you chose *this*?"

Karofsky stares at him. Phalanx keeps his arms wrapped around him, feels the thrumming of Kurt's body barely holding him up, doesn't dare to properly bear his weight because that would entail tightening his grip on him and he doesn't know how he's hurt, doesn't know if he'd make it *worse*.

And Karofsky wipes the blood out of his eyes, and tries to speak and can't, breathes on the second faltered attempt, so low and rough like it's breaking, "- I'm sorry."

Kurt's breathing - pants and catches, pants and catches, Phalanx can hear the wheeze of the hurt in it. Karofsky swallows, stumbles out again, "I'm s- I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I -"

Kurt shakes his head, he looks stunned, like he can hardly process this. "You don't understand. You don't understand what you did to me. You don't understand *anything* -"

"I didn't -" Karofsky looks around the bank, the unconscious criminals, the dropped guns, the scattered money - the blood on the marble floor, where the Ghost picked himself up. He looks like he's only just realised where he actually is. "I didn't know what else to . . ." His hands, his big blood-grubby hands, squeeze at each other. "I thought about you," he says, and Phalanx's breath gets tighter, his arms want to tighten, he can't let them, as he watches him over Kurt's shoulder and he will *kill* him if he takes one step forward, he never had any right to be near him in the first place, he never had the right to *think* about him - "I thought - a lot, I did, about what I - did to you. And how . . . you . . ."

"You don't have any idea what you did to me. It wasn't just hiding yourself behind hurting me, you *know* what you did to me, don't you - ? You can't. You couldn't have if you knew what you were doing, no-one could do that to another person, you don't know what it was *like*, you don't know what you *did* to -" Kurt

looks at his own hand wrapped around his hanging arm, chokes a disbelieving little laugh, lets go to raise it, gloved fingers trembling. "I can show you. I can show you exactly what you did to me, if you want."

Phalanx - breathes.

He's asked him what the haunting is. Kurt doesn't really know himself, confessed that he doesn't think about it, tries not to, eyes not meeting Blaine's. He did it to himself once, he'd said, to find out what the hell it is he's doing to people. It's not very nice. It was such a Kurt way of wording it; *it's not very nice*.

"I think," he'd said, and stopped, and he'd looked at his own hand, holding his arm folded close across his chest. "I think it's all the fear I've felt," he'd said to his hand. "All of it, compressed down into a fraction of a second. It's -" He'd closed his eyes, turned his head away. "There's a lot of it. I don't know. Ghosts haunt people."

There's a reason there's a lot of it. The reason is looking down at Kurt now, Kurt bloody and sagging and the muscles in his right arm are spasming oddly, Blaine thinks in sheer pain, it's broken in at least one place, oh god he shouldn't be on his feet they shouldn't be here they should be getting *help* . . .

Karofsky stares at him, blinking, wiping the blood from his eyes again with his wrist. And then his jaw flexes and he says, "- yeah. Yeah. Sure. If you - yes."

Phalanx doesn't know what to do, as he takes that step forward and bends down, on one knee, at Kurt's feet. Kurt stares down at him like he hadn't expected his consent, lips a little parted, blood running down his throat from just under his hairline, blood spotting dark through the pale costume. He whispers, ". . . every day of my life, Karofsky. Every *minute*."

Karofsky just watches his face, and says, and his voice is horribly shuddery, "I'm sorry."

Kurt stares at his eyes, something not right in his gaze, and doesn't move. No-one moves. For a second, all three of them just breathe.

And then, breath so softly groaning out, Phalanx closes his eyes.

He knows why Kurt's gone still. His face is frozen; he opens his eyes to see the waver in him, the waking nausea, the inner recoil and he knows and it sinks so sick in him that Kurt can't bring himself to do it. He can't haunt him. Faced with the person who is the *reason* he has all this fear in him, he can't do it. He can't

bring himself to cast it back on the one person who really does deserve it. *Punishment* has never been the reason Kurt's done this, he's never *deliberately* hurt anyone like this, never looked them in the helpless eye and *made* them scream if there was any other option. He can't hurt people for the sake of hurting them. It's not who he is and he can't make himself do it. He can't.

Karofsky will walk away from him never knowing what he did to him, what he actually put him through, because Kurt can't put him through it in return. Kurt wets his lips, and Phalanx holds him and thinks, I knew who you were when I fell in love with you but oh god, Kurt, just once, can't you just be *less* good . . . ?

At his feet Karofsky kneels, and shifts nervously, but doesn't look away.

. . . and Phalanx sees something else settle in Kurt's eyes and falling behind his face. Some quiet sad realisation, that awful empathy of his, the sort of compassion that makes you suffer; he's not doing this for revenge, and he's not doing it to hurt him. Karofsky needs to understand. *They* need to understand. They need to share this, because how can either of them get past it otherwise? Because Kurt can think, even if Phalanx never could, Did he think about me? Did he think about what he did and what it meant to me? Did he suffer, in his guilt, not knowing what happened to me, did he suffer *because* of me . . . ? Will this help?

Help *him* or help Kurt? Is that what 'hero' means, is this what it has to mean, that nothing else comes into it, you don't get a choice, you have to rescue *everyone*?

For a second, Kurt's hand over Karofsky's forehead looks almost like a blessing.

Then his fingers pass through and Karofsky's eyes roll up, his body jerks, Phalanx pulls Kurt back in fear and Kurt's breath sucks in, and Karofsky just slumps to the side, soundlessly gone, thumping heavy onto the floor and not moving again. And the Ghost's head jerks back hard, eyes too wide, and Phalanx realises that he's *hurt* him jolting him like that, whimpers, "No no no-" and slides as carefully as he can to his knees, propping the Ghost's slumped body over his lap, the Ghost's head falling so his forehead rests against Phalanx's chest. "Oh," he whispers, very quietly, first sound Phalanx has heard him make about the pain he's so clearly in, and god he'll never understand his boyfriend, he's *smiling*.

"Ghost - Ghost -"

"Okay," he whispers, through the smile and the blood. "'m okay."

"You're - god I need to get you to a hospital, just -"

"No." His eyes open, absurdly blue, far too blue through the blood. "No, no hospitals, you know -"

"We don't have a *choice*."

"*No*. I'll never get out with my mask on, you *know* it, they'll - Phalanx for god's sake the *mob* want me and my *dad* - you, *you* and everyone, I'd never be able to -"

He's struggling in his panic, his head falls back with a sucked in gasp again, pain whenever he moves himself and Phalanx doesn't dare to hug him closer. "I -"

"Please," he chokes, and he looks wild, halfway gone, crazed with pain and fear. "No hospitals, promise me, please, *please* -"

He stares at him and hears shouting from outside, looks at the door sick with fear. The cops. They don't have the time for this argument, the street outside is *crawling* with over-impatient police -

"Please," the Ghost sobs up at him, his one working arm hitting him, fingers finding no purchase on the armour over his chest. "*Please* promise me -"

"Okay, okay, okay, no hospitals. Mike and Tina. We have to get to Mike and Tina's, now."

His eyes close, he nods and his breath comes shaking out of him. "I can - if you help me I can ghost us out of here. The back. But . . ."

"I'll get you there. I'll find a way, I'll get you there."

He opens his eyes, his breath shudders, he looks up at him. "Out the back. We don't have much time."

Phalanx supports him to his feet, not looking at Karofsky's still body, feeling sick himself at how pale the Ghost looks against the blood edging his face, streaked and wet down his right cheek. He walks, a strange shambling rhythmless walk with Phalanx trying to bear his weight without squeezing him around the chest; he's got at least one broken rib, he can't tell how badly hurt he is, while he cradles his broken arm to himself and fades them out of sight as they approach the rear wall of the bank as cops finally burst in through the entrance, guns ready.

They pass through the marble like it's not even there.

Outside the air is so cold and the Ghost, like that was the last strength he had, crumples. Phalanx catches him, lowers him to the cold sidewalk - they're exposed, parked cars and an open street, he can see the flashing lights of cop cars where the streets cross further down. There's no time to think, no time to do anything but act; he sucks his breath in and scoops the Ghost's body into his arms - he isn't light, all the muscle and bone of him and just the weight of the *costume*, and he's taller than Phalanx, and it's an awkward *strain* to hike him into his arms, his head spilling back drunkenly, before just *running* across the street for the nearest, darkest alleyway.

No-one shouts after them. Little miracles.

Once he's down there he can put him down, can kneel to let the Ghost's head rest on his lap, can just pant, and try to think what the *hell* to do.

No hospitals. Fuck.

He can't carry him. He physically couldn't carry him all the way to Mike and Tina's anyway but he couldn't do it *unseen* which is more of a problem, he's not the Ghost, he can't move him from here safely. He looks back into the street behind them hearing a car roll down it, and -

Maybe he has been a superhero too long, he *knows* it's not good.

He drags the Ghost behind some trash cans, crouches there shielding his paler body from view, watches the cop car slowly circle the block. Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck. He's running low on options, if they don't move on they'll be trapped, they'll be caught, he can't risk the Ghost like this in a fight. But if they get caught at least they'll take him to the hospital, wouldn't they - ?

He promised.

His eyes close, he hangs his head over the Ghost's still body. He promised for a *reason*. It's not just paranoia. If the cops took the Ghost it would be a media *riot* and he's right, in a hospital he'd have no chance of keeping his identity secret. Everyone would know. Everyone. And all those people who want their revenge on the Ghost, suddenly it'd be open season on everyone who's ever known *Kurt*. If anything happened to Kurt's dad and it was his fault -

If anything happened to his dad and he knew it was *Phalanx's* fault . . .

"I don't know what to do," he says, very alone in the dark. "I'm not *you*. I *don't know what to do*."

*

They don't have Mike and Tina's number, they don't want any connection on them that anyone could find with them, the two of them risk enough for the Ghost and Phalanx even without that sort of incriminating evidence. For a second he thinks, That card, iBorg, that team - but he doesn't have the card. He and Kurt are always interchangeably checking and restocking each other's utility belts, there's no privacy in them, he'd been keeping it in his wallet while thinking of how to broach the subject with Kurt again, when Kurt seemed to be in a trusting mood.

The first time they really do need another hero and there's no way in hell to contact any.

And Phalanx doesn't have Finn's number, the Ghost has it memorised. Because the plan was that if Phalanx was out alone and needed help, he'd call *the Ghost*, he wouldn't need to drag Finn into it, Finn was for when the Ghost had been on his own and desperate, they shouldn't be forcing Finn into their mess more than they can help. If they were together and Phalanx needed help then the Ghost would help him. And if the Ghost's the one who needs help?

You knew how you'd get me to safety if I needed it, he thinks, teeth gritted, binding the Ghost's broken arm to his chest so it's one less thing to worry about hurting him with. You didn't think about getting *you* to safety, you didn't make plans for *this*, how could you - I don't know what to *do* -

He risks the edge of the alleyway, holds a mirror out to check the crossroads at either side of the street; cop cars, still. They'll be working in the bank, it'll be a long time until they're all gone and he doesn't *have* a long time. Who can he call? Who can he call in the middle of the night to help him get a superhero to safety, whose number does he even *know* to call?

On his back on the alley floor, the Ghost makes a very soft noise, and his head tips a little to the side. Phalanx nearly hurts his knees dropping down next to him again, touching his shoulder, whispering, "Okay it's okay it's okay angel I'm right here -"

He hears another car, crouches protectively over the Ghost to hide his pale cloak and looks over his shoulder, watches the car - not a cop car - flash past in the night. They haven't actually cordoned this back street off, it's just weirdly quiet in the middle of the night; no bars, no clubs around here, no-one lives

around here, no reason to be here outside business hours on a weekday. Which is why the cops would seriously notice a superhero walking down the street carrying another one. What the hell is he going to do? He's *hurt*, he doesn't even know how badly, all he knows is, yes, *badly*. He's hit his head, head injuries, he knows, he *knows* he can't leave him like this but he can't take him anywhere, he's never going to get him to Mike and Tina's, he can't carry him to the end of the street without getting arrested, let alone blocks and blocks away -

Be rational.

You need a car. You need someone with a car to come help.

You can't call anyone.

... do you have internet access?

The Ghost - tries to lift his head without opening his eyes, his breath comes out of him and it might want to be a word but there's no strength for it. Blaine catches his shoulders, whispers, "Okay it's okay I'm right here sweetheart you're okay I'm right here -"

He made a promise. He said he'd get him to Mike and Tina's. He *promised*.

He settles the Ghost's head on his lap, tucks his cloak around him for warmth, and takes the cell from his belt, not one of the throwaways, the cell set up so the Ghost can track it, unlocks it and checks what wifi he can pick up. He works through connections, password, password, password, until one just happily lets him online. God bless whatever sloppy office set this system up ...

Who can you trust, at this time of night, to come help you take a superhero to safety?

He swallows, and wets his lips. He strokes the Ghost's cheek anxiously with the thumb of one hand. And then he lets his breath out, because he has no other choice in this world.

He's not the only person in New York who loves the Ghost.

*

It's her boyfriend's best friend's car. They only borrowed it this week to pick up his last boxes from his old apartment, or - or what would she have done? Asked around neighbours until someone loaned her a ride, like anyone would? She drives, thumb picking at a fingernail on the wheel as she goes, and she knows she's breathing funny but fuck wouldn't anyone?

(Ghostly, bb, did you just get a weird message from an anon?)

(I did. We really are the chosen ones, hm? I don't think Blackbindings is online anyway, not that she needs to deal with the weirdest anonymous trolling in the world...)

She doesn't drive in the city much, they live out in the suburbs, middle of nowhere practically. Fanghosts find out she lives in New York and say *omg have you seen him??* and of course she hasn't, she doesn't know how to explain to them the *size* of the city, he sticks to Manhattan mostly and what would he do in her neighbourhood anyway, rescue cats from trees, intimidate bored kids hanging out on the corner...?

(Do you think it's real?)

*(Draxie, as much as I hate coming out with cliches, what the actual fuck. You think *Phalanx* just messaged us? Anonymously, in the middle of the night, you think 'the Ghost is down' and what *he* thinks to do is contact *us*? Because clearly the most useful people to him in that situation would be *fangirls*?)*

God, there are the cops, just like the message said. They're surrounding the bank still, cop cars on the street and so many of them standing around, one waves her around the block rather than straight on, god oh fuck oh god she wishes this frequently but she *wishes* she was Paleandghostly who isn't afraid of anything, she wishes she was Blackbindings who is so much braver than she can possibly understand, she wishes she wasn't *her*...

(Don't reblog it.)

*(Oh god, Draxie, really? Do you think? I'm not even going to mention I got it. The abusive ones I quite enjoy, this is just attention-seeking *weirdness*.)*

(I'll message bb and tell her to ignore it.)

(Perils of BNFery, you get all the nutjobs.)

(G'night Ghostly, gotta do stuff.)

(Be well, Draxie my dear. Don't let the anons bite.)

Around the back of the bank, slowing the car, eyes searching for an alleyway, sickness *writhes* low down inside. She -

She doesn't want it to be true. She wishes she hadn't come. She wants to go home and not tell her boyfriend, fiancé, fuck, she doesn't want to tell him what a moron she's been. She wants to go home and say she went out to see a friend and pretend this never happened, she never got a message saying the Ghost was down and Phalanx was pinned down with him by cops, they needed *help*. It's just so stupid, it can't be real, can it? What kind of superhero messages *fans* to say they need help and they need it *quickly* and it's dangerous and they're *sorry*?

Seeing the alleyway ahead just like the message said she slows the car to a crawl, reaches across the passenger seat and closes her hand around the baseball bat, then changes her mind and reaches for the glove compartment, puts her hand on the knife handle in there instead, then can't face even the thought of blood and snatches for the bat again as it rolls off the seat and into the footwell.

"- shit -"

Because a pretty good possibility, after all, isn't a hoax or a joke or, yeah, a superhero. A pretty good possibility is some nutcase murderer rapist *psychopath* -

There's someone in the alleyway. She grabs the wrong end of the bat and actually *feels* all of the blood drain out of her face.

There's someone in the alleyway, in the pitch of the dark down there, she sees - barely - the smudge of a face in the shadow, and then -

"Fucking fuck," she whispers, and maybe she has picked something up off Ghostly after all.

Phalanx standing there, very still, one hand on the alley wall, watching the car. She opens the door, stumbles in her belt and falls back into the seat, snaps it open and croaks, "I -"

He's shorter than she thought he would be. It's almost all she can think.

"I got - your message."

He looks very defensive, very on edge, the guy in superhero armour with dark distrustful eyes. "What's your name?"

She stops herself. She says, "Draxie." and at his folding expression, "You're not the only one with a secret identity to keep safe, you know."

He - smiles. The quickest flicker of a smile and he turns into the alleyway, crouches down. "I'm kind of even in disguise, contact lenses and everything," she says, rambling a little and she knows it, stepping onto the sidewalk and glancing up the street, nervous of those cops, just *nervous*. "Do you need -"

"Can you get the back door?"

"- sure, just let me - seat covered in crap, it's not my car, just ignore all the metal magazines and I don't even wanna know why there's a box of Kleenex in holy *crap*."

He's got the Ghost in his arms. She stands there with a box of tissues bending under the pressure of her hands and Phalanx hikes him higher to his chest, his head hangs back so *helpless*, there's streaked blood all over his face and down his chest and his arm's strapped to him like it's broken -

She's been in this fandom from the beginning. She prayed with all the rest of them after that burning building, she's felt the silent strain every time no-one saw him for a few weeks. He has meant the *world* to her sometimes, through shitty shifts at shitty jobs, through all that fic, she's written her fucking heart out over the years for him, and now - now he's real, now he hangs in Phalanx's arms like he's dead, pale and real and broken, a real human being, really, really hurt.

She sees the exertion in Phalanx's body holding him up, steps quickly aside, glances up the street as Phalanx leans down and whispers to his forehead, "I'm sorry, love." and staggers forward, all but *throws* him into the back seat, clambers in after him slamming the door behind himself. "*Drive*."

She doesn't even say anything, drops the tissues in the street and scrambles back into the driver's seat, slams the door and checks the mirror - no cops seem to be heading down the street and her heart tastes metallic with blood in the back of her throat, too hard and too hot and too fast, her hands are weirdly numb as she hits the indicator wrong and fumbles the pedals and *wrenches* the car away from the kerb.

Phalanx is still groping around in the back, she looks up to check the mirror again and can't see anything for him, then he gets himself down with a grunt, and she sees that he's got the Ghost's head on his lap, and he's slithering down low in the seat so no-one outside can get a good look in at him through the window. "Thank you," he whispers, and fuck, he's really young. They're both really young. Between glances at the road and the rear view mirror she sees him tenderly, mouth not quite flat and eyes too bright, tucking the Ghost's hood up for him, hiding his face as best he can, brushing his cheek with his thumb.

She looks at the road. She drives, with her heart ticking in her mouth, and it takes a really hard swallow to dislodge it enough to say around it, "Where am I driving?"

"This direction's fine for now. We have - we know a doctor."

Her lips are too dry and her hands are all weird on the wheel, no way can she risk letting go for the chapstick in her jeans pocket. "Is he okay?"

Phalanx is silent, for a while. Then he says, very quietly, "The less you know is kind of safer for you. I'm sorry."

"No, I - I get it. I didn't - I didn't reblog it. I got Ghostly and BB, um, Blackbindings, none of us will, I thought it was safer if it was just us than a fandom-wide meltdown."

Phalanx says so quietly, "Thank you."

"- we thought you were." She feels like she might be high. Everything's happening too fast and a little too distant, it's hard to react to, she's hurting her hands trying to drive too carefully. "We thought, Ghostly thought you were a troll. We don't get those sorts of messages. We didn't, I mean we didn't know you two know we *exist*, we -"

Oh shit. This means they know about the porn.

Shit, shit, shit, shit, *shit*.

Her face goes so dark and hot, eyes fixed on the road as he says quietly, "There wasn't anyone I could ask. I'm sorry to drag you into this. I - I have to ask you not to tell anyone, I - *everything* is dangerous, it's -"

"I won't, I wouldn't tell anyone anything, you don't think we get the whole secret -"

"It's not just that, it's not just *us*. If people thought you knew who we were, they - I don't know - that's a lie. I *do* know what they would do to you to try to get you to tell them. It's for your own safety. Please."

Fucking, fucking hell, Draxie, what have you walked yourself into . . .

She whispers, "I won't."

There's a shifting noise on the back seat, a sharp-sucked in breath. "Oh, no," Phalanx says helplessly. "No, no, angel, it's alright, everything's -"

"What -" His voice is like something tightening on her spine. She knows it, from internet audio clips but it sounds nothing like that in real life, it sounds - it sounds all snapped-up rough with pain, still somehow higher and softer, and she blinks at the road, and her eyes are wet.

"Everything's fine, you're going to be okay, beautiful, everything's *fine* -"

"Blaine . . . ?"

She grips the wheel so tight her arms hurt, and makes herself not. "I can't hear a thing," she babbles, quickly, and wipes her nose on the back of her wrist. "I can't hear a damn thing you would not believe it craziest thing like the rear one eighty degrees I just can't hear a *thing* in that direction it's this crazy unexplained medical *thing* -"

Phalanx whispers, "Thank you."

"Blaine -"

"It's alright, angel. I've got you. Everything's fine, you're fine."

"Where . . ."

His voice trails like it's coming loose. She hears Phalanx breathing, quite hard. Then he says very low, "He's gone again. He's . . ."

'Angel'. She glances at the mirror and he's got his head down, one palm pressed hard over his closed eye, fingers digging into his hair. And she thinks - he means everything to him. Oh fuck, it never was just shit we were making up; he means *everything* to him.

... he means everything to so many people.

There's no way to tell him, if she tried she knows she'd only start crying, that there's this girl in England who's never met him and never will and he's saved her life more times over than he'll ever know, because she knows Blackbindings - Blackbindings who writes like an angel, like she knows what suffering is and she knows how much knowing that matters, who writes so far beyond her years with the sort of *control* Draxie knows she'll never have - Blackbindings who is so shy she can barely bring herself to reblog anything, Blackbindings who just has one of the sweetest, quietest, *kindest* souls Draxie thinks she's ever known and the sort of brain chemistry that you fight every day of your life, she doesn't know if Blackbindings would still *be* here if it wasn't for him. If she was trapped in this world that breaks her heart and breaks her down, she doesn't know how long that girl would have lasted if she didn't think about *him* being brave for everyone else, *caring* about everyone else, maybe caring about her, trapped in her own mind an ocean away, using up all the strength she has just to not *hurt* herself. There are weeks when she cries every single day. And thinks about him, she says. And then she can make herself breathe.

And Ghostly, everyone thinks they know Paleandghostly, everyone thinks Paleandghostly doesn't need anything, doesn't feel anything, can take care of herself and doesn't need a thing. She is the single most terrifying woman Draxie has ever met, yes, she's read every book Draxie knows of and a hell of a lot more of them that she couldn't even understand, she's got a mind like diamond-edged steel, she is *awesome* in a sense of the word older than the internet - and she lives with her mom, in her trailer, in the middle of nowhere, because there's no-one else to look after her. She sits watching her mom's mind slowly crumble from its edges inwards while she forgets to drink unless she's told to and wants to go for a walk down streets she hasn't lived anywhere near in decades, and Ghostly who should be - Draxie doesn't even know, running the CIA, creating entire new disciplines of thought, running the *country*, Ghostly helps her mom wash and cleans the trailer and spends her mind, her ravenous, razor-bright, vicious mind, defending *him* from everyone on the internet. Even from other fanghosts half the time when she points out that they're being creepy as all fuck and look maybe you can justify using a character with that name but don't pretend for one second that you know who he is, because he's a person you'll never know the inside of and you don't get to act like you're *entitled* to that. Draxie doesn't know what Ghostly would do without him. Hate the world, while her mind flayed itself to pieces from the inside. Hate the world and all the injustice in it,

and no-one to give a fuck about it. But there's him. And she says, Oh, good, at least *someone's* being sensible . . .

And her. What would she do without him?

She's not special, not like BB and Ghostly, who awe her with their intelligence and the things they're capable of, all their humbling potential. All she does is write - a lot - because it's fun. She's under no illusions, she's popular through quantity not quality, she's not *bad* but she is not Blackbindings and she never will be. She writes because it's fun. And she thinks about him, and what he does.

She works three jobs she hates, just to keep the bills paid. She wanted to get into journalism but she can't afford the internships. She already sees what her life will be like, she sees the path ahead, she knows there's no way off; she'll never not be working three dead end jobs she hates, she'll marry her boyfriend and unless there's an accident they'll decide almost too late that fuck it they'd better have those kids now or never, because they never will be able to afford them; she'll never do anything amazing, never be anything amazing, just a person in a world full of people, getting by.

But there's him. And every time she faces life and thinks she can't bear it, there's him. If he can be *so* brave, can't she manage the littlest bravery? Because - because her little pointless life that will never mean anything, that will have vanished beyond notice within hardly more than a hundred years *if* she has those kids to remember her, her dragging, struggling life of bills and broken pipes and fuck it it's another ramen week unless they can live without cell phones -

If she was in trouble, he'd still rescue her, wouldn't he? Her life wouldn't mean anything less to him. He rescues people. She's still a person, as much as anyone else. She's not important and she's not special. But she's a *person*. And she wipes her nose on the back of her wrist because she tossed the tissues and that's what he gave her, and maybe it's the smallest way to save someone's life, to let them know they still matter whoever they are, but fuck like it doesn't mean anything to her. It does. She owes him *this*, and everything . . .

"Your doctor's gonna help him," she says, and sniffs hard. "It's gonna be fine. Just tell me where to drive, we'll get him there."

". . . right in two more blocks."

She sniffs again, swallows. "Are you okay? You didn't get hurt too?"

"I'm fine," he says, and sucks his breath in. "*Fuck*. I'm *fine*."

"Good." She glances in the mirror, sees his hot angry eyes meet hers. "He needs you okay to be able to help him, doesn't he?"

He looks down at him again, and she checks the road, and he says very quietly, "I wasn't . . . I shouldn't even be telling you any of this. I wasn't thinking. I wasn't shielding him. It is my fault."

"Unless you're the one who did that to him I really don't think it is."

He looks over the edge of the window, and blinks hard a few times. She says, "Right here?"

He closes his eyes, draws his breath in, nods. "Yes. Thank you."

"How far along?"

He swallows, looks warily through the window for a second, lowers his head over the Ghost again. "There . . . god. How much can I trust you?"

"If it helps you guys out then you can trust me with *anything*, don't - don't make stupid compromises for him because of *me*, I don't want anything to happen to him 'cause you thought I was some stupid fangirl who'd just *blab*, I'm not telling anyone anything, *fucking hell* we're allowed to do this for you too!"

Phalanx - rubs his forehead, squeezing at his mask with his fingers and thumb, and mumbles, "This conversation is giving me the weirdest déjà vu. There'll be a launderette on the right with an alleyway next to it, can you let me out there? Then drive off. Don't look back, just *go*."

"Okay. That's all you had to say. Okay."

He whispers, "Oh god, look at you." and she looks in the mirror but he's talking to *him*, thumbing some clotted blood from his face beside the mask, he looks like it's his heart he's got bloody and still in his lap. She breathes through her nose, watches the road, watches the street for a launderette, doesn't know what to . . .

"I know some of the fan stuff must look creepy to you," she says, to the street. "I know, um, I - get that. But I do - I do think most people do it 'cause they just love you. Both of you. You know we've always - him, we always supported him and then you came along and it was like - I don't know what happened, okay, I don't know how long you've known him and what the history is and all that. But I know we've been kind of stalking him over the internet for *years*, now, and I know we've never seen him this happy. I mean that. Never - we never even saw him *smiling*, crime victims said he did sometimes but it was like it was for *them*, he would never just . . . and the costume, and I don't *know* but . . ." She swallows, she could choke on how much it hurts, her voice cracks. "But thank you. For - for being there for him 'cause we can't, we can't ever, we're not like you, we can't be that for him. I'm sorry if it's *weird* but we just - we know what you two *mean* -"

"I know," he says, quietly. "I know. You don't have to . . . I know."

She takes a hand off the wheel to wipe her eyes with a knuckle. "Fuck. Fuck, launderette -"

The lights are off, it's closed. She has to reverse back to the kerb, closes her eyes and flinches at the guy slamming his horn behind her. Ghostly would flip him off. She just pulls into the space, cuts the engine, hangs onto the wheel and feels *exhausted*, fuck superheroing, she can't even cope with the getaway . . .

She climbs out, opens the door to help him, checks up and down the street and nods quickly, as Phalanx glances around her body and then slides his legs out, catches the Ghost around the chest, hauls him with his teeth clenched - fear as much as exertion - into his arms again, staggering backwards into that alleyway. "Drive," he says. "I'm sorry, it's not safe. Please just -"

"I'm already going." She's still crying. Fuck, anyone would've been better, not even Ghostly, just, *anyone*. She wipes her eyes on her wrist, slams the back door, climbs back in the driver's seat. "I'm already gone, just, look after him -"

"Hey -" he calls, before she pulls the door in, and she glances up, and down the alley he's kneeling, his arms are around the Ghost's limp hang, head slumped to Phalanx's shoulder, blood on his costume. And Phalanx - smiles, a little tightly, but it's meant. "Thank you. And - congratulations."

She blinks.

She closes the door. She finds the belt. She starts the engine. She doesn't look around.

She's two blocks down before she thinks, God. God, fuck, god, he *knows*.

Fuck. Fuck . . .

. . . if he knows about that then he *definitely* knows about the porn . . .

*

He kicks a bag of trash, he doesn't want to let go of him, he isn't *thinking*, he can't think right with the Ghost just a body in his arms. His hand finds a bottle to toss up at Mike and Tina's window but fuck he's not *thinking*, he has to throw a shield around them and instinctively hunch his shoulders over the Ghost's hanging head as the shattered glass rains back down, lethal bits of light in the night.

A glow edges the window, the blinds pull to one side, there's some confused scuffling movement and then Mike steps out pulling a sweater on, Tina leans out with one hand on his back, both of them looking down as Phalanx chokes up at them, "I need your *help* -"

Mike's eyes go wide and he lets the ladder down, while Tina vanishes back into the apartment. Mike nearly *skids* down the ladder to get to the ground, says, "What the hell happened to - ?"

"- hit, he got hit, it's his arm and, I don't *know* what else, his ribs -"

"Wh - he needs to be in a *hospital*."

"He made me promise not to!"

Tina's leaning over the fire escape. "Your kit!"

Mike has his hands dug in his hair, staring down at the Ghost with his mouth just opening and closing before he says, "What - he should be in a *hospital*, this doesn't just need *patching up*, don't you realise he could have - internal bleeding, he could already be -"

He's a physical therapist in training, he's not *stupid*, but it's just like his brain's been shocked too numb to face what he already did know. "- I - I know, but -"

"He needs an x-ray, he could need operating on, we are *taking him* to the *hospital* -"

"He made me promise!" His hands are too tight on him, he can't stop them. "He made me *promise*, you know if they - if they get his mask off him they'll kill his *family*, we can't, what the hell are we supposed to -"

Mike pulls his hands through his hair, shakes his head hard, looks up and hisses to Tina, "Forget the kit, get some clothes for him, anything of mine that might fit! Help me get this off him, do you have a knife -?"

He jerks the Ghost back from Mike's reaching hands, startled. "Wh-"

"He goes into the hospital as *him*, I'll take him in as a hit and run, just help me get this costume off him, careful with his arm -"

"What do I -"

Mike unhooks the Ghost's cloak, his hands already know how to do it just like Phalanx does, he's done this before, when he's been incapable before, baring his throat and Phalanx's hurts too much to *talk* anymore as Mike begins grimly feeling around them to open the utility belts. "You go home, you get changed into whoever you actually are and - do you know him? Outside of this?"

"Y-" He has to close his eyes, his voice *cracks*. "I'm his boyfriend."

He keeps his eyes on what he's doing. "Then you wait for me to call you as his ICE, you need to give me your cell number. The whole secret identity thing goes to hell one way or another, you might as well limit it to me and Tina." He pulls his gloves off him. "Do you have that knife?"

"Clothes!" Tina calls overhead, leaning over the edge of the fire escape with jeans and a hoodie dangling and her long black hair falling forward over them.

Phalanx runs his fingers around the Ghost's unresponsive wrist, turns that fine silver chain over his pulse; *Blood type A, no allergies*. He's wearing one under his own glove that almost matches. He finds the catch with his thumb, flicks it open and balls it in his hand. "Sure," he whispers, and lets the Ghost out of his arms, gently to the alley floor, laying his head down with his hand behind it.

He runs his fingers, still so stunned, down his cheek. He can't believe this, can't process this, that the Ghost isn't doing anything, isn't moving, is *helpless*. He can't understand it, it doesn't make any sense, he wouldn't do this to Phalanx, leave him alone and not knowing what to do and scared out of his mind in

case - in case - he can't stay like this, he wouldn't do this to him, why won't he just *look* at him even, something, *anything*?

His eyelashes don't even flicker.

Phalanx draws his breath in, slow through his nose. He lets it loose, and unpeels Kurt's mask.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The ER on a New York night, gun wounds and overdoses and sprains, cursing and shouting and crying, there's nowhere to be alone. Blaine sits small on a plastic seat against the wall, elbows tucked in close with his phone in both hands, trying not to look at all the panic and frustration and hurry under the strip lighting, trying to avoid eye contact with anyone who might look at him and see him for exactly what he is right now and *break* him. Trying to make himself small and invisible, god, he feels like he's been kicked in the throat, god, god, he has never understood Kurt so much as . . .

"His arm in two places, three of his ribs, stitches in his forehead and some pretty fantastic bruising, but he'll live." Mike had said, while Blaine pulled a shirt over his head and tried to stab his feet into his sneakers in the disused loft where they'd dumped his bag earlier. *"It looks like he got hit by a car, what the hell hit him that hard?"*

He switched his cell to his other ear, tugged the shirt down straight, kicked a shoe right on his heel, sucked his breath in. "Super. Another super. Is he - ?"

"Hasn't woken up yet, you should be here when he does, he's - he's not going to like this, if he wakes up and panics -"

He'd grabbed his bag up, already stumbling for the window again. "I know. I'm on my way, I *know*."

Now he sits and makes himself look at his phone, and his hands don't want to grip it right.

You have to do this. You can't not do this. Putting it off isn't going to make it any better, you want him asking you why you took so *long* to call and you have to tell him that you just couldn't face his voice . . . ?

He unlocks his phone, skims through his contacts, stops on Mr Hummel. He closes his eyes again, lifts the phone, holds it in both hands against his forehead, head down.

If he asks him why he, big shields and all, why *he* let it be Kurt and not him -

Why is the worst thing always *not* getting hurt . . . ?

He takes another shallow hospital-scented breath and hits call.

It's nearly three in the morning, and Blaine licks his lips, and knows what Mr Hummel will *instantly* think on getting a call from his superhero son's superhero boyfriend in the middle of the night. And when he picks up, sleep-rough voice too fast, the first thing he says is, "*What happened?*"

Blaine hears Carole's voice say gravely in the background, "*Burt, what - ?*"

He has to swallow. "I'm sorry - it's so late, sir -"

"*What happened? Where is he?*"

He pulls a hand back through his crazy hair and blinks up at the ceiling, makes himself say, "I'm at the hospital, waiting - for -"

Carole says in the background, "*Burt, what happened?*"

Mr Hummel says, too controlled, too low, "*What happened to him?*"

"He, um, he, he's -" He wants to say he's okay even though it's a lie, because it's a better thing to have to say than *he's not dead*. "His - arm and his, his ribs, he's - he hasn't woken up yet, he's . . ." He closes his eyes. He's surrounded by hurrying medical staff, by a porter pushing a trolley, a man walks past holding his own bloody arm tight. He says, too flatly, "They said it was a hit and run."

"*I bet they did,*" Mr Hummel chokes and it's like a punch, Blaine keeps his eyes closed and bears it, has to swallow again. He can hear shifting, movement, he must be out of bed and finding clothes. Mr Hummel says, too strained, "*In the mask?*"

"Not - now. Not here." He wants to cry, he can't cry on the phone to Kurt's dad, not like *this*. "Just him."

"*You are gonna send me the details on where you are, the hospital an' his room, I'm on the first flight I can catch over.*"

He says, very quietly, "Yes, sir."

The quiet metallic clink of a belt buckle as he dresses. "*You okay?*"

His mouth opens, he closes it again. He swallows, hard. He says, "I'm fine."

"Good. You tell him I'm comin'."

"... yes, sir ... I ..."

"I'm guessin' you can't talk right now."

He looks up and he's *scared* of the room full of frightened hurt impatient exhausted people, and every one of them a threat if they knew. "No. I -"

"So we'll talk when I get there. Just - look after him. Hold on, kid."

He hangs up. Blaine closes his eyes again, slumps back in his seat, lets the back of his head bump off the cold wall behind him. He bumps it off it a couple more times. How much longer - how much longer -

"Blaine Anderson?"

He looks up, into the professionally caring eyes of Mike Chang, first time he's actually seen him in doctor's scrubs, looking down at him with just too much tightness in his forehead. "We've got your boyfriend comfortable, if you want to see him."

Blaine tries to lift a hand to touch his face but his arm's suddenly too weak to raise that high. He just nods and pulls himself up in two unfolding jerks and with his cell in hand, he follows Mike through the hospital.

In the elevator a girl in a robe with a walking frame gets out on the third floor, leaving them alone. Blaine says, "Is he -"

"Still out of it, but he's stable, he's doing good. When he wakes up we'll get a better idea of his head but I've seen him get up from almost worse. He's okay."

"Do you think ... his head ..."

"No reason to think it's bad. You said he was talking earlier, right? We'll know when he wakes up. Hey." He grips Blaine's shoulder, shakes him a little. "The worst part's over, okay? No-one's going to die. No-one's cover is blown. It's just -"

The elevator stops, and Mike falls silent as the doors open. Blaine takes a breath in, puts his head back, says, "Okay." and steps out, pockets his cell, walks with Mike along the corridor to a room with the blind closed over its little glass window, opening and offering the door for Blaine.

He stares through it, at the end of a bed.

You can do this. You went barrelling into a bank heist this evening, you can't *not* walk into his hospital room . . .

When he sees him he doesn't think about anything else, doesn't even notice anything else, he's just on his knees next to the bed taking his hand from the covers - god, god, it's good just to see more colour in his skin than in those sheets - wrapping both of his hands around his with its hospital bracelet, whispering, "Hey, hey . . ."

Kurt's settled in the pillow just like he's sleeping except he never sleeps like that, laid out flat on his back - he curls on his side, he tucks his body to the shape of Blaine's, nuzzles in as close and innocent as an animal. He doesn't sleep with one arm in a cast arranged carefully over his chest. He doesn't usually have black-purple bruising across his forehead, horror movie stitches in a line just under his hair. He doesn't usually look *this* drained, this drawn, this far *distant* from Blaine . . .

But those are his perfect lashes against his perfect cheek, his perfect lips a little parted, a little dry . . . Blaine mumbles, without even thinking about it, "Didn't bring your chapstick."

Mike closes the door, carefully, behind himself. "I'm not officially on shift or anything, I said he was a friend and I stayed to help. He might need - I've seen him wake up kind of *frantic* before, when he thinks his identity's in danger. He might, um. We don't have many options here if he's loud. He might need sedating."

Blaine closes his eyes, shakes his head, closing his fingers around Kurt's hand. His voice is still getting caught in odd ways coming out of his throat. "Don't hurt him."

"It'll keep him from hurting *himself*."

Blaine wets his own too-dry lips. "You're better at keeping a secret identity than we are."

"Hey, he had a four year run of passing out bleeding on my couch without me having a clue who he was, he did pretty well."

Blaine opens his eyes and murmurs, "And you knew who I was within two minutes of him dropping me into your apartment."

"That's kind of down to him. He didn't want . . . he just wanted you to be safe."

They both go quiet, with Kurt unconscious in the bed. Blaine runs his thumb over his skin, cool and soft, up and down the hard edge of Kurt's metacarpal (you have lovely bones, the physical therapist in him has wanted to say more than once, keeping silent because he *knows* that's weird but oh he has *beautiful* bones) up to his still thumb. Mike says quietly, "Here. There's a chair, come on, don't wreck your knees like that, the hospital has enough to do already . . . how's your leg been?"

His knees ache, the cold of the floor more than anything, and he sits with a small grimace in the plastic chair. "It's been fine. Thank you, for that. Apart from the scar I wouldn't know it'd even happened." (Blink, Kurt, lift your head, smile at me . . .)

"My pleasure. Those Christmas cookies make a bit of excitement at one AM now and then completely worth it." Blaine looks up at him almost too tired to process and Mike grins, and Blaine, wearily, grins back.

He rubs his eye, takes Kurt's hand in his again, murmurs, "You - tonight, I don't know what I would have . . ."

"Not all of us have superpowers." Mike says evenly. "For some of us this is the best we can do and we *want* to do it, just as much as you guys must. And I wasn't lying about those cookies, Tina wants that recipe."

He watches Kurt's still face, closes his eyes, smiles, a little. "It's his, he'll take it to the grave. You know him and his secrets."

". . . I think he's always known, we've all always known, that if me and Tina had wanted to know who he was we could find it out. We just never would, all of us know that, we wouldn't do that to him. I know he trusts us. He just . . . I know he doesn't want us in danger."

"He doesn't want anyone in danger."

"You'd think he of all people would get what life *is*, huh?" Mike says, and Blaine opens his eyes, watches Kurt breathe, reaches up and, very gently, combs his hair to something a little more naturally *Kurt* than the spiked mess of it with the blood washed out. It's the one part of life Kurt never can accept, never can bear, people *shouldn't* be in danger, shouldn't suffer, can't he protect them from *everything* . . . ?

"Should've been shielding him," he mutters, and it comes out with his breath shaking a little he's so angry at himself, Kurt like this, like *this*, what the hell is the point of Blaine if every time he could actually *do* something he - "I should've been -"

"I'm fairly convinced that if you could have been then you, you know, *would* have been." Mike says, quietly. "I'm guessing it was more complicated than that."

Blaine holds his hand, and stares through his bruises, and thinks, Yes. There's only a single person on this planet who could have hurt him like that, because every night dozens try and the Ghost barely acknowledges their attempt but *him* - him -

If he hadn't been a super, Blaine would have killed him without even thinking about it.

Too much to think about, too much, he needs Kurt to make these things make sense, he needs . . .

Mike puts his hand on his shoulder. "You look like you could use a cup of coffee."

The laugh shocks him, and he rubs his eye, gives a tight, thin grin up at Mike. "That would - that would seriously make you my hero right now, yes."

*

It's still dark outside - not yet six AM - when Blaine notices that Kurt's breathing has changed. He sits higher in his chair, and Mike, asleep on the chair at the other side of the bed, lifts his head, touches his face, blinks and rubs his hair back as Blaine takes Kurt's hand again, whispers, "Kurt, can you hear me? Kurt, angel . . . ?"

Kurt pulls his breath in like it's an effort, and his eyes crack painfully open. He blinks, gets them a little wider, and at Blaine's squeeze of his hand he angles his head, tortoise-slow, to squint at him. His lips part around a word but no sound comes out; *Hi*.

"Hi, you." Blaine says, swallowing his own hurt down, stroking Kurt's hand in his as the fingers flex, just a little. He smiles, crooked and painful and *real*, as Mike takes a thin flashlight and checks Kurt's pupils while Kurt tries to wriggle away, and then -

Realises where he is.

He tries to lurch himself up and they both pin him by a shoulder, Blaine feeling his body *wrench* with the pain, rattling out, "No Kurt no it's okay don't move everything's okay -"

Kurt's eyes close, he squirms miserably under their hands, head jerked back in hurt, can't get out, doesn't understand -

"It's all we could *do*, no-one knows, okay no-one but Mike and Tina but no-one *knows*, we brought you in as *you*, everything's -"

Mike snags the chart from the end of the bed and holds it in front of Kurt's face, and Kurt focuses on it with some difficulty through the pain and panic, breathes, breathes, sinks back against the pillow again in sheer confusion, reading, *Kurt Hummel, hit + run*. He looks at Blaine, looking so confused, and Blaine strokes his hair back, says to him like soothing a child, "We told them it was a car, no masks, no-one knows, no-one knows anything. Your dad's on his way, everything's fine, no-one *knows*, Kurt."

He breathes, still a little too quick, until he closes his eyes and lets his head fall back. He's not going back to sleep, Blaine thinks, mouth tightening. He's thinking. Damn it, Kurt, you can't just rest *now* - ?

Kurt licks his lips, whispers out, dry and cracked, "... 't time is it?"

"I -" Blaine checks his cell. "Five forty-one. You can go back to sleep, Kurt, your dad'll be a while."

Kurt lays there for another moment, eyes closed, thinking, thinking. Then he takes another little breath and manages, "I need you to call Finn."

"- oh Jesus. Yeah, of course, sorry, I didn't think - god there's Rachel as well, I just wasn't -"

Kurt swallows, wets his dry lips again, and his fingers flex a *quiet, please* under Blaine's. His voice is still too hoarse. "I need you to find out from him if they've moved Karofsky from the holding cells yet."

"I - what?"

Kurt opens his eyes - all the blue seems to have steeped out while they've been closed, they're grey-green under the hospital lighting, like they've faded. He looks at Mike, long and slow, then says, "I didn't want you put in danger. You and Tina. I only . . ."

"I know," Mike says, quietly. "There weren't a lot of options, sorry. You should get some more rest, your body's going to need it to heal."

He just wets his lips again, and Blaine finally thinks to pour some water from the jug by the bed, to gently help him shift to raise his head, to drink. He closes his eyes and sags again against Blaine's hand, sighing his breath out, then looks up at him and twitches a smile. "I need you to call Finn, Blaine."

"You don't need to be worrying about that guy, the cops have him, don't even think about -"

"I have to go talk to him."

"You - *what?*"

"I have to." He licks his lips again, looks down at his arm in its cast and his mouth twitches almost like he's *amused*, pressing the other hand down to try to raise himself on the pillows a little. Blaine helps because he's terrified of Kurt doing it alone, eyes screwed up with pain even with Blaine doing the lifting. "He knows - he was with that blond super. He's probably a made super himself, he knows - who and where and how - we have to talk to him before they move him, we'll never get another chance -"

"Are you *insane?* You are not leaving this *bed*, you have three broken -"

Kurt looks him right in the eye, set of his jaw like the Ghost, that commanding quality that silences Blaine every time. "He knows who I am. I have to talk to him and you know I do. He *knows* and we have to make sure that he won't tell anybody, everyone who could get hurt if he told a single person -"

"- you can't worry about that right now, you have to -"

"I have to worry about it right now, it's *happening* right now, he knows and I *have* to talk to him, Blaine! I need you to call Finn and find out where he is and bring me my costume, and -"

"Okay, no. *No*. My foot is down because this is *insane*, you're not going *anywhere*. If you want me to then *I'll* talk to him -"

"What, you'll just waltz into a police station and ask to speak to him?" Kurt snaps. "We don't have the time for this, you need to call Finn and go get my costume, there are spares at home, I need your *help*, Blaine, for god's sake, what do you think happens if he tells the *police*? There'll be cops outside that door in minutes and the *idiots* will let it leak and - and everyone will know, everyone who wants me dead, *Rachel*, if they go right to my apartment then *Rachel* and *you* and for god's sake Blaine *Cooper*, *everyone*, do you *get* what happens if it gets out - ?"

Blaine stares at him, and there's a hole inside him, the silent horror of this, of what really could happen, what the fallout from this really could be, not just Kurt in a hospital bed weak and hurt and frantic, *everything*. "... but ..."

"If you won't help me then I'll go on my own." Kurt says, and his breath shivers in, shakes out. "It has to be done. There is no point arguing with it, I *have* to talk to him. So I'm going, whether you help me or not."

"Speaking as your doctor," Mike says, "you are completely insane. And no, you are not leaving that bed."

Kurt closes his eyes, says quietly, "I don't want to have to do this, but you both know that you can't stop me if I really want to go."

Blaine puts a hand over his eyes, squeezes at the skin, god he's tired, tired, *tired*. "You don't have to talk to him," he says, so low, he can't bear this. "You don't. You shouldn't have to. If you - if you can ghost me in then I can tell him -"

"No. He'll listen to me." Blaine lowers his hand, blinks at Kurt's pale determination, something so grim behind his eyes. "I will make him listen to me."

Blaine watches his face, and doesn't even know if he should argue with that expression. They're talking about the guy who silenced Kurt for seven years. If Kurt finally wants to speak, if Kurt finally has the words, his voice back, if he *can* . . .

Mike says, "This is not happening. You shouldn't be out of bed, let alone -"

"I'm going whether either of you help me or not."

"I'll help you." Blaine says, very quietly, and it *hurts*. "If you *promise* to be gentle with yourself. I'll help you."

Kurt closes his eyes, and gives a single little breath of a laugh behind his smile, and then grimaces at how it jogs his chest. "Thank you," he whispers, pulling at Blaine's fingers, and Mike is giving him a *look* but Mike doesn't have a clue, Mike barely knows Kurt, and this isn't about the *Ghost*. This is about Kurt and how he's the single most stubborn human being alive, once he knows he has to do something a tidal wave couldn't stop him, long, grinding years of his own life haven't stopped him, Kurt is doing what he has to do and no-one on earth can stop a boy who can *choose* when to just walk right through any obstacle in his path.

He shouldn't be alone. Not for this. Not for this of all things. Because Blaine isn't the only person in the world who knows, three people know what that guy did to Kurt, Kurt and Blaine and *him*. *Him* of all people, and Kurt shouldn't be alone for this.

He squeezes Kurt's hand, gently, and says, "Let me call Finn."

*

Mike is furious with them.

He doesn't say a word when Blaine arrives back in Kurt's hospital room, Kurt sat up now with Finn's help, Finn looking bleached and stunned, this all happened so suddenly for him. He doesn't say a word when Blaine pulls the two superhero costumes from his heavy bag, and kisses Kurt, very gently, and asks Finn to help him. The only thing he says when Kurt ghosts his arm in its cast into the sleeve of his costume is, "Careful -"

He is absolutely furious with them, and Blaine know he has every right to be, because this is insane. He's taking Kurt with multiple broken bones out of his hospital room and into a police station to talk to the last person Kurt should ever be in a room with, even if Mike doesn't know *that* part. And Kurt can barely stand, hangs off Blaine with his breath so harsh it's almost a sob, as Blaine reaches up, and lifts his hood, and the Ghost grips his arm in shaking hands.

"Not much of a superhero right now," he says, shakily. Phalanx kisses him, on the mask between his eyes.

Finn says, very quietly, "This isn't right, dude."

"You remember Karofsky." the Ghost says, mouth grim with concentration as Phalanx leads him around the room once, slowly, testing his steps; they wobble but don't fall. "Well, he remembers me. So I need to convince him not to - to out me. You know I do."

"He was a dick to you in high school."

Phalanx's jaw works. The Ghost says, grimacing with his steps, "Finn, with all the love in the world, *you* were a dick to me in high school. People change. I have to talk to him."

"I can keep the door locked." Mike says, woodenly. "I can tell people I'm helping you and keep the nurses out. But you do not have a lot of time before people get very suspicious."

The Ghost squeezes Phalanx's arm. "We need to go."

No, he thinks. No, we don't. We don't, Kurt, we *don't*.

He says, "Okay." and turns him, carefully carefully holding his arm with an arm around his back, for the door. "Easy."

They're already fading out of sight. Finn says, "Kurt . . ."

"We won't be long. Don't tell Rachel until we're back, just in case."

"Kurt -"

He tugs at Phalanx, ghosts them invisible through the door, like he can't face Finn right now. Phalanx supports him, aims them for the elevator, works his jaw and says nothing, nothing at all, and he doesn't know if he's doing the right thing, all he knows is that there are so many wrong things to do and maybe the best choice he has is only the least worst option -

Slowly, shambling, invisible, they walk to the elevator. Doctors and patients pass them by, like the way the Ghost is holding his arm doesn't even matter, like his being helpless doesn't mean anything, and Phalanx doesn't know how this city is still up and running now the Ghost is using up all his strength just to *walk*.

Heroes shouldn't fall. It's too hard on everyone, it just means too much . . .

*

He had to refuse any more painkillers, he couldn't risk his head being too fogged to *say* anything to Karofsky. There's no point whining about it, though every time they have to use stairs - into the subway, then into the right police station and, invisible, downstairs and through locked doors - the pain catches like something *desperate* in his throat and he can't make a sound. All he can do is grip Phalanx's arm probably tightly enough to cut the blood off, so they both walk in grim pained silence, until at the bottom of the last staircase he has to squeeze his arm a warning and lower himself to his knees, he *can't*. Phalanx holds him, whispering, "It's okay it's okay it's okay -" and the Ghost kneels there trembling, head down, trying to contain his own body's manic pain, everything too much, *everything*.

It's a few minutes before he can tug at Phalanx's arm, be helped back to his feet. He walks shivering, now, nauseous with pain, walks like a ninety year old on quivering legs through another locked door, into that corridor of reinforced cells, to begin checking through them for Karofsky.

He's in the third cell, which is a relief because every extra second is wearing at him, he can't see right, black bubbles keep obscuring his vision before they burst. Karofsky's sitting on the bench at the end of the cell, manacled hands in his lap, staring down at them, unmoving; the Ghost steps through the door like it's not there, carefully bringing Phalanx through with him, then fades them back into sight, as Phalanx's arm wraps more protective around his side.

(Oh, Blaine. I'm so sorry that I can't let you save me from this . . .)

Karofsky - looks up, startled, then his face *drains* like he might faint, mouth open, staring at the two of them. The Ghost takes a breath to say something and realises that he *will* throw up if he does, he has no strength even to speak, and maybe it shows on his face how close to dropping he is; Karofsky stands in a stumbling hurry, offering the bench, saying, "Sit - sit down, just -"

Phalanx noticeably doesn't look at him, walks the Ghost over and turns him, lets him - as gently as he can, it still jars and his head snaps back, his teeth snap closed, at the pain - down onto the bench, to sit. Not having to support his own weight nearly makes the breath sob out of him with relief, he is truly pathetic right now, letting him not have to stand is the most kindness possible to him in this moment. "Thank - thank you." he manages, and then he lets his head down, breathes, breathes, through the popping bubbles of black, while Phalanx keeps his arm around his side, bent oddly down to do so, standing at his side between the Ghost and Karofsky who can't exactly back off any more than he has, chained to the wall

behind his head in a tiny cell. The Ghost swallows, and wraps his hand around Phalanx's wrist. "Thank you."

Karofsky says, "I -"

"No names." the Ghost says, the first thing, the most important thing. "Probably a camera, could be microphones in here. Do not use my name."

"- no. Okay."

He breathes at the floor some more, feels less sick now he's sitting. He manages to lift his head, and Phalanx is watching his face and *he* looks so sick, the Ghost smiles, a little, reaches up and brushes his cheek with his thumb. "Okay," he says gently, and he is, more than he probably should be, he just really feels like nothing *worse* could happen to him at this point.

Phalanx doesn't look convinced, but this has always been hard for Blaine to understand, he knows. He lets his hand fall, rests his head back against the wall, and looks at Karofsky. Karofsky, *terrified*, looks back.

What do you say to him of all people, now that it's actually come to it?

He's never imagined this, really, through all the years. All he thought he'd feel if he saw Karofsky again was tongue-dumbing terror, he tried not to think about him at all, he never did rehearse his 'fuck you, I *survived*' speech, he has nothing to throw at him. And he doesn't have the time, anyway, he's here for other people, this isn't about him. There are things he has to know, and quickly, and all the rest of it - all the rest of it can't be fixed anyway. So.

"I had to come," the Ghost says. "Despite -" He touches his arm in its cast, slung up across his chest. "- inconveniences. Because you know, and I need to know that you're not going to tell anyone else. I need to *know* that you're not going to tell anyone."

". . . haven't," he says, in such a *young* voice. "I haven't. Haven't told the cops anything, they don't know I - I know you."

"No-one can know. You know -" He licks his lips. "You know the mob want me, and some supervillains. You know - what they'd do to my family if they knew. You know what they'd do to *you* if they even knew you

knew, to make you tell. You can't. Ever. Not a single person." He draws his breath in, lets it, hissed with pain, out again. "I kept your secrets, Karofsky. What I'm asking in return is that you keep mine."

Karofsky stares at him, and the Ghost stares back, and why, he wonders, isn't he afraid? Because he isn't, he doesn't feel any fear at all, looking at Karofsky now. He was so afraid of him, *so* afraid, for so many years it nearly drowned him. But there he stands now, not a monster, not a nightmare, a scared young man - he looks very young, still - still bruised from Phalanx fighting him, looking mutely terrified back at him like the *Ghost* is the scary one. You made me feel two inches tall, he thinks, watching his face and not understanding. Don't you know how much power you had over me, for years? Don't you know . . . ?

"I'm sorry ab . . ." Karofsky stares, and the Ghost swallows, stares back. Phalanx shifts at his side, and doesn't let go of his arm, his shoulder. "I'm sorry about. High school. I - I was just scared all the time, I was - I was scared of being you."

He lets his breath out, hard, audibly angry, and Karofsky's manacles clank as he lifts his hands. "Not - I was scared of people *treating* me like you, you were always - I couldn't be alone like that, I -"

"Bullying me to make yourself safe wasn't the worst thing you did to me." he says, hard, and Karofsky stares back, swallows.

"I . . . I only wanted . . ."

"What did you want?" he says, trying not to be too angry, his breathing picking up is already hurting his chest, he *can't* be this angry but he really, really is. Because it's not just that Karofsky had all that power over Kurt and used it, it's *how* he used it, and even after feeling *how* afraid Kurt was can't he admit to either of them *what he did*? "What did you think you were going to achieve, that I was going to slit my wrists, what would you have *gained*? What did you *only want* to do to me?"

He looks so, so scared, and the Ghost remembers how scared *he* was, and can't be merciful in this. "I just wanted . . . I was just scared."

He whispers, "Well, so was I, since you convinced me that you were going to rape and murder me."

Karofsky looks like he might throw up. The Ghost makes himself breathe, makes it come slower and steadier, his ribs press vicious with pain against his lungs, all he's doing is hurting *himself*. He has to look away, to try to regain some rationality, to try to deal with this situation. If there are cameras in this cell,

which there probably are, they might not have much time until someone checks the monitor. He can't just scream the last seven years of his life out of himself at Karofsky. He can't make it *better*, nothing will ever make that not have happened, nothing will ever get him himself unhurt back, himself untangled from all that was done to him, himself as he should have been, untarnished. There is no *point* in howling the unfairness of it at him. Blame won't get him a single day of despising his own life back. Blame won't save either of them now.

Karofsky sniffs, and the Ghost looks across to see him wipe his nose on the back of his wrist, wipe his eyes on the back of his hand. "I'm sorry," he says, voice all trembling-broken. "I'm sorry, I - I'm *sorry* -"

Oh for god's sake. Oh for *god's sake* that he finds his own throat hurting, he tries to look away and he can't, he swallows around the aching knot in his throat and for *god's sake* he could laugh at how pathetic he is, that there's no hate left in him, only a miserable sort of pity because god, Karofsky's life, he wouldn't wish what was done to him on his worst enemy but he can't even *imagine* what Karofsky has done to *himself*. "Phalanx," he says, snapping open a compartment on his belt, holding out a tissue. Phalanx stares at him. The Ghost, wearily, looks back.

(What do you want me to do, Blaine? You knew from the beginning, this is just what I *do*.)

Phalanx breathes, very slowly, and takes the tissue, and says nothing. He straightens up to hand it to Karofsky, who flinches a little when he moves and then just stands there, staring at it with wet eyes, not understanding. Then he takes the tiny little white flag of peace and whispers, "Thank you." and blows his nose into it. Phalanx sits next to the Ghost on the bench, taking his arm again, jaw too tight, and the Ghost turns his head, bumps his forehead off Phalanx's for just a second.

(I need you to be so strong for me right now, Blaine, because I *can't* do this on my own . . .)

Be practical. There isn't the time, the strength, for anything else. "How did you end up superpowered and robbing a New York bank?"

Karofsky wipes his eyes off, sniffs his breath in, clears his throat. "I - I only got here last month. I . . . I tried, in the last place, I tried being honest again, it always . . . it never lasts more than a month, I never manage . . . for more than a month, then I have to - get out, again, find somewhere else, find another job, lie, again, I can't . . . I only just got here. I thought it was big enough here to - to keep stuff secret, if I had to."

"You're not out. How can you not be out? How can you - you're just going to lie for the rest of your *life*?"

Karofsky looks away, squeezing the tissue in his big hands. He shakes his head a little. "I kept tryin'. Moved somewhere new an' *tried*. But . . ."

But. The Ghost hangs his head, so tired. But.

But there's always someone who'll yell out of their car window driving past. There's always someone who'll shoulder you aside on the sidewalk. There's always someone, always, who will try to make you feel like shit just for existing as you are, and Karofsky . . . Karofsky just learned running away, learned hiding, as the only way of avoiding it. He couldn't face up to it, never could, he put every obstacle he could between other people's contempt and himself. God, he learned it back in high school, how effectively it worked, when he used Kurt as a human shield against the world's ability to wound.

"If you can't find just a little bit of bravery," he says, very quietly, "then it won't ever get better than this. You need to realise that as quickly as possible. There isn't an easy way out, neither way is *easy*. But one is braver. One is *better*, for yourself and everyone else."

Karofsky squeezes the tissue in his hands.

The Ghost takes a breath in and his expanding ribs clench inside him, he has to shudder it out again. "You weren't born a super."

". . . this guy. Said there was someone who could . . . I just wanted to feel . . . stronger."

"It doesn't make you stronger. It just gives you more to deal with."

"Was it always you?" The Ghost looks across at him, and still he looks so lost. "The Ghost, was it always - you? Every time?"

"No, David, it's just my *turn*. Of course it was *always me*, how many people do you think can walk through walls?"

He stares. "But . . ."

What's made it into the national news, what does Dave probably know? That burning building, that serial killer, the super incidents; that bomb. "What was I supposed to do with it?" the Ghost says. "Hide?"

Dave's eyes flick away, understanding that as a jibe, though not the cruellest one the Ghost could reach for right now. He clears his throat, says, "There was this guy, said they could . . . they'd pay me, and then I could work for them. I guess, um, criminals. 'cause it's risky, it was a 'dangerous procedure' he said, so they'd pay me and - never have any money, always have to move, I could make a *go* of it if it had some cash and - and if I was stronger -"

"*It doesn't make you stronger*. Who did it? Where?"

". . . building down on the docks, old warehouse, they have these labs underneath. I didn't ask questions. Some guy in a lab coat did it. Made me . . ."

Dave looks down at his own hands, and how small the used tissue looks in his fist. The Ghost closes his eyes. He knows how strong they made him, he feels his ribs shift and grind as he tries, tries, to breathe. "The address of the warehouse."

"I don't know the address, I don't know this place well, on the West Side, I don't know. Near Penn Station?"

"Are they doing this regularly? Do they have a lot of made supers?"

". . . said it was dangerous."

If they had more supers they would be using them, he thinks, they would want their money's worth out of them. If they even can find the volunteers it doesn't sound like many survive it, and where are they getting all these 'volunteers' from . . . ? Organised crime at this probable level of expense, the Ghost knows how this city works. He says, "Are the Mottas bankrolling it?"

"They told me not to ask."

"And you didn't." The Ghost gives him a look, not an unkind one, more weary than anything. Dave looks back, looks - young, and haunted, and the Ghost tries to imagine - moving around all the time, nowhere home, always alone, always lonely, never being able to be honest, never being anything but scared, never being anything but alone -

(And always knowing what you did to someone else, spending every moment of your life trying not to see the guilt out of the corner of your eye . . . ?)

Phalanx is stroking his arm with his thumb, his body crooked protectively around his. The Ghost knows what loneliness is like, knows what keeping secrets is like. Now he's not lonely anymore he sees it from the outside, looks on it with sickening horror, he can't go back, he could never go back, he could never *survive* that again . . .

And it would be so easy to hate Dave, because he does know that he can't *owe* him forgiveness, not for what he did to him. But he has so much love in his life now, Kurt has so *much*, and it would just seem like *meanness* to push Dave even further into that corner on his own. He doesn't owe him this, but he'll give him it anyway. He can afford to be generous. He squeezes Phalanx's wrist, he has so *much*, and broken bones and broken life and all he is still supposed to be a superhero. What else can he do?

"You need to think about your life." he says, watching Dave's face. "It's not going to be easy, not after what you've done, the cops aren't going to write off robbing a bank. But you can - you can take the time to think. To work out what you need and what you can do. Because you can do so *much*, now, and - and helping people - what can you do but *help* people? You know what it is to feel threatened, you know what it's *like*, don't you want to help other people . . . ? You can use what makes you different to make other people's lives *better*. You can remember how you've been hurt to help other people. I don't mean you have to become a superhero, this is not a *nice* job, but there are - things -"

"It was always you." Dave looks at him, still so stunned, like he still can't believe it. "I thought about you - all the time, what you would've done, I didn't know it was *this* but I knew you would've got out, I always - I hated you 'cause I knew you'd go off an' be *better* than me, I always knew that. You were so sure about everything. You always were."

Phalanx is holding his arm tighter, and the Ghost says, carefully to the wall, "I don't know if I was."

Dave rubs his nose, rubs the back of his head, manacles shifting. He flicks his gaze around the cell, doesn't let it settle. "I wanted to *be* you an' I knew I wasn't brave enough." His hands clench, unclench. "'course I wanted to hurt you. Not excusing it, I'm not saying - it was - it was shit, what I did to you, I was *shit* to you." He wets his lips quickly. "But I felt like crap just 'cause you existed, you made me feel everything I wouldn't ever be, always - you kept your head up and I was scared and clumsy and ugly and stupid and you were so *sure* and -"

He feels a dread, rising, and holds Phalanx's arm, and tries not to breathe too hard . . .

"Beautiful," Dave mumbles, and doesn't look at him, just stares scarlet at the floor while Phalanx's hands grip his arm and the Ghost grips him back.

It doesn't feel good to be told that by him. He doesn't know what it feels like. Like -

A door opens, down the corridor, and all three of them look up and then the Ghost - cringes, around the sudden movement, his ribs hurt like a snapped-up accordion. Phalanx whispers, "We have to go." and he nods, lets him pull him to his feet, too quickly and his vision spots black again but it can't be helped with footsteps hurrying to the door -

He looks at Dave, Dave stares back, they don't know what to *say*, neither of them can make the past go away, that ghost is here to stay, there is always, always going to be a reason that Kurt wears this cloak . . .

What matters to him more than anything is his name, his family, his friends, the secret. He whispers, "Please."

Dave understands, even as they fade out of sight. He nods, hard. He's crying again.

It takes the cops some time to get the serious lock on the door open, and by the time three of them are in there, guns drawn and yelling at Dave on his own, the Ghost and Phalanx are limping, hushed and struggling and invisible, up the corridor; the cops have very thoughtfully left all the doors open for them on their rush down to catch them in Dave's cell . . .

The journey back is far worse than the journey there. There aren't any seats on the crowded subway now the morning's getting along so Phalanx stands him against a pole, holding him against it with his body, the Ghost keeping them invisible but he feels *sick* by then, every time the train lurches he nearly gags with pain, eyes closed tight and head jerking on Phalanx's shoulder. They have to be silent, they can't say anything, he's shaking and stupid with pain and too weak to walk when it gets to the stop by the hospital, Phalanx has to get his arm around his shoulders and *haul* him off the train. Up the steps to street level and he's trying not to sob, his legs don't want to work, the sun's up now and it's morning in New York and he - staggers, has to pull Phalanx in a panic with him, to lean against a wall and sit and just be in *agony* for a moment, because he can't, he can't, he *can't* -

Phalanx holds his arm, his hand finds his face, he strokes his hair under the hood and whispers to him, "Going to be fine going to be fine not much further going to be *fine* angel -"

Take a breath. Take his arms. Get to your feet again.

It feels like it won't ever end, this is what hell is like, this journey with David Karofsky's face looking so lost in his mind and every part of him hurts, the pain chases him out, no space for him in his head when the pain is so *huge* and he has to keep them invisible, he *has* to . . . he never did know his own limits; out of the elevator and he doesn't know how they got there, he thinks he blacked out for a bit, unable to concentrate on anything but invisibility and Phalanx is *carrying* him with his arms around his chest and feet dragging, he pulls at his arm and chokes, "Let me, let me ghost -"

Phalanx lets him to his feet to ghost them through the door and that's it, he can let them visible, and both Mike and Finn leap forward with a yelp to catch him when he drops. His ribs jar, his arm throbs, he clutches Finn's arm and puts his face into his shoulder and *screams*.

Blaine's face is white under the mask as they get Kurt sitting on the edge of the bed, eyes unfocused, he feels weirdly feverish, breathing too hard and breathing *hurts*. Blaine unpeels Kurt's mask, gently slips his gloves loose, unclips the cloak, says, "Get this off him, we need to get him in bed, Kurt sweetheart can you just ghost out of it, your arm at least, please -"

He's too shaky and stupid to want to risk it, he knows what a ghosting gone wrong can mean, it can mean he ends up with some of his clothing *inside* himself. He's going to throw up. Mike's doing something with the drip, says, "Cut him out of it if you have to."

"Blaine," Kurt says, because he's scared, he is scared now, of how much it hurts and of how scared he is, the fear feeds off itself. Blaine catches his cheek and says to his forehead, "Everything's alright everything is going to be alright just get this off and you can lay down and you'll be fine, Kurt you'll be *fine* -"

Someone knocks on the door, and tries the handle. The two superheroes in the room go still, and Mike and Finn share a horrified look, as the door handle jiggles again.

"Someone in there?" Another knock. "They said my son was in here, open the - is this the right room?"

"Burt," Finn says, and Kurt whimpers a little bit on the edge of his breath, his dad -

He's wearing a superhero costume.

No.

He catches the arm of the costume as Blaine takes the knife from his leg belt and slits the neck wider. Kurt ghosts it, pull it down so at least his cast is free and lets it fall against his side, and Blaine works on the rest, slices the costume clean up the middle (can make another he can make another) and unpeel it from his other arm, as Finn goes to the door and says through it, "Burt, we're just, he's just dressing can you hold up -"

"Finn? God's sake you know how many baths I gave that kid? I don't care what he's wearing, open the *door* Finn -"

Mike hisses, "Don't open the door."

The door *bangs* in the lock. "Flew all the way from goddamn Ohio in the middle of the night for my *son* you open *this damn door* -"

"He'll have security here if we don't do something -" Blaine says, a little too high, and Finn probably thinks he's helping, probably thinks this will soothe Kurt's dad down to stop shouting at least, when he opens the door a crack and says through it, "Burt, look, just -"

His dad barges right past him, sees Kurt, stops dead.

Half out of a superhero costume, Mike quickly getting his gown over his arm as best he can, and Kurt sees - the look, in his dad's eyes, that he knows what's happened, that he knows Kurt's been out like this, like *this*, and he can't, he can't, this entire night has been hell, Kurt can't *survive* his dad yelling at him now -

"Dad don't be mad don't be mad Dad please please -"

He's crying, he can't think, he's *shaking*. Blaine says nothing, gets his belts off him, pulls his boots off so they can get the gown on him properly but he can't lift him into the bed because Kurt is holding his one working arm out, trembling uncontrollably, for his dad, sobbing, "- please please please please Dad don't be mad with me -"

His dad steps to him and Blaine - backs off, ruins of Kurt's costume in his arms, and Kurt flinches from his dad's hand but it settles so gently into his hair, and he says, "I'm not mad, Kurt, I'm not mad, lay down, you always get upset when you're too tired -"

"Don't be mad," Kurt chokes, he can't bear it, and his dad thumbs his cheek dry, kisses the top of his head, pulls at the bed's covers.

"I'm not mad. Get into bed, c'mon. C'mon, buddy, it's okay. It's okay. Into bed."

Mike takes his wrist and Kurt blinks at him but he doesn't say anything, just slips the needle home, reaches up and adjusts the drip. Something cool runs into his arm, cool and clean and numbing.

Kurt's tongue fumbles on, "Dad . . ."

"Just lay down, sport. You're fine now. I'm right here. I'm right here."

There's a pillow, which is good, because his head is so heavy that otherwise it might fall right through the floor. Darkness rises, feeling falls, and then there's nothing at all.

*

Blaine stands there, in his armour, holding another wrecked Ghost costume in his arms, watching Burt Hummel sitting on the edge of his son's bed, stroking his hair back from his face, looking up, taking a tissue from the box by the bed and drying his eyes for him. Kurt's gone silent, entire body slack, finally; Blaine's never seen him like that, never seen him *beg* like that . . . he looks at the drip, looks at Mike, who gives a discreet sort of shrug. Blaine swallows, and shifts the costume in his arms, flicks up the fall of the cloak a little so it doesn't trail the floor.

When he's certain Kurt is settled, Kurt is asleep, Mr Hummel looks at Finn standing wide-eyed and useless by the closed door, at Blaine feeling sick and very alone holding Kurt's costume, and then at Mike, by the drip. He says, "Who's he?"

"I'm his doctor." Mike says, calmly. "I take it you must be Mr -" It takes him a second, he only learned Kurt's name tonight. "- Hummel. My name's Mike Chang, I've been helping him when he's -"

"He never mentioned you."

"You know about his . . ."

They both look at Blaine, Blaine standing in a superhero costume and holding another one and feeling nothing like a hero at all. "Yeah." Mr Hummel says. "An' I knew *this* was gonna happen, too." Looking grimly back at Kurt, still and very pale in the bed, and Blaine thinks, broken arm, three broken ribs, and besides lurching through the city like that he had to face *him*, Blaine doesn't think he could be a room with someone who did to him what Karofsky did to Kurt. Blaine feels *wiped*. Kurt must have felt . . .

"I only knew him in costume until last night, and he never mentioned you to me either, sir. I think he likes to keep these things separate. It's safer for everyone."

"When I spoke to you," Mr Hummel says, slowly, and not quite looking at Blaine like he can't *bring* himself to look at Blaine, "you said he was already down. So why the - *hell*. Was he wearing *that* when I came in?"

Blaine swallows. "He, um. He -"

Finn says, "It was his idea."

"Don't any of you dare make excuses, he went out like *this*? An' none of you stopped him, you *helped* him?"

"I was kind of tempted," Mike says, "to quietly sedate him before he could get out of the bed. But, yes, sir."

"The," Blaine says, and stops. "The guy who - did this to him." Did everything to him. "He knew Kurt from high school, he recognised him, Kurt wanted to - he had to talk to him, to make sure he'd keep it secret. That was all. He just had to talk to -"

"That can't wait? Someone else can't do that, he's got to be out there like *this*, *Jesus* -"

Blaine doesn't think that that is the only reason Kurt wanted to talk to Karofsky, and he doesn't think his injuries are the only reason Kurt was so spent after it. He looks away, and hugs his costume closer. It now smells more of hospital than Kurt.

Mr Hummel does look at him, now. "What the hell happened to keeping him safe?"

All he can do is stare back at him, pinned, and swallow it down again, and not say anything. He's not going to defend himself. He *knows* he failed. Mr Hummel's anger is quick and skittery, too much too fast, and

then he looks down and touches Kurt's hand, folds his larger hand around it, closes his fingers. He stares down at his hand, limp and unmoving, like he can barely even process *that*, then looks up at Kurt's face and Blaine has to close his eyes and turn his head away again. "I'll get changed," he whispers, and retreats to the little bathroom attached to Kurt's room, to get out of a superhero costume he profoundly does not deserve to wear and back into his civvies, smoothing the shirt, fixing the bow tie, combing his hair back, and in the mirror he still looks like crap.

He thinks of Kurt *crying* for his dad not to be angry with him and this is actually the worst night of Blaine's life, worse than any of them he can remember, because Kurt should never feel like he has to *beg* . . .

He can't put it off any longer. He opens the door.

Mr Hummel's still sitting on the bed, holding Kurt's hand, but Finn's got a tentative hand on his shoulder, and Mike is standing against the wall, giving Blaine a silent glance of solidarity. Blaine swallows again, and looks at that little broken family group, and he doesn't know where he fits in. He wants to be next to Kurt, touching him to know he's okay, watching him sleep, he wants to be allowed to be close to him because he needs it, but -

But.

But . . .

Mr Hummel shifts, clears his throat a little. "What was that," he says, and stops. "That thing on his chest, when you got the gown on. Some kind of - scar?"

Mike says, "That was what happened to him before he had anyone to help him out there."

Mr Hummel looks at him, silent, then looks at Blaine and says, "What happened last night?"

Blaine hasn't slept. He's been running off adrenaline and horror since they sailed into that bank last night; he got five hours' sleep the night before that, and he's now been awake since seven o' clock in the morning on the previous day. He doesn't know if he's capable of forming sentences, doesn't know if he can say anything without saying *everything* which he knows Kurt doesn't want him to do, which he has no right to do, there is so much that it's Kurt's right alone to choose when his father knows. He opens his mouth, he stops, he feels really dizzy, and he realises that he hasn't eaten since the previous day and hasn't drunk anything but one really bad cup of hospital coffee since before the bank.

"He . . ." Everything feels so foggy and difficult. He rubs his eye. "We, it was a bank heist, it should've been - it shouldn't have been difficult. There were two supers there but it shouldn't have been *difficult*, nothing should have - gone wrong, nothing should have happened. But Kurt - recognised that guy, and, and he wasn't - he shocked him, or - I don't know, he just wasn't ghosting, I thought he was, I thought if he wasn't he'd get out of the way, I -" It all breaks, he can't make it not. "I'm *sorry*, sir. I - I thought he was - I was trying to shield off the other super, I wasn't - we were both - I'm *sorry* -"

Mr Hummel says quietly, "You slept yet?"

He stands with his back too straight because he doesn't dare let it loose, and shakes his head.

"Go to bed, kid. Nothing you can do here." His breath comes out of him, slowly. "He's not goin' anywhere."

"I can help you find a hotel, sir -"

Mr Hummel shakes his head. "I'm stayin' here as long as he is." he says, squeezing Kurt's hand. "Then I'll sleep on his sofa 'til he picks up. I can sleep in a chair if I have to. Had plenty of practise livin' out of a hospital," he adds, and watches Kurt's face, and Blaine can't even think, doesn't even try to understand.

"C'mon man, I'll drive you back." Finn says. "You look like hell."

"I -" He can't do anything. He couldn't do anything for Kurt last night and he can't do anything now but god, *god*, he needs to sleep. He nods, gets out too roughly, "Thank you." but -

He looks at Kurt. He needs to say goodbye to him if he's going but Kurt's not even awake, and there's Mr Hummel like a guarding dragon to get past first. But he can't just walk out, he can't just *leave* him, not even unconscious with no idea of it, he can't just . . .

Mr Hummel's grip relaxes, just a little, on Kurt's hand.

Blaine draws his breath in, and all the last of his courage. He walks to Kurt's side, looks down at him, his heart twists in his throat that he doesn't even move. He brushes Kurt's hair a little neater, a little more like Kurt, and he whispers, "I'll be right back. I promise." and leans down to kiss, so so gently, the unhurt side of his forehead.

He gives the best approximation of a smile that he can manage to Mike, makes himself meet Mr Hummel's eyes to say, "I'll see you soon, sir." and Mr Hummel says, very roughly, "Just get some sleep, kid."

Then he picks up the bag with their costumes in and walks under Finn's arm as he holds the door open, Finn looking drawn back across the room at Kurt, and he wipes his eyes a couple of times walking to the elevator. He hits the call button, and sniffs hard, and Finn grips his shoulder, says, "He'll be okay. So long as . . . he'll be okay."

"I just need some sleep," Blaine whispers, it's the worst night, everything's too much to cope with, and Finn squeezes his shoulder as the elevator doors open.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Voices roll around the room, disconnected from all meaning, almost like music. Kurt just lets them happen, for a while, doesn't even try to make sense of them. It's only when he recognises his dad's voice that he tries to focus, and becomes aware that oh, god, he feels like *hell*.

"Hey, buddy, don't move. You're okay, just relax."

He makes his eyes crack open, and the light is too glaring, and he focuses with some difficulty up at his dad. He tries to make a word and can't, gives up, turns his head a little to see who's at the other side of the bed; Rachel, near to tears, whispering, "*Kurt*." at him like she hasn't seen him in weeks.

How long has he been *asleep*?

He looks at his dad again, tries to work out what the hell happened. Memory - returns, too much memory in his stomach too quickly, and he closes his eyes at the thought of David Karofsky, turns his head to the side and lets his breath out hard like he can expel even the memory of it. He feels achy and throbbing and exhausted but the pain isn't as bad as he remembers it, like his ribs were snapped fibreglass, like his arm was a thousand degrees too hot. "You feeling okay?" his dad says. "You want me to call for the nurse?"

Rachel whispers, "Oh my god, Kurt, it must have been so terrifying."

Kurt looks across at her again, feeling a slow sort of dread, what does she know? *What* must have been so terrifying? His dad says, "You even remember what happened?" and Kurt's stupid for a moment but then understands the get out clause he's been offered, shakes his head, swallows too dry. "No," he rasps. "I - no."

His dad helps him up a little to get a drink, while Rachel begins digging through an oversized bag on her lap. "I brought your pyjamas and your toothbrush and your shampoo, I couldn't find your moisturiser I just bought one on the way in, there's your robe I didn't know if you'd be cold -"

"Thank you, Rachel."

"- and your -" She wipes under her eyes, "- book on the bedside table, and a newspaper because I know you like to keep up to date and I got some of those cookies you like out of the -"

At that point she gives up and just puts her hands over her eyes and *cries*, and Kurt finds that his arm is absolutely no good for reaching for her, encased in pot as it is, and has to reach across with his exhausted left arm to pet ineffectively at her. His ribs shift and snarl pain at him. "Rachel - Rachel -"

"Finn called me," she sobs. "*Finn* called me *last* everybody already knew your dad's been here all *day* and Finn just - just only just called me no-one called me you get hit by a car and no-one calls *me* -?"

"... where's Blaine ...?"

"He's *asleep*, Finn said he was up with you all night, he went home to *sleep*. Finn didn't *call* me -"

Kurt looks at his dad, because if Finn is 'organising' matters then they're in trouble, says, "Did anyone call my office?"

Rachel starts sobbing even harder. "Hell," his dad mutters, rubbing his face; he needs a shave, and he looks so tired, and guilt and worry twist low down. "I don't know. I think Blaine has your phone, if they called he probably picked up."

Kurt says, "Rachel, please stop, I have a headache." but he *does* feel guilty, taking her hand as she squeezes back and sucks her ungainly breaths in. Always on the outside, Rachel, since they all know and she can't, always the last one to know, which is Rachel's least favourite thing in the world. "I'm okay," he says. "I'm sorry Finn didn't call, you know what he's like, he doesn't ... Finn and priorities," he says, and shrugs and regrets it, his dad rubbing his shoulder while he tries not to audibly whine his way through the resettling of his ribs.

She wipes her eyes, sniffs hard, squeezes his hand. "I am going to write a piece on the shocking standards of morality that lead to people knocking someone down and *driving off*, who would just *leave* you like that -?"

"It's New York," Kurt says, and doesn't shrug again, but still. If someone was late and had had a bad day, he's not sure half the city wouldn't just drive off, sometimes. Then he realises that this is all pointless speculation because no-one actually did hit him with their car, and he could almost smile at himself, tries to keep his mouth flat. Rachel sniffs again, takes a tissue from the box by the bed, blows her nose.

"This is all because people think superheroes will pick up after them whatever they do, if people would just take some *responsibility* -"

Kurt groans, and rolls his head back to his dad. "Where's Blaine?"

"He went home to sleep, kid." His dad touches Kurt's head, eyes a little anxious. "You just asked that."

"Oh. I do remember doing that, I just - Dad I do not have brain damage, don't look like that, I do *not* have brain damage, I've never been any good before the first cup of coffee."

"I might call a doctor in all the same."

"Dad, I was distracted, people were *crying*, I remember already! Oh god." he mutters, as his dad heads out of the room and Rachel grips at his hand.

"Finn will work *tirelessly* until they bring in whoever ran you down."

"I bet he will," Kurt mutters at the ceiling.

". . . are you sure your head's alright? If you don't even remember it happening . . ."

"I'm fine," he says, and his throat hardens more than he expected, he *does* remember too much and it's hard to even *say* this. "I just really do want Blaine."

*

Outside the door to his room he runs a hand over his hair to check it hasn't dislodged since he last checked it in the elevator, he rearranges the roses in their wrapping again, he touches his bow tie to make sure it's still straight, he stares at the little window with its blind down. And then he draws his breath in, and he can't put it off, he can't be so afraid of facing Kurt's father that he doesn't get to see *Kurt* . . .

It's not only Kurt's father he's afraid of. He keeps hearing Kurt crying, *please, please don't be mad with me* and Blaine's heart just *breaks*, he can't bear the thought of Kurt like that, Kurt reduced to that - but he can't be afraid of Kurt's fear, he can't, he has to be braver than this for *him*. So he knocks, and turns the handle, and he doesn't let himself not open the door.

It looks like Kurt had been sleeping, or on his way there, because his eyes come open as Blaine looks into the room, focus on Blaine and - Blaine doesn't think Kurt's ever looked so happy to see him, he tries to

shift himself up on his arm and Blaine hurries over clucking, "No, no, no," dropping the flowers on the bed to catch his shoulder, catch his cheek to stop him, but he can't stop himself from kissing him.

Kurt doesn't seem to mind, pulls at the cuff of his shirtsleeve, kisses back, it all ends up a little heavier than Blaine meant it to but then a toilet flushes in the next room and he breaks back, licks his lips, blinks. "Dad," Kurt says, and tugs Blaine's cuff again, smiles, says, "Hi."

"Hi, you." Blaine says, cupping his face, tipping his forehead so carefully to the unhurt side of his. "Hi . . ."

"Did you sleep?"

"Yes. I didn't think I could but as soon as I hit the bed I was gone. I brought -" He looks down, picks up the roses, offers them, and Kurt's smile is more genuinely, twistingly touched than Blaine had expected.

He thinks, You've never brought him flowers before.

He thinks, Has anyone brought him flowers before?

He looks so, so much better than this morning . . .

He runs his thumb under Kurt's eye, says, "You still look really tired."

"That's exactly what I wanted to hear my boyfriend tell me with a bouquet, you *really* know how to say it with flowers, Blaine." Kurt says, letting himself relax onto the pillow again, hand letting go of Blaine's sleeve so Blaine can lay the flowers on the table by the bed. "I know, I feel it. I think they're spiking my drip."

"I think you just need to *sleep*, Kurt."

"Dad keeps telling me that." He flexes another small, too-much of a smile at him. "Wait with me while I fall asleep?"

"Of course I will." He folds his fingers through Kurt's. "Of course I -"

The door to the bathroom opens and Mr Hummel steps out, adjusting his belt. "Thought I heard voices," he says, and Blaine doesn't know what to say but Kurt's looking very calmly up at him, like he's been waiting for Blaine to come back just so he can *look* at him. "You get some sleep, kid?"

"... yes, sir, thank you. Do you need to get some rest? It's been a long day."

"He's had two million cups of coffee, because since he's in a hospital already he might as well give himself another heart attack while he's here." Kurt says, but he's still watching Blaine's face, and his hand's relaxed in his.

"I'm good for a while. I wouldn't mind if this one wouldn't take a nap an' stop talking back so much, but I'm good, thanks."

"I'm right here." Kurt mutters, eyelids heavier, now.

"He's always ratty when he's tired." Blaine murmurs, and Mr Hummel confirms as he sits down again, "Even as a kid."

"Don't talk about me like I'm not here," Kurt tells them, and closes his eyes, managing to look too superior to care about them flat on his back with multicoloured bruising across his face. Blaine sits down, still holding his hand, and after a few minutes he feels how loose his fingers have gone, and he closes his own eyes for a second just out of relief.

Mr Hummel murmurs, "You sure you slept? Still look like you could use it."

He almost laughs out of sheer *nervousness*, smiles at him, says, "We um, we kind of both always do, it comes with the territory."

Mr Hummel's looking at him, not unkindly, and Blaine really doesn't know what to do or say. Blaine realises he's probably in Mr Hummel's seat on this side of Kurt, he's the one who really should be holding Kurt's hand, but if he lets go he might wake him up and it's miracle enough for Kurt to be resting -

"I might've sounded," Mr Hummel says, slowly, "last night, like I was - angrier with you than I should've been. It'd -" He draws his breath in. "It was not a good night. I'm sure it wasn't for you either. I'm sorry about that."

"... no, sir, I... I really should have been looking out for him better, it, just, it -"

"Okay, kid."

"- I just -"

"It's okay, kid."

Mr Hummel's looking at Kurt, eyes closed and asleep there on the pillow. Blaine swallows very hard a couple of times, and gets his breathing to settle, and watches Kurt's face too. At least he's calm, now, at least he seems happier. After last night...

Mr Hummel mutters, "I really was mad at him, too."

The laugh - shocks right out of him that time, he has to let Kurt's hand go as gently as he can to try not to shake him awake with it. Mr Hummel glances at him, looks back at Kurt, shaking his head with his eyebrows raised. "Wrapped around his little finger an' he knows it. Never can yell at him, even when he does deserve it."

"Last night - it, it really wasn't good, last night."

Mr Hummel looks at his son, and slowly shakes his head.

Blaine feels a little too light in the head, edgy and uncertain of the weird grace he's been granted, that neither Kurt nor Kurt's father seem to hold him responsible for everything that happened last night. But Blaine's not the one in the hospital bed - again - and Mr Hummel must have been waiting for that phone call for five years, and *Blaine's* the one who has all these shields and he swore, he swore they were for him...

"Never seen him like that," Mr Hummel says, quietly. "Don't ever want to again, I don't - I don't wanna be something he's *scared* of like that -"

"It's not - it's not you, sir, he's not scared of *you*, he just, he can't bear disappointing you, you - you really mean everything, to him, sir, your good opinion means..."

Mr Hummel looks at him, looks like Blaine just threw a glass of water over his head. "Disappointed?" he says, looking so stunned. "Who'd be - who could be *disappointed*? I don't want him in danger, I don't want him like *this* -" A gesture at Kurt, in his hospital bed, sunk in the leaden sleep of pain and painkillers - "- but hell my kid's a hero an' I *know* it. What the hell parent could be *disappointed*? I didn't raise him to not do what he thinks is the right thing to do. I just -" He shifts the cap on his head, rubs his forehead, "I just sometimes wanna tell him that maybe looking after himself better might be the right thing to do as well . . ."

What the hell parent, Blaine thinks, could be disappointed. He stares at Kurt's still hand, and turns over that heavy thing in his stomach, the permanent paperweight over the thought, What if you told them and they didn't even manage disappointment, what if they just didn't *care* . . . ?

"If he'd been on his own last night," Mr Hummel says. "What would have happened?"

Blaine looks up at him, blinks, opens his mouth before he actually has the words. "I . . . don't . . ."

Karofsky walking towards Kurt's still body to do *what*, he thinks. To check it was really him? And knowing it was him . . . what would he have done then? He thinks about Karofsky's face, how haunted *he* looked, like Kurt was the one to be afraid of; he thinks about the police outside the bank waiting to arrest everyone inside; he thinks about how Kurt is clearly convinced that the Mottas are the ones who turned Karofsky into a super. What would have happened if Blaine hadn't been there to pick him up?

The 'best' of these worst case scenarios would have been the police taking him, at least he'd have ended up in a hospital, at least he would have survived last night. Karofsky couldn't have - it shudders sickly in Blaine's stomach to think about him trying, even wanting to - saved him, not if he's on the Mottas' payroll, the only people he could have taken Kurt to was *them*. And if Kurt had been just awake enough to try to save himself, if he'd ghosted, nowhere to go but straight down . . .

He could have died in the dark, on his own, in terrible pain, unfound, unhelped. He could have been unmasked and everything would be over. Karofsky could have carried him right into the arms of the Mottas and god if they got hold of him helpless . . .

Blaine touches his hand again, closes his fingers around it, his breathing's got too tight. He swallows. "I don't know. It - wouldn't have been good."

Mr Hummel says roughly, "Thank you. For helping him." Blaine stares at Kurt's arm, he can't bring himself to look at his face or meet Mr Hummel's eye. "No-one's disappointed in you either, kid."

His throat tightens, his eyes fill, his *nose* fills like a child -

Mr Hummel hands him a tissue. Blaine blows his nose, scuffs too hard at his eyes, says through it, "I'm sorry -"

"Not a problem. Not a situation I don't have practise dealing with." Mr Hummel says calmly, and looks at his son, and smiles, not entirely sad; the wry quiet smile of so much memory.

Blaine blows his nose again, and checks on Kurt - still asleep - and drops the tissue in the trash. Mr Hummel says, "When he was a kid . . ." and stops. "It's weird because they don't stop being kids, you still look at them an' see . . . he's still exactly the same. Exactly the same. Always cared about everything too much. An' even then it was like . . . he fell off his bike an' he'd just get up again, but if someone else was upset he couldn't even cope, he always ended up crying for the both of 'em. An' you bring your kid up an' you think - you think you know what their life's gonna be, an' okay I knew Kurt wasn't gonna do exactly like I did because he kept playing soap operas instead of fighting with his toys and he was obsessed with *The Sound of Music* but . . . but you don't plan for this. You don't . . ." He looks so hard and so struggling at Kurt. "He got older an' he changed but he didn't. I know high school was hard on him but he kept himself busy an' even with the - the powers coming through, he was still just him, just dealing with things. An' then he left and went to college and . . ." Blaine watches him watch Kurt, and swallows. "Maybe I shoulda known all along. Soon as he got the powers I should've known what he'd do with them. Soon as he was 'different' I should've known. Soon as he started crying just 'cause other people were crying. He was always gonna . . ."

Blaine says quietly, "He's a good person."

Mr Hummel is shaking his head, his eyes not leaving Kurt's face. "Gets it from his mom. I did my best but - I tried to raise him *good*, I didn't try to raise him . . . I know he'd - die to help other people an' it's, it's *hard*, knowing he's . . ."

Blaine says, very low, "Too good."

"The both of you. You can't owe anybody *this* much."

"It's not about owing."

"Yeah. I know."

"... he's still not too good to not yell me out about leaving the mustard out."

Mr Hummel gives a little rumbling laugh, says, "Yeah? An' chewing you out about changing the toilet roll?"

"Oh my god. I put it on the *wrong way around*."

"That can't've been pretty."

"I thought I was *neat* until I met him."

"Coasters."

"He polishes the cutlery."

"He actually uses all those weird attachments on the vacuum cleaner."

Too much in his throat, it feels like it needs to get out, a rise of joyhopefearneed, Blaine has to close his hands tight not to say - Mr Hummel, one of these days when I think he won't just think I'm being crazy, Mr Hummel, we almost die all the *time* and I need to hold onto him as much as possible, Mr Hummel, I want to be in his life because it's *so* much better than mine, Mr Hummel if I blurt out to him that I want him to marry me too soon and I know it would you be okay with that . . . ?

I'm not going to pretend that my parents would approve. I'm not going to pretend I can bring much to your family besides an irritating but well-meaning older brother. But all I want in the world is for him to be happy and safe, and I *swear* I will work for that, remember that, never forget that I love him because we almost die all the time and I will spend the rest of my life knowing what he looks like just laying on the floor like a body and I *will not forget this*, not for him, this just - this isn't like it's been when I was with other people, it can't be, I could never feel this for someone else, because as soon as I met him and he stopped being just a superhero to me he became my *hero* in a way that means so much more, he became -

He became exactly who he is, and I love every bone in him, because if you cut him all the way to the marrow all you find is love. He doesn't leave anyone behind. He rescues everyone. He never forgets that

they hurt too, and that he'll never know how deep their hurt runs. I love him. I can't not. He made me see the whole world differently, it's like I didn't even *see* people until I met him, and he tells me he can't go back to what he had before but I couldn't *survive* it, going back to life without him. I need him. I can't be strong without him, not enough for this life. I need him, and I know he needs me because he's honest with me and he needs *someone* to be honest with and he needs someone to love him as much as he deserves, and I do, I swear, I do . . .

He takes Kurt's hand again, gently, and runs his thumbs over his smooth skin. He says, very quietly, "I really do wish it had been me."

"He doesn't," Mr Hummel says, watching his son sleep, and they both know Kurt, and they don't say anything else.

*

Kurt sleeps, mostly. There's a revolving stream of his dad, Blaine, Rachel and Finn in and out of the room, but he really does hurt like hell and he's been tired for most of his life it feels like, so he sleeps. He wakes up hungry and needs the bed raising to sit up, and with his arm useless in a cast his dad has to cut his food for him like he's three or something. Kurt gives him a look, and his dad keeps his eyebrows high and his mouth so not flat, and says, "You need me to feed it to you too?"

But his dad's still there when he wakes up in the middle of the night, he has to guess it's night by the low lighting, asleep on the chair by the bed. Kurt would get up, find a blanket for him, take his cap off him at least, but he can't move. He can't move and drowsiness pulls at him like an underwater current, too strong to fight, and he slips under again into the dark.

He dreams that he's walking the city with his hood up but no mask on, gloved hands over his eyes and looking at the world from between his fingers, but the city's empty. No voices, no cars, no sound at all. Silent as a graveyard, and the Ghost hiding his face.

He wakes slowly, and tries to remember which cloak he was wearing but he can't.

"- not *there*, tip everything over -"

"They *look* best there, which one of us is the artist here?"

His eyes come open, and with a blink, actually focus.

"Okay, he needs that, stop trying to put them on top of -"

"Ugh, stop *fussing*."

"I'm a *doctor*, what do you want me to be- oh, hi." Mike has noticed that he's actually awake, and Kurt turns his head to Tina, holding a bunch of sunshine-orange flowers, bright as a smile. For one second she stares at him open-mouthed and then *she* smiles, so, so happy.

"Hi. I didn't want to bother you yesterday, Mike said you had family in and out all day -"

He looks at Mike, puts his elbow down and tries to heave himself to sit up and Mike grabs his shoulder, says, "*Please stop doing that* god your ribs -"

He presses the button so the bed raises itself so he can sort of sit up, though he would much rather be doing it on his own impetus. Mike passes him the beaker and he takes a sip of water, swallows it, smiles a little uncertainly at Tina because it's the first time he's ever spoken to her without the safety of a mask between them; "Hi."

She *beams*, and he licks his lips and swallows some more water, and he always has liked Tina, a lot, and regretted never being able to say to her - I love that dress on you, I would *love* some of your prints if it wouldn't make too much of a link between us, it's like Cindy Sherman doing New York, there are places I could take you to photograph that you wouldn't *believe* . . .

Tina plays with the crinkling cellophane wrapping the flowers for a second, then says, "You can trust us, you do know -"

"Yes. I know." He shifts his shoulder, winces his eyes closed, he's stiff just from lying in the same position for so long. "It never was - it never was that I didn't trust you, I just, if anyone ever knew you knew, even suspected . . . well," He looks down at himself. "It's dangerous."

Tina passes the flowers to Mike, who takes them and finds them a home behind Blaine's bouquet, behind the card Rachel brought, and one from Carole. Tina says, "I always wanted . . . I did want to find a way to say *thank you*, to - to you, not just -"

"I think you did already, I have been waking you up at really inappropriate times to get blood on your soft furnishings for four years now."

"No." she says, quietly and very seriously. "I've never been able to . . . to do anything to make up for . . ." She blinks, looks to the side, to the floor. "What might have . . ."

Mike puts an arm around her back, squeezes her shoulder in a hug. "She really did want to make it up to you. She's been wanting to set you up for years."

"Mike!"

"What, you *did*, you went through every eligible guy we knew."

She rolls her eyes, says to Kurt, "No but really some of them were *very* cute, there's a medical student he knows who would've been *perfect* -"

"I'm - I'm kind of - taken now." he says, and there's nothing he can do about how hard he's blushing, and he swallows some more water on the remotest off-chance that it might cool his skin *down* a little -

"I *know*, and he's *perfect*. He is perfect. Because . . ." Her fingers play together. "Because I never did know how to get you out on a date with anybody without the mask, or how to tell him I knew you even, or what you *liked* really because you couldn't ever say . . ."

"I . . . I'm still . . . it's not that I don't want to know either of you two because I do, I'm - I'm so grateful I can't even say it, there were - there were years when you were almost the only people in my life who cared about *him*. But . . . but it is so dangerous, if anything did happen to either of you because of me . . ."

"Some things are worth a little risk." She takes his hand, squeezes it. "Come over. When you're better. Bring him, we'll make dinner."

"I really feel like I owe you dinner for . . ."

She squeezes his hand again. "Then we'll come to yours the next time. Please. Kurt . . ."

He closes his eyes, because it is so strange that there are contexts in which his own name is so shocking to him. He draws his breath in, slowly, and god, he's kept a wall between himself and everyone else in the

world for so long, and he's tired, and if it's weak to need friends, he has never denied that he's weak. He looks up at her again, smiles. "I would really like that. Thank you."

She hugs him very, very carefully, her hair swinging to brush his bare arm, then pulls back and says, "I have to go, but we'll arrange stuff when you're up again, okay? I'll come visit again. Get better soon."

"As soon as I can. Thank you for the flowers."

"Thank *you*," she says, and *smiles*, and takes Mike's hand and comes off her heels to kiss him, then with one last smile she's breezing out of the room. She is really the perkier person to wear so much black that Kurt has ever known.

"Your dad went out for breakfast, he'll be back soon." Mike says. "You need anything? You hungry?"

"Only for food I can eat one-handed, I swear he would put me in a high chair if he could." He rubs his eyes, says, "The other night, the night I . . . I don't really remember a lot of what went on, not until I woke up here. Um, thank you for . . ." He wets his lips. "What you did. I don't really know how much of a pain I might have been, I . . ."

"It was fine. Nothing at all I wouldn't do ten times over." Mike unhooks Kurt's chart from the foot of the bed, twitches his mouth at it, says, "I know this is a stupid question, but . . . are you planning on going back out there again? After this heals?"

He cradles his arm in its cast to himself. "Yes. People didn't stop needing people to do what we do just because I let my guard down and got clobbered."

Mike nods, slowly, and rehangs his chart. "It's going to be a while."

"I know. I guessed that much."

"I don't mean like I say 'take two weeks off' and you take one, I mean, seriously, a *long time*, it'll be months before you're at full strength again."

"I know." He runs his fingers over the sling of his cast, concentrating on the low throb of the bone inside. "He - Blaine, he's training to be a physical therapist. He'll make sure I do everything right, believe me."

"Good. I'm glad, if anyone needs their own in-house physical therapist it's you."

"Mm," he says, rolling his eyes, and then - hesitates, his fingertips pausing in their skimming of the sling. "I . . . when you brought me in, um, I . . ."

"You were wearing some of my clothes, no-one suspected a thing, believe me."

"Mike, I . . . there are . . . scars."

"Oh, yeah. I told them you're into some crazy martial arts, I assume you - are, actually."

"Mostly aikido," he mumbles, fingers picking a little anxiously at the cast now. He always comes back to aikido. He's played with kickboxing and jujutsu and capoeira and half a dozen others, but it's aikido he always comes back to, and not only just because he suspects that his teacher *knows* and must be placated (the man watched him with such iciness before Kurt stopped pretending not to be as good as he really was getting, and he's been much more mellow, much less terrifying, since Kurt just accepted the role of star pupil, even if sometimes when Kurt nervously bows to him he does look into his smile and think, Oh, god, you *know*, don't you . . . ?). Aikido suits him. He can take people down without hurting them if he doesn't have to, and learning how to face someone attacking him without *panicking* was something Kurt had at first desperately needed. Aikido's been good for him, but if he needs to name a bunch of martial arts he might have got himself stabbed while attempting to learn, he does have a record for them, at least. But *those* scars aren't the problem. The problem . . .

"The, um." Kurt says. "The - one that goes right around -"

"That one, *that* one I need an Oscar for, best scriptwriter or best actor, I don't mind which." Mike's grinning a bit too much. "You should've been awake for it, it was genius. If anyone asks you again, it's a long elaborate story involving being dared into breaking into a building yard as a stupid teenager, some rickety scaffolding and this electrical cabling and - I had a backing cast and everything, there were subplots and moments of dramatic tension, it was -"

Kurt rubs his eyes again, mumbles, "As long as no-one thinks . . ."

"That you fell right *through* a really hot metal bar? No, no-one thought that was a more likely explanation than my, you know, Pulitzer prize winning creation. Which came with emotional arcs and moral lessons."

". . . thank you."

"Any time. I'll go see about-"

There's a knock and the door opens, and it's Kurt's dad with a paper bag in his hand, glancing up to see Mike and Kurt, awake. "Hey. I brought you a bagel, figured you could eat it one-handed."

He's not a *complete* sadist while Kurt's trapped in bed with one useless arm, then. "Thanks, Dad."

"I need to get out there." Mike says, checking his watch. "Behave. Don't break anything else at least until I can check on you again."

"I don't even know how I *would* break anything when I'm not allowed out of the bed."

"I'll keep him down," his dad says, dropping the paper bag on the tray-table over the bed, wheeling it closer so Kurt can reach, as Mike heads out of the room. "Thanks, Mike."

"Any time, Mr Hummel."

Kurt narrows his eyes at his dad as he sits with a grunt by the bed. ". . . did you have him spying on me while you went out?"

"'Spying' isn't the right word," his dad says mildly. "Cream cheese, you even gonna eat that?"

"I don't need a twenty-four hour babysitter."

"Well, you know what? Last time I left you on your own you went out wandering the city so busted up I have no idea how you even made it out of the *building*, Kurt, so as long as I'm here at least you stay in bed an' heal the right way. And eat your breakfast."

He opens the bag one-handed, peeks in. "Is it the low fat cream cheese?"

"Kurt-"

"I'm eating it, jeez, I'm eating it. You worry too much."

His dad says, his jaw too grim, "I worry exactly the right amount."

A whole globe full of people all worrying about each other. Kurt turns half the bagel in his hand, says meekly to it, "Thank you." and starts to eat. His dad lifts the remote and turns the TV on. Kurt licks cream cheese off his thumb, says, "Could you put on -"

"The news, I know. Don't even know why you wanna watch it, never any good news an' like *hell* you're getting involved in anything right now. If Godzilla comes out of that harbour an' starts smashing up Manhattan you are still not leaving that bed."

Kurt rolls his eyes, takes a bite of bagel, looks up as his dad finds a news channel. "I'm no good against reptiles, I already tried, if he turns up it's Blaine's problem anyway."

His dad grunts again, folds his arms and watches the TV. Kurt obediently eats his bagel, picks up the second half and says, "I'm not going to be able to go out for months, you know, like this. I know it's not the way you wanted it but it kind of is what you wanted."

"This is *not* what I wanted."

Kurt keeps his eyes low on the bagel. "All I'm saying is . . . I'm going to be stuck on my ass doing nothing for *weeks* on end from now on, I probably won't exert myself more than walking to the fridge. So, you know. Just . . . you seriously could have got me the low fat cream cheese."

His dad's silent for a moment, then reaches over and before Kurt can stop him, ruffles his hair about mercilessly.

"Dad-!"

"Be nice to your old man." his dad says, folding his arms again. "He's had a rough couple of days."

Kurt has to drop the bagel and wipe his fingers off to try to fix whatever unholy mess of his hair his dad just made, glancing a glare at him before it fades, and he picks up his bagel again.

"Yeah," he says quietly. "I know."

He keeps remembering Karofsky in that cell, how he looked at him. Kurt has weeks on his ass to look forward to, weeks of nothing to occupy him but remembering - everything. He looks back on it now so confused, he can't sift the thoughts right yet, he's still so *tired*. What the hell are they putting in that drip?

His dad says, "You can go back to sleep if you want."

Kurt says, "I'm fine." and finishes his bagel.

He's asleep again less than two bulletins later.

*

By the afternoon he's bored of sleep to the point almost of craziness, frustrated with his own body's lethargy, ratty and headachy and snappish. At first he can't work out why he's already so impatient - it's been less than two *days* and if this is his reaction already, he will have murdered everyone he knows and tripped right into supervillain territory before a single bone has actually healed - before he realises what's missing, what extremely necessary part of his life he hasn't actually touched since before the bank heist that put him here.

He murmurs to the ceiling, "I would give my *left* arm for a cup of coffee."

His dad days into his newspaper, "My son, the addict."

"Dad."

"You s'posed to be on coffee anyway? You're still hooked up to that thing."

"It's only painkillers, Mike said they'd take it off me today anyway. It would hardly kill me." Of course it wouldn't. Coffee, sweet bringer of life, his tongue feels dry for want of it. He doesn't think he's been more than a few hours between cups of coffee since he was nineteen, and now he tries to work out how long it's been, that bank heist must have started a little after eleven and now it's two days later, nearly five o' clock ...

His dad sighs, and puts down his newspaper. "There's a place down the street, I'll go. What do you want?"

"- really?" He wasn't actually expecting his dad to cave, certainly not so easily, and he's so surprised he almost can't think. "I . . . hazelnut latte?"

His dad starts pulling his jacket on. Kurt watches him, sort of stunned, then remembers - sort of remembers - he doesn't really remember -

He remembers getting back to this room hurting so much he was *panicking*, and his dad, and knowing his dad would be mad at him, knowing he would be so angry at what Kurt had done, he - he does remember crying. He licks his lips. He probably looked like a complete mess, he *was* a complete mess. He probably scared him. God, he flies all the way from Ohio just to see Kurt like that, if Kurt ever saw his dad . . .

His fingers close in the sheets, and he says with a guilty twitch of his mouth, "I would give my left arm for a cup of coffee and a copy of *Vogue*?"

His dad says wearily, "Which one's *Vogue* again?"

"It's the one that says 'Vogue' on the front cover in really big letters."

His dad rolls his eyes, turns for the door. Kurt says, "Dad -"

He stops, looks around at him. *He* looks tired, forget Kurt. Kurt twitches again his small, guilty smile. "I love you, Dad."

That softened look Kurt knows well, softened to shield the sharp edges of the pain. "I love you too, kid. *Vogue* an' a hazelnut latte."

"Thank you."

"Back soon."

The door closes behind him, and Kurt doesn't remember being left alone in this room yet. He stretches, as much as he dares, and his ribs register their complaints, he grimaces and relaxes again, eyes closing with a sigh. Weeks, he thinks. Weeks of this. Your own stupid fault. Your own stupid fault for freezing, your own stupid fault for not ghosting, your own stupid -

He keeps thinking about David Karofsky's eyes, and remembering . . .

There are two taps at the door, and the handle turns. He opens his eyes, looks across -

"Sophie," he says, and it's so automatic to try to sit up from lying flat on his back when his *boss* walks in. She says, "Are you supposed to - oh, my god, stop doing that, Hummel, *stop it*."

He flumps himself back onto his back, closes his eyes, *oh* that hurt. She walks over, heels neatly clipping the floor, and he blinks miserably up at her again, says, "I keep forgetting my ribs . . . sorry."

She's holding an obscenely huge bouquet of flowers, they must be from the whole office, and a card, and she's staring at him with her face very oddly carefully blank. "My god, Hummel. You have the worst luck of any designer I have ever met, do you know that?"

He wets his lips, swallows, clears his throat a little. "I'm sorry about - about this, I, I never seem to be at work for more than two weeks at a time without -" The realisation of dread sets a slow sinking in his stomach. "I can still work, like this, if someone brings me my portfolio I can-" He stops, and stares at his own bound-up right arm. "I can - work something out I can still type or I can learn to draw left-handed but I can still work I *promise* I -"

"Oh my god, Kurt, you got hit by some asshole's *car*, you are actually - are you actually laying there in a hospital bed thinking I came here to *fire* you? What kind of harpy do you think I am?" She's got a pen stuck through her tied-up hair, which means she came from the office in a hurry. "Have you not *noticed* that you get more done in that office in three days than the rest of them manage in a week as it is?"

"- I -"

"Hummel, when poachers from other design houses come, as I know full well they will, I am having them *assassinated*, if I have anything to do with it then you're not leaving that office until you're in a box. Which," She looks him over again, and he hasn't actually *seen* himself yet, hasn't wanted to, is aware of the stitches in his forehead and the bruises and he just doesn't want to *know*, "I'm hoping will be in quite a long time, despite . . ."

He looks down at his arm in its sling, mumbles, "Sorry."

"Don't be sorry, god, you got hit by a *car*, I can't . . ." She sighs, sits down, puts the flowers on the floor by the bed since there's no space for them on the bedside table now. "This is from everyone," she says, passing over the card then taking her bag onto her lap and snapping it open, taking out the bottle of

alcohol gel; it smells like lavender, oddly old-fashioned for her, as she works it into her hands. "Even some of the quite big names, if you're not sentimental you can always eBay it for the signatures."

He slips it from its envelope, and the first message he reads is Robbie's green-inked, *Ouch, Bambi*. He sighs, and flops it onto his lap. "Thank you. Can you tell everyone thank you from me?"

"Of course." She looks at the floor and then keeps her bag on her lap instead. "Chandler's inconsolable, by the way."

"I - Blaine has my phone, as soon as I get it back I can start texting people, god knows I need something to do in here anyway . . ."

"You are actually missing your portfolio, aren't you?"

"Have you seen this?" He picks at the cast's sling, and tries to avoid even *looking* at the gown, which is really too disgusting to contemplate. "There must be a market for hospital accessories that don't make people *nauseous*, how are you supposed to feel better when you look like a polyester nightmare?"

"Hospital chic."

He picks at the sling. "I . . . well, I know I'd pay for something more flattering right now, this thing is grotesque." He sighs. "No-one to blame but myself."

"I think I'd be blaming whatever dick was driving. What were you even doing walking around New York in the middle of the night? You're not in Ohio anymore, this is not the nicest city in the world, we have superheroes coming out of our hair for a reason."

He looks at the wall. "Midnight froyo craving."

"God, I've had those. At least now I know not to -"

There's a tapping at the still-open door, and they both look over to - Kurt's fingers stretch and tighten in the sheets - Blaine, holding a cell phone and a paper bag, smiling and saying, "Hi, am I - I can come back in a few -"

Sophie says, "*Tell* me this is the boyfriend."

Kurt licks his lips, tries not to reach out for Blaine too greedily. "This is the boyfriend. Blaine, this is Sophie, my boss. This is -" He closes his eyes when Blaine leans down to kiss him between them, taking his hand, then puts the bag on top of his card on his lap; Krispy Kreme. "Blaine. Who is in a conspiracy with my father to make me leave this hospital the size of a *manatee*, Blaine -"

"They always make me feel better." He rubs Kurt's shoulder. "Hi, it's really nice to meet you, Sophie, I'm sorry for interrupting."

"Oh no, no problem. Smile!" She hits a button and lowers her phone and Kurt realises too late what's happened as she checks the screen.

"Sophie - oh my god *no* I look like Frankenstein's *monster* -"

"I got everything I came for." She says happily, standing up, swinging her bag onto her shoulder again and leaving the flowers on the floor. "A delight to meet you Blaine, keep him out of the office for as long as he needs it, knowing his luck he'll only get hit by another car on the way back in . . ."

He can't sit up. "Sophie, what are you doing with that *photograph* -?"

She waves with her cell as she leaves. "Charging the junior designers five dollars a pop for a sighting of the mythical boyfriend. Rest up, Kurt!"

She closes the door behind herself. Kurt rolls his head back on the pillow and *groans*, and Blaine says, "She seems nice."

Kurt opens his eyes at him, eyebrows raised, but - Blaine, Blaine, settling his fingers through his, gently brushing Kurt's hair back with a knuckle before offering him the cell in his hand. "Quite a few missed calls and texts, I tried to contact anyone who seemed urgent. How're you feeling?"

Kurt would take the cell, but he's holding Blaine's hand and doesn't want to let go and his other hand . . . Blaine looks down, gives a little eye-rolling *I am such an idiot* and puts it on the tray over the bed, and sits on the mattress - very carefully - next to him. Kurt strokes his hand with his thumb, has to swallow it down, this is the first time he's been alone with him since - since -

Blaine sees it in his eyes, his lips part and his eyebrows come together and then he just leans in and kisses him and Kurt lets go of his hand and curls his fingers around the back of his neck, to hold him there, warm skin and real and *there*, oh, *you* . . .

Blaine's thumb strokes the corner of his mouth, he whispers to it, "Thought about you all day, don't even know why I went to class, all I could think about was . . ."

Kurt keeps his eyes closed, keeps him close. "I'm fine. I've been right here."

Blaine says, "I should've been here."

Kurt lets his fingers creep to the very bottom edge of Blaine's hair, he knows any higher and he'll get twitchy. "Dad was here all day. I'm just - you shouldn't put your life on hold just because I -"

(You should, you should be in bed with me right now, don't you ever walk out of a door if I'm not walking through it right after you again . . .)

"Kurt," Kurt opens his eyes as Blaine cups his face, nudges his forehead off the side of his, looks over his bruises and his mouth's twisted all sad-happy. "This isn't something *small*, I can't . . ."

"I'm fine." He can't stop the smile, closes his eyes and it comes so bright and real, as Blaine kisses him where the mask would fall between his eyes again. He catches Blaine's wrist, strokes his thumb and forefinger around it. "Blaine, I'm *fine* -"

"Do you . . . do you remember what . . ."

"I think I remember most of it. I don't remember . . ." He cracks his eyes open, tries to think. "Between the bank and the hospital I don't remember a thing. I remember the rest of it, I think. What happened . . . that blond super, what happened to him?"

Blaine stares at him, opens his mouth, closes it, rubs his eye and sits back a little. "I have no idea. God. I completely forgot he existed. I guess he ran off, after . . . I don't know when."

Kurt tugs at his hand a little, mouth twitching ironic, because they both know *why* Blaine forgot the rest of the world existed. "And then . . ." Kurt's eyes trail to the edge of the bed, and he says softly, "There was David. After that - how did we get out of there?"

"You ghosted us out through the back."

"Okay. After that, how did you get me - ?"

"Hey," Blaine runs his hand through Kurt's hair, tucking it back behind his ear. "How much do you remember? You remember - we went to his cell, to - to talk to him?"

He nods, and swallows as he looks away. "I remember all that. I'm a bit confused about how we got back *again*, I don't know how together I was . . ."

"Are you okay?"

"What, apart from the multiple broken bones?"

"Kurt, it's - I, I know you don't like talking about it, but . . . it's still him, it's . . ."

". . . I know." He runs his fingertips along the edge of the sling. "I know, it's . . . it's weird, thinking about, I know I don't have my head around it yet, I suppose it's a good thing I have - weeks and weeks ahead and nothing to do but *think*."

"Are you - he won't ever hurt you again, you won't even ever have to *see* him again -"

"Blaine, I'm not -" He touches his face, stops and looks away. "It's not like that. I'm not *scared*. I just . . . I just need to work out . . ."

". . . what?"

He takes Blaine's hand, stares at his skin, softly sun-touched. He closes his paler fingers around Blaine's. He wets his lips, says, "What do you do when the worst person you can think of turns out to be a *person*?"

He knows Blaine's staring at him, doesn't need to look at him for that. He just looks at his hand, his lovely skin, and thinks, I wasted so much time, but - but I couldn't have known any sooner, I couldn't have worked it out sooner than this, I couldn't have been okay with it if I didn't have him for it, if - if I'd met him again last year, the year before, it wouldn't have . . . it would have broken me. I couldn't have done anything, *said* anything, I would still have been silent if he looked at me. But now . . .

Time is a better superhero than Kurt will ever be. Time saves everyone, if they can just wait long enough for it. He closes his eyes, tugs at Blaine to encourage him closer, thinks, Even me, even me, maybe him . . .

Blaine closes his arms, carefully, around him. Kurt kisses his shoulder and rests his cheek there, his one arm wrapped around Blaine's back, pressed to the shape of his spine raised in its curve through his sweater; Kurt rubs his side, whispers to him, "I'm okay. I think if I have you I could be okay with anything."

Blaine says fiercely into his hair, "You'll *always* have me."

Kurt's fingers tighten over his back, and he opens his eyes, stares at Blaine's shoulder and the wall. "Then I'll always be okay, won't I?"

The door opens again, and they both look up to Kurt's dad, little cardboard tray of coffee cups in his hand, magazine under his arm. "Hey," he says. "If I'd known you were coming I'd've picked you up something, kid."

Blaine sits back a little, hand sliding down to take Kurt's again. "It's okay, sir, thank you, I just wanted to drop Kurt's phone off."

Kurt would check it now but he can't, not without letting go of Blaine's hand; only having one working arm sucks. But - but then he can *smell* the coffee as his dad walks over, tries not to wet his lips, tries not to shift in the bed, tries not to over-enthusiastically drop Blaine's hand to take the cup. "Thank you."

Oh, god, *coffee*.

When he opens his eyes and lowers the cup they're both looking at him, and Kurt says, "What?"

Blaine says, "You have a problem."

His dad says, "That's what I told him."

"I do not have a problem! I appreciate a good cup of coffee!"

Blaine says soothingly, "Admitting you have a problem is half of the battle, Kurt."

"We're in a hospital, they probably have some leaflets with helplines on 'em somewhere around here . . ."

"You'll notice how funny I'm finding both of you by how hard I'm not laughing."

"Always ratty when he's tired." his dad says, shaking his head, and Blaine says, "He'll feel better after a nap."

Maybe it wasn't the lack of coffee making him so murderous. Maybe all the men in his life really are just *that* irritating.

*

Blaine didn't follow the Kurt Hummel rule, the 'get right back on the horse that kicked you off' rule, the golden rule of not choking while superheroing; he hasn't been out as Phalanx since the Ghost went down.

That first night after that worst morning, with Kurt finally safe in the hospital, he'd found Kurt's cell full of messages and voicemails to deal with - Kurt's office had no idea why he hadn't turned up for work - and so he told himself he was busy, dealing with that and checking the internet for any leaks but fandom was rolling on in blissful ignorance of anything that actually happened. Apart from being quieter than usual, Draxie's blog gave no indication of anything out of the ordinary happening at all. Thank god, thank god, thank god.

The second night he was tired from staying late at the hospital, talking with Kurt's dad after Kurt fell asleep again, quietly reaching their consensus about Kurt's discharge: his apartment has no elevator and no bath, and even when they let Kurt out of here, he'll be a long way from climbing multiple flights of stairs and he's going to be struggling with the cast for a long time. So Blaine got home and talked to Cooper instead of going out, but that was fine, that was *planning*, that was fine.

(Plus, when you're feeling drained and guilty and scared about your boyfriend unable to even lever himself from the bed, talking to your big brother, getting a manly sort of shoulder grab-and-shake, is really just the most relief possible short of Kurt magically healing himself and walking in through the apartment door...)

The third night he didn't have an excuse and he knew he didn't. He picked shiftily over his room for a while, trying to think of something he had to do but there wasn't anything, he wasn't even behind with homework. So...

So he knelt, and pulled his bag out from under the bed, and unzipped it to check on his costume. Inside was a balled-up, torn-up Ghost costume, cold and empty.

Blaine put the bag back under the bed.

Night follows night follows night.

Kurt doesn't ask him about it, doesn't mention it, doesn't even give any indication that he's thinking about it, his city unprotected and Blaine being so spineless. Because - because Blaine thinks about putting the costume back on -

He thinks about the fury, the uncontrolled *rage* he'd felt that night, the Ghost tossed like a *thing* to break on the floor and him, *him* -

Blaine could have killed him. If he hadn't been a super, Blaine would have killed him.

He sits on his bed, hands curled in the edge of the mattress, breathing slow through the awareness of the bag underneath him with two superhero costumes in it.

He needs to talk to Kurt, but Kurt's in a hospital bed, Kurt doesn't *need* this right now, Blaine's cowardice shouldn't be troubling *Kurt*. He needs Kurt to tell him what the right thing to do is. He should never have to decide the right thing for himself, he always makes the wrong decision, he always fucks it up and Kurt, Kurt *knows* these things, Kurt makes the difficult right decisions every time and Blaine needs Kurt, but, but how can he even admit this to him, to tell Kurt who can even look at *him* like he's human . . .

Kurt, I could have killed him.

What the hell *am* I when you're not here?

*

Things Kurt put his foot down about when they eventually discharged him from the hospital, finally 'stable' after his 'unexplained deterioration' on that first night:

He is not intruding on Blaine's brother's apartment while he's such a wreck just for the convenience of an elevator and a bath, he wouldn't *dream* of it, he couldn't *possibly* do that.

And his dad is *not* sleeping on the sofa, his dad can go back to Ohio, Kurt is *fine*.

And no way in all of hell is Blaine sleeping on the floor while Kurt takes his bed because he's afraid of rolling in his sleep and hurting him, that is *not* going to happen, no way, this is all *insane*.

Blaine had kissed his forehead and taken his arm, helping him up from the side of the hospital bed with his dad's hands steadying his shoulder, and said, "Well, tough, because I already bought a sleeping bag."

So Kurt flatly refused, and woke up on his first night out of the hospital in Blaine's bed, listening to Blaine's sleep-slow breathing from the floor, and his eyes slowly focused through the dark, through the ever-glow of the New York night through the blinds, and a distant siren wailing its way up from street level. Maybe that was what woke him. He's kind of attuned to the sound of sirens.

Hello, darkness, my old friend . . .

Trying to laugh silently only jogs his ribs the wrong way and he covers his mouth not to wake Blaine with the *groan*, now, his own stupid fault, his fault, him and the painkillers for making him find himself *funny*. He settles his breath again, slowly, and blinks at the dark, and thinks, Sirens, and no superhero answering them.

He knows Blaine hasn't been out, and now he's sleeping beside him, in a sleeping bag on his own bedroom floor. He doesn't blame him for not going out. He does need to ask him why, when he has the strength for the conversation, because - because there could be a dozen reasons, there *are* a dozen reasons, the problem has always been finding a reason to go out, not a reason not to, because there are ten thousand reasons not to do it and only one reason to do it, and that reason is other people. And if that's not enough, Kurt isn't going to judge. Blaine's done plenty, Blaine's done more than enough. There's more than enough reason not to; Blaine has done more than anyone ever had a right to ask him to, and he has a right to his own life.

He swallows, closes his eyes, breathes, breathes.

As soon as he's mended, he's going back out there again. Because he has to. Because someone has to. Because even the worst person is still a person, and what can you *do* but everything you can? He's going out there again as soon as he can, and if he has to do it alone -

Oh god he can't go back to it, he can't . . .

He closes his fingers in the covers, tells himself to sleep, not to think, to *sleep*.

What if we had met just because you spilled my coffee on the street? What if neither of us wore a mask, what if I wasn't a mess of bruises and broken bones right now but you were in here with me, holding me, what if everything was *simple* . . . ?

And the part of him that's the Ghost murmurs, Then it's just bad luck for all those people you should have helped, isn't it?

. . . or maybe that was Kurt. There used to be such an easy break between the two of them. And now - now they're so much the same person that if Blaine doesn't want the Ghost anymore, what does that mean for *Kurt*?

(. . . would Blaine have ever looked twice at him if it wasn't for the Ghost?)

Don't think. Don't think. Just go to sleep.

I can't be so selfish as to make him do this for my sake but - but what happens if he stops . . . ?

God you shouldn't ever, ever be allowed to *think*.

He hears Blaine suck a breath in, and shifting from beside the bed. The room lights faint grey from Blaine's cell, and Kurt turns his head as Blaine kneels up to check on him, then smiles and Kurt has to swallow his heart down to whisper, "Hi."

Blaine turns the lamp on, smooths the covers over Kurt, says, "You should be asleep."

"Just woke up, I just heard . . . I just woke up."

"Are you okay? Do you want a drink, a painkiller?"

Kurt stops thinking and actually listens to his broken bones, which ache *hot* under the flesh, and thinks, This is why you shouldn't be allowed to think. 'A siren woke me' my ass, *pain* woke you up, idiot.

"I would love a painkiller."

Blaine smiles, gets up and takes the glass from the bedside table, fills it from the bathroom faucet since Kurt's dad is asleep out in the lounge, and pops a pill from its little blister pack. He helps Kurt lift his head to drink and swallow, then kisses him and puts the glass down again. "Better?"

I love you too much and Blaine, *this* is what I'm afraid of, not something going wrong out there, something going wrong between *us*.

"Yes," he whispers. "I'm fine."

Blaine strokes his cheek, kisses his forehead, murmurs, "Go back to sleep."

Kurt keeps his eyes closed, and the lamp turns off, Blaine shuffles back down into the sleeping bag.

I can survive David Karofsky hitting me like a train. I can survive guns and knives and fire and monsters. But Blaine, I can't survive us coming apart, I don't know what it'll do to me, I don't know who I'll *be* . . .

Kurt whispers, "I love you."

From the floor Blaine whispers back, "Love you too, Kurt."

He's foggy and tired and his body throbs with hurt, and he wants to dangle a hand to touch Blaine with, but his bones won't let him. His head is so heavy and his throat hurts. He says, "Blaine."

Blaine says, "What, angel?"

But he's just so tired, and Blaine says, "Kurt?" but sleep weighs him down, deeper into the dark.

Chapter Twenty-Four

going to bang my head off the wall because there's nothing else worth doing when there's no sightings fml

Fic, Faster, Ghostlanx, R; It's not just bullets that make hearts race.

Ghost!plush came with me on a beach trip, photos under cut!!

*Rereading Draxie's Victoriana!verse from the beginning, omg I just cannot with this thing, how do you words I just *can't* what happened to my ability to can??*

Maybe they're on vacation I bet the Ghost's a city break kind of guy

San Francisco baby! XD

(Draxie my dear, I know that you're online . . .)

STOP THE INTERNET WHAT IF THEIR ON THEIR HONEYMOON

ACTUALLY JUST SCREAMED OMFG

no new sightings in like two weeeeeeeeeeks

Fic: Black Coffee, ghostlanx, PG-13, just a moment of the quiet times - writing exercise a day day four, fic without dialogue

*(Drax, you know I got a worried message from Blackbindings about you yesterday? And I know she worries because it's like, Tuesday, but I'm not exactly not concerned myself right now. I remember your punctuation-free period when you were fever-crazed with flu, I quite enjoyed it, you posted fic once while at a cousin's *wedding*, so, no fic in two weeks and we're supposed to think nothing's wrong . . . ?)*

Fanart, Ghostlanx, R, Smoke & Mirrors, or, I wanted to play with smoke effects so I drew bondage sex in front of a mirror with lots of incense burning to keep it R? <3

*we don't know what they're doing when theres no sightings, they could be sick or hurt or resting or visiting their moms, we don't *know**

(I'm just really busy Ghostly, on my way to a shift right now)

(Do you think I'm somehow unaware that you're actively avoiding us? You are not the type to turn bridezilla on us, Drax, what's happening?)

What was the last sighting of them, that mugging in the Bronx? We got an upcloak shot out of it but that was weeks ago ;_;

Unofficial police reports of them in that bank heist, that was two weeks ago

Draxie I know you're probably busy with like wedding stuff but are you updating anytime soon?? victoriana!verse would like make my week about now T_T

*Just because we're not getting reports of them doesn't mean they're not active, they don't exactly clock in on an evening, two weeks is hardly anything. We'll get new sightings when we get new *sightings*.*

Fic: I've Never, ghostlanx, PG-13, a 5 + 1 fic; five things Phalanx has never done, and a first for the Ghost.

(I have to run sorry ghostly)

(Are you okay?)

(I'm fine just busy got to go tell bb not to worry)

*(It's like telling the sky not to rain. You think I won't get on a bus and come kick you in person. You are wrong. We want to *help*, Draxie.)*

(Bye Ghostly take care <3)

Rest up superboyfriends, I hope you're looking after each other? xxxx

(Believe me, my dear, this conversation is not over.)

*no puckzilla in months the ghost probably misses him you don't know what it's like to *wait**

We are the fandom that holds its vigils. We know patience, we know silence, we know that keeping faith means keeping it every single day. We're still here, spooky & his soldier, for as long as it takes.

Prayer circle for both of them, wherever they and their glorious asses may be <3

*

Kurt says, "I am capable of toasting my own bagel."

"One-handed?" his dad says, pressing him back onto the sofa and putting the remote into his hand, heading for Cooper's kitchen. "What do you want on it?"

"My own very minor effort is what I want on it -"

"Sit." his dad barks, rustling things in cupboards. "How'd you slice it with one hand anyway?"

"They have a bagel slicer! *Ow*, okay, you know what, I think being patronised is worse for my ribs than crossing the room to toast my own goddamn -"

"My son, the superhero." his dad says, and bangs the lever on the toaster down. "All you have to do is sit there an' get better and stop griping about it, this feels like really weird karma 'cause you were never a fussy baby -"

Kurt folds his arm over his already permanently-folded arm. "Maybe it feels like really weird karma because when I was trying to help you recover from a heart attack you kept sneaking burgers in your car and *don't* think I didn't know because I found the *wrappers*."

His dad leans back against the counter and says contemplatively, "Nobody pushes the Hummels around, huh?"

Kurt - holds it down for one second but he can't, and laughing *hurts*. His dad walks over, rubs his shoulder while he tries to make his body stop shaking, stop hurting. "Easy," his dad says softly, and pats his shoulder; Kurt nods, a little tightly, and begins relaxing his body from its pained hunch.

He says, "I'm not saying I'm not happy to spend time with you, Dad, but you know that you don't still have to be here."

"course I do." His dad heads back to the kitchen counter. "*Laughing* hurts you, yeah I still have to be here."

". . . okay. Just . . ." He picks at the sling. "You can't stay here forever."

His dad stands and looks at the toaster. "You goin' out again? When that heals up?"

Kurt closes his eyes, and remembers how the mask feels on his skin.

"Yes." he says, and opens his eyes again, because he knows he's going out again the way he knows that he'll keep on sleeping and showering and drinking coffee in a morning, it's just what his life *is*. "I'll be more careful. No-one will surprise me like that again." No-one could, there's only one David Karofsky in the world and presumably he's on his way to jail right now, and no-one else will ever be what he was to Kurt again. They couldn't be, no-one can cancel Kurt out like that anymore, not now he has Blaine at his back -

(Don't think about facing the world with him *not* there. Don't.)

"Kurt - you say that like if you're 'paying attention' then it *won't* happen again -"

"I really do try not to let it happen, Dad."

His dad says, "You want cream cheese on it?"

"There's jelly in the cupboard next to the stove. To the right, Dad. Dad, I don't go out there to get myself killed, I go out there -"

"I know why you go out there." His dad bangs a jar out of the cupboard, wrenches a drawer open for a knife. "An' you know why I sit at home waiting by the phone every night you do go out there Kurt, because I'm waitin' on *that call*, every night, every goddamn -"

". . . Dad, I -"

"Do you know what it was *like*, do you - do you even remember bein' like that?"

He runs his fingers down the sling, murmurs to it, "Like what? I remember - I remember when you got there. I know I, I was a bit messed up, it'd just - it'd been a really long night, I was -"

"You should never've been out of that bed. I can't believe you - I still can't believe you did that, an' no-one stopped you -"

"How could they stop me? I could walk right through them if they tried. They were only trying to *help*, Dad, they -"

"If they wanted to help they should've found some way around it, you shouldn't've been up -"

"Dad they want to *help*, do you know - do you know what would've happened if I'd been on my own? I - Dad I didn't have *anyone*, before, you know that, it -" He's never tried to talk to his dad about how *hard* it was, never wanted to admit to him that there was a crack in the mask, a place his dad could put pressure on to try to get it off him. "It was - I don't know how I did it, I look back on it now and I don't know how I *coped*, if I hadn't had Blaine that night -"

The toaster pops up. They both look at it.

His dad snags the bagels out and opens the jar of jelly. Kurt swallows, and says to his back, "Please don't ask me not to. Please. All this did was make me realise how necessary what we do is, I can't stop, Dad, I *can't*."

His dad's shoulder blades are jagged through his shirt. "How the hell did this make you *more* keen?"

"Because." He wets his lips. "Because - because that guy, the one I knew from high school, he -" It flurries in his mind, all of it, too much of it, always - "he was, he was one of the bullies in high school, Dad, he was the worst of them, he was . . . he was the reason . . ."

His dad carries the plate over, his brows low, his eyes all troubled, and Kurt touches his arm, not the plate in his hand.

He says, "He was the reason I disappeared." and his throat sounds too full, but he makes space for the words to get out. "He was - bad, to me. But -"

Quietly, little stones at the bottom of a well, "But what?"

Kurt swallows again. "But it turns out he needed rescuing just as much as I did. I know we . . . I know we went about coping with things in different ways, I am not - I am never going to think that what he did to

me was okay, it *wasn't*. But, but we still both had to cope, as best we could, with - with the world. People *need* people to do this, Dad. They *need* people to help, and - and to remind them that people do want to help. Blaine's right." His dad's eyes look so lost and so *worried*, on his. "We mean more than what we are, we have to. We symbolise something to people. People *need* us, in so many ways. And I can't stop. Someone has to do it. Someone has to help people. And - and I don't know what the point is of what I can do, what I've been through, if I *don't* use it to help people -"

His dad says quietly, "Eat your bagel."

He twists his mouth, and takes the plate from him. His dad sits next to him, picks up the forgotten remote, flicks through channels and winds up back on the news again. There's a panel discussion about the 'super threat', kicked up again after Karofsky's arrest, now a vocal minority are clamouring for registration again. Karofsky appears to have kept his mouth shut about how he came by his powers, and Kurt understands the threat it must be, if he talked - *that* he talked, to the Ghost and Phalanx - because even in prison the Mottas can reach out for revenge if they need to. If they know Karofsky talked then superpowers won't save him, and he needs to be smart and he needs to be *silent*, something he at least has had some practise in . . .

His dad says to the TV, "I didn't raise you not to do what you think is right."

Kurt swallows his mouthful, says, "I know."

His dad says, tighter, still to the TV, "I'm gonna worry every single day of my life."

"Dad, your *heart*, so do *I*. You think I call you every single day because of what *I* do?"

"Don't act like that's the same, I didn't *choose* my heart -"

"Do you think I have a *choice* in this? It's not that simple, people *need* - they need us, Dad, I can't . . ."

His dad says to the screen, "I'm not askin' you to quit."

Kurt stares at his bagel, and nods, and takes another bite.

His dad says, "I'm askin' you to come home. Regularly. I'm askin' you to always come home again. 'cause that's not a choice either, Kurt, *I* need that, you got that?"

He swallows. "Yeah. Yes. I do."

His dad works his jaw, says without looking at him, "You mean more than you know it to me most of all, Kurt."

He closes his eyes but it's too late, has to put the plate down to wipe his cheeks one-handed. "I know," he croaks. "I do know that, Dad -"

"Oh jeez. Come here."

"Sorry," Kurt says into his shoulder, and his dad rubs his back.

"Don't be sorry. Just don't ask me to care about you any less, you got that too? I'm staying 'til you don't need me anymore, an' I don't care if I'm embarrassing you. Okay?"

"I'm not embarrassed." He squeezes his fingers in his dad's shirt. "I just don't want to *worry* you."

"If you have kids one day, you'll look back on that sentence an' roll your eyes, kiddo."

I have a dad, he thinks, closing his eyes to his shoulder, breathing in his him-smell. He already knows; a whole globe full of people all worrying about each other . . .

*

Both Blaine and Kurt's dad tell him he's not taking his dad to the airport, he still can't even dress himself without help, he's staying home. So he says goodbye to him in Blaine's apartment, and it aches the worst way in his throat, he's got greedy having his dad around so much, he's going to miss him worse than ever and even if his dad doesn't believe it, Kurt *always* misses him . . .

His dad hugs him that careful-tight way, and Kurt doesn't mention that his ribs still feel the squeeze because then he'd only let go. "You look after yourself." he says gruffly, and Kurt nods into his shoulder, says tightly, "You too, Dad."

And Blaine smiles at him a little too anxiously, and heads out with him for the subway. Cooper's away, filming a commercial in California which is kind of a relief because Kurt's still a little too dazzled by him, his tongue trips itself when he's around, Cooper Anderson, like a real human being, and Kurt looking like

he fell down a spiral staircase. So Kurt's alone for pretty much the first time since he got pasted across the floor of a bank, alone with his thoughts, his never-comfortable thoughts, which sigh out for space in the empty room.

Blaine.

Blaine who hasn't gone out since Kurt went down, Blaine who doesn't mention superheroes when it used to be all he talked about. Blaine who fell in love with *that* part of Kurt first, Blaine . . . Blaine who watched his hero get smashed aside like a fly, and Kurt knows it. It feels like a broken promise and he doesn't know why. Like they had both been implicitly okay with the idea that the Ghost would never falter, never fail, would always be able to help Phalanx, would always know what to do; well, now he has trouble opening his own zipper to use the bathroom, now he has fallen so far from heroic, and Blaine . . .

What if Blaine asks him to quit?

What if Blaine's seen the worst of it now, finally understands that no-one is untouchable, no-one is immune, the Ghost can die just as readily as any other human being - will die, one day, everyone will, whether he's in costume for it or not. What if Blaine has finally understood the risk they've been playing with all along (it was different when Phalanx was hurt, the Ghost was there to take care of him, the danger wasn't quite real to Blaine then, *now* he understands the risk . . .) and he wants them to stop? Because - because Kurt couldn't even stop for his dad, won't stop, he *has* to do this.

Can he stop for Blaine?

It's panic inside him, scrabbling to get out, a squirrel in a cupboard, Blaine doesn't know what he *means* to Kurt. He knows - he knows that if, oh god *if*, they broke up, if Kurt was no longer allowed to love Blaine the way he does, all those mirror-pieces of himself he so painstakingly mosaic'd back together, whole again, himself showing the cracks but *whole*, if he didn't have Blaine then they'd just shatter back into a thousand pieces again instantly. There is no strength without Blaine, no hope. If he didn't have Blaine then he would crumble back in on himself, nothing left of him but the Ghost, back to the masks and terror every day of his life, back to hating himself and hiding, back to aloneness and an empty bed -

No, worse, worse, so much worse than just back to what he had before Blaine. Before he had Blaine he didn't know that Blaine was possible, he didn't understand how alone he actually was. Losing Blaine

would mean a horrible new vista opened out all around him, the immobilizing knowledge that he *can't* have him, couldn't keep him, wasn't enough to be with him, never will be enough without him -

In theory, if Blaine wants to quit and Kurt doesn't, then they'll still have a relationship as Kurt and Blaine, no masks involved. But Kurt really won't quit. And he knows the wreck it made of even Kurt's facades of relationships, the hours he keeps, the stress, the exhaustion, the constant demand for more of him from guys not understanding how little of himself he has left with the whole city to give too much to every night. How long could even Blaine last before the mask was too much, before he wanted Kurt to make the choice that Kurt *can't* make, Blaine or the Ghost?

How can Kurt choose to be either Kurt or the Ghost? *They* are him, that's what Blaine's taught him, that was what he learned when he fixed the mirror and saw himself in the pieces: he is *them*. Both of them. He can't give either of them up, it would be an act of self-mutilation, there is no line between them anymore, they're *him*. If Blaine makes him choose between having Blaine and being the Ghost -

He wouldn't do that to me, he thinks, desperate and cold alone in the apartment, too clumsy one-handed to get the throw comfortable around his shoulders. He would never demand that of me. He would never force me to do anything I can't, he *wouldn't*.

He would demand it just by existing. Kurt knows what he would owe Blaine, Blaine wanting more of him, Blaine wanting the city to take less of him even if he was too good to say it to him out loud. Kurt would see it in his hurting eyes and it would kill him.

He's afraid of how literally he means that. He's afraid of Blaine, knowing that he can't have all of Kurt, letting the rest of him go too; he's afraid of Blaine moving on, Blaine so comfortable in the world and his skin, Blaine would find other people to love him, people will always love him. Someone would look after Blaine, someone would love Blaine.

And Kurt, and the Ghost?

Do you honestly think that you could focus, defend yourself in the darkest parts of the night and really mean it, knowing the aloneness you faced for the rest of your life? Do you honestly think that you could fight for your own life like you *meant* it, like you actually *want* to live?

Without Blaine Kurt risks suicide by superheroing, unintentional and unavoidable, and he doesn't want to die. He doesn't want to, he doesn't know why people think he does, he *doesn't*. He wants to live. He wants so badly to live. But he can't imagine a life that won't kill him that doesn't have Blaine in it . . .

Did you ever have the right to tie love up in this situation, to put Blaine at the mercy of yourself and your choices, to be so selfish as to need him this much?

But it doesn't feel like love who's suffering for this. It doesn't feel like Kurt trapped love, like Kurt's the one who ever held love on a leash in his hands. Kurt feels love's hand on his throat, feels the press of its palm and fingers to his panic-fluttered pulse, feels how it will squeeze. It always was as unexpected and as unpredictable as an angel. He feels his own helplessness and the serenity of love's cruelty, that the world will keep on turning while love guts him and chokes him. Love will bleed him dry, to feed all the red roses and cartoon hearts in the world, and it's not Kurt's fault, and it's not Blaine's, never Blaine's, he will *never* blame Blaine for this. It was love who came along and took Kurt by the throat and told him, *Look at what you could have had*, quite clinically and calmly and with the cruelty of a crucifixion. *Look at him, look at what you could have had, if life gave a shit about your feelings. The irony of it all is that he'll be safer and happier without you, and there's no point screaming at his feet, he doesn't need you and all your ugly need, he's bled for you enough already and it's time for you to stop pretending that you ever did deserve him.*

Love wants his heart. It wants it on its altar, still beating shocked, still desperately pumping like that will fix anything when the blood is only staining the stone. What will kill Kurt isn't a bullet or a knife or just the fists and boots until he can't feel them anymore; it's love, hands around his neck and no mercy in its eyes. Love only swelled his heart to stop it.

He wasn't afraid sitting in a cell with David Karofsky. He's afraid now, waiting for Blaine to come home.

And he shouldn't do this now, when Blaine texts, *On my way back! Do you want anything picking up?*. He shouldn't do this now because he's stuck in Blaine's home, in Blaine's *bed*, he should at least wait until he's back in his own apartment, he shouldn't put Blaine through this conversation and the attendant isolation and awkwardness afterwards, not when they still have to sleep in the same room, it's not fair to him. But love's palm presses his quickening pulse, and he can't live afraid any longer, he can't be afraid like this, not every minute of his life, not again, not *again*.

You are the most selfish human being alive, he thinks, and texts, *Just come back? Need to ask you something*

xx

*

Blaine had sworn it one last time at the airport, looking Mr Hummel in the eye, meaning it; "I will look after him, sir."

He'd just looked back at him, tired and drained under the airport slighting, and he'd said, "I need you to, kid, 'cause he needs you to."

He unlocks Cooper's apartment door and he knows what Mr Hummel meant. He remembers Kurt facing Karofsky and not looking afraid, and Blaine knows that's Kurt, that's Kurt's courage, Kurt's the one who rejected the weakness the rest of the world told him he must have, Kurt's the one who asserted his own strength despite everyone else believing in his lack of it, Kurt's the one who *demand*ed that his voice matters too. But. *But*.

But Blaine is still the only person he's ever even told. Blaine is the first person he ever felt like he could trust, back when misplaced trust could have meant Kurt's death and, worse as far as Kurt is concerned, death for everyone he loves. Blaine is the one who didn't reject him, didn't run away, didn't confirm for Kurt all his own worst fears about himself, didn't affirm for him that he is, as he's believed for so long, alone not because of circumstance but because aloneness is just all he can ever expect for himself. Kurt had told himself that his own loneliness was not just necessary but justified, that he was incapable of being close to someone, that he was so toxic that other people were better off without him anyway, and Blaine is the first person who ever told him *No*, the first person who ever *knew* him and still loved him.

Kurt has done the hard work, Kurt has faced his own ghosts, Kurt clawed himself out of the dark with nothing but his own strength - but they both know he did it because of Blaine. Because he met Blaine, and he could trust Blaine, because Blaine loves him and Kurt believes him. And it's not just defending his back on the dangerous streets, it's not just telling him that it's late and they should call it a night, it's not just shielding him when the bullets start to fly.

It's being at his side because he shouldn't have to feel lonely. It's telling him that he's loved, when he's drained and weary of himself. It's the shield his arms make, folded around him, because Kurt who is so brave to exist at all still sometimes needs somewhere to hide, and Blaine will always be a harbour for him, when the winds blow their worst.

If he can. If he can be trusted to. Because Blaine doesn't know what he's capable of, because Blaine's now joined Kurt in knowing what fear really means. What's to be afraid of now isn't failing, he knows what failure is like already, failure is a known dread: what he's afraid of is *succeeding*, at the very worst things, the things he shouldn't even *want* to do. What he's afraid of is the Ghost needing to take him down because he - he's half an inch of luck away from being a supervillain, and how is he supposed to trust himself when he doesn't know what he's capable of, who he *is*?

So he opens the door and smiles at Kurt on the sofa, but the light is failing and Kurt hasn't put any lamps on, he's just sitting in the weak glow of the TV news and even that dies when Kurt switches it off. "Hi," he says, and Blaine flicks the light switch, says, "Hi. What do you want for dinner? I have a pasta craving but I can be talked out of it if you wanted -"

Kurt sitting on the sofa, half-wrapped in a throw fallen to his elbows. He stares at Blaine and wets his lips, and says, "Can I - ask you something?"

". . . sure. Um. Is this a serious talk? You look really serious."

"I don't know how serious it is." He stares at Blaine, and swallows, and lifts the only hand he has for it, holds it out for him. Blaine walks over, sits next to him, takes it, and Kurt's thumb quickly skates the back of his hand and it shouldn't be as needy a gesture as it is, he knows Kurt too well. He reaches up, brushes Kurt's cheek with his own thumb. "What's wrong . . . ?"

Kurt watches his eyes, and says quietly, "We haven't been able to talk, really, with Dad here, I . . ." He clears his throat. "I need to ask. I'm not accusing you of anything or asking you to do anything. I just want to know, that's all. I just wanted to ask. If." His teeth pull at his lip and he stops them. "If you want to stop. Being Phalanx. Because I know you haven't, since, and it's your decision to make, and I just wanted to know."

There's something too neutral about his voice, and Blaine feels the shame overfill his stomach. "I -" he starts, and stops, because he doesn't know how to . . .

Kurt watches his face, and Blaine feels about as bad as he's ever felt, because is this the choice right in front of him now, failing Kurt *again* or else risking he doesn't even *know* what . . . ?

Kurt wets his lips, says, "I need to ask because I'm not quitting, Blaine, not until I physically can't, I'm not. As soon as I can I'm going back out there. And you don't have to, not if you don't want to, you *don't*, but - but we have to talk about - what it means. For us. If you'll be okay with. Oh god I'm sorry I didn't want to -"

"Don't cry."

His breath shudders back in. "I didn't want to - I wanted to be *rational* - Blaine, it'll, it'll be really hard to make things work if I'm, if I am and you're not, and I don't want you to do it for the wrong reasons but I -" He swallows again and lets go of Blaine's hand, but Blaine's the one who grabs a tissue and gets there first, even as Kurt tries to dry his face with his hand. "I know it's not fair on you, I know none of it's fair, I don't know what you want . . ."

"I want you to not be upset, Kurt, you're supposed to be resting, you're supposed to be healing -"

Kurt manages to get the tissue off him to blow his nose, mop up the last of the tears but his eyes are still too bright. "I'm sorry. I've been - thinking about this for too long, I should have asked sooner, shouldn't have - do you want to quit? Just tell me, I won't think - whatever you think, I won't, it's the sensible decision to make, you've already done so, so much -"

To be Blaine, faced with Kurt; to be so shamed, faced with *him*, he feels sick with it. "I don't," he says, and stops, and god he doesn't know how he'll say this without retching he feels so queasy with it. He manages, and his voice sounds all wrong, "I don't *want* to quit."

Kurt's fingers squeeze the tissue, and he says, breathy and determined to be brave, "'But'?"

Blaine looks at the floor.

Kurt faced the guy who ruined his life - they've neither of them worded it like that but Blaine knows it's true, he *wrecked* Kurt's chances of happiness for seven years, he nearly destroyed him, he *disgusts* Blaine with his claim to be a human being because he's *not*, he doesn't have the right to human rights for doing what he did to Kurt *knowing* he was doing it to Kurt - and in the end, through the anger and the horror and the hurt, through the worst things he's ever lived through, what Kurt came out with was compassion. Kurt looked at that man, *that man*, and *felt* for him. And Blaine -

Everything Kurt is capable of, everything Kurt is, and Blaine has to tell *him* that this is what *he* is . . . ?

He looks at the floor.

He says, "In the bank. After he hurt you. I wasn't thinking."

The tissue shifts in Kurt's hand.

He says, "If he'd been a normal person I would have killed him."

There's a pause, and then Kurt, slowly like he's still trying to understand, says, "You didn't kill him."

"Only because it was harder than I thought it was! I - wanted to. I wanted to. I wanted to *kill* him for what he did to you, everything he did to you, I wanted to *kill* him, Kurt what the hell does that make me, the only reason I'm not a murderer is an *accident* -"

"No -"

"I'm scared. Okay? That's why I haven't been going out without you, because I'm *scared*, because I - I'm not safe to be around people, I'm, I shouldn't have this power, I could - I could hurt people with it. I could kill people with it. I - no, I can't. Kurt I can't. I could - kill someone, I - I couldn't -"

"Blaine," he says, dropping the tissue into his lap, taking his hand again - Blaine tries to snatch it back but hears Kurt's breath catch, this little lean towards Blaine too much for his ribs, and he grabs Kurt's hand again in a quick squeezing *so, so sorry*. "Blaine," he says again, face too tight. "You *didn't* kill him. God do you think - do you think I've never been scared of my powers? I had to haunt myself because I didn't know if I was giving people *brain* damage, I -"

"But you wouldn't! You never would, you would never -"

Kurt looks away, something passing over his face as it turns, barely a blink. He says to the coffee table, "Do you think I don't get angry and I don't - really feel the hate, sometimes, for what people have done to someone else?" He presses his lips together hard for a second. "I have - really scared people in the past, Blaine, there's a reason people are *scared* of me, I . . . I've followed them, and watched them, and let them . . . let them really feel it, because it's what they did to someone else, that fear, and I *wanted* them to feel it. I have . . . I only ever feel worse afterwards. It doesn't help. Making the world that bit worse, it can't. I learned my lesson." He looks back up at him, and the skin around his eyes looks too tight. "I read an article once, about a guy who said he had PTSD after I haunted him. I don't even remember him. That was the

worst, I just didn't even remember him, I remember victims but the perps are just - I don't remember them all, I don't always get a good look at them. And he was so messed up, he was so -"

"I remember that article. We all read it, people thought it was bullcrap. He put other people through it and then he couldn't take it himself."

"I didn't think it was 'bullcrap', I think I fundamentally damaged another human being. I didn't know him. I didn't know what a haunting would do to him. I don't know other people's lives, not the victims and not the perpetrators, I *don't*, I don't think most people hurt other people because they're *evil*, I can't think that, they have to have reasons too. And I - I learned my lesson. I'm sorry he had to get messed up halfway to hell for me to learn it. I only haunt people if I have to. If someone else's life is directly at stake, if it's that or die, if they don't understand what they did to someone and they *need* to, if I don't have another choice. But I don't do it just to make people pay. I don't know why I have this power but I know it's not so I can do to other people what was done to me. I'm not a *saint*, Blaine, I've messed up a thousand times, I have to risk hurting people to help people, but I have to keep trying to make the balance a little bit better instead of a little bit worse, I don't know what else you're supposed to *do*."

"So that's great for you," Blaine says bitterly. "You don't want to hurt people so you don't. But I'm *not* you, it's not like I can decide not to feel like that again, I could just - how do I know I won't just - ?"

Kurt says, softly, "Do you think about it a lot? What you might have done?"

"Yes! God like all the *time* I've been going out of my -"

"Then one," Kurt says, and squeezes his hand, "*talk* to me, Blaine, because I'm always going to listen, you don't just have to *suffer* like that. I'm right here, you know I'm here, I can't even leave the goddamned building right now, of course I'm always here. And two . . . if this is something you're never going to forget, then how could you do it again?" Blaine's mouth opens, but then stops open. "I'm not saying it's easy," Kurt says, watching his eyes. "I'm not saying *I* never lose my temper out there, but it's something you work on every day of your life, that's what life *is*. You don't snap your fingers and become a perfect human being just because you know you ought to be one. You work at it. You risk that you won't be perfect because you don't have a choice, none of us do. Every time we drive a car we could kill someone, that doesn't make us all murderers in waiting."

"Kurt, if I could have killed him, I *would*."

"Do you think that you would?" Kurt watches his eyes, very closely. "I've seen people beg for their lives. Do you know what that's like? When someone cries and *begs* you, no dignity, just terror, they would do *anything* if you just don't kill them. Some of them call for their moms, sometimes they actually do wet themselves. If he'd begged you, would you still have killed him?"

Blaine - doesn't want to think about it, doesn't know where to look, he feels sick. "No. No, of course I - but I would have had time to *think*, then -"

Kurt holds his hand, tight. "You have shields. You have shields because you're not meant to hurt people, you're here to protect them. I know you protect me. And I know this isn't easy but - Blaine, god, I thought . . . I don't know what I thought. I didn't think you wanted to stop because of *this*. I didn't know you felt like this, I've never thought of you as . . . as anything but a good man."

It hurts too much to look at him so he closes his eyes. "I want to be. I want to, I'm just - I'm scared, Kurt, there's . . . there's so much to mess up, it's not a *mistake* if I go wrong, it's someone's *life*. I . . ."

Kurt squeezes his hand. "Promise me. Whether you quit or not, just - promise me."

He blinks, looks at him again. "Promise what?"

"That you *won't* kill someone." Kurt watches his eyes, and holds his hand. His smile twitches "You never break promises to me."

Blaine's still not breathing quite right. He licks his lips, and stares at Kurt. And he thinks, If you quit . . .

If you quit, he's on his own. He won't stop, you know he won't. And on his own, on his own, that night in the bank, what if you hadn't been there? Who would watch out for him, who would look after him? You promised his *dad*. Oh, hell.

If you risk it, if you hurt someone, if you did kill someone . . .

He's still afraid but there's doubt in the fear, now. Would he? As angry as he gets, he couldn't do that in front of Kurt, he *couldn't*, not with him watching. And -

And is Kurt right? Will he remember this, every worst night, will he remember what he could have done and know to stop? What would happen, if he can't risk that he'll remember this and he does quit?

He quits, and Kurt goes out on his own, unprotected. He quits and all those people he could've helped, well, too bad for them. He quits and *then* it's the hard decisions, the really hard decisions, of how to make the two of them work when Kurt's saving lives and Blaine's at home worrying and wondering in an empty bed, feeling his inadequacy and Kurt's exhaustion, Blaine's having a life and Kurt's having this, having to explain to people why he never actually goes out anywhere with his boyfriend on an evening, having to tell guys that he's already seeing someone even though he rarely *sees* him . . .

Suddenly he knows why Kurt started crying when he tried to ask Blaine this. Because if Blaine quit this, it - yes. It would be really hard to hold them together. He would face so many nights alone in the bed, face so many empty evenings without Kurt there, and if he went out on an evening to amuse himself, just to clubs and bars while Kurt haunted the streets, if he met other guys and he never even *saw* his boyfriend -

How strong are you actually capable of being? How much do you want to risk it? Because he could tell Kurt not to assume that if Blaine quit Phalanx he'd soon enough quit Kurt too, but they're adults, this is the real world, 'true love' isn't always enough; if Blaine isn't strong enough to risk the streets as Phalanx every night, is he strong enough to risk Kurt's heart as they drift away from each other in the dark . . . ?

He saw him lying on the ground like a body, he really thought he could be dead. It gluts his throat, he can't, he can't risk Kurt, can't risk him alone in danger and can't risk them *breaking*, he can't put Kurt through this, he *has* to be stronger than this, he has to be enough for him, he has to, there isn't any choice, he *has* to. Some things you really don't have a choice in, and all the choice involved is just in how you *face* that.

He holds his hand, and cups the back of his head, gently pressing his forehead to Kurt's, eyes closed, swallowing hard. "Yes," he says, and kisses him, catching the corner of his mouth. "Yes. I promise. I do."

Kurt breathes, slowly, eyes closed like he's hypnotised by Blaine this close. "If you don't want to," he whispers, and Blaine kisses him again.

"I'm not leaving you on your own. I'm not, Kurt, I'm not, I won't ever -"

The tear hits his cheek, and rolls down that instead of Kurt's. "I'm not asking you to, it's so dangerous, I shouldn't ask -"

Blaine presses his fingers through his hair. "I am not leaving you on your own. Not now and not ever. I promise that, too." He reaches around with his thumb, tries to smudge some of the warm damp of the tears away. "I love you, Kurt."

He kisses him, and again, and he doesn't need to hear the words in return because Kurt is crying, and holding him with the one hand that can, and it feels like the breath reaches to the bottom of his lungs again, fills them all the way out, the deepest breath, that Blaine's going out tonight. He's going out, and he will be brave, for Kurt, and face the promises he made for Kurt, and *keep* them, he will.

The reason to do this is that there should be more love in the world than hate, forget the hatred and remember that you're doing it for love, and he loves Kurt more than he even knew he could love anyone. So he sings to him, "We're okay, we're okay." and hugs him as close as he dares, and Kurt presses his wet face to his throat and what he whispers there is, "Thank you."

For being brave, for being there, for loving him?

Blaine murmurs to his hair, "From the hero to the fanboy that kind of should come from the other side, you know."

Kurt breathes into his throat, then says, "You literally saved my life, I think you get to be a 'hero' by now." He lifts his face, wipes his eyes off on his wrist, *smiles*. "How about that 'thank you for rescuing me' kiss?"

They're halfway through it, slow and easy and so very much, when Blaine realises -

Kurt wasn't talking about Blaine picking him up off the floor of a bank.

He kisses him, and Kurt grips him tighter than Blaine can risk in return, and doesn't cry.

*

PHALANX SIGHTING *skimming between buildings FUCK YES*

No ghost???

This fandom's new anthem is DON'T WANNA BE ALL BYYYYYYYY MYYYYYYYYSELF ANYMOOOOOOOOOORE~

ALL THE FLOWERS THAT YOU PLANTED MAMA

IN THE BACK YARD

ALL DIED WHEN HE WENT AWAY

(aaahaaahaaahaaahhhh...)

So faaaar away, doesn't anybody stay in one place anymore...

MY LONELINESS IS KILLING ME AND I MUST CONFESS I STILL BELIEVE (still belieeeve)

WHEN I'M NOT WITH YOU I LOSE MY MIND /o

GIVE ME A SHIIIIIIIGN~

HIT ME SPOOKY ONE MORE TIME

rofl

Lover, you should've come over...

^ omfg THIS ^

(Draxie, we are staging an intervention.)

(We're really worried Draxie we never hear from you anymore is something wrong? I'm sorry if you're just really busy we don't want to bother you we're just worried =()

*(Blackbindings, that is not how you stage an interrogation. Draxie, fucksake, say something or I am actually catching a bus right now, you think I'm joking but my dear, *I will be waiting outside your door when you wake up*.)*

(... here's Ghostly?)

(Oh she is still capable of speech and a sense of humor. Well done.)

Oh my god where is he though where's the Ghost??

Remind me which one of them turns invisible again? Oh, that's right, the Ghost. ㄣ_ㄣ

No draxie update in like forever I liked her better before she was engaged :/

Fanart: ghostlanx play beach volleyball because um you know dat ass. Rating depends on how you feel about guys in spray-on swimsuits?

(I'm ok, you shouldn't worry about me, I'm just working really hard right now. Everyone's been amazing about helping out but the stupid wedding will still cost money and we hardly hit rent most months as it is. Well, the belt I want will cost money, anyway :/)

(Nice excuse, explain to me why I should fall for it. Because I know you spend the empty hours of your pawn store job online basically waiting for anyone anywhere to update anything at all, so that's fourteen hours a week you could have spent replying to emails with more than a single line, Draxie.)

(Did we do something really awful? Just tell us and I'll apologise, I feel so bad, I'm really sorry, Draxie.)

(No no bb don't be sorry you haven't done anything, you really haven't, it's not you, don't be upset!!)

*(Draxie, what is going *on*. Because I actually mean it, if I don't get an answer tonight I'm coming over. We're *worried* about you, if you'd just tell us why at least we wouldn't worry. And don't make some fucking joke about me caring because you fucking well know I do, and if you don't then I will be waiting outside your door in the morning with a cup of take-out coffee and a fucking foul mood to prove it . . .)*

*(... Draxie ... ? *worried*)*

Reblog if you've ever been rescued by Phalanx. (let the new guy get a look in!)

*Thank you so much for stopping that car, I would have been - God I would have been dead and I know it. Thank you, so much, screw Figgins, doesn't he know what you guys *do*?? (Spooky I don't know if you were around but if you were THANK YOU TOO <3 <3 <3)*

i wish the ghost wasn't so shy about showing his face, doesn't he know he's beautiful?? <3

maybe he went to visit puckzilla!!

I hope the Ghost's getting some good rest if he's not out tonight, snuggled down safe and warm waiting for Phalanx to come home and cuddle him <3

Gifset: Phalanx shielding the Ghost (superboyfraaaans ;-;)

(I haven't been doing great. I haven't been sleeping properly, I can't stop my brain working and working and working. The bf doesn't know what's wrong with me.)

(Are you okay??)

(What is wrong with you, Draxie?)

The problem with this photo ok is they're like THIS CLOSE to their faces touching and STILL NO KISS. IT'S LIKE THEY HATE US. YOU'RE SUPERHEROES. SAVE US. PUBLIC MAKE-OUTS PLEASE

*(I need to tell you something. I need to tell someone it's making me feel sick all the time. but you can't tell anyone. Not anyone at all, not any of it, not ever, it's not my secret to share, you *have* to keep it secret.)*

(Draxie, keeping a poxy secret is the least I would do for you, don't you know that?)

(You can trust me Draxie I hardly talk to anyone to tell them anyway ^^;)

*(I can't do this on my own. And you guys are the biggest heroes I have in my life, you're like the sisters I would *choose*.)*

(Draxie, my dearest, if needs be I actually will be outside your door tomorrow morning. Tell us what you need to, and we'll do anything we can.)

Ghostlanx fanvid to Rescue Me by Fontella Bass because why not? <3

(You remember that message we got a couple of weeks back, from someone who said they were Phalanx and they needed help . . . ?)

Interlude: Ash

It sounds like someone just dropped a dead foal onto their fire escape. Mike's up with a snort and Tina says, "*Jesu-*" and falls sideways out of the bed. Mike scrabbles to grab her up again and she scrabbles to grab onto him, and then they're just still for a moment, clutching each other in the dark, still but for their hearts running like pistons.

The fire escape's metal rattles and hums a little as it settles, and then there's silence.

Tina clutches his arm, wets her lips, whispers, "- holy *crap* was that?"

His heart's still drumming the insides of his ears. "Cat?"

"The size of a *calf*?"

Mike stares at the closed blinds over the window. Tina squeezes his arm, whimpers, "Go look."

"- why am *I* going to look -?"

"You're the guy! Go be the guy! I have to have periods, you go look!"

"That is not a reason!" he hisses back at her, but when he looks back at the blinds, he can't hear a thing out there. Whatever hit their fire escape, it's not moving now. It hit and fled? Or - or it's still there . . . ?

He turns the lamp on, and then goes still, waiting for a reaction from outside. There isn't one. Tina swallows, squeezes his arm again suddenly and whispers, "Not on your own, you're not going on your own, let me get a -"

She grabs up her robe and runs out of the room, presumably for their kitchen knives. And it's not about being the guy. It's not about how afraid he is, heart in his throat. It's about - it's just that Tina's had enough to be afraid of, after this year. He doesn't want her to have to face anything else. This one's on him. It's got to be on him.

He picks up her hairbrush, only damn weapon in the room, walks over and whisks the blinds up before he can possibly have time to think and *stop*.

There's nothing there.

He cranes to look. There's - something, dark, on the fire escape, like a dropped bag of trash. He opens the window, cautiously, leans out, and he only realises what it is when Tina bangs the door open again, says, "What - ?"

Mike climbs out, horror clogging his throat, tries not to step *on* him but there's not much space on the cold metal bars. The cloak squelches wet under his bare feet. He bends, hoping to god he's not going to be sick out of sheer dread, and pulls the hood out of the way, and the Ghost's eyes slit open, stutter closed again.

He's awake. He's just got no strength left to move.

He smells *powerfully* of something burnt, and when Mike takes his arm to lift him up he sees the charred palm of his glove, his hand comes away wet with ash from the cloak's edge. And when Tina says in the window, "*Oh my god -*"

His head falls back, his cloak falls back when Mike lifts his torso from the fire escape. The stained, pale bodysuit is scorched all the way around, burnt like something *gripped* him red hot, and in Mike's arm he begins, weakly, to cough.

*

He's sodden and freezing is the first problem, his skin's so clammy and cold. Mike hikes him onto the bed and his head drops to the side, he begins to cough with real feeling now, his whole body wrenching *painfully* with it, and Mike stares at that burn around his chest and thinks -

Fuck. It's not only on the outside.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Tina whispers, close to tears, "What do we do what do we do do we call an ambulance - ?"

"No." Mike says, immediately. If he came to them, he came for a reason. "No."

I - I'm a medical student. If you ever - if you ever need anything. Anything at all, anything. I'll help. Tina's body in his arms, tight and small and shaking with her sobs. *Anything.*

The Ghost coughs and coughs and coughs into a glove, his cloak staining their duvet dark with water and ash. "Hot water bottle," Mike says. "Some towels, blankets, anything. Hurry."

"I - right."

"And the first aid kit!" he yells after her, as the door swings. The Ghost's still coughing like he can't stop, Mike can hear the panic behind each fraction of a breath he does manage to suck down, catches his shoulder and says, "Easy, easy, just try and breathe, just, slowly, try and breathe . . . I need to get that cloak off you, you're freezing, do you - mind?"

He's got soot on his face and panic in his eyes. He shakes his head, hand clamped over his mouth now trying to hold the cough in but he's still wheezing through it, and then his eyes close and his whole body *wrenches* as it starts again. Fuck. Mike's hands fumble at his throat, he can't find -

The Ghost gasps his breath in, takes Mike's wrist, pushes it under the fabric. His fingers close over a clasp, and after a few seconds he manages to snap it open. He picks the wet hood off his hair, says, kind of astonished by it, "How the hell did you get so burnt and so *wet* -?"

The Ghost gives him a weary look, from behind his hand.

Mike unpeels the clinging cloak from his back, helps him stand shakily to get it out from under him but he falls back into coughing, his knees can't hold him, he folds right back onto the mattress again. Hell, he must have dragged himself here from *god* knows where like this. Why here? Why not - not back to whatever weird lair he has, doesn't he have - help, some kind of team, someone to help him when - ?

He looks a lot younger than Mike remembers him looking. He looks even younger than they do.

He says, quietly, "Do you have medical help for when things go wrong?"

The Ghost holds his eye, his whole body heaving with each painful breath, and shakes his head.

". . . by any chance . . . are you just a guy who happens to be able to walk through walls, you don't actually have any . . . training, or help, or . . . ?"

The Ghost raises his eyebrows ironically under the mask, then his eyes flutter closed as he loses himself to the coughing again. Tina bursts the door open, arms full of towels and dropping the first aid kit in her hurry. "Towels -"

Mike rattles quickly through their first aid kit but *hell*, there's nothing, nothing that can help, bandages and antiseptic but his lungs are *scorched*, he needs to be on oxygen, what if they get *infected* -?

"God you're freezing," Tina says, and rubs urgently at the Ghost's arms. "We need to get this off you, get you warm, is it - okay if I -"

He's not really in much of a position to stop her, though he does, hands shaking, help her unclip the utility belts. There's a zipper, hidden under a seam, but when she tries to unpeel the costume from him his body *spasms* and she jumps back with a horrified little choke, and Mike drops the kit to grab his arm -

His costume's stuck in the burn. His eyes look *wrong* with pain, too blue around the pupils, and he stares at Mike white with panic under the dirt. Tina still looks like she's going to start crying. Someone has to take charge of this situation, and Mike's the one who said he'd do *anything* and hell, he really meant it, too ...

"I need you to go to the all-night pharmacy," he says, grabbing a notepad from her desk, scribbling on it. "Pick up these painkillers, they're as close to morphine as we can get over the counter, and ask about non-brand versions of the cream. Quickly, Tina, please."

"I - yeah. Yes, I'm on it." She grabs the paper off him, pulls a skirt on under the long t-shirt she sleeps in, pulls a coat on over her robe. "I'll be quick." She comes up on tiptoes to kiss Mike's cheek and *stares* at the Ghost, who's coughing into his hand again, sagging on the bed, he can hardly hold himself up. Then she runs back into the lounge and Mike calls after her, "Take your purse!" because he knows what she's like in a hurry.

Her feet clatter into shoes, the front door bangs. The Ghost coughs until his body - wrenches like a retch, and he lifts his hand, and makes a small noise, low and very rough in his throat.

There's blood on the glove's palm.

He looks dazedly at Mike, wobbling a little side to side sitting on the bed, and makes a writing gesture with one hand, his bloody palm acting as the paper. He can't speak. Mike brings the notepad over, watches him write very shakily, smearing wet ash on the paper, *Am I going to die?*

"No." he says, very firmly. "No. No way in hell. No you're not. But I need you to take some painkillers, because we need to get that costume off that burn."

He nods, but there's a glassiness to his eyes, a slackness to his jaw, and Mike can tell that he can't even think about it, how much it's going to hurt. Mike doesn't know how much this evening has hurt already. He hears the kettle click off its boil in the next room, remembers he told Tina to get a hot water bottle, god he's still stone cold and there's too much that has to be done *now* and no nurses and no *tools* and no *help* -

You just have to do what you have to do. What do you think he does every night?

*

He's glad Tina isn't there for getting his costume off the burn, because it isn't nice, he just had to ignore the Ghost rolling up one of his own gloves to bite into it and *not* scream, though every muscle in his body stood out rigid. It came off, though, with the help of some warm water. It wasn't burned into him, it had just stuck in the blood and the - other fluids. The burn isn't minutes fresh, it's *hours* fresh. What was he doing while his suit was sticking to his skin - ?

But it's easier, once it's off. He cleans the loop of it and murmurs, "Believe it or not, the blistering's good. Means it's only superficial, you'll be fine."

The Ghost looks dazedly down at him, but something in the set of his mouth says, '*Good*' my ass. Mike's mouth twitches back, and he goes back to cleaning, as gently as he can, before he heads for the kitchen and comes back in with the Saran wrap, which the Ghost gives a bleary, incomprehending look; "Until Tina gets back with that cream and I can dress it properly," he says, but -

There's something about the way he's sitting on the bed, half-naked, arms hooked in awkwardly around himself, avoiding the burn. Mike doesn't think it's the cold, the way he's shielding himself, the way he's not meeting Mike's eye. He doesn't know what . . .

He remembers Tina hanging onto the Ghost and crying, and the quiet, sad, hurt way he watched her, and let her, and held her.

He's just a kid, like them. He must see so much *shit* on a night. And -

And there must be reasons he does what he does, while his shoulders hunch a cringe on Mike's bed, and he stares at the carpet, breath rasping faster.

Training to be a doctor he's often felt the weird power imbalance of him in his scrubs and a patient half-undressed, but that's in a hospital and it's clinical and it's expected and he's never felt the power differential feel like *this* before, he's never *felt* like this before, stomach falling low in his abdomen as the Ghost's head tucks closer and his hands close tighter against his own bared skin . . .

The impulse is to walk up and touch him, but he knows instantly that it's the wrong thing to do, the worst thing to do. He clears his throat. He says, "It's okay. I'm a doctor. We need to get that wound covered, you don't want it to get infected unless you want to walk into an ER and explain it. Can you lift your arms for me?"

He keeps his voice professional and the Ghost looks at him, hair scuffed wet and ash-dark and mad, face and mask all grubby with smoke, blistered ring around his naked chest. And then he swallows and nods, and lets Mike so gently layer the Saran wrap around, so he can wrap a blanket around him, cover him more, and as the Ghost pulls the blanket close at his throat and lowers his head to cough, weakly from deep in his chest, he thinks, It's not only about a secret identity, that cloak and hood, is it . . . ?

Mike makes him sit with a hot water bottle while he brews some tea, because he needs to get his temperature up and some fluids into him, god knows he must be dehydrated. He doesn't even mention getting the rest of the suit off him, clinging wet and cold as it is, because he suspects that Tina will be much more welcome for helping with that. He seems easier, wrapped in a blanket, huddled around that hot water bottle with its knitted cover of cats, even with his chest wrapped up in plastic and clearly still dazed and in a great deal of pain; takes the cup of tea with a little twitched smile, more genuine, more actually shyly *grateful* than Mike had expected.

He sips, and wrinkles his nose. Even his lips are stained with smoke, it must be all he can taste. Mike gets a wet washcloth, rubs his face off like a kid and he closes his eyes and screws his nose up but doesn't object. He rasps, low wrecked rutted voice, "*Th-ank you.*"

"No problem. Try not to talk if it hurts."

He swallows some more tea, and his chest falls in a gulped sigh. Mike remembers getting Tina back. He remembers knowing how, *how* awful it could have been if someone hadn't been there to help her, he remembers how she cried pretty much non-stop for three days before she took an hour long shower and came out of the bathroom red-eyed and straight-backed and wet-haired and sure, and snatched up her camera again. Since then she's been working with ideas of identity, the marks people make in the city - the marks they don't make, can't make, like ghosts . . .

And Mike's been quietly determined, working in the hospital, doing what he knows is his duty because it's what his father's always wanted for him but for the first time it's really *his* duty too. Life hurts people and Mike patches them up again. He might not wear a mask and cape to do it, but ever since then, he does what he can.

"Why didn't you - sorry, look, write it down, don't hurt your voice. Why *didn't* you go to a hospital?"

The Ghost looks at him, then puts the mug on the night table, takes the offered pen and paper again. His writing's less trembly but clearly still not *neat*, as he writes in a strangely young, looping script, *I've upset a couple of gangs in the city. Not really safe for me to go to the ER. + there's always the mask.*

"You could stop them unmasking you."

He shrugs, writes, *Can't risk it. I have people to keep safe.* He taps the pen off the paper, eyes flicking almost-up then staying guiltily low. *I won't come again. I'm sorry. I just didn*

Mike stops his hand. "Hey. I said if you needed anything we're here. I still mean that."

The Ghost looks at him with weirdly frightened eyes and, silent and so slightly, shakes his head.

And the apartment's front door opens, and Tina's hurrying through. "I got everything you said and some cough drops, I thought -"

Mike - could almost laugh, cough drops aren't going to solve *this*, but what keeps him silent is that haunted look on his face, that silent *no*, that silent statement that even this is too much to ask from them. "Anything," Mike murmurs, quiet and meant, and then stands up as Tina comes into the bedroom, waving a tube of burn cream. "She said this was good!"

"Thanks, Tina."

The Ghost gives her a nervous twitch of a smile. She looks caught somewhere between crying and smiling back at him.

*

Mike heads out to the pharmacy later, with a better idea of what he'll need to recover without taking himself to a doctor. He passes a newsstand on the way back, sees the first edition of the day's paper there, stops and stares at the grainy photograph on the front.

The building behind him burns like the apocalypse, and the firefighter holds the oxygen up for him, his whole body sagging too needily to that mask. *8 Die In Arson Attack*, the headline states. *NY's New Hero Saves 12*.

Twelve. Twelve, holy crap, no wonder he can hardly speak, how many times did he go *in* there? He buys a paper too. Firefighters, he thinks. He's finally worked out how he got so burnt and so drenched at the same time . . .

*

Mike gets woken by Tina moving, getting up from beside him, padding barefoot on the floor. He rolls a little, rubs his eye, lifts himself - he's on the sofa bed, they'd curled up there together after finally convincing the superhero that he could hardly leave when he couldn't actually stand unaided yet, and got him to lie down on their bed - as she opens the bedroom door, and closes it behind herself again.

He hears the gentle creaking of floorboards, the shift of springs in the mattress, the low murmur of her voice in the next room. He hears his voice, but that sets off another coughing fit, which lasts a while as Tina speaks through it. Then quieter exchanges, their voices barely there, hard to tell apart they're so low.

Mike waits until during a pause in their voices - mostly her voice - he can count all the way to thirty, then he knocks, and opens the door.

The Ghost's dressed himself in the costume they'd hung on a radiator, still stained from the night before. The cloak hides most of it, dark as it is, though Mike knows the cloak's thicker material is probably still damp. Tina must have stopped him, just, from leaving; now he's sitting beside her on the bed, and she's got her hand over his gloved one on the mattress, and he doesn't look at Mike, just looks at the carpet,

guilty and tired and in the thin rising dawn light, oddly spent, oddly out of all place, hard to imagine where he *could* look like he belongs. Now it's not the middle of the night, how strange a superhero looks . . .

Tina wipes her cheeks off on her palm, squeezes his hand. "It's better than nothing," she says. "Isn't it?"

He doesn't look up. Mike swallows, and says, "You're going to need a few weeks resting to let your lungs heal, but if you want me to check on you in the meantime, you know where to find us. The fire escape's always open."

His eyes track further into the corner of the room. Hood hanging limp with damp, bandages pressing visible through the stained suit, one of his utility belts hanging from his free hand - it must hurt too much to get it back on over that burn - and he looks like all he wishes in the world was that he was invisible, untouchable, not here, not in front of two people who want to *help* him.

Mike says, "I got you some stuff to take away with you. Just a second."

In the lounge he grabs up the bag from the pharmacy, roots through it to check. His lungs can't be burned as badly as he'd feared, the blistering suggests that whatever went all the way *through* him wasn't as hot as it could have been. He still regrets not being able to get him on oxygen but there's nothing he could do about that with the access to medical materials he's got. He's already thinking . . .

(But how to get it out of the hospital unseen? Unless he can find a supply online . . .)

There must be reasons he does what he does, because it turns out that all a superhero is is a kid who *can*, and *can* isn't enough for all this, there has to be a why . . .

He carries the bag back through, holds it out for him. The Ghost stares at it like it's in some way threatening. Then he takes it, breaks into coughing when he tries to speak, puts it on the bed to cover his mouth. When he can finally stop he croaks broken-voiced through his fingers, "Thank you." and opens the bag, looks dazedly in.

"Painkillers, mostly, follow the instructions, don't take too many. Stay down until you can *breathe* at least, okay? Tell - tell people you have a chest infection or something. The flu."

He picks up his utility belt, drops it into the bag, scrunches the whole thing closed. He whispers, gravelled, burned-earth voice, "Thank you." again, and then, "I'm sorry - about all the mess."

And then he's gone. Just gone, Tina's hand hits the mattress and she gasps and snatches it back, and they don't even hear the boards creak, don't even see the blinds twitch, he's just *gone*. Mike stands very, very still for a second, can't even blink, and then Tina wipes her eyes again, with both hands, begins to choke, "I just wanted to help, I just wanted to say *thank you* -"

Mike hesitates for a second before sitting where the Ghost was, because he can't be there anymore, he's *nowhere*. He puts an arm around her. "You did help. Hey, you did, Tina . . ."

Her hands squeeze at his chest. "We're never gonna see him again, are we?"

He holds her into his body, doesn't say anything as she cries into his shoulder. He thinks about how he couldn't meet both their gazes, how when too much of him was revealed to Mike he *cringed*. He thinks that he's just a kid, like them, and what must his life be *like*, Mike thought the ER on a night was crazy, what kind of crap must he see? He thinks about how he shook his head, the flat acceptance in his eyes when he did it, *No, no help. Just me*.

He thinks, How alone can a person be?

He rubs her back. He says, "I don't know."

He doesn't. It depends on a lot of things. It depends what trouble he gets himself into; it depends how alone he can cope with being . . .

*

It's three months later, Tina's reading in bed and he's just pulling a t-shirt on after a shower, when their fire escape creaks under some new weight.

Tina drops her book, eyes wide. Mike draws his breath in slow.

He says, "Can you fetch the first aid kit? I stocked up on some supplies from the hospital just in case."

There is a gleam, in her eyes, too close to joy to not be tears, as she tosses the covers aside and rolls out of bed. Mike heads for the window, to open the blinds.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Blaine is beginning to understand why Kurt became a superhero in the first place, now, because he really doesn't have the sort of brain that can be left without pretty serious stimulation for more than a few minutes. At first he was mostly just sleeping so he didn't really feel the new limits of his life, but in Cooper's apartment, well enough to move around but still missing his right arm and any easy effort, the thready edges of Kurt's need to do *something* are beginning to show. Kurt, Blaine thinks, watching him prowl up and down in Blaine's room hugging his cast to himself, eyes flicking across all Blaine's newspaper clippings, Kurt is no house cat, and he can scent the open space out there, he knows how confined he is . . .

It's his right arm. Without his right arm he can't do anything he would normally do to occupy himself - he can't sketch, can't sew, can't cook, can't even type easily. He doesn't complain, has never so much as mentioned pain or boredom or frustration, but that doesn't stop it very much wearing on him. He's obviously trying not to be short-tempered but being aware of Kurt restraining his temper feels very little different to Blaine to Kurt just *losing* his temper. Kurt prowls the apartment like an angry cat and Blaine sits quite small and still like a frightened puppy, because he doesn't know when he's going to start hissing at him.

He signs up for an online Spanish course. He begins making his way through a list of *1000 Books You Should Read Before You Die*. He becomes heavily involved with blogs disseminating the outfits on *Mad Men*. He listens obsessively to Mercedes Jones' new album, because they both go a little weak for her version of *Ain't No Way*. He patiently, one-handed and piece by piece, restocks utility belts and sands down the edges of the fake bottom they've put in Blaine's wardrobe. He goes through his recipe cards annotating, cataloguing and discarding, very, very carefully in slow left-handed handwriting. He keeps the TV news on while rhythmically squeezing a stress ball until even Blaine feels headachy from too much bad news, and introduces him to Cooper's DVD collection instead (Kurt has very little interest in most of Blaine's DVDs, as, if ignoring the superhero movies and s/f, Kurt's watched every last one of Blaine's musicals a dozen times already). This turns out to be an Error, capital E as far as Blaine's concerned.

It shouldn't be a problem that Kurt starts watching *The Wire*.

It becomes sort of a problem that Kurt's started watching *The Wire*.

The problem is that Blaine becomes aware that Kurt gets kind of uneasy watching it when Blaine's around, and after Kurt pauses it and changes to a new tab on Blaine's computer, blushing a little and affecting indifference when Blaine comes into the room one time too many, he begins to piece some things together. He sits pretending to do his homework and watching Kurt shiftily watching it on his laptop, headphones on with that dreamy glaze to his eyes, and Blaine doesn't think it's painkillers doing that.

He's on season three before Blaine realises that Kurt has a crush on Jimmy McNulty.

It is very, very childish to sulk about your boyfriend having a crush on a fictional character, especially because it's not like Blaine doesn't keep rewatching *The Lord of the Rings* only out of respect for Tolkien. And it feels even more childish when he knows that Kurt knows, because he's started watching it only in secret, when Blaine's out in class or on a placement or patrolling. Blaine sulks, and Kurt meekly placates but doesn't stop watching, and one night when Blaine's pulling his sweater off, tired as hell at two AM and really too exhausted for a post-superheroing shower, Kurt says from the bed, "You should sleep in here with me, you know."

Blaine rubs his eye, pulls his polo shirt off too. "Your ribs. I'm a wriggly sleeper, you know I'll -"

"I think we'd *both* wake up before you could do me any serious damage and you're only wriggly when you're only just asleep, when you're really tired you never move. You really don't need to sleep on the floor any longer, Blaine, it's not good for you, and - and my feet get cold when you're not in here with me, anyway."

Blaine tugs the t-shirt on over his head, looks around at him, the dark of Kurt's eyes in the low lamplight, lying rolled just a little on his side like he can, now, with his ribs less tender. Blaine lowers his eyebrows a little. "If I hurt you -"

Kurt murmurs, "You would never hurt me."

Kurt all long-limbed and alone in Blaine's bed, skin sheened gold in the lamplight, green eyes on Blaine through the warmth of the glow . . .

Blaine is tired and weak and takes very little persuading when it comes to Kurt. He shuffles under the covers behind him, kisses his shoulder and tucks an arm carefully around him, underneath the cast at his waist, feet sliding between Kurt's to warm them. Kurt shuffles down comfortable and Blaine leans up to

turn the lamp off, to lay there in the dark throbbing a little with exhaustion but *Kurt* all close and heavy and Kurt-scented, nuzzling himself into the pillow, murmuring there, "It's your fault anyway, you know."

"Mm?" Blaine says into the back of his neck.

Hopeful in its teasing, "You're the one who gave me a thing for curly-haired men with soulful eyes."

Blaine lays there with an arm over his side in a bedroom papered with photographs of a superhero, and smiles, slowly, into Kurt's skin.

Then he sleeps, warm and safe and happy, and wakes with the alarm against Kurt's side exactly as he fell asleep, Kurt's eyes coming slowly open, turning his head to see Blaine and *smile* his 'good morning'.

Blaine closes his eyes, brushes his nose over his skin above the neck of his t-shirt. He doesn't know why he worries about Kurt being anything but his, they *fit* together, tessellate like - his hand slides down Kurt's side, finds Kurt's hand, their fingers flex and fold together - well. Like hexagon shields. They fit like held hands.

"Good morning," he says, and yawns into the back of Kurt's shoulder.

"It is," Kurt says, holding Blaine's hand close.

*

Kurt in Cooper's bath, cast wrapped up in plastic, eyes closed blissful at the warm water. The stitches are out of his forehead now, and there'll be a fine scar left to show but Kurt's confident cover-up will disguise it when he's the Ghost. It's always Kurt, Blaine knows, who wears the Ghost's scars, it's Kurt who bears the bruises and the Ghost who no-one ever even sees look tired, the Ghost who stands straight-backed whenever Kurt's life suffers for him. Blaine kneels on the tiles next to him, cheek resting on his folded arm on the bath's edge, other hand hanging loose to play his fingers through the water; "Already?" he says, trying not to pitch his voice too disappointed, too unsure.

"Mm," Kurt purrs up at the ceiling. "I'm a lot better than I was, you know that. I can go back to work and I need to be at home with my own wardrobe for that. And I can't keep leeching off your brother, Blaine, it's not exactly - it's not exactly not-strange that you're bathing me in his bathroom, I would like just a *little* bit more privacy back in our relationship . . ."

One benefit of *The Wire* is that Kurt has at least been distracted from staring at *Cooper* like that. "But . . . I promised your dad I'd look after you," Blaine says, because he can't think of a better excuse and he needs *some* reason to keep Kurt in his bed when the real reason is just that Blaine really likes having Kurt in his bed.

Kurt opens his eyes, looks at him, smiles a little and runs his bath-warm fingers up and down Blaine's damp forearm. "I'm hardly moving to the other side of the planet, Blaine, just my own apartment. You can still come look after me, I'll still need someone to wash my back . . ."

Blaine mumbles, "And soap your feet."

"Which you are so very good at," Kurt wheedles, stroking his arm with the backs of his fingers. "Blaine . . . ?"

Blaine sighs, and looks up at him. Kurt pets his hair with a wet hand, smiles crookedly, says, "Sorry." and lifts himself up, eyes squeezing closed - Blaine quickly scrambles to help - to sit. Kurt brushes his finger down Blaine's face and then kisses him where the damp is cooling on Blaine's skin, and licks the droplet of water running down his cheek from his hair. "I'm better, Blaine, you know I'm better," he says, into Blaine's jaw, while Blaine swallows and yes, he does know that. Kurt is so, so much better than he was, he's not too weak to get himself upright anymore, he doesn't need someone else to do the lifting whenever he stands up from the sofa, doesn't need to ask, always embarrassed, for Blaine's help to get to the bathroom when he needs it. Kurt is not always going to be there in Blaine's bed, needing Blaine, helpless but for Blaine. Kurt is not always going to be *safe* . . .

"You're nowhere near well enough to go out yet." Blaine says, and Kurt rolls his eyes, says, "I didn't even suggest it, you'll notice. I hardly want to walk around as the Ghost with *this*," raising his cast. "It doesn't exactly strike fear into the hearts of the evildoers of New York City, does it?"

"You could hit someone pretty hard with it."

"I think I'd regret it more than they would."

Blaine tips his cheek to his own bent arm again, and sighs. It'll be a long time until the Ghost goes out again. A long time until they can seriously look into the place where supers are being made - Kurt has forbidden Blaine from even *thinking* about it before they can go together, and while they've narrowed

their area down they still don't know where they really need to be - a long time for a lot of things, because they haven't exactly been 'active' while Kurt's been unable to move himself without hurting himself and Blaine's been so nervous of being the one who does hurt him . . .

Kurt murmurs, "Is there a reason you're staring at my nipple?"

Blaine blinks, and realises that he is. ". . . I'm trying to think of one," he says, slowly, "that doesn't make me sound like a sex addict."

"I don't think you're a sex addict." Kurt says quietly. "You're always patient with me."

Blaine thinks about that, because while he could brush that aside - being afraid of hurting Kurt does not mean that he doesn't want to be all over Kurt pretty much all the time, which has kind of been true from the beginning - it is strangely easy for him to forget his horniness, watching Kurt wince and stop when reaching for something, brushing the fading bruises on his face, kissing the poor tender flesh of his shoulder when they can let the cast's sling loose on a night. Blaine says, "I don't want to hurt you."

Kurt says, "I'm not hurting now."

Blaine is quiet, and Kurt's thumb skims his skin.

It's his brother's bathroom. His boyfriend is trussed up in a sling with multiple broken bones, naked in the bath. Is this weird? This is probably weird. Blaine wears a superhero costume on a night; he is aware that 'weird' is something he has always found a little too seductive. He says, "Uh."

Kurt murmurs, "Stand up."

"Stand up?"

Kurt's damp hand tugs at Blaine's bare arm. "Stand up."

He has a slight tendency to do exactly what Kurt tells him to without really thinking about it, but, one-handed, Kurt can pop the button and pull the zipper but can't get his pants off his hips, tip of his tongue pressed between his teeth, trying not to laugh; Blaine catches his wrist and, deafened by his heart's blood-heavy thumping in his ears, tugs his pants and underwear down just enough.

This is probably weird. Is this weird?

He has to lean more than is really comfortable, his back bowed inwards, because Kurt can't lean very far out of the bath. Blaine grips the edge of the bath with one pale-knuckled hand and cups the back of Kurt's head with the other, trying not to forget himself, trying not to whimper out loud in Cooper's bathroom, trying not to forget how he could hurt him. Kurt experiments with how deep he can take Blaine down, thoughtfully relaxing his throat, and Blaine makes a *noise* and Kurt's mouth twitches as much of a smile as he can really manage right now.

Blaine's hand scrabbles, loses grip of the bath, slams off the tiled wall behind Kurt as he comes, hunched over him, pressing his mouth to his bicep to try to muffle the sound he makes. Kurt sucks his way up and off him, lifts his head with a hand over his mouth, hooks the sponge over to clean himself up a little. "Better?" he says, sounding quite self-satisfied, and Blaine lets himself with a grunt down to his knees again because *holy* fuck, his boyfriend, how can Kurt even manage to make Blaine feel like the helpless one when Kurt's naked in the bath with his arm in a cast . . . ?

He leans in to kiss him, says low and rough, "*So much better.*" and slides his hand down Kurt's warm body, into the green of the water, curling around Kurt's interested cock as Kurt's fingers squeeze through Blaine's hair. "Let's make you feel better too . . ."

Kurt sits in Blaine's desk chair while Blaine kneels to towel his hair dry, Kurt sleepy and warm post-bath and post-sex, wearing Blaine's robe and a towel around his shoulders. "I have a question," he says, when Blaine flicks the towel away and begins combing Kurt's wet hair back.

Blaine keeps his eyes on what he's doing, trying to be careful with the knots. "Mm?"

"When Dave knocked me out in the bank - I lost a few minutes then, I know that, because I woke up on the floor and you two were trying to kill each other."

"Not without reasonable provocation," Blaine says evenly to Kurt's hair, and he wishes Kurt wouldn't call him *Dave*.

"I know. I'm not saying I wouldn't have done the same thing if it had been the other way around." Kurt catches Blaine's wrist, pulls his hand down from combing his hair; his eyes are dark blue, and worried.

"What happened after that? The next thing I'm really clear about is waking up in hospital. I - take it we got out of the bank."

Blaine turns the comb in his fingers. "Yeah, um, yes, we did."

Kurt's eyebrows are low. "Then what happened? How did you - you did take me to Mike and Tina's, right? Mike was there afterwards. How did you get me there? We were miles away."

"Uhhhhhmm," Blaine says, drawing it out, looking at the ceiling, playing with the comb, trying to think of a way to explain this. "I, uh, I couldn't carry you all the way there."

"No. I doubted you could."

"And people would have *seen* me carrying you there, which was a problem."

"Kind of a non-problem as you couldn't have carried me there anyway, but yes." Kurt says, still patient, still watching Blaine's eyes.

"And, we don't have Mike and Tina's numbers."

"No."

"And I didn't have Finn's number -"

"No." He has it now, he's memorised it now, and Tina's cell. He does not want to end up repeating that night - god, for so many reasons, not ever, ever again.

He even keeps, written on a scrap of paper hidden in the undersole of one of his boots, the number iBorg gave him, because the worst things can *always* happen, and they might always need more help than the bravest people he knows without superpowers can give them . . .

"There were a bunch of cops around still going in and out of the bank, so I couldn't move you anywhere from the alley we were in. So, uh, I knew I needed someone with a car to come help us, and I couldn't exactly hail a cab . . ."

"No," Kurt says, still evenly, still patiently, still watching, watching, every flicker of Blaine's eyes scooting everywhere around the room to avoid looking at him.

"So I, uh. Asked someone for help."

Kurt's back is very straight and very still, and his voice is very calm. "Asked whom?"

He swallows. "Well there really wasn't - anyone I could contact and, and I was pretty desperate, I didn't know how badly hurt you were, I was kind of - freaking out a bit, I wasn't - I wasn't okay -"

"I know," Kurt says, and takes his hand, but his eyes are still intent on Blaine's face, his eyebrows are no less low with suspicion even as he squeezes Blaine's hand. "I know. I'm sorry you had to go through that, but . . . Blaine, who did you ask for help?"

Blaine swallows again, and does, very skittishly, meet Kurt's suspicious eyes for this. "There are these fangirls who -"

Plus point, Kurt's eyebrows are no longer low with suspicion; minus point, they have just shot up in face-blanking *horror*.

"- who would just do anything for you and I didn't know who else to ask and -"

"No," Kurt says, though his facial expression hasn't changed like maybe it no longer can change. "No, this - what did you do? What did you *do*?"

He licks his lips, squeezes nervously at Kurt's hand. His face has flushed, he can feel it, he feels like a fanboy faced with a superhero again, he feels *embarrassed* more than anything else of this. "I, um. I sent messages to, to three of them, the biggest BN- uh, most well-known fans, I sent them anonymous messages saying I was Phalanx and we needed help because I knew if they reblogged that enough people would see it that *someone* would come help -"

"Jesus please tell me this isn't true," Kurt whispers, and his face has gone grey.

Blaine squeezes more urgently at his hand. "But they *didn't* reblog it, they kept it private, one of them came, this girl brought her car and helped me get you to -"

"You did not do this, this is insane, you did not -"

"I had to! You were - you weren't moving and you were covered in blood and I thought you were *dying*, I didn't know what else to -"

"This girl, this - who the hell is she?"

"Draxie. She's called Draxie, I didn't ask for her real name -"

"*Jesus*, Blaine -"

"- because she didn't ask for ours, she didn't ask for *anything*, okay, she helped me get you to safety and then she drove off and she hasn't even *mentioned* us, there's not a whisper about it on any of the blogs, no-one knows, Kurt! She's a good person, she -"

"This is insanity, this is absolute - you brought some normal person into - Blaine we were attacked by *supers* and the police were there with *guns* and you brought in some - some girl, some poor girl who could as we speak be blabbing this to a psychiatrist after all the *trauma* for god's -"

"She hasn't said anything! I've been watching the blogs, I've been -"

Kurt screams at him, "*Not everyone says everything through their blog, Blaine!*"

Blaine closes his mouth, after a moment, and thinks, Oh. Yeah. They don't.

He wets his lips again, thinks. Kurt has taken his hand back to cover his eyes, mouth all tight like he's having the worst headache ever. Blaine knows Draxie has a fiancé, she has friends, she's really close to the other fandom BNFs, even the really scary one, everyone gets on with Draxie. She must have dozens of people in her life she could have actually *spoken* about this to, not posted about it, just, just *said* . . .

"I don't think she would," he says, quietly. "She's been on the blogs since the beginning, she loves you. She would never do anything -"

"Blaine, if anyone thinks that she knows anything, they'll - they'll kill her." Kurt says, mouth twisting like he feels sick. "Eventually."

"I told her not to. I told her that. She's not stupid, she understands -"

Kurt drops his hand, stares with wide-open dazed eyes at the ceiling. Blaine holds his knee since he won't give him his hand back, says, "She won't, Kurt, she *helped* us, she told me I could trust her -"

Kurt stares through the ceiling, and Blaine thinks that now is probably not the best time to tell him that while completely out of it in the back of her car, while swimming through a head injury and delirium-inducing pain, the Ghost kept calling Phalanx 'Blaine'. Kurt doesn't even remember it. Maybe best if he doesn't...

Kurt says to the ceiling, "I need to know who this girl is."

Blaine watches his face, and holds onto his knee. "I don't exactly have her name and address, Kurt."

"Her blog. Send me her blog. I need to know her. I need to know what this - this, what this is."

"Um." Blaine presses his knee. "She hasn't posted much recently but you might not want to look at her blog, there's a lot of, um. Fanfic. About, um."

Kurt closes his eyes, looks down from the ceiling and lifts a hand to touch Blaine's hair. "Send me the link. Are you going out tonight?"

"I... yes."

Kurt nods. "Then send me it before you go. I need to know, Blaine. You know I do."

Not everything, Blaine thinks, you really don't, you really do not need the kink meme and the NC-17 stuff and I know whenever Draxie's written porn about 'us' without even reading it because it's all the internet *talks* about -

Kurt's fingers stroke along the sides of his hair, and his eyes are too anxious and tight but he is trying to smile at Blaine. "I know it was a horrible situation. I know. I'm sorry I was so useless. I'm not - blaming you -"

"I really didn't have many options."

Kurt says, "I just need to know, and you know I do." and Blaine take a breath, lets it go, presses his lips together and nods.

The only hope he has is that he *knows* Draxie loves the Ghost. Maybe, just maybe, that's what Kurt will take from her blog too . . .

*

Gifset: Phalanx, alone

WHY WOULD YOU

why no ghost why why what happened to him why ;_;

*Theory: maybe this was his plan all along. Maybe he and Phalanx were only ever going to overlap for a while because the Ghost hadn't taken him on as a partner, he was training him to be a *replacement*. 5 years is a long time, maybe he needed to retire =(*

But. SUPERBOYFRIENDS.

(How're you holding up, Draxie my dear?)

(I'm ok. Tired, mostly, just, sad and tired. I just can't stop thinking.)

*(Thinking what? You did the right thing. I know it was a horrible but what they do *is* horrible, we always knew that, Drax.)*

(No-one's seen him since.)

*(Phalanx seems pretty fucking chipper if his boyfriend did die after rolling out of your car. I think you can take it that he's recovering and stop *worrying*.)*

Fic: Instruction, ghostzilla, NC-17; you wouldn't think he'd like being told what to do . . .

but where is he?? What if he's hurt, what if he's really badly hurt and Phalanx has to go out without him? :(

What if Phalanx killed him so he got to be the big hero all on his own?

AJKG;HSRTAEUKRGLHAEUK WHAT THE FUCK IS WRONG WITH PEOPLE

lol no nope no more can't just can't I no longer nope

WE ARE THE FANDOM THAT HOLDS ITS VIGILS. A LITTLE FUCKING DECORUM WHILE VIGIL-HOLDING PLEASE.

(I know I should stop thinking about it. I know that. I just cant stop.

I had to tell the bf I hit a dog and took it to the animal hospital, there was blood on the backseat. It wouldn't all wash off.)

*(Oh Jesus. Draxie, anyone would need some time, okay? It's like wading into a war zone, you do need to recover. But you do need to not *worry*. He's not dead. Believe me, he's not. Do you think Phalanx would still be smiling for the camera if he was dead?)*

(I don't know what Phalanx would do if he was dead. I literally don't. I don't know how to describe the way he was looking at him. What would you feel like if the most important person in your world was this bloody mess in your lap?)

(I would feel like murder.)

(I would feel like curling up in the bottom of a pit and never stopping crying.

*You remember that photo of them hugging, months ago now? The really intense one? The guy who took it said something about eye contact and that was how he knew they loved each other. and he was right. Becase it was the way Phalanx was looking at him that was how I knew. He was looking at him like he *needed* him to look back, and he couldn't.)*

(Draxie, all you ever wanted was for him to have someone who looked at him like that. You wrote reams of fic about it. You sobbed on my shoulder on a Saturday night about it. Metaphorically.)

Fic rec: Gogoghost's high school AU verse, which you'd think would be stupid but she really goes for it with the Ghost needing to keep his powers secret from his parents and fight crime on a night and still keep up with

*his homework, and how *lonely* he is before Phalanx shows up one night just breaks my heeeaaart ;-; The way they don't know each other's secret identities outside of the masks is *amazing*. And then they squabble and fight and the tension's about a million degrees and it's great, omg <3 New chapter is the prom!! There are *developments*!! <3 <3 <3*

Went to church today, first time this year. Lit a candle for him. Don't care if the Pope wouldn't approve, I think Jesus would. Praying for you, spooky <3

*Phandom's a mess right now. How long's it been, nearly four weeks? We've waited longer, guys, be strong. *determined**

(I feel really weird about the fic now.)

(In what way? Meeting them in real life made your fic OOC?)

(No. I don't know.

It feels wrong. Like I shouldn't have written any of it.)

*(Draxie, we've had these conversations. You've never pretended to write *accurate* RPF. It's only ever characters with those names.)*

*(Ghostly, none of it's right. for one thing none of it's real enough. Everything they do and how stupid and small and childish must we look to them? Playing around with *this* when there's a whole world of awfulness out there they have to deal with, *using* them like this, they must *despise* us.)*

*(Why must they? They're not me, they're decent people. And it's not stupid and small and childish. You think it's stupid and small and childish for Blackbindings? It keeps her *sane*, it keeps her *alive* and we both know it. And Draxie, what you write isn't childish. The feeling in it is real. Your fic actually does come from your heart and people can tell that when they read it.)*

(None of it's right anymore. None of it.

*He woke up at one point. I know I'm not supposed to be telling you any of this but it's what I can't stop thinking about. He woke up and he asked for Phalanx when he was right there, he didn't know where he was or what had happened, he was saying Phalanx's name like he was scared and he needed *him*. And I've never*

*written it like that, not the way it really is, not the way they *need* each other. Can you think how alone they are without each other, whay it must be like and how they *need* someone else, *him*?)*

*Fic rec: Breathe Me, NC-17, ghostlanx, actual!ghost, by Spookmehard. I've never cried while reading smut before but the Ghost can't make himself solid so all he can do is watch and talk to Phalanx and *want* and they both want it, but they can't. It's fucking HEARTBREAKING. WHY DO I KEEP READING ACTUAL!GHOST FIC. WHY. WHY DO I DO THIS TO MYSELF. anyway it's really good like read it and stuff bring tissues fml*

I hope the Ghost is warm, and safe, and peaceful, and coming back to us as soon as it's right. If you need a holiday, spooky, I hope it's a good one, you deserve it.

please draxie please update please please draxie please I can deal with the ghost not being here if you'd update ;_;

Phalanx stops homicide, only two hours ago, he's doing great solo <3

(So write something that's right. Write something that's real. There's no reason in the world not to write unless you think that what you're writing is untrue, if what you're writing is insincere. Write something real. Write something you wouldn't mind them reading. Write something to make them proud.)

Lit a candle in my window. Come home to us safe, spooky.

(Why do you say that like it's so easy)

(Draxie, why do you say that like it's something you can't do?)

(I'm not Blackbindings.)

*(No. Her writing is very different, and she approaches it very differently. But yours has heart, Draxie. You are direct in a way other writers *strive* to achieve. So write.)*

(I'm not you. I'm not that brave and I'm not that clever and I'm not anything but a mess write now. I can't just put myself on paper right now. I can't face it.)

(Freud can go fuck himself, but that's a very interesting slip of the fingers, my dear.

*And no. You are not me. You trust people and you believe in people and you *care*, a great deal, about people. I would never have gone out looking for them in the middle of the night because I fully expect tedious trolling, but you're the one who goes out *just in case* it's really them. You are a good person. So write *that*. Write all the heart out of yourself. Write out all the hurt, and all the ways that you know it will get better. Because it will. You and I both know that. You are not weak, Draxie. You rescued two superheroes in a borrowed car in the middle of the night. You are not a coward. You are a flesh and blood woman and a fucking magnificent one, one who *cares*, one who survives. So write that. Write what you have to. Write what you need to. You don't have to show it to anyone if you don't want to, but I think that you should write it. It will help.)*

(do you promise?)

(I promise that things will get better, if you can hold on for it. And I promise that things getting better is worth holding on for.)

Phanmix: Long Nights Alone, for whenever they're apart . . .

(I love you, Ghostly.)

(I love you too, Draxie my dearest. Have I put a pen into your hand yet?)

(I'll think about it. the bf's back, I need to go.)

(He's just the 'f' now, you know. Take care, my dear.)

(G'night Ghostly. I hope your mom's well <3)

*(And how could you not think you're brave, to be so familiar with *me* when most of the fandom wets its pants when I approach . . . ?)*

*

It's nearly eleven, and Kurt sits curled in a blanket on Blaine's bed with Blaine's iPad in his lap, trying to work out if he really does need to laugh. It's just so . . .

He's begun to understand that it's not always enough to just be there when bad things happen, that bad things happen for *reasons*, that there's a reason the world needs detectives. He's begun to understand

what more he needs to do, now that he has the time to think instead of just react, for possibly the first time in his life. So he uses her blog almost as an experiment, to see what he can do, what he can piece together, what puzzles he can solve. And this girl, this woman, thank you Blaine, she's at least five years older than them, this woman . . .

Sorry there's been no fic guys, picking up extra shifts to put more money into the Draxie wedding belt fund, damned expensive designers, why can't someone on Etsy make a cheap knock-off ;_;

. . . he really, really could laugh.

He scrolls through it, and tries to ignore the fanfic at first but he does know, really, that the fanfic is a part of who she is as much as any of it. He still doesn't click the links. Lots of it is labelled as 'smuff'. Urban Dictionary informs him that this is either some kind of scarf, some substance he would rather not think about, or sex involving feelings. Presumably it's the third. He hopes to god it's not the second. He wouldn't especially object to the first, though he's dubious about the fabric these scarves are made of.

She hasn't posted any fanfic since she came out to help them. He checks the dates, makes the timeline; she went from more than a dozen updates a day - usually images he thinks she's sharing from other sources (he's working this website out, he'll be fluent soon enough) and usually at least one 'drabble' (a short piece of fan fiction; a piece of fanfiction of exactly one hundred words long; a person who randomly contacts all your exes to find out if you ever lied to them; he goes with option A, and gives himself a gold star in detecting) - to nothing at all for two days, and then thin little trickles of posts, image 'reblogs' and those occasional text posts about her life, but no fanfiction at all. She used to sneeze it out.

He thinks about Blaine, the first time he met the Ghost. He thinks about Blaine telling him as time went on that he's nothing like that 'caricature' of the cloak online, that he's *more* to him, now. He wonders what it does to a person who idolises someone and then has to drive them through the city in the middle of the night, bleeding all over their back seat.

He finds the clamour of people eager to help out with her budget wedding, and wipes his eyes, and sniffs, and looks around for a tissue. He loves weddings. He never goes to them. The only friend he hasn't driven away over the years is Rachel, and while he has hopes of getting her and Finn to the altar one day - in a colour scheme of his choosing, of course - he doesn't know how long that will take. He loves weddings, though, he would love to go to more. People being so happy just makes him . . .

He blows his nose, and shifts the pillows so he can sit back against the headboard, so he can think in the glow of the lamp.

She hasn't said a word about what happened, though she has stopped writing anything about them. Kurt is - Kurt doesn't *know* if he's okay with the fanfiction. He knows he doesn't really have a choice in being okay with it, no-one is going to stop writing it just because of his feelings; he knows that people need heroes, need something to hang on to. There was a time in high school when he listened to *Defying Gravity* over and over and over and swore to himself with shaking hands that he would get out, he would survive, he would be different, things would be *better*. Before they got worse. But he does understand that there are things you cling to, and he didn't ask for people to hang off his cloak to make themselves feel better but it feels like selfishness to try to yank it out of their hands now. If they need him then they can have him. Isn't that why he's been doing this all along?

He stares through Blaine's blinds, and thinks, and thinks.

Her wedding this summer is open invitation, and he loves weddings, and if they could go however quietly, if they could just let her know . . . but they can't. These are people who *obsess* over Phalanx and the Ghost. Kurt and Blaine together really can't walk into that crowd, it's too risky, all those photographs they spend all their time staring at, *someone* would notice. They can't. But that doesn't mean that they can't do something. Kurt feels so guilty, so gut-draining guilty, that this poor woman got dragged into their life, he knows that he can't stop the choices he's made affecting other people too but *god* it's a lot to fall face-first into, the fear and the danger and the blood and the night. And he thinks, there is something I can do, isn't there?

He picks the iPad up again, begins searching. Google tells him how to pull her IP address but that that won't get her actual street address, not accurately. He digs deeper. She seems to be best friends with two other women, one of whom is very difficult to learn *anything* about, the other - the other has posted some photographs and a few text posts about the college she's studying at in England.

(England, part of him sings, a high rising thrill, if they ever take an actual vacation, an actual *vacation*, he would *beg* Blaine for England. Oh god they could go to Buckingham Palace. They could have afternoon tea. It would all be so civilised, and polite, and *British, England* . . .

. . . if he could handle the split-sideways fear of leaving his city an *ocean* away and unprotected without him. Baby steps. Maybe. One day.)

He researches the college. It's easy as hell to pull its address, her first name is innocently there on her blog, and it's only a few dead ends before he follows a trail to find her old high school, her local newspaper, the little article about the local girl getting into Cambridge. Last name achieved, Blackbindings unmasked. God, the internet is scary. He really does need to keep his own presence on it next to *silent* if he doesn't want people trailing him like this.

This might be a slightly long-way-around way of doing things, but it's really the best he can do, he's not a computer hacker, he can't stalk Draxie's home address out of the internet, the best he can manage is a friend's college a continent away. He emails Sophie confirming the date he's returning to work and asks if he could get a prototype of one of his own belts, and then skims up and down this other girl's blog for a fascinated moment, this girl who posts about missing her cat more than she posts fanfiction about him . . .

"Well isn't this," a kiss on the side of his forehead, the iPad slipped from his hand, "a reversal of roles. You'll hurt your neck sleeping like that, angel."

He blinks, and his neck twinges as he lifts it, squints dopily at Blaine in the lamplight. "Mn," he says, and wriggles his shoulders, and lifts a hand to cover a yawn. "Hi. Wh't time is . . . ?"

"One fifteen. I called an early night after breaking up this completely crazy fight outside a bar, everyone started crying at the end, I had to hand around hugs, don't even *ask*." He rubs his hair, smiles at Kurt and Kurt's still too close to sleep, can't even think anything beyond how pretty he is. "The internet's a cruel mistress, huh Kurt?"

Kurt tries to touch him and realises it's the wrong arm, lifts the other and wraps it around his neck, pulling him in closer. "Missed you," he breathes into the side of his neck, nuzzling in close. Blaine's skim is warm and smells of *him*, and Kurt closes his eyes to his jaw, mumbles, "Missed you, missed you . . ."

Blaine rubs his back. "Into bed, Kurt, I'm not going anywhere."

Under the covers, Blaine's hands running gentle around his sides through his t-shirt, Blaine whispering, "Was it okay, did you . . . ?"

He tries to understand, he's so sleepy, nods drowsily. "Think she'll be okay. She seems nice."

"She was nice."

"Blaine."

His fingers brush into his hair at the back of his head. "What, angel?"

He's warm and safe in bed with the best man he's ever met, and the world just seems like such a good place to be. "Love you."

Blaine's arm settles around him, his leg wraps over Kurt's, his forehead nudges off his. "Love you too, Kurt."

And isn't the world just the best place to be . . . ?

*

"There is a lot of swearing in this show."

"People do swear a lot. Have you not noticed that we get sworn at at least four dozen times every night?"

"Well, it's not polite to bring it up again afterwards. There's a lot of casual littering in this show too."

"And yet the drugs and murders you fail to comment on."

"He's a cop, he should know better! So who is he, again?"

"That's Bunk. You know Bunk. He's Jimmy's partner."

"I thought that was that woman cop."

"What? That's Kima. She's sort of his partner in the drugs division, Bunk's his partner in homicide."

"Oh. Who's he?"

"That's Omar. You ask me who he is every episode."

"Oh. Oh my god, has he always had that scar?"

"Yes, Blaine, he has always had that scar."

". . . is he kind of gay?"

"He's really gay, Blaine. Do you not notice the bad guys calling him a 'cocksucker' *all the time*?"

"They kind of call everyone that, I didn't think it meant anything."

"You asked me that two episodes ago, anyway."

"There are a lot of characters, okay? Who's he?"

"Oh my god, I'm not letting you watch it if you won't do it properly."

"No, no no, no I'm paying attention, there are just *so many people*. Who is he?"

"That's Bodie."

"That sofa is disgusting."

"Mm-hm."

"Who's that guy with him? Is that guy Wee Bey?"

"What? No! That's Poot! How the hell can you mix up Wee Bey and Poot?"

"I don't know, I never knew who Wee Bey was! His parents called him 'Poot'?"

"I am seriously never watching this with you again."

"I don't like you watching it unsupervised. I can't believe this is your downtime activity, this is your *job*."

"The writing is superb."

"And you have a crush on Jimmy McNulty."

"Oh shut up, you have a thing for a hobbit, you don't get to judge."

"Yeah, well, at least Frodo saves Middle Earth, Jimmy McNulty is kind of an asshole."

"That's your incisive commentary? His *mom* probably thinks he's an asshole."

"That guy - that's Poot?"

"Yes, Blaine, *that's Poot*."

"He has the weirdest eyebrows I have ever seen."

". . . really, Blaine?"

Chapter Twenty-Six

It was a few weeks back, long before that catastrophic bank heist, the ceremony of exchanging keys. Kurt had mentioned it, trying too hard to sound casual about it, and Blaine had confirmed that it was probably a good idea while completely failing to sound casual about it himself; so one morning they sat in Cooper's kitchen, all embarrassed flitting eye contact and too-tentative fingers and mouths that didn't know what to do with themselves, pushing keys along the breakfast bar at each other between their coffee mugs. Kurt's squirming blush, Blaine's laugh balling up inside his chest to escape, sheer joy as he turned a slip of cut metal between his fingers and it meant too much.

It would be madness, at this point in their relationship - they met a grand total of eight months ago - to try to put a ring on Kurt's finger, though the symbolism of it (unbroken, endless) is something that feels so *right*. He likes having a key on his key ring, though. He likes having Kurt's on his. There might be, however, something *too* symbolic about a key, something a little inarguable about the idea of unlocking. No wonder Kurt blushed.

So he lets himself into Kurt and Rachel's apartment, where Rachel is sitting on the couch with her feet on the coffee table, iPad on her hunched knees, stabbing away at it. "You try him." she snaps at him. "He's being *completely* unreasonable, I refuse to waste any further sympathy on his *moods*."

Blaine gives her a wary look, and treads a carefully wide path around her snarling aura to get to Kurt's door. Returned to his own apartment and back at work, and for the first time in nearly six years actually *sleeping* most of most nights now, Kurt's actually been almost more mellow than Blaine's ever known him, pliable and happy as a cat in sunlight whenever they're together, anxiously affectionate before Blaine goes out, warmly, sweetly *delighted* whenever he returns. But then Kurt and Rachel's relationship has always been tempestuous. Given compatible sexualities they could probably manage the kind of romance that rattles windows and smashes vases and leads to great sex and short marriages; as best friends and roommates, as a secret superhero and a vociferously anti-superhero student reporter, they clearly adore each other and yet fight like cats in a sack. Movie nights sitting in between Kurt and Rachel, both of them arms folded and one crossed leg twitching irritably, staring through the screen and waiting for the next explosion, is actually Blaine's least favourite thing in the world. He'll take any gang fight, bank heist or super threat over waiting for which one of them will boil over first. Drugs busts. Attempted homicides. Littering, even . . .

He knocks, very gently, on Kurt's door. "Kurt? It's me."

He hears - movement, and then a pause, and then the door unlocks and cracks open. "Inside," Kurt murmurs, and Rachel yells over, "Stop acting like I'd *contaminate* your room, I don't have girl cooties!"

"Nor are you yet a functioning adult!" Kurt spits back, jerks Blaine in and slams the door behind him. The lock snaps closed. He bristles there, one arm in a sling and mouth pouted *furiously*, and then says, "Don't you dare step on anything. I can't let her in, she's a one woman avalanche waiting to happen and how the hell would I even *explain* it - ?"

Blaine - stares.

There's a map of New York stuck over Kurt's bed, covered in pins and mug shots tied together with coloured thread; there are articles cut from newspapers and what looks like snippets of police reports stuck around it and laying across the bed itself; the floor is *stacked* with papers, Kurt's laptop appears to have thirty open tabs, and there are a stack of writeable CDs and two memory sticks Blaine hasn't seen before next to it, on the usually pristine and currently paper-covered chaos of Kurt's desk . . .

Blaine says, "How . . . how *do* you explain this?"

He squints at the photos stuck to the map. Some of them are of corpses, floating in the river. Blaine pulls a face, and Kurt gives the photographs a mouth-twitched look. "I'm trying to work things out. I can't go out like this, I can still do *something* to help."

"Work out . . . what?"

Kurt's eyes track the map. "Where they're making supers, and what the hell the real cost actually is."

Blaine stares at the map, at the jostling pins, at the highlighted piers, at the places Kurt's circled near the redevelopment projects on the West Side. God, he thinks, Kurt Hummel, you really can't be left without stimulation, can you . . . ?

"You said we weren't detectives."

"I think we need to be. We can't check *every building* until we find the right one, we hardly even know what we're looking for. Only -" He stops, tilts his head with his eyebrows tight at that map. "I'm beginning to guess . . ."

Blaine looks at the map, tries to make sense of it, looks at the photographs again a little uneasily. "Bodies," Kurt says. "I asked Finn to get the information for me, bit by bit. People have been turning up in the water, a lot of them, for the last few months. They always do, but there are - patterns. It's a lot of the kinds of people who don't always get missed, people who're out alone and they're vulnerable like that. Known drug addicts, prostitutes, homeless people, petty criminals. The autopsies are weird, a lot of them have recent track marks but not always any known street drugs in their systems. I - I guessed. When David said it was a dangerous procedure, and when Puckerman said he'd been told he 'wasn't any good' . . . they're experimenting. It's not a finalised procedure. Which means - there could've been quite a few people who, um . . . 'weren't any good'. Puckerman's good at escaping from things, he got out of prison too. Other people might not be - able to."

Photos of faces, photos of bodies. Blaine stares. "They're - murdering and dumping people?"

"Some of the autopsies are weird," Kurt says quietly. "I think the procedure . . . I don't think all of them could be volunteers. Not for something this dangerous and scary. Some of them, maybe there are different procedures, maybe they're more sure about some of the powers they're handing out. Not all of them. Some don't survive the process. Maybe they weren't meant to, if it was an experiment. And some of them - aren't what they wanted."

"How many?"

"I don't know that I can account for everyone. I don't know that everyone *is* connected, I'm only spec-"

"How many?"

Kurt touches the back of his arm. He says softly, "I'm pretty certain at least twenty-two. I - do mean that as the very lowest estimate."

Photos of faces, photos of bodies. "In how long?"

"I think, um. I don't think Puckerman was the first, and I first fought him ten months ago. So I think around a year."

Blaine stares. "Do you . . . have you . . ."

Kurt takes a little breath, and lifts his hand from Blaine's arm again. "They're increasingly similar dumping patterns, besides the correlating autopsies. I've been checking the tidal data, where they washed up, look, they all *start* turning up further south and kind of scattered - the colours show the dates they were found - but as time goes on the cops are finding them a little further north, a little bit closer to this area on the West Side, currents from *here* and *here* would bring them there . . . it'll be henchidiots lower down the food chain who take the bodies out for dumping. There'll be rules, and they'll *mostly* follow them, but they'll get lazier the longer they go on undetected, it always happens, it's how we spot drugs stashes on the move, people just get lazy over time if nothing's gone wrong *yet*. It's also why some superheroes take to leaving their costume in a bag under their bed which we do have to have a conversation about, by the way."

"Oh, uh, ah, do we?"

"They got lazy." Kurt continues, eyes narrowed at the map and Blaine now squirming. "They're driving less of a distance to do the dumping, *and* they're doing it all from about the same place now, I guess one of these piers along here. They *should* be doing it from somewhere different each time, they really haven't thought this through."

"You would make a much better serial killer than them," Blaine assures him, and Kurt cuts him a look, then back to the map.

"So we have options. We could take a look at these piers, try to catch some crooks in the act and follow them back again. *Or* we can search through likely spots near Penn Station, which is where David said they'd be; I guess they need somewhere soundproof, somewhere people won't think twice about comings and goings at weird times of the day and night, I don't know how much *space* they need though, how much equipment . . ."

"This is, by the way, incredible. I mean, it's seriously horrific. But you are a genius."

"Mm. I think I might be, a little bit."

"Would you like me to get you a drink or anything while I'm here?"

"We're still having that conversation, Blaine."

"You're absolutely certain I can't distract you from it?"

Kurt begins, one-handed, sorting photographs and files on his bed to make space. "Sit. Blaine - I mean, *Jesus*, you know what you're playing with."

There's enough space cleared, so, like a shamed dog, he sits, hands curled around the edge of the mattress. "I . . . yes. I do."

Kurt sits next to him, taps his little stack of papers neat on his leg, and sets it to one side. "Do you . . ." He watches Blaine's face, attentive grey-green eyes a little worried. "I haven't known how to ask for a while. Do you *want* Cooper to know? I know . . . I know my family do, and it's - maybe not fair, this, on you. Would it, would it make it easier for you . . ."

". . . no." He closes his eyes, shakes his head. "No, that's not what I - no, I don't want him to know. He would freak out. He never knows how much of a big brother to be, I really don't think this is something he can really - deal with. And I don't have the relationship with my parents like you do with your dad, Kurt, it's not like they *need* to know, and it's just . . . the fewer people who know, the safer everyone is. Right?"

"So . . . do you want to tell me why you had our costumes under your bed? You've got the bottom of the wardrobe and that air vent in the bathroom, why . . ."

"Why were you looking under my bed?"

"Because I dropped a sock. Excuse me for being clumsy while dressing with this." Kurt waves the sling at him. "I dropped a sock and I - remembered it, the bag, as soon as I saw it, from that night in the hospital. And it turns out it was a good thing I did see it, I - I know you're not taking this *lightly*, you get that this is dangerous, why - ?"

Blaine doesn't really know how to start. He doesn't really know if there is a single reason he can give. He stares at the floor, and he can feel Kurt watching his face, until Kurt says quietly, "My costume was in there too."

Blaine's eyes slink to the other side of the floor, even further from Kurt. Kurt's hand touches his on the bed, then his fingers slip through Blaine's, squeeze.

Blaine squeezes back.

"That first - morning, I left you in the hospital. You - Mike had to sedate you. Do you remember - ?"

Kurt's palm presses over his hand. "Not well. But yes."

"I got home . . . I hadn't slept yet. I was kind of a mess. I just - I just tossed the bag under and fell asleep on top. I didn't think about it. I just didn't, I'm *sorry*, I *didn't*. All I was thinking about was -"

A man who should have been dead because of Blaine but for *luck*, and Kurt, *Kurt*, *Dad don't be mad don't be mad Dad please please* -

Kurt presses his fingers through his. Blaine hangs his head.

". . . and the next night - I just didn't want to touch it. I'm sorry. I know it's childish. I just didn't even want to *touch* it -"

"Okay." Kurt says, quietly.

"And when I did pull it out and open it - your costume was in there. All - cut up and -"

"Okay," Kurt says, his thumb stroking Blaine's hand.

". . . it almost got comforting, eventually." Blaine says, to the floor. "I don't know, I don't *know*, okay, it was like sleeping with a body under the bed but - but at least I knew where it was, it was . . . in a deeply messed up way it was kind of good that it was there, I couldn't see it but I knew it was *there*. And then you were sleeping there and . . . and I was just trying not to think about it at all. It's not there anymore. I moved it when I started going out again."

"I know. I thought maybe you were doing that just because you knew I was in there watching you."

"I think I just - didn't need it there anymore. Reminding me."

"Blaine," Kurt says, tugging his hand a little. "There's enough memory of the bad things already. There always is. You don't need to make extra mementos of them as well."

Blaine looks at Kurt, Kurt who always wears the Ghost's scars, and Kurt gives him one of those small, closed-mouthed smiles, hopeful that everything will be okay; Blaine leans up and kisses him on it, because he's alive and happy and safe and *there*, and Kurt just holds his hand, kisses back, when Blaine lifts his head his eyes are closed and there's still the glow of smile about his cheeks.

Kurt whispers, as Blaine ducks his head in a little closer again, nudging his nose off Kurt's, "Okay?"

"Okay." Blaine whispers back, and catches Kurt's cheek to kiss him again, and Kurt holds his hand tight, and Blaine - kisses him, feels the rise of the pitch in Kurt's response, thinks, Oh, yes, please . . .

And then from the next room they hear a frustrated strangled *scream*, and something thumping down. Kurt starts, jerks to look at the door too quick and hisses, putting his hand to his chest, and Blaine blinks at the door, stands up, skips over Kurt's piles of 'detective work' on the floor and unlocks the door as Kurt says, "Blaine -"

Rachel's kicked a pile of magazines off the coffee table and she's got her head buried in her arms on top of her bent knees, a tight little ball of fury. Blaine doesn't have a clue what to do but Kurt touches his side, brushes past him, walks over and sits next to her, silently puts an arm around her.

Rachel says into her knees, "I'm going to fail my course."

Kurt rubs her arm. "Of course you're not. It's just one assignment."

She holds his arm, stuffs her face into his shoulder. Apparently they're not having an extended make-out and whatever might follow, then, and Blaine, a little ruefully, closes Kurt's bedroom door behind himself. "My teacher *hates* me and she's going to fail me. She said I haven't got the guts of an investigative reporter, she said I just don't have the *hunger* for it -"

"Rachel, you will succeed because you will make damn well sure you succeed and we both know it. No-one does hunger like you do."

Rachel mumbles into Kurt's arm, "She said I haven't got the balls for it."

Kurt says, "What on earth would you want those for anyway? I fail to see how they would help your writing."

Blaine - grins, while Rachel's shoulders shake a laugh, and he heads over to the fridge. "You guys want a drink of anything . . . ?"

Rachel sniffs, and sits up, keeps Kurt's arm through hers while she wipes her cheeks off with a palm. "I would love an iced tea, thank you. I need a killer project to pass this assignment and *show* her, I need some

hard-boiled steel-stomached serious *journalism* . . . she thinks I just write wussy opinion pieces, I need something *real*."

Kurt watches Rachel's face and twitches a little smile for her, as Blaine walks over with a can of iced tea for Rachel and a can of Diet Coke for him and Kurt to share, perching on the arm of the sofa next to Kurt. Rachel takes the can, brushes her hair back and sits upright, sniffing, snapping it open. Blaine passes the Coke to Kurt for a sip and says, "You could write about -"

Kurt quickly swallows his mouthful. "Neither of you are allowed to *mention* the word 'superhero' or I swear to *god* I'm just locking you both in here to have it out and finally *end* it."

"He supports criminals!"

"They're trying to help people!"

"Maybe your teachers just don't want to read *another* article on superheroes from you Rachel, because god knows I'm sick enough of hearing about them!" Kurt snaps, and stabs the can up at Blaine with a *glare* of 'look what you did'. But Rachel - stops, blinking her dark-wet eyelashes, and swallows some tea, and for a moment she doesn't say anything.

Then she says to the coffee table, "Maybe you're right."

Kurt looks uneasily at her, like she might yet turn on him. ". . . really?"

"Something different," she murmurs to the coffee table. "Something to show them that I'm not all about opinion pieces on the superhero menace, something -"

Blaine mutters, "They're not a men-" and Kurt hits him in the arm.

"- something different, something . . ."

She picks up her iPad again, belts back some iced tea and puts the can on the coffee table. Kurt slips a coaster under it and says, "Is the crisis averted for one more evening?"

Rachel grunts at her iPad, apparently engrossed in a new train of thought. Kurt rolls his eyes, and Blaine dries his hand, condensation-damp from the can, on the leg of his pants before offering it to Kurt to help

him up. "Come on," Kurt murmurs to him, tugging him by the hand for his bedroom door. "We were in the middle of something, after all . . ."

Making out after all. Blaine beams all the way back inside.

*

An open letter to fandom, from Ghostofasmile and Phantomphi:

*Next Friday will be the six week anniversary of the last reported sighting of the Ghost. Phalanx has been around a little since then, and it's not like it's the longest period the Ghost's been absent - we do all remember the Great Ghost Drought of four years ago, there's a reason that this is the fandom that holds its vigils. But it's a significant period of time, and we **are** the fandom that holds its vigils . . .*

*So, we don't know what's up with him and we know that; we don't know if he's sick or hurt or worse, we don't know if he's on vacation or taking a break or if he hung up the cloak for good. We never know. But the fact that we never know doesn't change how much we appreciate what he does, it doesn't change the fact that we're grateful and we think he's **awesome**, and even if we never see him again, it will never change the fact that he's saved lives. **Lots** of them, over the years.*

So what we're suggesting to fandom is this: next Friday night, if no-one's seen the Ghost by then, the fandom that holds its vigils holds an actual vigil.

*Not to hurry him back if he's away for a good reason. Not to **ask** for anything from him. Just to let him know that we never stopped appreciating him, that we don't forget, and we never will. Even if it wasn't for all the other rescues, he stopped New York being blown off the **map**. We owe him **everything**.*

*So: next Friday, seven PM onwards, Central Park. If you live in and you're familiar with the NY area and would like to act as a vigil chaperone to get other fanghosts safely to the site, contact us (We made a site: [vigilfortheghost](#). Signing up for chaperoning not only helps other fanghosts out, it puts you in **great** company, we already contacted the speedwriting queen of the fandom, NY's very own [Draxie](#) and she's promised to chaperone a group in! <3), and we're arranging a system - the last thing the Ghost would ever want is people travelling unsafe and on their own in this city on a night, make sure you're in touch with each other, contact us if you don't know anyone else who's coming, **the best way to help the Ghost out has always been to just keep safe and not give him more work to do.** Anyone and everyone is welcome, **do***

contact us if you have any questions at all. Bring flashlights, candles, lanterns, anything to make the night brighter. Wear a cloak if you have one. We'll have buckets to collect and later transcribe messages, to put on [vigilfortheghost](#) after the vigil.

If you can't make it to New York that night - and we do appreciate that this is a global fandom and the wider US and international fanghosts are as loyal as the NY fanghosts have ever been - please bring some light to the internet instead. We hope there'll be a lot of fanghosts around so you don't feel lonely in vigil holding.

We'll be holding a two minutes silence at 8PM. We know we're not in mourning, we have no idea what he's up to right now. But we owe some serious respect, and we intend to show it.

*If you want to do something more hands-on than just hoping for him either that night or in the longer term, please volunteer to help out with something in your local area, he'd probably appreciate that. Help out at an animal shelter, take a first aid course, write letters for Amnesty International, call on an elderly relative or neighbor, do **something** to **help**. We're beginning to contact various NY charities and groups who need volunteers to find out if they might want to use the vigil to advertise for the help they need. There are a **lot** of us and we could really help people, and we think he'd like that. We're the size of an army, you guys, but, like the Ghost's very own soldier, we're an army with no weapon in our hands. The only weapon we need is compassion. **He** taught us that.*

*Further info to come, keep an eye on [vigilfortheghost](#). And remember that we don't know where he is and we don't know why we haven't seen him in so long, but we **know** he made the world a better place. Thank you, spooky. We love you <3*

Blaine wakes up slowly on Sunday morning, warm and leaden-lazy in Kurt's bed, but alone in it. He hooks his arm around the pillow to tuck it out of his face, blinks at the room - daylight behind the closed blinds - and rolls his eye to Kurt, who's standing in the middle of the floor, in the middle of all his piles of important detective paperwork, stretching. His face is screwed up, eyes closed, as he bends his one working arm out high above his head, but it doesn't look like he's in pain. Just concentrating, on how his body's speaking to him.

Blaine misses Sunday mornings.

He misses waking up because Kurt's not in the bed, and Kurt coming back to put a hand in Blaine's hair and stoop to kiss his forehead when Blaine starts sleepily complaining about that. He misses the *whsk-whsk* of Kurt's yoga pants against the floor, they're the baggiest things Kurt owns and somehow in their looseness they emphasise rather than disguise the muscles in his legs and hell, that ass, somehow in glancing off him rather than clinging to him they dry Blaine's mouth even more. He misses falling back to sleep under Kurt's sheets, and waking again to Kurt returned from yoga, all liquid-muscled and blissed out breathing, with pain au chocolat in a bag and coffee on the brew. He misses breakfast in bed, and eating pastry from Kurt's fingers, and he misses being able - with just a few plucks - to untie those charcoal grey yoga pants, and watch them slip loose down Kurt's white hips . . .

He says from the pillow, "As your physical therapist, what are you doing?"

"Bored," Kurt says to the ceiling, bending his arm back behind his head until he winces, and stops. "Barely *moved* in weeks. Feel like the whole world's more agile than I am right now . . ." He sits on the side of the bed, rubs Blaine's cheek with the backs of his fingers, rasping off the stubble. "Well. Maybe except you."

"Ho ho." He wriggles around onto his front, chin propped off the pillow. "How are your ribs?"

"Better. Healing. They just feel stiff, they only hurt now when I push too hard."

"Maybe don't push too hard, Kurt."

"Oh, wisdom." Kurt's fingers stroke a curl out of his hair, slow-dance down the back of Blaine's neck. "Blaine?"

He closes his eyes, it's nice being petted, and hums, "Mm?" into the pillow.

"Do you, um. Miss . . ." Kurt's fingers spread on his skin, and his thumb touches the bone at the top of his spine. "Do you miss . . ."

Blaine yawns, "Do I miss what?" against the pillow.

Kurt's silent for a second, then says, "I don't know a delicate way to put it." Blaine feels a breath, and then a lingering kiss to the base of his neck. "I miss you - being inside me."

There is not a single blood vessel in Blaine's body that does not react to that statement. He breath holds in silent and he hears Kurt swallow, and his fingers press Blaine's back. "Blaine . . . ?"

The thing is - well, Blaine is not unaware that he is incredibly easy to please in bed (which might, he knows, explain how Kurt travelled so cleanly and *quickly* from viewing sex with distress and shame and misery to pretty much owning Blaine's body in bed, because Kurt touches him and Blaine immediately collapses into a needy whining mess); easy to arouse, eager to see it through, very simply satisfied. And that, that was always under *ordinary* circumstances, this is *Kurt*. This is Kurt, Kurt who could demand anything of Blaine and he would scramble to fulfil it, Kurt who Blaine can't *deny* he knew the ass of before he knew the face of, Kurt who just makes him forget *words* and then he has to go and put the cherry on the damn cake by also *really wanting to have sex with Blaine*. How the hell does he expect Blaine to react to that?

He has to shift his hips against the mattress, very suddenly very uncomfortable. He says, "Um."

"I'm mostly better," Kurt says, and the undertone of pleading in it makes Blaine's skin break out in a sudden hot sweat. "It wouldn't hurt, I was thinking about the positions -"

He has to sit up because it is physically difficult to lie on his front right now, and Kurt's hand starts back, he blinks, and Blaine's hands are a little shaky for catching his face down into the kiss. Kurt settles his arm around Blaine's shoulder and blinks his eyes open when he finally breaks the kiss. "Is this a 'yes'?" he whispers, breathy and low and hopeful, and then they both look down at the enthusiastic third party to the conversation, the shape Blaine's making under the sheets.

Blaine's eyes flick to Kurt's pyjama pants. At least he's not the only one. He swallows, and rubs his morning hair a little, and says, "But -" Be sensible, be sensible, you can't *hurt* him. Not for this, Jesus. "Your ribs, Kurt, the, uh, the -" He makes an embarrassed hand gesture. "- jogging -"

Kurt's mouth twists and presses a smile he can't hide, ducking his head. "It's fine. Blaine, they're almost *healed*, I'll be fine, I miss - I miss us, like that, I . . ." His hand slides down, his fingers touch Blaine's. "I kind of feel like I have some lost time to make up for, you know. And - and you wouldn't hurt me, you . . ." He wets his lips, and stares at Blaine's hand. He says very quietly, "You know I like it when you're gentle."

- breathe.

Breathe.

Breathe. Until you're absolutely definite that you're not going to come just from the sheets laying against you while Kurt says *that* -

Breathe.

Blaine touches his face, and Kurt's eyes flit up to his, a little embarrassed. Blaine kisses his forehead, then whispers to his mouth, "Gently." like a warning, because he *can't* hurt him.

Kurt nods, quick and only a flutter in Blaine's hand, and Blaine - closes his eyes, grits the moan down, kisses him instead.

It's been a while, but the process of slipping loose clothes, the slickness of lube and fingers and kissing the inside of Kurt's thigh while his fingers close and squeeze in Blaine's hair is enough to settle the *agony* of arousal down into a lower, steadier want, the even thumping of a heartbeat. It's been more than a little creepy sleeping under Kurt's crime map of New York, even if he does cover it with a sheet on a night - Blaine knows that those photographs of bodies aren't just photographs to Kurt either - and it's been more than a little humbling, watching Kurt too wounded to fight for people *thinking* for them instead. There's too much thought in Kurt's mind, always, he knows too much about himself and the world, he has far too much to think about, a bird borne on air currents and Blaine feels very far below -

He likes reducing him to the innocence of skin. He likes making him forget that he has to walk the world a superhero because this world needs superheroes; he likes shifting and curling his fingers so Kurt's knees slip wider and his back bows in a little, mouth coming open, he likes saying into the meet of his leg and belly, "Careful, angel." and hearing his softly moaned response, he likes making Kurt forget anything but him, responding to his voice and his hands and his mouth and the rest of the world is only the rest of the world, and Kurt has *Blaine*.

His fingers dig into the sweat on Blaine's shoulder for grip. "Blaine -" His breath whispers loose from him again, his fingers tighten. "Blaine, please, it's -"

Blaine kisses his other thigh. "Gently," he says.

Kurt's head rolls loose, nodding, and his eyes open, focus drowsy with lust down on Blaine. "Yes."

Blaine stands next to the bed, he is afraid of putting his weight on Kurt, and carefully grips, raises his thighs. Kurt's naked but for the sling holding his arm over that scar circling his chest, all flushed and straining and damp and gorgeous between the legs, watching Blaine's eyes while Blaine watches his free arm fall back, and his hand squeezes into the pillow.

Gently. *Gently*. But oh god *fuck* the heat and grip and *pull* of him, like all he wants is Blaine -

Gently. Blaine's thumbs stroke his hips, the innocence of skin, he'll never hurt *this* body . . .

"Just you," Kurt whispers, too far away and completely engulfing him, laid out on the bed. "It's only you, just you, only ever you -"

"Careful." Blaine manages through his teeth, holding Kurt's thighs harder as they shift but don't try to draw this faster, just resettle in his hands.

"It's like you invented it," Kurt says from the pillow, and his grin rolls out, all lazy and sexy as his body rocks, so gently, to Blaine's. "You're good enough at it to have invented it."

Blaine tries to keep it (in, in, in) steady, and slow, and (in, in, in) *gentle* . . .

The muscles in Kurt's arm stand out as his hand tightens on the pillow, before he lets go. "Talk to me," he whispers, and Blaine drops his head, his eyes stutter closed, got to keep it slow, *got* to keep it gentle . . .

"I love you," he says, he never knew he *had* this much self-control, his hips just want to *go*. "And this is killing me."

Kurt *laughs*, up there on the pillow, and Blaine looks up at his hand squeezing the pillow again and releasing, running down between his own legs - Blaine swallows, and can't look away - closing around himself, changing his breath. "There are things I've learned in yoga," he says, low, sex-rich voice, eyes dark on Blaine's from the pillow. "Breathing. Control. I could teach you. Could see - how long we could -" His eyes close, and his hand is moving, and Blaine is beginning to make a noise out loud. Kurt whispers, "Just breathe," and Blaine comes.

He draws himself loose, when he can, flesh all throbbing and fierce with orgasm, stops Kurt's hand and lets himself down to his wobbly knees. Kurt whines, softly, and his long body arches back on the bed, one leg hooks over Blaine's shoulder to clasp him closer. He slides two easy fingers back inside him and it

doesn't take much to tip him over, shuddering and keening in a high, tight way he can't control, while Blaine draws him down, settled to a safe landing, all easy and good with the sex-sparks still crawling pleasure under his skin.

Blaine kisses the hot damp inside of his thigh. "Love you," he says, pressing his cheek there.

"Only ever you," Kurt mumbles, like he's sinking back towards sleep again. Blaine plucks some tissues, gets rid of the condom, climbs onto the bed, hooks Kurt's legs back onto the mattress, rescues some blankets to pull back over them. Kurt touches his face, crooks a smile, murmurs, "You need to shave." and then just closes his eyes again.

Back to sleep on a Sunday morning sounds like the best plan in the world; Kurt really is a genius.

*

Blaine doesn't think Kurt's aware of it, because dipping his toe in the fandom pool seemed only to confirm for Kurt that it's just not his place. He doesn't seem upset about anything he found there, but nor does he want to know anything further about it, which is some sort of peace to reach with his own strange fame, Blaine supposes. So while phandom talks about nothing else, plans and organises and preps like it's a military manoeuvre (they're currently advertising for litter-pickers for after the vigil, so they can leave the park possibly more spotless than when they arrived), the Ghost himself is reading *The End of the Affair*, and researching the potential sites of their super-laboratory online.

That Friday night Blaine calls Kurt to say he's not going out. "Insane amounts of homework," he says into his cell, while packing a costume into a bag in his room. "If I want to go out at all this weekend I need to make a start."

"My poor Blaine. You work too hard."

"Wow, coming from you that seriously does mean something."

A little amused breath on the line, and Kurt says, *"Mr Conti will miss you."*

"I'll head along and apologise tomorrow night, he's a pretty understanding guy."

"Does this mean I won't be seeing much of you this weekend?"

"I think I can make time for my boyfriend while he's laid up with multiple broken bones, Kurt."

"Cast's coming off next week. I will soon be officially not a wreck anymore."

"You're still not-"

"Oh my god, Blaine, no, I'm not, not now I have you and Mike has my cell number to bitch at me over, do you think I even want to go out there with a right arm that still won't be good for anything? Here I was hoping my physical therapist boyfriend would help me get street-ready again . . ."

"Of course I will." he says soothingly. "You'll be my extra-curricular project."

Kurt laughs out loud this time, and teases down the line, *"I hope you don't treat all your patients like you treat me."*

"No, I think you can get in a lot of trouble for doing that."

"You would get into most of that trouble with me if you ever used the same system of 'reward for good progress' with someone else that you use with me, Blaine ."

"I wouldn't dream of it. Even without the right arm you can still kick my ass."

"Mm," Kurt murmurs, which is profoundly not a denial. *"Call me later on if you get bored?"*

"Will do. Rest up, Kurt."

"I love you."

"Love you too. G'night!"

He'll surprise Kurt, after the vigil. Turn up at his door with a kiss and his iPad; *You need to see this*. He knows which parts of fandom creep Kurt out and he knows which are the parts Kurt can't really deal with not because they scare him but because he can't *grasp* them, too much to deal with, he can't see himself the way they see him but Blaine wants him to see *this*. It was one of the first things Kurt ever said to him; *If you can save one person from something horrible, it's kind of . . . you just feel - I don't know, grateful. Does that make sense?*

Kurt, he wants to say. It makes all the sense in the world to me now. And so does how grateful they feel for *you*.

He leaves his cell on silent in his bedroom and tells Cooper he's going to Kurt's. Cooper's reading reviews of his show online and just grunts, absorbed in his laptop, so Blaine just rolls his eyes and closes the door behind himself.

There's a loft pretty near the south end of the park they use sometimes, where he leaves the bag after changing into costume. It's not yet eight, early for Phalanx to be out, but he wants to keep an eye on this thing, the *last* thing Kurt would ever want is trouble at this event, even if he doesn't know about it . . . there are already people arriving, knotted groups of them at the designated site, flashlights in the growing dark and lanterns swinging. Phalanx stays on a building overlooking them, ducked back into the shadows as much as he can manage, watching, grinning a little; he'd love to be down there, love to talk to some of them, but he does respect Kurt and his 'paranoia', because he is so afraid of people knowing them too well for a *reason* . . .

He itches for his camera but he does know that he won't even need it, the internet will *flood* with photographs of this tonight, more than enough to show to Kurt. He breathes the cold night air and watches them, the gathering phanghosts, the flutter of darker and paler cloaks, a guy with a lighter and a huddle of people with candles coming together around him, passing their little flames out, spreading like stars growing stronger through the night sky.

The gathering grows. He doesn't know if he'll recognise anyone from this distance, as a group of phanghosts turn up with a girl with a guitar strumming at it madly, singing as they walk, he squints to listen and then bursts out laughing; they're singing *Help*.

The atmosphere rises into the air like sparks from a bonfire, excitement breathes like a ghost at the back of Phalanx's neck. He hooks his legs over the edge of the building, sits and grins, he's going to need a cup of coffee soon but for now he just wants to watch, just wants to watch all these people who love his boyfriend almost as much as he does, he just wants to watch over them while the Ghost can't.

Down below, the girl with the guitar nods at someone else's words, and starts picking the notes out. The song strains up, through the traffic and the voices, and Phalanx's smile turns low and softer, as they sing *I Will Follow You Into the Dark*.

*

Kurt sits on the sofa, book propped open on his chest, staring up at the meet of wall and ceiling, thinking. Thinking -

If he could go out as the Ghost, there are people he could ask. There are plenty of people in this city who know when trouble happens, and they might not be willing to talk to the cops but they don't always mind a word in the ear of a ghost. They can trust someone else who walks the narrow line of not-quite-existing, someone else who can't trust the proper authorities, someone else society has no real place for. He's not the police, he doesn't represent any authority, he's just someone else who walks out in the night while 'normal' people look right through him, someone else making up his own rules, no defence in the dark except himself. There's more affinity between them sometimes than Kurt can comfortably think about.

They put the word for him once. He helped out a dancer, walking home from her job in a club and finding she had to run from the ex-boyfriend following her, and when he walked her home after cuffing *him* while she called the cops, she told him that people had said, *If you see the Ghost, tell him about Cissie.*

He'd listened. He'd gone to talk to the other women she sent him to, and they told him the rest of the story, at least what they knew, and he listened, silent, and it was one of the first times that he understood quite how many different things he meant to people. He thought then, as he still does now, that he goes out on a night to *protect* people, there's no other reason, he just wants to help people. But they look at him and they see a rare opportunity for them for *justice*. Justice -

Kurt doesn't know what to do with that concept. He's not okay with the idea of hurting people like that will make how they hurt someone else any better, all he thinks he can do is try to *help*, he's never felt any better about the world because he hurt somebody . . . justice as a concept cracks under the weight of the world. Politically, he understands it. Person to person, he doesn't know why the fact that you're dealing with another *person* isn't enough, he doesn't *understand* why people do the things justice has to repair.

But he found the guy they told him about, the missing woman's violent boyfriend and sometime pimp, and left him for the cops, handcuffed through the door handle of a police car with a note pinned to his jacket; *Ask me about Cissie Wainwright, 23, location unknown, last seen in my company 8 days ago.*

There are people in this city who might know about the shadowing dumping of bodies on a night, who might know about people going missing and turning up again face-down in the Hudson. But he needs to

speaking to them as the *Ghost*, it's not like Kurt Hummel can wander out there and ask any serious questions, who the hell would take him seriously anyway? Impatience itches at him and he *knows* he can't go out there like this, it's *insanity* to walk out there as a half-healed superhero, it's asking to get dumped back on his ass again and even worse this time. But -

Every extra day could be someone else's life. It eats at him, he has Blaine to distract him and he keeps himself busy but it knots his guts, every day and he doesn't *know* what's happening and he can't *help* . . .

Rachel's bedroom door opens and she strides out clutching her purse determinedly, sees him and puts one of those scary Rachel smiles on. "There you are! I need you to do something for me."

He flips his book up, puts the bookmark in. "Do what?" he says, warily. He's known her too long, and that manic light behind her eyes never means anything good . . .

Rachel opens her purse, takes out a slip of paper and hands it to him, and he gives her a guarded look before taking it. "If I'm not back by midnight then I need you to call the police and tell them I was in that area, okay? Because this might be a teeny bit dangerous and I just want to take all of the proper precautions."

"You - what are you doing?"

She snaps her purse shut. "I'm going to go talk to the invisible people of New York. I'm going to write a hard-hitting exposé on the people shut out of ordinary city life and instead making a precarious and *perilous* living outside -"

Kurt's unfolded the paper, and it's all he can do not to make a noise out loud; Kurt *knows* the area Rachel's written down, it's haunted his thoughts for the past two weeks, because if Kurt's calculations are correct, if all Kurt's worst and most probable fears are true, then Rachel is heading off to do some stupid college journalism project on the piers that the mob are dumping dead super experiments off on a night.

Maybe his heart stops for a moment, maybe his brain's not getting any blood, maybe that's why the whole world is for a fraction of a second so *silent* before the breath gasps in again and his heart kicks up to *pound*.

"Wh- y- what the *hell* are you doing, you can't go out there on your own in the middle of the-"

"I have mace and my rape whistle and investigative reporters are never afraid of getting to the *truth*, Kurt."

"Y-" His heart *hurts* from squeezing so hard. "You can't go on your own in the middle of the night to the docks, you *can't*, even by your standards this is crazy, you *cannot* do this -"

"I don't only write fluffy opinion pieces." Rachel says, a little shakily, hands gripping tight at her purse. "I'm serious. I'll show them. I'll make them -"

"You can't do this just to get even with a teacher you hate!"

"She hated me first, okay! And this is my *career*, Kurt, this is what I'm going to *do*, I might as well start now! You can't stop me, my mind is made up, Rachel Berry is going to have a Pulitzer on her desk by the time she's twenty-five. This is my first step towards going down in journalism *history* -"

He can't talk sense to Rachel any more than he could to a polar bear. "Why - why don't you take *Finn* with you - ?"

It's a flash of genius, suddenly there may be an actual use to Kurt's enormous armed cop stepbrother dating his *insane* roommate, but Rachel just rolls her eyes. "Who would talk to me with *him* there? I won't get into any trouble, I'll speak to some people and come right back, you worry about things far too much -"

"Rachel this is - you cannot do this, this is *crazy*, do you understand how dangerous -"

"I'll be fine. I'll be very sensible."

"What part of this is sensible?" he screeches, and she rolls her eyes, heads for the door. Kurt scrambles to stand up. "I'll come with you! Wait up while I -"

She *snorts*. Kurt - stops. Rachel makes her mouth lie flat and her voice come soothing. "Kurt, I don't mean to . . . look, I know you have your little martial arts classes and everything but - you've got a broken arm and you're not exactly a bouncer at the best of times, I really think you're safer staying here."

There is no time to work out exactly what confusion of emotions *that* makes him feel. "- you're not going on your own. Just let me get my shoes on -"

"Okay, *no* way in hell are you coming with me, don't even *try*, if you trip and hurt yourself again I'll never hear the end of -"

"Blaine!" He shocks himself by yelping it so loud. "I'll call Blaine, *he'll* go with you, you can't go out on your own -"

"Oh my god, I don't need your boyfriend to babysit me! This isn't the eighteenth century, I don't need a man as a chaperone!"

"If you weren't going to the docks in the middle of the night I would agree! Just let me -" He struggles, left-handed, scrolling through his cell until he finds Blaine's name, the last caller before his father. Rachel folds her arms and leans against their front door and huffs, as the phone rings, and rings, and rings.

"This is ridiculous," Rachel mutters.

"Just a second," Kurt says, as the phone cuts to voice mail. Why isn't he picking *up* - ? He hits redial. Rachel stands straight again with a jerk and says, "This is a waste of time, I'm going. I'll be back by midnight, you don't have to be such a grandma about -"

The phone rings, rings rings, and panic is trying to stop his throat. "Rachel -"

"Try not to hurt yourself while I'm gone!" she sings, and the door slams behind her, and Blaine's phone sends Kurt, alone in the apartment, to voicemail.

Kurt blinks out of his paralysis of horror at Blaine's voice, wets his lips, chokes into the phone, "You *have* to call me back as soon as you get this, this is *urgent*." and then paces up and down the room twice, breathing too fast, holding the phone too tight, stunned with - this is -

He texts, *Blaine I *need* you this is important pls call me!!*

She'll already be at the bottom of the stairs.

There isn't the time. He doesn't know why Blaine isn't answering but there isn't the *time*.

She'll already be trying to flag down a cab.

He calls Blaine again. He says into his voice mail, "Rachel is on some demented mission to get herself killed on the docks, I have to go out after her. The piers, it's the piers we were - the address is in my room, come out after us as soon as you can, *please*."

He hangs up. He drops his phone onto his bed.

He lets his breath go.

It's been weeks since he's been in costume, and he's never tried to get into on his own with only one working arm. Mike will kill him; *Blaine* will kill him, but there's no time for any of it, as he takes the cast in his hand and ghosts it free, breath hissing through his teeth. He drops it on his bed, holds his arm, tests the flex once with his muscles tensed; it bends, though not easily, the muscles are stiff and lazy, the bone feels too heavy.

Mask on, struggling with his clumsy, weak arm to zip the costume, to close the utility belt around his chest. No time, no time. He picks the phone up again, stares at it, doesn't *understand* -

He hits call, one last time.

Pick up. Please pick up. Please, please, please pick up -

Blaine's voicemail message is so perky and it closes Kurt's eyes with what would be despair if he had the luxury of despair in his life. All he has is the things he has to do.

He lifts his hood with his left hand. He's invisible before he's out of the room.

*

Before I head out to the vigil (meeting my group at the station, so excited! <3), this is for everyone who can't make it out tonight, because I know I've been quiet on the fic front recently, sorry, guys, thank you for all your patience and always being awesome phanghosts when I'm being useless. Good luck with your net-based vigil holding <3 Been struggling with trying to work some things out for a while, this is - just my getting my head around things. Sorry if it's kind of weird compared to my normal stuff? :/

I hope you're ok, wherever you are, spooky. We love you.

All the Other Ghosts, ghostlanx, R for the kind of violence and threat you could actually expect while superheroing. Because the city is so dark on a night, and what 'hero' means to the Ghost can't just be what he does.

Shitting fuck Draxie updated THERE IS A GOD

moping at home about not being able to make the vigil and then EWRKGJHLAEGJERKA.;GHDFNJK

*First photos coming in, so many people *_*Wish* I was there, guys!!*

Do you think he knows? Do you think he's watching?

i hope he is bc that means hes ok

Reblog if you've ever been rescued by the Ghost. Let Figgins know what an assbutt he's being. We love you, spooky <3

I almost did something really stupid last night, before I remembered it was the vigil today. Woke up this morning and I knew I might not have. I know you weren't there, but you're still the reason I'm still here; thank you, Spooky.

Look at all the lights isn't it beautiful?? I hope he sees it <3 <3 <3

*Oh fuck Draxie I just tears everywhere read her new fic but bring tissues *fuck**

aesrlkeh;raegaerkhkfl draxie updated??

Listening to my Ghost playlist, hoping he'll turn up. He wouldn't leave us all miserable right??

DRAXIE UPDATED FUCK YEAH :D

*I mean, if you actually think about the Ghost, his powers could make him the best supervillain in the *world*, he could be robbing banks and no-one would ever even know it, he could get away with *anything*. But all he does is help people. I just feel better about humanity because there's no reason for him to be brave and good and kind except that he *is*.*

Me and Sociallyspooky at the vigil! The Ghost to my Phalanx, my beautiful camera-shy bb <3

omg Draxie I don't know what to say, it's **beautiful**, you seriously made me tear up ;_ ; This: 'It's not like he planned on falling in love. He only ever planned for the worst. And then he turned up like something out a myth, one of those things the Ghost had never realised had actually, so long ago, started in fact.' And, 'This isn't a world that doesn't need them, but it could be, couldn't it? What can a superhero fight for but a world that doesn't need superheroes?' Oh my **god**, Draxie, I can't even tell you how much I love it, I'm so glad you wrote it <3

Draxie update nothing like her normal stuff I mean some serious just I don't even know what but fuck it's close to the bone on a night like this, **spooky** T-T

At the vigil!! Meeting so many amazing people omg I spoke to Draxie she's like SO NICE it's stupid I just really love everyone in this fandom okay ;_ ;

Eight o' clock approaching. I don't pray, but I do hope, very hard.

Draxie, my dear. Look at what you did. My word. I don't think I've been this proud of you since - no. I don't think I've ever been this proud of you. And I know you don't believe it, but I always am. You genuinely **love** people, don't you? I think that's all a superhero needs, Drax.

i hope the ghost's okay and puckzilla too <3

Nearly time. Keep realising I'm holding my breath.

just finished draxie's new fic don't mind me i'll just silently weep my way through the 2 mins silence

Wherever you are, spooky, whatever happened, whatever you're doing - all we hope is that you're okay. Please, please be okay. We **love** you <3

Chapter Twenty-Seven

So maybe he is the most paranoid overprotective idiot on the planet.

So far he's seen Rachel approach a few people in the dark but they've either largely ignored her or, in a couple of instances - the guy sitting in a blanket against the wall rocking back and forth, the woman with a cigarette who began screaming at Rachel that she 'knows she's CIA' - scared her immediately back off again. She's pretty tireless, though. Rachel and her notebook and the iPhone she keeps stabbing in people's faces (the Ghost wants to smack himself in the forehead, she might as well be waving a sign that says *Please mug me!*) to record them largely backing away and telling her to fuck off. The Ghost could have told her this was a bad idea for so many reasons. Who wants their life to be turned into a salacious pass grade for a cluelessly privileged journalism student? This isn't only dangerous, it's *pointless*.

In its own way, so is what the Ghost's doing. Maybe he is a patronising chauvinist after all, apart from *alarming* her no-one's hurt Rachel in any way, it's just . . . it's just that he knows what the worst case scenario could be (nearly six years of his life, now, he's been dealing with the worst case scenario every night), and he can't not. It's *Rachel*. Despite every reason not to, he loves Rachel, she's one of the most important people in his life, she has been *impossibly* good to him over the years while he's been - as far as she knows - moody and unpredictable and a terrible, terrible friend. She's put up with his awful hours and his sleep-deprived rattiness and his kitchen fascism (that's not related to the superheroing, that's just because things will go in the correct place and that is the end of any discussion), god, she *maced* a guy for him once, she's his *best friend*. They don't talk about it but he thinks she knows that he doesn't want to talk about it, and they both know what would have happened. He can't explain to her the particular painful twist of that escape, why he can't bring himself to think about it. She doesn't know . . .

She doesn't know so many things. He's never been fair to Rachel.

He follows along the edge of buildings, invisible and holding his too-numb arm to himself, trying to avoid people walking right through him, watching her stride frustrated along the sidewalk. It's dark, and people are busy with any number of both harmless and not-so-harmless activities, but the weird thing is that two blocks *that way* are expensive restaurants and wedding planners and boutiques, this city's just got too much of everything crammed together like a nest of ants, because *here* it's the cold wind off the Hudson and the Ghost is fairly certain that those guys in that empty building yard are stealing copper but he's not exactly in any position to do anything about it, while Rachel approaches a woman standing under a

streetlight who tells her where the nearest subway station is, which isn't what she'd asked, and adds, not exactly cruelly, "Just fuck off home, okay honey?"

He follows her, and thinks, Rachel, this isn't your world.

Nor is it Kurt's, Kurt has led a very sheltered life from all of this. But it is the Ghost's . . .

Rachel not them, he thinks, face screwing up. Don't walk up to them, they are high. How can you not tell that they are high. God's *sake*, Rachel -

Rachel backs off again quickly. The Ghost sighs, in the shadows, and rubs his sore arm a little, and thinks, You don't need to do this to be an investigative reporter, Rachel. You don't need to put your neck on the line to prove something to some bitter teacher of yours, journalists are brave when they look past the easy story and tell the difficult truth, not only when they're out alone in the dark. You could have written something real and genuinely dangerous just by sifting through other people's information, it's people like you finding the flaws in how we view the world that changes how we *can* view the world. You are actually *good* at writing opinion pieces. You mean it and you care about it and it shows. It might be nice if they weren't all about how evil *I* must be but it turns out that being really opinionated means there's a real place for you in the world, and you should be at home on the sofa on your laptop, you shouldn't be out here . . .

Neither should you, 'superhero' with multiple semi-healed broken bones.

(Blaine will kill me. But not if I kill him first, why didn't he pick up his *phone* -?)

She heads a little further north. They're far away from all the parkland now, all those nice green spaces planted alongside the river, here are the rusted piers - no fancy, shiny white yachts moored to these like they are further south - disused loading docks, old factories not yet gentrified. It's here that the hairs rise, a little, on the back of his neck. It's quieter, here. New York is so rarely quiet, one thing he should have trusted in instead of following her out like this was that hardly anything can happen unseen in New York, there are *always* people around, doesn't he - constantly caught on cameras he doesn't even realise are there - know that all too well? But - but here it is quiet. No loitering men and women, no people heading out to bars, not even drug dealers impatiently jiggling their hands in their pockets. Quiet as the grave.

And the Ghost, who knows this city, who walks in all its darkest places, thinks, If I spoke to some people who just might speak to me but never a cop, they might tell me, *We don't go there anymore. We know not to go there. We know the things we're better not seeing.*

There's a guy smoking up against the side of a van at the base of a pier. The Ghost - feels the prickle, between his shoulder blades, lowers his arm carefully to his side, hurries, a little, to follow Rachel's approach. He's kept his distance, even invisible he's wary, he *knows* Rachel can't get a good look at him like this, and he's far enough away that he can't see the set of her jaw, though he can see the determined set of her stride. The man drops his cigarette, *looks* at her when she announces a question and pushes the iPhone at him. And then -

Two other men are coming out of the rust-rickety building at the base of the pier, one of them wiping his hands off on his pants, heading back to the van. Rachel, suddenly very outnumbered, hesitates. The man by the van says, "Get the fuck out of here, bitch." and Rachel takes one step back, weight paused like a deer to flee but *holding her ground*, saying shakily, "What are you three doing - in the middle of the night on a disused pier -"

The guy lunges to grab her. Rachel takes a photograph right in his face and he *swears* at the flash but she's too slow in turning, his blind hand still snatches and twists on her upper arm, and the two guys are running to get to them now -

The Ghost gets there first. He becomes visible grabbing the guy's arm, ghosts his grip right through Rachel, turns and uses the guy's own weight and momentum to throw him right over his shoulder, and his ribs wrench a discordant accordion note in his chest -

Idiot. Idiot, he let instinct take over, *idiot*, should've haunted him, should've tasered him, should've - he staggers back, a small noise punched out of him with the pain, a diaphragm-low *un*. The other two guys are *yelling* now, and he looks up to see the drawn gun, grabs Rachel's arm - she's staring at him open-mouthed, huge-eyed, this is *way* too much for her to process all at once - and *runs*.

She jerks into the run after him, while he grits his teeth and concentrates as much as he can on ghosting them, pain squeezing and stretching his ribcage. Two bullets zip through his body and one must go through Rachel - she suddenly, violently *screams* - and almost trips, he has to catch her with his body more than his useless right arm, then yank her into the run again. Away from the water, straight at the first

building he can see, the edges of his vision are already going dark, he can hear his own breath too loud, ghosting two people and his ribs and the jerking of his arm -

Rachel shrieks, "No-!" as they ghost through the wall - it's like running face-first through a smokescreen so thick the whole world goes dark, and he knows that the *normal* reaction to running right at a wall is panic - and inside the Ghost stops, heart pounding his crackling ribs, hanging his head in the hood, she can't see his face, he can't let her see his -

Rachel wrenches her arm out of his hand, backs away with her phone held tight to her chest, spits, "*Don't touch me don't you dare I am carrying mace-*"

He keeps his head low in the hood, turned slightly away, and tries to breathe. Pain speckles and narrows his vision and it's pitch black in here anyway, as Rachel lights a flashlight function on her phone and he lifts his head dazedly; warehouse, there are shipping containers piled up around them, filing cabinets against the wall, a dusty semi-pornographic calendar hung over them. He lets the fall of the cloak disguise that he puts a hand on one of the cabinets, to bear his weight better, because he feels like he's going to be sick. Didn't think that through. Idiot. Should've just haunted him, in *this* state, Blaine will - Mike will - his *dad* will - idiot. It could've been a lot worse but god, he didn't think that through, as his ribs wheeze and jar with pain . . .

Rachel lets her breath out heavy and shaking. "Thank you," she says, clipped but trembling a little, "for getting me away from them. But just so you know, I do *not* approve of what you do, I do *not* trust you, you can't buy people into liking you by rescuing them."

He keeps his head down, and breathes. And as weird as this is - as terrifying as this is, because Rachel is not stupid and he can't let her see his face even in this dim lighting - some small part of him wants to smile; Rachel Berry, life threatened, *shot* at, rescued by the superhero she hates - is still determined to let him know that. Her teacher's an idiot. Who could ever say that this woman doesn't have more guts than a person could *need*?

She rubs her arms, bristling, and says, "It's *creepy*, you just turn up out of nowhere and - how do we ever know you're *not* there -?"

He swallows, and breathes, and he's already thinking that he needs to get Rachel out of this area but he knows that won't be easy if she doesn't trust him and he can't let her see his face, this is . . .

Something in Rachel's stance has changed. "Are you okay?"

I just threw someone who weighs more than I do over my shoulder on top of my three cracked ribs. I'm not exactly feeling the best I've ever felt, no. He swallows his own sickly saliva, drops his voice an octave - it grates low with pain anyway - and says, "Please let me get you to safety, ma'am."

She says, wispy, frightened, determined voice, "I don't need babysitting by a criminal." and then they hear -

Noises, from the big doors at the front of the warehouse. The Ghost lifts his head, grabs her phone to muffle the light; "Off," he rasps, low, and Rachel's face is too pale as she kills the light. He swallows again, hard, pushes himself off from the filing cabinet as a gun goes off (the lock, shit) and reaches for Rachel's arm to walk and ghost her out of -

His step twists this weird way, there's no strength in his knees. Rachel catches his arms, his weight, staggering back with him, and she says in a cracking voice, "You're - how are you hurt, *why* are you hurt - ?"

The doors screech with rust, and grind against the concrete floor as they're pulled open.

He has to get Rachel out of here. He has to get her to safety. But black bubbles are popping in his eyes, and it's Rachel who hisses, "Stay quiet." and drags him through the dark (his right arm, the pain grinds hot in the bone), so their backs press to a container, yanking him in against her hot thrumming side and the container's cold hard metal.

The dark's pierced by the light from the opening door - it's big enough for a truck but they've only opened it enough to admit a couple of people, it's still midnight dark, line of light on the ground like the line of a sword and the dim edges of containers revealed. There's murmuring near the doors, and footsteps click, grind a little on the dusty concrete floor.

Shit, shit, shit.

"Quiet," Rachel so, so barely says, low as a breath in the chest. And she starts pulling him away from the doors, along the edge of the container, slow as she can dare with men moving through the dark looking for them. They turn the corner, press their backs to the darker side of a container, and it's difficult to make his breath quiet enough to keep them safe . . .

His vision's blotching darker in places, and he's scared to try to move them out of here in case with one step his knees go. So they wait. In the silence and the dark and the fear, breath muffled, hearts racing, they wait.

Footsteps circle them, the bright beam of flashlights fly across the walls. Slowly they hear the approach of someone muttering, "Fuckin' invisible creepy fuck -" and Rachel's hand tightens on his arm, he grabs her wrist involuntarily - the pain startled him like a punch - and she *just* stops a choked breath, stares at him shocked while he unpeels her hand from his arm, can't, he can't bear it -

He meant for her to take his other arm, if she has to hold him. She puts her hand in his instead, and squeezes the glove hard. He closes his eyes, keeps his head down, squeezes back.

(I will keep you safe, I *will*, I *have* to -)

A voice is approaching their corner, their nothing of a hiding place with the flashlight a quick wobbling beam out in front. "Why's he rescuing girls anyway, everyone knows he's a fuckin' faggot -"

He squeezes her hand, and fades them invisible. He hears the soft intake of her breath, he knows it's strange, knows it's weird and unsettling in a really fundamental way to see your body fade away like it doesn't exist, it's *scary*, just before one of the guys turns the corner, gun raised, looking nowhere near them as he stares around the dim of the warehouse, still murmuring, "Come the fuck on out Casper you cocksucking -"

Rachel's hand is shaking in his, god he knows it's scary, please Rachel, please, please just be as brave as you're being for just a little -

Rachel's cell *bloops* a text message.

The guy spins and looks wildly all around them, flashlight streaming through them, gun aimed right at them and Rachel can't stop the shriek, and the Ghost lifts his leaden, hopeless right arm to take her arm in a trembling grip and tries to concentrate on invisibility, on ghosting, on not existing enough for their bullets -

"Fucking fucking creepy fuck -" the guy chokes, backing off, gun and flashlight still shakily aimed on where they are. "Fuck, they're here! Can't - can't see them, they're still in here -"

There's the sound of tyres outside, popping and gritting on the concrete. Help? the Ghost thinks, too wildly, too desperately, if someone intervenes - if someone's passing by - there are people getting out of the car, but -

"C'mon out, they're here, they got it." someone calls, and the guy with the gun stares at them and through them at the same time, shaking, then spits out, "Creepy *fuck*." and *runs* around the container for the entrance. The Ghost squeezes her hand tighter, need to get moving, need to get out of here, no choice, need to -

Low murmured voices at the entrance, and he drags his wobbling breath in, starts walking Rachel for the back wall to just ghost them out of here -

They're fading back into view. He stops, *confused* as the panic rises, he's never - he tries to concentrate, his hands are shaking, closes his eyes and tries to make them safe, unseen, *safe*, but when he opens them they're even more solidly *there*, and sickness picks through his guts like playing a harp . . .

"What -" Rachel whispers, and he doesn't understand, he feels so sick and -

"Here." He jolts as he spins, his ribs jump and grind and Rachel is gripping his hand tight enough to hurt as the Ghost stares at that blond super through bursting bubbles of black, that blond super whose face looks too blank, grim but *pale* and too young, like he feels ill. "They're here," he says, looking right at the Ghost, who stares back, and can't make himself not be seen.

More footsteps. He backs Rachel for the wall, if he can just ghost her through then she can *run*, if he can just - there's a man approaching, quite tall and thin, walking straight at him like he's not afraid of him at all and the Ghost can't - *trying* to lurches a panic inside him, he *can't* - make himself unseen. His breath huffs out hard through his nose, he presses Rachel behind his cloak, they can't - he throws a hand up to haunt him.

The man grabs his wrist.

Hand gripping tight to the bone like the Ghost is no ghost at all, and he can't - can't make himself intangible, can't make him stop touching him, can't - can't do *anything* -

He doesn't understand and he can't make himself invisible and he can't make him stop touching him. Can't. Can't do anything. Can't do *anything* -

His voice drops out of him like a stone, a pebble, small and useless in this big dark building, he doesn't mean to say it, it just is, the only thought, the only word left to him, tiny feeble useless word -

"- *no* -"

The man sinks a syringe into his hanging arm, his useless right arm, and the Ghost's breath sucks back into him again, and the black rises so suddenly, like the ground does.

"No," he says, and there's heaviness, the ground, then nothing.

*

For two minutes, Central Park glitters with lights, so many tiny little lights in the dark, in silence.

The traffic still runs them by, a plane is flying overhead. But they're silent, the crowd of them, there are so many people and they're utterly silent, holding their little lights and each other's hands, and Phalanx understands the way the joggers in the park slow as they approach them, the way people walking past on the sidewalk fall silent too. The silence spreads from them, almost like a sound. The silence hums around them. The silence speaks.

Respect, they had said, online. It's about that and more than that. They know that superheroes face awful things. They know that the Ghost, despite all their hope, probably isn't MIA for *nice* reasons. They know he's owed something that no-one will ever actually be capable of giving him. All they can give him is this: the fact that they know that. Silence and knowledge. They know the kind of things he's sacrificed, and that acknowledgment matters. And Phalanx watches them and is silent too, for them more than for him, awed by all their silence and all they mean by it.

The strangest things you do, to mean so much, to matter so much, to acknowledge how much someone *else* matters, so, so much . . .

One of the organisers lifts her head when the two minutes end. The people standing closest to her start clapping. It spreads, outwards, with a murmur of voices like a building wave; soon the applause is drumming the New York sidewalk, whistles and cheering, Phalanx's throat unexpectedly closes, his eyes fill, as after the silence there is so much *noise*, there's so much of everything, so much feeling for *him* -

The atmosphere gets brighter, more carnival-like, but there's still an edge of unease down there and Phalanx knows they wish they'd seen him, they wish the Ghost had come to acknowledge their acknowledgement. Phalanx bends his mouth, thinks how happy they'll be when he *does* show up again, completely out of the blue as far as they know, at least there's that to look forward to . . .

People stay for a long time before they begin peeling away, in little groups. New York bars will be mobbed with fanghosts tonight. There'll be so many new friendships just forging down there, people who've never met face to face before, people who've never met before, it's a big fandom, heading off to get to know more of each other than just that they both love the Ghost. Phalanx smiles, *that* is definitely part of this he'll be telling Kurt about, and watches over them until there's just the organisers left, gathering the buckets of change for charities they'd collected, the bucket of messages for their website, hauling trash bags to the litter points. He watches the little group of them gather to talk, and then head off themselves to somewhere warmer, somewhere indoors. It's nearly eleven o' clock, he should check if Kurt's asleep yet . . .

By the time he's Blaine again, back in his room, picking up his cell, it's half past eleven and he has a *lot* of missed calls, Kurt *really* wanted to get in touch with him. He winces in his guilt as he picks up his voicemail, and his face freezes as Kurt's voice says, too forcibly steady, "*Rachel is on some demented mission to get herself killed on the docks, I have to go out after her. The piers, it's the piers we were - the area's is in my room if you need it, come out after us as soon as you can, please.*"

The rational response is simply, This can't be happening. Kurt would not go out with multiple broken bones for any reason, he's not stupid, he doesn't want to make himself worse, get himself killed. Except -

Except that the part of him that is not rational, the part of him that loves and knows Kurt with the intimacy they have, *knowing* each other on a level somewhere deeper than knowledge - yes. Kurt would. If he thought someone else (*Rachel*) was immediately in danger, Kurt would put himself between them and any horrible fate they might meet in a heartbeat. And those piers - he doesn't need to check the area, he *knows* where Kurt means -

He calls him with numb and tremulous hands, they feel weirdly bigger than they are, and the phone rings, and rings, and rings.

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck fuck. Dizzy with panic he texts Rachel; *Hey, got some antsy messages from Kurt, are you ok? :)* and he immediately drops his cell, pulls his costume back on, he's going out the window like this, there isn't the *time*.

Rachel doesn't reply, anyway. He takes his cell with him this time. Kurt hates that, Kurt hates any overlap with *themselves* when they're in costume, but if either of them contact Blaine rather than Phalanx then he needs to know, he *needs* to know -

As fast as he can get there - which isn't fast enough - Kurt never had narrowed them down to a single point of where they needed to look. Phalanx remembers the highlighted area on the Western riverfront but it's not exactly a tiny area, and even when he's there, skimming on shield-slides, running across rooftops and skating across shields again - there's no sign of either of them, and god they could be *anywhere*. He remembers -

Fuck he's stupid when he panics. He stops on a rooftop, breath running too hard, and goes through Phalanx's cell, because the Ghost set them up so they could track each other. Except the Ghost's cell doesn't seem to exist to be tracked. Out of battery, or signal . . . or something happened to it. Because if it got - destroyed -

This can't be happening. He stands on the roof of some old warehouse, alone, and the Ghost is somewhere out there horribly vulnerable and not responding to Phalanx's messages. If there was trouble - would the Ghost's powers be enough? He can't *fight* like this, surely, could he get them to safety with just his powers and Jesus can he keep Rachel from knowing it's *him*? But right now Phalanx doesn't care, doesn't care if Rachel knows everything about them down to their pillow talk if only that means that the Ghost is *okay*.

He stands there dumb for some time, trying to think what to do, he *can't*. What can he do? They're *gone*. They're just *gone* and he has no idea where and he can't help them, he can't do *anything*.

He can keep looking. Stop whining to yourself and *find* him. You think the Ghost would stand around wringing his hands like this this if it was *you* missing? Find him, you have to find him, you *have* to find him, because the worst case scenario for the Ghost going missing is that he does literally that, that he actually does *vanish*, that the possibility that has hovered at Kurt's shoulder for all of his life finally becomes fact: that he will disappear, beyond touch and beyond comfort, that the ghosts have finally claimed him as one of their own, dragged him away from life's warm glow, into the cold and the dark they've been backing him towards all along. That Kurt has performed that ultimate disappearing trick, that Kurt has outdone

Houdini and he never will tell how. That not only will no-one who loves him ever see him again, none of them will ever even know *why*.

He searches, through the night, with the hopelessness a coldness eating up through his heart, because how can you search for a *ghost*?

*

There is breathing, in the dark. He's laying on - it shifts under him, and is warm with a body's quiet warmth - a lap. It's better than many ways he could wake up. It's not Blaine. A woman's lap. A woman - ?

He opens his eyes to blackness, laying on his back with his head cradled in Rachel's crossed legs, his hands pinned uncomfortably behind himself, her arms folded around his chest, and a line of light tells him where a doorway might be though they're in the utter dark, like being inside solidity; but they are alive . . .

He swallows, and takes a long breath, lets it out, feeling through his body for the pain. There's a dullness, a heaviness to every part of him, and he remembers that he was drugged, but *god*, his bones. Idiot to come out like this. Idiot. His jolted ribs ache, his arm pinned behind his back *howls*, white-hot pain but he has to ignore it, he can't - his wrists are in some kind of cuffs. He thinks, dazedly, What did they hope *that* would achieve?

He's still wearing his mask, he can feel it on his face. He doesn't understand that.

Above his head Rachel says quietly, "Are you awake?"

He closes his eyes, nods; he's not sure if he can speak yet.

Rachel breathes, overhead, then says dully, "I have actually no idea what to say to you."

He opens his eyes again, through the throbbing advancing and retreating of the pain. He wets his lips, tries to clear his dry throat but he feels so *tired*, what did they drug him with . . . ? His voice sounds too rough, like its edge has torn on the dryness in his throat; "Don't use my name."

He knows that whatever happened between that warehouse and here, Rachel has seen his face. Even if the bad guys don't know who he is, she does. And it sinks such guilt inside him; in Rachel's position, he wouldn't know what to say to him either.

It's so dark. He stares directly upward, somewhere through her face - he can see the very edge of her cheek, maybe - and murmurs, "Where are we?"

Rachel takes a shaky little breath. "Inside a big metal storage container. One of those storage depots, I don't know where, they brought us here in the back of the van. We were going north."

There's a storage depot he'd marked down as a 'possible'. Gold fucking star, he thinks, and closes his eyes again.

Rachel swallows, and her arms pull a little closer around his chest. "I don't - I don't know how to - *years*, I - it's been *years* and I -"

"I'm sorry."

"I can't call you that, I can't call you 'the Ghost' -"

"Rachel, I'm sorry."

"Didn't you - *god* why didn't you tell me -?" Her voice twists, sharp on the pain's sharp edge. "You let me write all that - you let me *think* all that and you never -"

"It wasn't safe, it's never safe, I'm sorry, Rachel, I'm - I *wanted* to -"

She's crying. He just lays there, floating on the exhaustion, the pain, the too-much of all of it. "Are you okay?"

"I'm losing my *mind*, I can't - it's him, isn't it? He's Phalanx."

He lets his breath out, oh, god, Blaine. Heart like a weight in his chest; "I'm sorry."

"Stop saying that! Why didn't you *tell* me, I must have - looked so *stupid* to you never working it out, I'm trying to think - all those times you 'worked late' or - do you follow me around like that a *lot*?"

"No. First time, Rachel, I promise. I knew . . . I knew you could run into serious trouble on those piers, I've been researching them, I knew something was . . . I had to come after you. I just had to."

He can hear her swallow, hard with anger.

"All those times you've been . . . you were never hit by a car, were you?"

"No," he says, quietly. "Hit by a supervillain. Sorry."

"Stop *saying* that like it - I -" She takes a hand back, and he hears her wipe her face, sniffing hard. "Why didn't you *tell* me?"

"Because it's not safe. No-one knows who doesn't *have* to know, Rachel, we're - we're here now, do you understand how dangerous this . . . ?"

"Then why the hell are you *doing* it? You're not - you're not -"

He waits, then says, so, so tired, "I'm not what, Rachel?"

She's silent for a long time, while he just lays bedded down on all his exhaustion, that drug's aftereffects have him too tired to *move*. Rachel's hand finds his forehead in the dark, rests there under the hood, over the mask. She says, "I don't even know who you are, do I?"

"Of course y- you know - I'm just, I'm sorry. I'm sorry -"

"Does Finn know?"

He lays there under her hand, so tired. "He knew I had the powers. He worked out - when I started, when he heard about it, him, *me*, on the news. Rachel, it's not like I was trying to - lie to you on purpose, we didn't even live together when I started, I just -"

"You *just what*, why did everyone know and - you let me say all those *things* about you, about - about supers," her voice has thickened, "right in front of you and you never *said* and do you know how stupid and ugly and *awful* I feel - ?"

"I don't care," he says, quietly. "I know you didn't hate *me*, I knew it was never about me, not really -"

"You don't know what it's *like*," she chokes at him.

He's so tired. He's so tired he can hardly think. "No. I don't. And I'm sorry that I don't, but I can't." He wishes he could see her face. "You don't know what this is like either, Rachel. I wished I could tell - I did, over the years, I *wished* I could tell you sometimes, I couldn't tell - only my family knew and I didn't want to worry them so I could never tell them what it got like, when it was hard, I couldn't tell *anyone*. But I needed . . . you're my best friend. Of course I wished I could tell you. You have no idea." He remembers the loneliness, memory of that loneliness is always circling him, prowling, desperate, *starving*, always waiting for its chance to press its claws through his flesh again. "All the time."

She says quietly, "Then why didn't you?"

". . . because of the danger. And because -" He stops. Might as well be honest, now of all times. "Because sometimes it did hurt, when you said . . ." It's so, so dark. He wets his lips, and his voice comes very soft. "Sometimes it did hurt. I'm sorry."

She wipes off her face again, and her voice is too thick. "Why are you sorry when I'm the one who said it?"

"I just am." He tests his hands, behind himself, wriggling in the cuffs; he's pretty familiar with handcuffs but these are weirdly bulky, press at his wrists in a strange way. "I'm used to things being my fault. Can I - if you help me up I can try to ghost out of -"

She helps him to sit, useless heavy body of his, and keeps a hand on his shoulder. "I can't - that you can do this. I can't . . . get my head around this."

"Imagine my surprise," he says dryly, and ghosts.

He's bent into Rachel's body, making little noises he can't stop with each too-quick breath while she digs her fingers into his shoulders and chokes, "- okay it's okay it's okay -"

He hangs there, stunned with the aftereffects of pain, like being punched in the lungs, trying to understand what the hell just happened. "- I -"

"You're okay, you're okay -"

Cuffs. He flexes his wrists in them and feels that strange, slight give in them, gripping to his gloves. Pressure sensors. When the pressure's less, when he ghosts - what the fuck *voltage* was that - ?

He lets his head slump to Rachel's shoulder, lays there with his heart still running too hard, every breath like something snapping in his ribs. "Thought it through," he mutters. "They thought it through. I -" He's never met anyone who's actually thought it through before. "Crap."

Can't use his powers. Couldn't use them then, he remembers, cold inside, that man -

They can't know what it does to him, that someone touched him and he *couldn't* make them stop. But he knows. He knows . . .

Rachel runs her fingers through his hair, his hood's fallen back, and she says trying not to sound panicked, "He'll come, won't he? To help you. Phalanx."

He closes his eyes in the throbbing dark, he can see the pained pulse of his blood behind his eyelids. That man -

Him. He was the reason. He deadened the Ghost's powers. That blond super hadn't even been *running*, he could have knocked the Ghost down dead in the state he's in but he wasn't using his powers either, he - the man muffles supers' powers just by being near them. He's a fire blanket. He extinguishes them.

He thinks, small and cold and desperate in the dark, Oh god, Blaine, don't. Don't come out for me, don't come after me, *don't*. I couldn't even keep Rachel safe, I can't bear this for you as well, *please*, don't. Leave me. Forget me. Don't pick up your phone. Don't come after me. *Please*.

Phalanx facing a man who steals his powers, leaves him helpless, Phalanx caught in this because of him . . .

Because he understands, now, what has happened. His powers are essentially done, the Ghost is no ghost at all. He can't fight, broken and cuffed as he is. And they have *Rachel*, how the hell is he going to even *try* to fight back if they have Rachel to hurt? And if is the Mottas, if this is them . . .

Oh Jesus I hope he doesn't. Please, please, please, Blaine, no, not you . . .

It's not just that they're going to kill him. Of course they're going to kill him. It's - he's found the bodies they've left, he's seen what they're capable of when someone's pissed them off in merely petty ways and the Ghost knows what he's done to them, the money he's cost them, and he knows how much money means to them because of what they're willing to do to other people to get it. They *hate* him. God, he knows they hate him, more than anyone.

It's not just that they'll kill him. It's the ways they'll kill him. And why would he want Blaine to risk walking into *this* for him - ?

Rachel eases him down again, his body feels like it's been hit by the world's biggest hammer and his mind has gone horribly quiet, horribly rushed, this horrible whispering clarity of -

If he is very, very lucky, his body will be so unidentifiable that his dad will never have to know.

He's going to be sick. He's too aware of it for a cold-sweated second before he manages to force the terror to a lower pitch because *yes* they will make sure that you know every second of your death but there is nothing you can do about it so there's no point *whining* -

There'll be no dignity by the end of it, and the only mercy is that by then he'll be so far past being able to care about that.

Rachel brushes his hair back from his forehead with his thumbs, cupping his head in her hands, breathing scared in the dark. "What do we do?"

He swallows his fear-sour saliva down, and rasps, "I don't know." He clears his throat. "I don't know, Rachel, I'm sorry." He closes his eyes. "I don't know how this part works. I really don't have much experience in being rescued."

*

He has to stop and sit on the lip of a building's roof, back to the drop and hands over his face, because he has to make himself not cry.

It's half past one in the morning and there's no sign of them. Neither Kurt nor Rachel respond to calls or texts, and the Ghost's cell, he can only assume, is out of action. He can't find them. He isn't capable of it, isn't enough, doesn't have a *clue*, and he's trying to stifle down the rising panic of knowing -

He will have to call Finn. He will have to call Mr Hummel. He will have to tell them . . . and he wasn't there, and it's never him, it's always someone else, it's never him and he can never *help* . . .

. . . and he thinks that he's no hero, not even a little bit, not at all, because he would give back every single person he's saved since this started, he would let them suffer *anything*, if it just got him Kurt back now.

A sound like wind, but too . . . narrow . . . ?

He lifts his head, his eyes feel *scoured*, and looks up - jaw held hard and grim as granite and eyes raw with not crying - at that blond super, breathing a little hard, bending forward with his hands on his knees and making a *hoo* noise of, *That was hard work*, standing back up again and lifting a hand in greeting. "Hey. Been looking for you all over, not the easiest guy to -"

He doesn't even stand up. He just doesn't care. "What do you want?" and then - his body unfolds, he comes to his feet with his hands tightening in their fists. "What do you *want*?"

The guy looks at him a little uneasily from the other side of the roof, head cocked, like he's working him out. Then he says, "You're missing something, huh? I can help."

"Help." The word is a joke. "Why the hell should I trust you? Why the hell should I think you even know anything, you're worse than nothing, you're a murderer's lapdog, everything you could be doing and you -"

"Dude, we don't have the time for this crap." he says, though his jaw flexes with something he holds back. He reaches into his jeans pocket, tugs something out, checks it and reaches out with it in his open hand. Phalanx just stares, hands held so tight they hurt, quivering a little in the Hudson wind, not knowing - what this might -

The guy rolls his eyes, and tosses the thing - bright, delicate - across the roof at him. It hits and skims along the surface, stopping a little way in front of his boots. He stares down at it. Fine silver chain.

He bends, and closes his gloved fingers around it, lifts it from the gritted roof. *Blood type A . . .*

"The boss is out of town," the blond super says. "They won't kill him 'til he's back, won't even unmask him, he wants it on camera. But there's not much time, they'll still -"

He stares at the thing in his hand, pale gleaming in the night, flimsy cold little thing that last wrapped Kurt's warm wrist. "Where is he?"

"Dude, it is not as easy as we just walk in an' grab him back, okay, this isn't -"

"Why should I trust you?" He closes his hand around the chain. "Why the *hell* should I trust you, what even is this, why should I believe -" His throat is tearing, it has to be for how much it *hurts* - "that he's even still *alive* -?"

"I want out." the blond super says, hands in anxious fists at his sides, eyes all nervous and big and young on Phalanx. "I want out. This isn't what I signed up for. I wanted - I just wanted to help my mom and dad and kid brother and sister, they - there's people dying. I didn't want this. This isn't what I -"

"What did you *think* would happen, he'd want you for a superpowered *gardener* or something? Half the gang violence in this city, the drugs and the extortion and the robberies and the forced sex work and -"

"I know, okay, I know! It was stupid but - Jesus we had *nothing*, do you understand, we had *nothing*, we'd've been on the streets an' what the hell was I supposed to do, watching Mom trying to make the food bank stuff last the week, watching Dad just *lose* it, you've got no idea but I just -" He shakes his head out, hard. "Dude, this isn't the time. He doesn't deserve this, I know - I know that he's done a lot of good stuff for people and he doesn't deserve what they'll-"

He puts his hand over his eyes, squeezes the chain tight in his fist. "We don't have time for this. We don't. Just tell me where he is and I'll go for him, you just - just run away." He shrugs, and his voice comes too rough. "You should be good at that."

"You don't understand, they have this guy -"

"I don't care who they have. I'll get past an army for him."

"You've got to *listen*, they have this *guy*, he used to work for the government - back when they were registering supers, he was all up in that, 'cause he's a super himself but he's - he's not like us, he doesn't *do* anything, he just - all he does is damp us down." The blond super folds his arms, rubs them awkwardly. "No powers," he says. "Just being near him, they just cut out." He shrugs. "You're just a guy against him."

Blaine as 'just a guy' will still kill that bastard for ever hurting -

Oh, shit.

Oh, shit, shit, shit.

He deadened his powers. He made it so the Ghost couldn't ghost. He knows that if the Ghost is conscious now he'll know the danger he's in, he's not stupid, he knows what the Mottas will do to him at their utterly non-existent 'mercy'. But more than that - he couldn't ghost. *Christ*, he couldn't - it's not *good*, maybe, the way Kurt views his powers, the way Blaine of all people knows that Kurt takes enough comfort to be able to meet the world in the eye just from the fact that if he *wanted* to, no-one could see him, no-one could touch him, he knows that Kurt can sometimes only cope at all because disappearing is always an option. Kurt exists, on the knife-edge of not existing, in a world he can find desperately threatening, because he has the option of invisibility. Take that away from him - put him on the internet with no idea what's happening and nowhere to hide - put him in front of the man who first had him at his mercy and abused that utterly - put him in the hands of someone he *can't stop touching him* -

He'll be terrified, Phalanx's fingers are almost too weak to hold the chain, oh god he'll be *terrified* and Blaine's not *there* . . .

"There's a bunch of guys there with guns," the blond super says. "Are you even listening to me? You can't just charge in, okay, they'll blow two dozen holes in you before you get anywhere near him, no shields, you understand that? *No powers*. You want him back, we need a *plan*."

He licks his lips, stares through him, whispers on automatic, "What plan?"

The Mottas, the Mottas who *hate* the Ghost, the Ghost who told him about the mob bodies he's found - *people in parts* -

There's no way in hell it would just be a bullet, not for how long and how much they've hated him. And the thought of him - him, so beautiful and good and *alive* - the thought that they will - oh god and Blaine knows every inch of his skin, the thought that they'll - he can't bear the *words* for what they'll do to him, he can't connect those words with his body -

They'll want their revenge. They'll want him so much less than a superhero by the end of it. They'll want him less than human. The thought that they will - maim and hurt and torture -

"Hey." the blond super's walking to him, and Phalanx realises that he must have been speaking to him and he didn't hear a word of it. "Are you okay?"

He doesn't know what to do. He feels like a kid, like a kid faced with the worst and he can't do *anything* to help - he shakes his head, and the blond super stares at him, wary of the closeness, then puts a hand around his arm. "We need a plan," he says, again, and squeezes his arm. "Okay? The super they've got, the ex-government guy, he's the one who - does the science stuff, look, I don't know what they do, I didn't ask questions, he's trying to work out how superpowers work. He's s'posed to be - extracting his powers from him. To put in someone else. You know he's like a dream criminal, all invisible and stuff, right?"

He whispers, tongue too numb, "He would never."

"Yeah. So they want to make other 'Ghosts', who would. Look, he's alive, okay? While they're working on that, he's alive, so we just have to get him out before they finish."

"What will they - do to -"

The blond super shakes his head, and swallows. "Don't know, man. Sorry. They injected me with stuff, some sort of blood transfusion, there was some kind of radiation or something. Don't know how they do it - the other way 'round. Pulling the powers *out*."

Blaine squeezes the fist holding the chain, lifts it to press it to his mouth, thinking thinking frantically - you need to get him out of there, no powers, you have to get him out of there, no *powers* -

... he's been hanging around the Ghost for too long; he forgot that help is even an option.

"I need to call some people," he says, lowering his hands from his mouth, swallowing and clearing his throat, putting his head up again, setting his shoulders, you can freak out *afterwards*, now he *needs* you. "How long do you think we have?"

He gives a shrug of *I don't know*. "Boss won't be back 'til tomorrow."

"So, by the morning. Can't risk longer." He opens a compartment on his belt, takes a cell out, drops the chain in. Then he sits down, and yanks his own boot off. "What's your name, anyway? I don't even know what to call you."

"Sam." He puts his hands in his pockets, rocks back and forth on his ankles a bit. "Am I getting yours or are you just 'Phalanx'?"

His squirming fingers catch the paper's edge, ease it out, and he bites on it while he stuffs the undersole back down again. "Do you know who he is yet?"

"Nope. No unmasking 'til the boss is back."

"Then just Phalanx." Boot back on he catches the paper in his fingers, opens it to dial. No point hiding if Kurt was unmasked. But while there's hope, tiniest glimmer of it, faintest star in the dark, while he's alive there's *hope* . . .

I'm coming for you, angel I promise, I'll make it work, I'll do it right this time, I'll get you back, I *will*. Because it can't end like this. Not for you. Not for us.

I'll get you out of there, I swear it, with or without powers, I am not letting this be how it ends, not for you. I have shields for a *reason*, for the same reason that you're the only person in the world who can get through them, I have them because *you* need them and I will get this right for you . . .

I can't never see you again. I can't never speak to you again and be touched by you again and see your eyes and your smile, the world can't be like that. It can't. I have shields for a *reason*. If you're not there to protect then what the hell is the point of me - ?

I will get this right. I will get this right. I will get this right. I will. I will. I *will* . . .

*

He doesn't know how long they're silent for. He's sunk to a very deep place inside himself, some stark place stricken silent by this knowledge, alone with Rachel holding him with this knowledge, nothing exists but the knowledge that very soon he's going to be tortured to death and all he can do is bear it. He's found mob bodies before. He knows . . .

He's never going to see Blaine again. Never going to see his dad again. Never going to see Finn, or Carole, or anyone he works with, never going to see the autumn collection come out, never going to just be *friends* with Mike and Tina, never going - he's already had the last cup of coffee he'll ever have.

You didn't have a bad life, he tells himself, a little desperately, numb in the numbing dark. You didn't. You had your family and you had Blaine. You really didn't -

He can't. He can't make himself be okay with it, he can't - they hate him. He knows the exact way they hate him, because it's enraging to be thwarted by a superhero but it's *humiliating* to be thwarted by a gay superhero. He always understood the very specific danger he was playing with, himself in this world, himself walking out like a dare in a cloak in the night in this world, picking fights with people who by definition are not *good* people. He knew the risk, if he fucked up for even a fraction of a second. It's not just being beaten to death, or the breaking of bones, or the stubbing of cigarettes, or god knows what other inventive mutilating sadism. There are things, there are forms of bodily violation thought specifically appropriate to women and anyone, like gay men, who doesn't play by society's very strict rules of gender and thus nominates themselves to be taught a lesson about their powerlessness in the face of those rules; he *knows* how bad this could be.

He can't. No-one can ask him to face that and not be afraid. No-one can ask him - the fear makes his head too heavy and too light, he's dizzy with it laying on Rachel's lap, he can't grasp anything solid through all of it, what they'll do to him - he can't -

He can't. He just can't. No-one can ask him to face this. But the only options . . . there are no options. There's . . . they took his utility belts, he has nothing. His cloak. They left him his cloak.

Rachel, he could say. If you took my cloak off me, and folded it up very thick, and just held it over my face until I stopped -

The thing that scares him the most, always, is his own mind.

Can't. Can't ask Rachel to do that. Can't leave Rachel alone with them, he might not be able to *do* anything but he's here, he's here and he's supposed to be a *superhero* and he wants to cry because he knows how they'll kill him, minute by dragging minute, god, *hours* . . .

Rachel's hand brushes at his hair. "He'll come, right?"

The Ghost blinks, in the black. "... what? Who?"

"B- Phalanx."

"Oh. I . . . I don't know how he'd find us." He licks his lips; he's thirsty, raw in his throat, and that realisation grounds him in his body a little more, not just floating in the terrifying dark of waiting and

knowing, but still alive and aching and very thirsty. Alive. He is alive, for now. "My powers . . . my powers didn't work against that man. I don't know what he would . . . I don't know, Rachel."

"I've been thinking about Finn," she says, brushing his hair back a little more, he thinks to soothe herself more than him, though every touch reminds him that he's alive, here's his body, here's the edges of him, the skin between him and the world, still alive. Rachel swallows. "If he calls and I don't answer . . . I mean, in the morning, he'd notice in the morning, right? He'd start a search for us, if the apartment was empty and neither of us were around, he'd do something, wouldn't he?"

"I don't know. I suppose so." Rachel, I don't know if we'll survive even that long. "What time is it?"

"I don't know. It's been so dark I don't . . . I don't know."

He lays in the dark, in the confines of his own body held against Rachel's, and he thinks, even if Finn and Blaine do come looking for them, they'll never find them in time. He can try to accept it or he can submerge into despair, which is the one thing he finally has the time for, now there are no other options left. He thinks . . .

It's so dark, and he's so tired, drugged and hurting and he doesn't have long left, now.

He thinks, I really didn't have a bad life. I really didn't. In so many ways it was so much more than I ever realised, more than I ever thought it could be. My dad loved me, even when he had every reason in the world not to. He stood by me through everything, and I don't want him to know this is how it ended but I'm still glad I had *some* time to know him, and love him. I hope he never knows. God I hope he never knows. If there's any mercy - I could endure it if I just knew he wouldn't have to *know*.

I had Finn and Carole. I had Rachel, and I wish to god she wasn't stuck in this with me now but there's nothing I can -

I helped people. I really did. I helped a lot of people, and I can't regret any of that, not any of it, even if it ends like this. I had a job I loved, I *loved* that job, I could almost have been happy with life just doing that except . . .

I had Mike and Tina. I had Mr Conti and his cheesecake. I had people who cared about me. I did.

I had Blaine.

I had Blaine . . .

He'd never made any contingency plan for falling in love, it just hadn't been a potential event, because of course it wouldn't happen. But then Blaine happened, then Blaine came stumbling into his life as overeager as a puppy and the Ghost hardly knew how to handle him, what do you *do* when your heart finally remembers what it's there for? Being with Blaine - touching him, being touched, smelling his skin, arms around him warm and safe; someone to snark about the news with and he always righteously agreed, someone to make coffee for in a morning, someone to warm the bed beside him at night . . . someone to trust, with the most fragile and dangerous words he had, someone who listened, and loved him still; someone who kissed him and put his hands on him and made love with him and he finally felt free of fear, everything that had enclosed his world demolished by the shield of Blaine's arms around him, by his beautiful eyes watching him so close, and the pull of his body, and all his skin so perfect that this had to be okay.

Someone who needed him, someone who needed someone to look after him, to tell him that he was brave and good and wanted in return. Someone who needed the Ghost to touch him, someone who made him *want* to be solid. Someone who made the world make sense, all the too-much of it suddenly just-right, with him there. Like he shook the world and everything fell back where it should have been all along. Like he made it better. Like from the frightened ruins of his life he rescued him, touched him and he could be solid, looked at him and he could be seen, and it was all *okay*.

Falling in love was like being the first person to walk on the moon, virgin ground, nothing but his footprints and so many stars. No-one has ever said that *this* existed. Like no-one had ever been here before, this was so new, so sudden, so unforeseen, so *delicate*, like it was too much to last. Too pristine, too perfect, so bright the light fractured into tears . . . nothing so perfect can last in this life. Blaine. More joy than he knew there was in the world, Blaine, and his throat closes. He had so much. He was so rich with love. Maybe too much over too soon is better than a bare trickle paid out through the parched length of a life. Maybe . . .

Maybe you can just let it happen, try not to exist in the same space as it, try to close yourself down, think about nothing but him . . .

He blinks, in the dazzling dark, in his battered, broken, breathing body, and he doesn't know what he's thinking, except that he does. It's a trick he's long familiar with, very practised in, though it's been months since he's done it; when life is more than you can bear, you just tell yourself that it couldn't be any better

anyway. Tell yourself that you're fine and that you probably deserve it. It's not appalling, you tell yourself, it's not unspeakable, it's not unbearable, it's just *life* . . .

He's been falling back into numbness, the safety of not really feeling anything, not being touched by what's really happening, soothing himself with the thought that this was always going to happen and he really couldn't expect any more than that, because it's been the safest place for him for years of his life. But hell, it's not like he ever *liked* it even then. Is he okay with this happening? No. No, of course he's not. He knows what they're going to do to him. *They're* the reason he'll never even get to say goodbye to him (and thank you, choked rather than said; too much), they're the ones who will leave him no dignity nor peace nor humanity by the end of it; fuck them. You know what, *fuck* them, the fuck I'm dying like this and the fuck they're taking Rachel, Rachel Berry is going to win a Pulitzer Prize by the time she's twenty-five, she is not dying in some storage depot in the middle of the night because of power-crazed gangsters, and fuck I only just started season five and I'm halfway through a book, you know what, *fuck* this.

"Help me up," he says, trying to shift his weight and his teeth clench, he can't even strain his head up. "Help me - I can try to ghost us out."

"You can't even *sit*, K-"

"No."

"- Ghost," she says, enunciating it too carefully like she thinks it's silly, but as he squirms she does take his shoulders, and carefully lever him to sit. He sways, giddy and heavy-headed and sick with pain, but with her holding him he doesn't fall. "The last time you used your powers those cuffs -"

"I know." He flexes his wrists in them, feels the give and grip, and he is cold-sweated *scared* of how they could hurt him. "I don't know how they work. They might not react if I ghost them as well. The pressure I put on them wouldn't change then. I don't know."

"Where would we go?" she says, nervously. "They put us in a container on top of a pile, it's a long way down if we just step out -"

Damn. He swallows too little spit, god he needs a drink. He could risk the drop ordinarily but if he lands wrong like *this* then he'll break or rebreak half the bones in his body, and Rachel . . . "How high?" he says,

and has to swallow again because he's so *thirsty*, and there's a noise outside, some weird metallic thumping noise, and then a drawn-out low whine . . .

Rachel's hands get tighter on him. Do you risk it? Now or never? If those cuffs *do* activate when he's already ghosting into something -

Isn't it better than what they'll do to you, isn't it at least *cleaner*?

The noise is approaching, mechanical, grinding. "They have a cherry picker." Rachel whispers, very dry. "For reaching . . ."

Now or never, choose, *do* something, but arms bound behind his back he feels so unbalanced and - wrong, and scared, because if they ghost straight down and there are things in that container, if it's actually full of *stuff*, they have to keep ghosting; he doesn't know how far down they'll have to go, and he doesn't know how long either of them can hold their breath. He doesn't feel strong enough for it right now and he has no idea how freaked out Rachel might be and how much of a risk it might be - if Rachel can't take it then she'll suffocate, but if the Ghost can't take it then they'll *both* die. Because the decision isn't only his life, it's *Rachel's*, and he wets his too-dry lips and rasps, "If I ghost us down - it's dangerous but this is dangerous enough, Rachel, do you want me to -?"

She whispers, "What?", aimed at the faint line of the entrance, fingers tight in his shoulders.

"Rachel, this is *important*, *listen*, I can ghost us straight down but it's a *risk*, if it goes wrong it could kill us, but if we stay in here then sooner or later they *will* kill us and I don't know how much time we have so please, please tell me if it's okay if I do this, I can't do it if you don't want me to -"

"Ghost us - ?"

"We'd be intangible. We'd fall through the container. We could fall until we hit - a subway, I don't know, *something*, do you -"

That grinding noise is closer, and Rachel's breath is now panic fast. "I - don't - how is it dangerous?"

Too close, too scared - "There's no air in solid objects, if we don't hit a patch of open air we'd suffocate, and if I did it wrong - Rachel, yes or no, I'm sorry there isn't the *time* -"

Something hits the end of their prison with the hollow *doom* of metal on metal, and the echoes reverberate right through the Ghost's broken bones. Rachel has gone very still. The Ghost says, "*Please*, just -"

"I don't -" she whispers, fingers biting his arms. "- know -"

Metal jars and squeals, and the faint line of less-dark becomes a widening light that *sears*, blinding him after hours in the dark, striking him like a spotlight; helpless, sightless, *seen*.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

look at all the candles, I hope he saw it <3

Getting news reports on us now, he better see it!!

(Welcome home, Draxie my dearest. Did you have fun?)

*(It was *amazing*, Ghostly. I feel so much better for that. Just - everyone was so amazing, so so perfect, I just feel better about the entire *planet*.)*

(I wish we could have been there Draxie! =()

(I missed you guys there too, bb. But I'll see you soon, right? <3)

ok reading draxie's new fic just after the vigil is a bit of a fuck in the feels I can't even

'Once he saw a guy in a store let a woman with a howling child clamped in her arm and a dragging-heavy basket skip ahead of him in the line, and he thought, The only difference between them and me is the cloak. You don't know what it might mean to someone, to do something kind. The only difference is I do it in the dark with a mask on and people say it's brave, but every time you reach out and make a ripple in a enormous world, isn't it always brave?' Fuck Drax. Shit. I mean, fuck, look at how articulate you made me, fuck

I hope the Ghost knows we love him, and that he finds an extra candy bar at the back of the icebox xx

(What was it like, Draxie?)

*(It was just really, really lovely, I can't even describe it. The crowd was *insane*, never seen so many people who you just wouldn't think had anything in common all standing there together. You sometimes think phandom's just a bunch of teenage girls - no offence, bb, you're my favourite teenage girl <3 - but it was a really crazy crowd, there were parents with little kids with Ghost dolls and grown women and there was this adorable couple of two girls one in green and one in gray holding hands and there were these two teenage boys with a little girl in tow arguing about orcs or something and one of them was wearing a Santa hat for some reason, I mean it was a *crazy* crowd, and a bunch of normal New Yorkers joined in, we shared out*

candles. It just felt really good, there was a lot of crying, mostly the happy crying, I'm crying again typing this jeez.)

(I'm crying too ;_;

(The fandom needed a moment to regroup. Superhero fangirling is an emotionally wearing business.)

AU: Supernaturghostlanx - 'You can't exorcise me, I'm not a real ghost!!' - I just need this a whole lot ok lots of confusion and squabbling and then banding together to save the world omg ;_;

. . . think I might have just started spontaneously shipping Ghostiel . . .

*Fanart rec, massively NSFW: Phuckyeahphalanx's Phalanx fucking the Ghost while he's invisible because um basically it's - this gorgeous anatomically-perfect I-can't-even of Phalanx - um - and you can work out what the Ghost's doing by - yeah. Fuck. *fans self**

I wish he'd come to see us, all we want to know is he's ok T-T

*(I feel so much better for that. I don't know, I know I don't *know* any more because of it, I don't know that he's fine now, but it's really good to know I'm not the only person who's felt this bad about it. It was really - it was good for us all to be able to vent feelings like that. You knows fangirls, always got too many feelings :P)*

*(The photos look *amazing* <3)*

(I wish he'd been able to show up for it. I hope he's ok. I wish Phalanx had come even, I get that they can't but it would reassure so many people . . .)

(You know why they can't, my dear. They might know about fandom but they can't let other people know that they do. Anything known about them is only more leverage against them, if someone tried to use fandom to hurt them - if someone hurt fans to get to them - it's the fucking opposite of what they're trying to do.)

(I know. And I know I'll never hear from them again. I just worry all the time about him now. He was hurt really badly, what if he's not coming out anymore because he'll never be able to again? It's not fair for him, for it to end like this.)

Video of the vigil set to You Are the Moon, I hope we make a mirror so he can see how beautiful he is in all our little lights <3

why isn't there a vigil for puckzilla

Because Puckzilla's a criminal who tried to murder the Ghost on two separate occasions, fucksake.

*Can the fandom have no *fucking* infighting tonight of all nights please?? ;_;*

(He's alive and he has Phalanx, which is less than many people can say, and I think he'd be aware of that. All we can do is wait and see. Since we are the fandom that holds its vigils . . .)

*(It's all we do, it's all we ever do, carrying candles for the things we *believe* in <3)*

(That's so sweet, bb <3 I gotta go guys, insanely late and I have work in like, five hours, ugh. See you around?)

(Sleep well, my dearest.)

(G'night Draxie ^^)

So I changed my major to classical studies because I am that much of a loser and I am leading an entirely Phalanx appreciation life

I hope the Ghost's houseplants never up and die on him

Holding my plush, not gonna sob that we might never see him again, not at all.

*You know what, if he has retired or something and we never do see him again? We had a *good ride*. This is like the longest-lived superhero fandom, no-one else got nearly six years on the streets. He will never not have been this amazing special person who helped so many people, whatever he's doing now.*

(Ghostly, can I ask you about something? If you're not busy right now! ^^;)

(Little slow loris, you can ask me anything at all.)

(I got a really weird box in the post. I don't know what to do about it. There was a note in it and another box, I typed the note out:

'Hello,

This may seem quite strange, but this package is actually for Draxie, who I'm aware you're close friends with. Sorry! I don't have her address and for various reasons I can't ask her for it. But I owe her a debt, and this is as close to repaying it as I'll ever be able to manage.

If it's not too much trouble, would you mind forwarding it on to her? I've included money to cover the cost. I would genuinely appreciate it, if you can, please. I also have to ask you to keep it secret. I'm sorry, because I know that's not always an easy thing to do, but it's a surprise, and it has to be anonymous, and it needs to be as secret as possible.

I hope you're well, and sorry to dump this on you out of the blue!

Thank you, very much, and take care of yourself.'

Underneath that there's someone else's handwriting, it says, 'P.S. You're an amazing writer, I know you probably hear that all the time but wow, seriously! xxx' which made me blush ^^;)

Keep listening to You Don't Miss Your Water and hugging my pillow. Miss him so bad ;_;

Ghost and Phalanx cupcakes ^_^ post-vigil party gone a bit wild, I'm sticking to clear Ghost cocktails but I'm a bit worried about Shieldbearingsoldier's hangover tomorrow after drinking all that green food coloring . . .

(My word.)

*(I don't know what to do. What if it's *not* them, what if it's someone being weird and horrible, I don't know if I should open the box to check what I'm sending to her . . .)*

(Well, there is always the potential for it to be some insane troll sending anthrax through the mail, yes. But it's a very slim possibility. Blackbindings, every morning you wake up and the sun has risen again; you do know that the sky stays put a lot more often than it falls.)

(I'm just scared. It's just a bit too good to be true.)

(Little slow loris. Sometimes life is.)

(I'm just scared.)

(I know. I know you always are. You're the bravest woman I know.)

(Ghostly no I'm not, Draxie went out in the middle of the night to rescue superheroes ^^;)

(And you go out of your front door every morning. I do know what that costs you, Blackbindings.)

Phanmix, Ghost Stories, because we will never forget every awesome thing you've ever done, spooky <3

Post-vigil photos squeeing it up in an NY bar I FUCKING LOVE THIS FANDOM OK

BEST FANDOM FUCK YEAH

WALK ON, WALK ON

WITH HOOPE IN YOUR HEART

AND YOU'LL NEEEVER WALK ALOOOONE ~

(How did they get my name and address?)

*(Because you're a different generation internet resident to us. The idea of posting our real names in any place online is alien to us, but social media tells *you* it's fine; Blackbindings, I hate to tell you this, but I could have your full name and address in under a minute if I wanted it.)*

(You do have both, you sent me a Christmas card ^^; I'm scared now.)

(Don't be scared. The internet is changing, it's not what it was anymore, that's all. Do be safe, though, little slow loris. Just be sensible. Say no to anons and tell your mommies if you're not sure.)

(Okay =/ If this is real that makes you the only one neither of them's spoken to in any way now, I feel bad ^^;)

(I don't need them to. I understand our places in the world, and that's all I need.)

YOU'LL NEVER WAAAAAALK

ALOOOOOOOOONE \o/

best, best fandom ;_;

(I'll post it on. I hope she likes it, whatever it is.)

(As do I. And how are you, Blackbindings? How is the world of academia treating you?)

(I love it <3 Even when it's scary, and it's really hard work, I do just love it. How're you, how's your mum doing, Ghostly? ^^)

Fanart rec, Phalanx picking up hurt!Ghost by phantomphi because we all really need the sobs this evening

Even if no-one ever reblogged it again, the number we've reached on 'Reblog if you've ever been rescued by the Ghost . . .' is pretty fucking awesome. Standing ovation, spooky. All the awards.

Fanghost till the end. Don't care what happens, never will. I have faith in you, spooky, forever <3

*

Rachel is holding his arms so tightly it hurts. And he, great superhero, ducks his head back in the hood, trying to shield his eyes from the light as it *burns*, it feels like it physically smacked his retinas; there's the metallic thumping of people stepping into their container, two quite heavy and one much lighter and more sprightly, and a girl's voice says, "Is it really him? Oh my *gawwd* -"

He squints up a little, dazed, at some human-shaped blur who walks up until she's close enough that she blots out the light and he can mostly make her out; she must be about his age, chewing gum and beaming, and wearing - his costume. It throws him like another blow, she's wearing -

No. Her version is made of satin, shining over the curves of her body, and the cloak is shorter, a little fluttery thing ending above her hips. One of the utility belts *isn't* a utility belt, just a grey belt for show, and those boots are incredibly impractical, and you can't wear earrings to fight crime in, and the whole thing is just a fanciful fairground mirror of him, not him at all. He keeps his eyes screwed up against the light as

she crouches to look at his face and chews her gum and says around it, "Hi! I'm Sugar, have you seen my blog? I wrote fic for you!"

His throat's so dry he can hardly speak. "... what?"

"You must've read it, you got kidnapped by that gross Puckzilla and you got rescued by -" She bounces back to her feet, strikes a pose. "Ghostette! Didn't you read it?"

This is the weirdest form of torture in the world. He swallows, hard and dry, and says, "Who *are* you?"

She chews her gum, folds her arms. "Sugar Motta. *Ghostette!*"

"I have no ..."

"You have to let us go." Rachel says, rasping with thirst, over his head. "I'm a journalist and my boyfriend's a cop, you are in so much trouble if you don't let us -"

Sugar hisses a *whatever* noise, rolling her eyes. "My dad can buy us out of trouble. He says you're like, a big pain to him anyway, he could totally sue you for interrupting all his business like that."

"Inter-" He stops, because - Sugar Motta. This is the mobster's daughter. And she - "His *business* involves murder and extortion and blackmail and drugs and abusing illegal immigrants and *taking money for rape*, that - joke you're wearing was paid for in other people's *misery*, do you actually understand what he *does?*"

She shrugs, and chews her gum, and her smile is a little less even. "It's only business."

"It's sick. You're profiting from other people's suffering. I don't know how you dare ... " That costume, that pathetic attempt at his costume, his throat's *burning*, he knew it meant something to other people but he never before realised that it did represent something to him too - "You are nothing to do with me."

She chews her gum, not really smiling now. "You're like, not what I imagined. At all."

"Well I'm so sorry," he hisses, "for ruining *your* day."

Rachel says, "You need to let us go. He needs a doctor, he's hurt, you can't keep us here like this -"

"No." Sugar's shaking her head. "You're not going anywhere. First of all they're gonna turn me into you and then my dad's gonna fly back from Philly so he can be here when they take your mask off. He wants it on camera and stuff."

He . . . the Ghost's jaw tightens. 'He wants it on camera'. He's going to be murdered on *Youtube*. God he fucking *hates* the internet.

"What do you mean," Rachel says, "'turn you into him' - ?"

Sugar chews her gum, takes the corner of her cape and plays with it a little, watching it ripple in the light. The Ghost's eyes are beginning to adjust; there are two henchmen standing near the exit, holding pretty big guns, and he can see the space out behind them, the high ceiling of the storage depot; straight down is probably a bad idea, he can tell how far from the ground they are and if he fucks it up then it's Rachel who pays too. But what are they going to *do* to them - ?

Sugar says, "My dad's got this scientist who's gonna like, take his powers and give them to me. And then I can be the Ghostette! Only I'm not gonna interrupt Dad's business, obviously."

"They're going to kill me." the Ghost says, and watches her face as she looks up from playing with her cloak. "Do you understand that? They are going to murder me, I can count the last hours I'll live. Why are you *okay* with this?"

She shakes her head a little, but doesn't look away from his eyes. "You just - shouldn't have interfered with my dad's business."

"Your dad's business involves terrifying whole families into submission to pay for 'protection', they never feel safe in their own *homes*. It puts *children* at the end of guns in fights over corners. It puts ordinary people in danger of getting caught up in bank robberies and stray bullets. And do you *know* why he hates me? Why he really hates me? Because I stopped his operation illegally bringing women into the country, your dad's business involves telling some woman struggling with poverty that if she comes to the States there's a job and security in it for her and she can send money back to her family, and then bringing her here and locking her into a life of forced prostitution. He makes *millions* from that and I cost him millions when I helped the cops to break it up. Do you have any idea how much *misery* is behind the money in your bank account? Your life is paid for by other people's lives being destroyed. How do you *sleep*? How do you *cope*? I literally -" His throat *hurts*, and she's just staring at him, not even chewing anymore, just . . . "I

would rather be me," he croaks, voice wrecked, "about to die in a really horrible way, than have to spend a single day as you, knowing what really paid for everything I have. I would rather die knowing I helped people than ever be you knowing that all I ever did was hurt them. I don't know how you *can*."

She stares at him. She chews her gum, once. And behind her back one of the men near the entrance says, "The doc wants him as soon as possible, Ms Motta."

She's still staring at the Ghost. She chews her gum once more. Then she says, "Yeah." and steps back a little, begins chewing, slowly, again. "Yeah, okay. Bring 'em down."

His head hangs, he's so *tired*, but Rachel's hands have tightened on him again. "Bring him where? What are you going to do to him?"

Sugar looks at Rachel. "The doc needs to look at him. So he can make me a ghost too."

The Ghost breathes at the floor, "Why the hell would anyone want to be . . ."

"What are you going to *do* to him?"

Sugar shrugs. "Ask the doc. C'mon, we've only got 'til my dad gets back an' then he'll wanna -"

Rachel's arms wrap around him, and the Ghost lifts his head, tired and drained and confused. "You're not hurting him." Rachel says, in a fierce, shaking voice. "People have rights, you can't - *experiment* on him -"

He lifts his head, mouth opening, thinking, Oh, god, no -

If they can take his powers and put them into other people - never mind what they'll do to him to achieve it, he's not exactly in a position to worry about a few more horrible things happening to him right now. What will they do to other people *with* them? If the Mottas have a 'Ghost' on their side -

"C'mon up," Sugar says, and the two guys guarding the door - big dark shapes, he can barely make out their faces in the glare of the light - walk for them, and one grabs him under the arm, bodily jerking him to his feet. His breath shocks in with pain, his mouth comes open, Rachel tries to hold on but one of the guys has her arm and wrenches her off. She yelps, "No -!"

"Pull any stupid trick an' she gets a hole put in her. Just walk." The gorilla shoves him at the exit and his feet stumble, he trips to his knee but the guy grabs his arm again before he can hit the floor; his ribs jar, but thank *god* it was his left arm. "Come the fuck on, Casper."

He can't stand properly, doesn't know if it's the drugs or just the whole evening, his ankles don't want to, his knees don't want to, his whole body just wants him horizontal. "Give me a -" he pants, and the guy kicks his leg, he stumbles forward and trips to his knees again, chokes the jolt of his ribs at the floor. He can hear Rachel yelling and struggling behind him, as a hand grabs his cuffs and hauls him back upright.

"Not such a cocky bitch now." He pants, and watches around the hang of the hood the hate-creased face of the man holding him upright. "Where's your boyfriend, huh? Shoulda sucked more dick when you had the chance, maybe he'd give more of a fuck."

He propels him out of the container and stumbling onto - careening and breath snapping in at the *drop* - the platform of the cherry picker, three containers above ground level and he's half-blind in the light. There's barely room to stand - they're bringing Rachel with them - but then he's only upright on this tiny platform at all because there's no space to fall except out of it, body rigid with fear. He doesn't recognise the guy who's got him by the cuffs, though he can tell that he recognises *him*. So many of the Mottas' thugs are just big faceless brutes to him.

The cherry picker lowers them. Rachel says, quiet and scared, "Are you okay -?" and the guy holding her arm mutters, "Shut up, bitch."

"I'm fine," he whispers, because there's no need for Rachel to know otherwise. And he half-wishes that he'd had the time to say to her, Whatever happens next, Rachel, *whatever* happens, please tell my dad that it was quick.

Partly just on the farthest outside chance that she *does* get out of here alive to do so, because that lie is the last thing Kurt will ever be able to give him. Partly to give her the glimmer of hope that she might get out of here to tell it. Because Rachel isn't stupid, and why are they bringing her too . . . ?

*

"So," Sam says, once waiting in silence has got awkward enough. "Uh. How'd you get into the whole superhero thing?"

Phalanx sits on the edge of the building holding his cell phone between his knees in both hands, and mutters at it, "Secret identity."

"'cause he's been around for way longer, right?"

Phalanx stares at his cell, and thinks, nearly six years. Longest time any superhero's lasted yet. That's not the record, though, because he's *going* to last longer. Jesus, Kurt, on your *own* and busted up like that, what were you *thinking* - ?

He was thinking that I wasn't helping, and someone had to. He closes his eyes, and his shoulders hurt from not sagging.

"Look, dude, don't . . . don't look like that, long as he's still alive we can still get him out, right?"

He opens his eyes, focuses on the phone. "Out from under the nose of a guy who makes our powers stop working?" he says, quietly. "Out from under a bunch of guys with guns who want him dead the worst way - "

"You said your friends could help."

He wets his lips. He says, too dry, "I don't know how if there's enough help in the *world* for this."

"Hey, look, don't freak out. I'm really thirsty, you want a Coke?"

Phalanx lifts his head, says, "What?" and Sam is gone, and then he's back again with two cans of Coke and two candy bars juggled against his chest. "Here you go," he says, holding one handful out at Phalanx. "I left cash," he says, at Phalanx's aggressively confused face.

He sighs, puts the cell back into his belt, takes the can and candy bar. "Thanks."

Sam sits next to him, says, "I burn this insane amount of calories with all the running." and tears the wrapper open, eats the bar in three big bites. "S'just stupid. Hungry the whole time."

Kurt and Rachel have been missing for hours. Phalanx has no idea how hungry they might be. He turns the can in his hands, silent, snaps it open and then just stares at it for a while.

"When . . . how was he when you, when you last saw him . . . ?"

Sam looks across at him, then snaps his can open and drains about half of it in one gulp. "Uh," he says. "He was still out of it, they drugged him to get him down. I was getting his belts off him, I knew I needed to bring something with me they wouldn't miss so you'd believe me, I saw that under his glove . . ."

Grip the can, say the words. They still come out sounding too much. "Was he okay?"

"Just." He shrugs one shoulder. "Just unconscious. They left him in a container with the girl they grabbed at the same time, she seemed pretty worried about him, she's probably keepin' an eye on him. Dude, I know you're gonna worry but -"

"We don't know." He says, and swallows hard. "We don't *know*, they could be doing anything to him, what the hell do they *do* when they - experiment on - ? You don't *know*, you don't *know* him, he can't - this is the worst." He digs the heel of his palm into his eye, rubs it hard. "I'm not there. I'm supposed to be - I'm not *there* -"

"Why was he even out? I didn't think - after the last time I saw you guys, I didn't think he'd be around for - I don't even know how long. It, he looked - bad."

Breathe, slow and hard. "He was bad. He shouldn't have been out. It's my fault." His teeth hurt. "It's *my* *fault*. He knew that girl was in danger and he couldn't get hold of me so he went but he *shouldn't* have, he's still hurt, he's still healing -"

Sam's elbow nudges his, jolting the can. "Drink your Coke. Sugar rush'll make you feel better."

He's so afraid it's all he can taste. "They wouldn't - they're not hurting -"

"Hey." He grips his shoulder. "S'okay. It'll be okay. They're not allowed to do anything to him until the boss gets back, apart from the - okay, apart from the experiments, but they're not allowed to *hurt* him. Whatever happens they're not killing him, you'll get him back, but you need to not *freak out* or no way you'll be able to help, not the way he'll need it. So just - chill, dude. Okay?"

He stares at the can. He draws a long breath in, and lets it go. He nods, and takes a drink.

Sam leans back on his hands a little beside him, looks up at the sky reflecting all of New York's neon dully back down at it again. "So how long'll your friends take?"

He shakes his head. "I don't know. They're not my 'friends', I don't even know them, I just - I don't have anyone else to ask." He closes his eyes, lets his breath out through his nose because he never even *told* the Ghost about iBorg coming back and now he's relying on iBorg's 'team' to help save his life, and - and god he doesn't *care* if Kurt yells at him if he's alive to do the yelling -

He tries to tell himself that Kurt losing all trust in him is worth it for Kurt being alive. Why is there no *best* case scenario . . . ?

Because he is meant to be with Kurt, the Ghost is meant to be with Phalanx, these are things that ought to be, this is how the world makes *sense*, because - because there will never be anyone like Kurt, Blaine knows that, Kurt is the love of his life and if he fucks this up -

The worst people in the city who could have him do have him, and he knows it, and Blaine isn't *there* . . .

"Hey," Sam says, and it takes him a moment of staring to recognise the firefly-light getting bigger on its way towards them, it takes him a moment to become Phalanx and not Blaine without Kurt. He drains half his can and puts it down, stands up, as iBorg skims in at their rooftop, letting himself down on his vicious-amber burning thrusters, clanging to the concrete. "Yo," he says, and gives a careless little salute, two fingers glancing off his helm. "What up, noob."

He folds his arms, because he's really not in a banter mood, but then he remembers what he read on the super blogs recently. "I'm sorry about your sidekick," he says. "Tough break."

iBorg scratches at the back of his helmet, mutters, "Don't even wanna talk about it." Seismic, the girl made of stone, dumped him as a crime-fighting partner three weeks ago, claiming that he was a sexist moron besides just being a loser. *All the supers are going solo* one fan had blogged, and set in motion another avalanche of Ghost-grieving and panic and flailing. And Blaine had held his iPad out at arm's length to pull a face at it, and from the bed Kurt had lifted his book to cover his yawn.

(Elegant even with a broken arm, angel.)

iBorg says, "So, uh, sorry about your - partner. Who's he?"

Phalanx has - something inside him freezes down small at those words, and it's Sam who has to say, "Sam, nice to meet you.", holding a hand out, shaking with him. "Used to work for the Mottas. Switching sides. Pay was great but the work sucks."

Phalanx looks across at him, and Sam has this awkward grin on his face, hands in his jeans pockets, obviously very much feeling his place between the two superheroes. But iBorg just nods, says, "You're gonna be in good company, believe me."

Because there's another light up there in the sky, following the same route iBorg took; a bigger, buzzing light, which as it comes closer turns out not to be a plane but some sort of helicopter, sleek and closer to silent than Phalanx had known they could be. He steps back a little, braces his weight as it circles the building once - his shields flicker around him and he doesn't try to stop them, he's *nervy*, he can't help it tonight of all nights, as Sam and iBorg back away with him and the wind from its blades drags at his hair - and then settles down to land in front of them. Its blades spin slower, and then whirr themselves out, and a door on its side clicks and slides sideways, metal steps purring down to the ground.

A woman emerges, short blonde hair and shades and a smart cut suit covered by a long, dramatic coat. She tilts her head to look regally down at Phalanx over her shades, then takes the steps down slowly, head tipped a little in thought. "This is the one who makes shields? Agent Sylvester." She holds a hand out, and manners have him shaking it before he's really considered it. "I represent some people with an interest in you and your partner. Enough of an interest in him to not want some cheap mobsters unduly terminating him, anyway."

"Who's intere- '*cheap mobsters*'? They own half of New York!"

"Gives you some idea of the scale we're working with, huh, curly?" she says, and looks across at the helicopter as a blonde girl - maybe Phalanx's age - climbs out, in a simple neat bodysuit, short jacket, utility belt around the hips. She looks coolly down at Phalanx and Phalanx realises that there's a shield between them and dissolves it, mostly ashamed of his own poor manners, a little freaked out that *that* was his automatic reaction; as soon as he saw her he felt the need to be shielded. "Hi," he says, and his voice seems too small surrounded by these people. She just nods, says, "Psyche."

She's followed out by -

Phalanx points, says because no other word seems *possible* in that moment, "- *no*."

Puckzilla gives him an even sort of look, says, "Better costume than last time, shortstuff."

"No way, *no*, I asked you for - *help*, why is he -?"

"Untwist your panties, dude, I am here to help. I'm a model citizen now."

"Noah Puckerman is part of our programme." Agent Sylvester says calmly. "He's paying back his debt to society by providing us with the kind of aid that only a half-idiot half-extinct-lizard can."

"What she said." Puckzilla says. "Plus they're paying me."

He's still too tense, the shields want to be up and he's trying not to let them. "You tried to kill him, I watched you -"

"Dude, I respect the spook, okay? You think I meet many guys who can take me down? An' he wasn't an asshole about it, so, we're okay, him an' me. I promise not to pull your boyfriend's head off after rescuing him, jeez." He thumps down the steps looking moody, arms folded, and Phalanx still just stands there on edge, which doesn't get any better when Cheer Girl gallops down the steps, holding one of her bunches in each hand as she goes like gripping her own reins, and Incendiary leans in the entrance behind her, arms folded and hip cocked like a gun in that spray-on suit.

"So who whupped him?" she says, grinning like a particularly smug cat. "C'mon, don't tell me he didn't have it coming, who finally brought down mr high-and-mighty so-much-better-than-"

Sam grabs his arm before Phalanx can complete the lurch forward. "They're going to *torture* him to death you sick-"

"Dude -"

"Poor baby." she says flatly, and slinks her way down the steps. "Be a real shame if we turned up too late, huh?"

"I asked you for *help*," he says, he can't *understand*, to iBorg. "They're - half these people tried to kill him *more* than once -"

iBorg shrugs, and there's no expression behind the helm and goggles but his shoulders look a little awkward. "People change?"

"I want to help people," Cheer Girl volunteers. "I have awesome powers, I'm going to use them to help people. Like George Washington."

Incendiary puts an arm around her waist and says, "George Washington wasn't a super."

"Also, racist." iBorg says. "Slavery is not cool."

"Someone like him. Cleopatra."

Phalanx is still staring at her trying to work out how her mind *works* when Agent Sylvester says, "Now here I thought we were on a schedule to get your boyfriend back before he stops being much use to anyone."

". . . yeah. I - yeah." He draws his breath in, lets it go, it's not like it's the first time he's had to entrust the Ghost's life to someone he doesn't know that he can trust. It worked out okay last time, didn't it . . . ? "We don't have long. Sam - Sam knows where he is and what they're -" He still feels so sick. "Doing to him."

"There's this storage depot a few blocks north," Sam says, hands in awkward pockets again. "Got him holed up in a shipping container with this girl they picked up at the same time."

Agent Sylvester says coolly, "And how are they keeping him there, given his proclivity for walking through walls?"

"He was still unconscious when I left."

"The girl." Phalanx says, and clears his throat. "He won't - if there's someone else they can hurt, he won't do anything to save himself."

"Well, that's a poorly thought-through allocation of resources." Agent Sylvester mutters. "The world's full of girls, we only have one Ghost. So give us the location and we can start -"

Phalanx blurts, "They have this -" He looks at Sam, who rolls his eyes and says, "They have this guy. The guy who does the experiments, they're trying to take his powers out of him, the Ghost, an' put them into

someone else. And the guy who does it, he damps supers' powers down. No-one has any powers around him. He couldn't get away if he wanted."

Agent Sylvester has gone very still. Phalanx gives her an uneasy look as she takes her shades off and stares *intently* at Sam, like she can see through his *skull*. "Tell me," she says, and the hand gripping her shades is white-knuckled, "*everything*."

*

Sugar trailing behind humming, the two guys with guns walk them through the aisles of containers, and the Ghost can hear how tight Rachel's breathing is behind him. She has a *gun* aimed at her. This is every night of his life but it's nothing to do with Rachel, she shouldn't *be* here and he doesn't know (he knows) if he can help her (he can't) and her fear is a knife of guilt in the guts, because if he owes anyone a rescue then it's Rachel . . .

Another kick to the back of the leg sends him staggering again, jarring off the side of a container - the wrong arm, and his breath snaps in - and the guy jerks him up by the cuffs again, thrusting him forward. He scrabbles, stumbles to walk, this would be hard enough if he *didn't* keep getting kicked over, glances back at him from inside the hood and rasps, "We'd get there a lot quicker if you'd *stop* doing that, actually."

"Shut up an' walk, bitch."

Even as he turns his head back his ankle's swiped out from underneath him again, and this time he trips completely down, whacks his left elbow as he tries to brace himself and the rattle of his ribs punches his breath out on the floor. "You can't do this-!" Rachel is yelling, like citizens' rights mean anything much to those two, and Sugar says, "You're not allowed to hurt him, my dad said -"

A hand hauls him up by the cuffs again, dizzy with all the bouncing around, boots scrabbling and knees bruising off the floor as he's lurched up. "'pologies, Ms Motta. My foot slipped."

"What exactly did I do to you that got you this pissed?" the Ghost snaps at him, because he feels disorientated and loose-brained and *hurting* and far too irritated to care about even his own imminent awful death right now.

The guy hauls him back into his space, the Ghost's back to his chest, huffs over his shoulder - the Ghost turns his head from the feel of his breath on his cheek - "You don't remember?"

He could hurt you. These small humiliations are nothing and you know it, he could do terrible, terrible things to you before this is over.

... nothing will stop the terrible things happening anyway. So. Fuck him.

He says primly, "One gorilla looks much like the next to me."

The guy shoves him forward again. "*Walk*, cocksucker."

He keeps his feet, just, swinging and unsteady with the guy jerking the cuffs to aim him around the corner. "I'm guessing I just kicked your ass because if I'd haunted you, there is no way in hell that you would ever *dare* to be this close to me again."

"You are *fucking* asking for it, Casper -"

"My dad said -"

"You can shut up as well." the Ghost snaps at her. "That *joke* you're wearing was paid for in blood and misery, I don't know how you get up in a morning."

The guy holding his cuffs grabs the back of the hood, wrenching his head back by the hair. "You we're not allowed to break bits off yet," he growls. "*Her* we got no orders 'cept not killin' her. So next time you open your fuckin' mouth it's one of her fingers, you got that?"

He holds his jaw hard, and breathes in, slow, and nods as much as he can with his hair pinning his head back. The guy's fingers tighten for one tearing second because they *can*, and then he lets go, kicks him in the back of the shin to make him walk again. "Get a move on. Can't fuckin' wait 'til the boss gets back."

His breath shivers as it comes out, because god, Rachel. There's nothing he can do about his own life at this point but he *can't* make it worse for Rachel. And where the hell are they even taking them ... ?

Towards another storage unit, doors swung open and there are lights rigged up inside it; some kind of rudimentary lab in there, a table and some machine *whrrring* a ring of test tubes around. And a man, a tall thin man, in a white lab coat ...

His heels set themselves automatically to *stop* and the gorilla shoves him forward again, but the Ghost's breath has stopped in his chest and his body is automatically trying to turn invisible -

And can't. And now he's afraid. *Now* he's afraid, forced every step of the way towards that man, the man who makes him not a ghost at all, the man who - *this scientist who's gonna like, take his powers and give them to me* - oh Jesus what are they going to *do* to him - ?

He has to be shoved hard again to get into the container, and inside he just stands there stupid with fear, every desperate urge to be invisible and he *can't*. He could still ghost when they were in that container but now he's close to him again he *can't* and he is so, so afraid, as Rachel's shoved to stagger next to him, touches the back of his arm and whispers, "Are you okay?"

Two containers have been fixed together, from the outside they only look like they're next to each other but inside the metal between them is cut away, and he can see - chains and straps on one of the walls, and some big scary machine he doesn't understand taking up most of the attached container, and his throat, already dry from lack of drink, now won't allow a single sound out. Rachel wraps her hands around his left arm and holds on tight, and he stares at the man making notes on the table, checking something in a folder, laboriously moving back and forth between the two pieces of paper while the Ghost tries to swallow and there's nothing to swallow with.

The man looks up, looks the Ghost over quite clinically. He tries to swallow again and makes himself cough this time, and Rachel rubs his arm, rasps out, "If we both die of dehydration before your boss gets back then you're all in a *lot* of trouble."

The man in the lab coat sighs out through his nose, then nods his head at a mini-fridge at the container's wall. "There's water in there."

Sugar strolls to his side, looks down at what he's working on. "Can I help?"

"If you just - stay to the side, Ms Motta." he says, and goes back to checking and making notes.

One of the gorillas has walked to the fridge, while the other keeps his gun aimed at Rachel, who is trying so hard to be brave in the middle of all *this*. He brings over two bottles of water, passes one to Rachel who takes it straight-backed and imperious, but then he looks at the Ghost, hands cuffed useless behind

himself, hunching his shoulders smaller around himself. The gorilla rolls his eyes, unscrews the top, holds it out.

The Ghost stands very still. He's so thirsty he can barely breathe, but he can't put himself closer to that man, doesn't dare, fear's pinned him to the spot. There's no reason for him to treat him with anything but contempt at the very best; there's no reason to trust that bottle in his hand when this could be the cruellest mockery, and he has nothing better than that to look forward to until they kill him, and he can't (can't ghost can't be invisible can't haunt can't fight can't do *anything*) - he just *can't* -

The gorilla glares at him, as Rachel gasps after swallowing her mouthful. "Here," he says, stabbing the second bottle at Rachel. "Don't think he trusts me much."

The Ghost swallows, hot and hard and hurting, as Rachel hesitates and then takes the bottle. She caps her own, tucks it under her arm, gives the gorilla one last distrustful glance and then catches the Ghost's cheek under the hood to hold his face steady; "Here," she says, gently, holding the bottle to his mouth.

He closes his eyes, and water filling his mouth makes him want to cry, because this is the last kindness he can ever expect and he can't even save Rachel, he can't . . .

She lets him take a few long pulls, then makes herself smile and drinks some more herself, and the Ghost wets his lips, swallows again, a little easier now, and looks at that man as he sets the folder aside, and hits a button to stop the test tubes whirling. He wants to ask what he's going to do to him, but he doesn't want to give them the satisfaction of knowing that he *cares* what they're going to do to him.

The man murmurs, "I need to be able to talk to you anyway."

"Talk about what?" he says, voice rasping lower than he'd expected it to come out.

"I need to understand the workings of your powers. I'm going to need you to co-operate."

"Co-operate." he says flatly. And then remembers -

"You know what happens if you don't." the man says, and begins putting on a pair of surgical gloves. "You have a history of doing what you're told if a hostage could get hurt."

He closes his eyes, and he breathes. It doesn't matter that they don't know who Rachel is to him, they know that he *can't* let someone else get hurt for his sake, other people shouldn't get hurt because of his choices, they know how trapped he is. He swallows again, says quietly, "You don't have to hurt her. You don't even need her here. Just - if you just let her go then I'll do whatever you want, you know I can't get away anyway, between the cuffs and -"

You, he thinks, staring into the man's eyes. He looks back, tired and distant, and then lifts one of the test tubes and peers through the clear liquid inside it. The Ghost says softly, "Who are you?"

He murmurs to the test tube, "It doesn't matter to you, does it?"

"I'm already dead and we both know it, this is just - killing time. Who are you, how can you - ? Doctor . . . ?"

"I'm not a doctor." He puts a syringe into the test tube, injects something else in. The Ghost can't tear his eyes away, weak as his legs feel, hollow as his breath comes. "They just call me that. This method - someone else invented it. I just adapted it. Refined it."

"You've been experimenting on people." His knees want to *shake* and he doesn't know why they don't, what bravery holds them steady, because he doesn't feel like he has a drop of courage left in him. "And dumping the 'failures' in the river, I know. You might as well tell me your name, who the hell am I going to tell any of this - ?"

He gives him a more thoughtful look this time. "How do you know about the experiments?"

"This is my city." He's breathed in the streets and the skyscrapers and the sewers, this is his *city*, how could they think that something so ill in it could pass him by? He licks his lips, says, "You're going to do something to me that I can't stop and - and I would just really like to at least know your name, please." His voice is clotting in his throat. "I really don't have many of these little courtesies left to me, you know that."

The man looks at him and he looks older than he probably is, and tired, and like he cares about very little, really. "Schuester." he says. "The procedure is the last thing you have to worry about. If you just co-operate then we'll be done by dawn."

Neither of them are intended to leave here alive, then, if he'll say it in front of Rachel too. His voice still isn't shaking, why isn't his voice shaking? "In time for your boss to come back and murder me as slowly as he likes?"

There's nothing like pity in his eyes, but really nothing like hatred, either. "You were the one who put that costume on. You knew the risk when you played the game."

Breathe. Breathe. Breathe. God, it hurts, the knowledge of this. "All I wanted was to help people."

Rachel whispers, "You can't do this to him. You can't do this to people, we have *rights*, you can't -"

"He doesn't have rights." Schuester says calmly. "He doesn't exist. No social security, no passport, no identity." He looks right at him. "Just a ghost."

"Is that how you're going to do this to me?" he says, and his breath's getting more difficult, his wrists press in their cuffs. "Tell yourself that I'm not a person and it doesn't matter? Is that what you did with all the others, I don't even know how *many*, they could be finding more bodies for months for all I - the youngest was *seventeen* you -"

One of the gorillas says, "You want me to shut him up?"

Schuester puts the test tube back in its rack, and sets the machine spinning again. "It makes no difference to me."

Nothing he does now will make a difference. Can't do a thing, can't risk anything that might make it worse to Rachel, couldn't do anything anyway - god, he's already dead, it's already over, it was over when that man first grabbed his arm . . .

Not yet, his heart beats inside him. Not yet, not yet, not yet. Not yet.

Not a ghost yet.

There is so much more to come before nothing will ever be able to touch him again . . .

*

Agent Sylvester lifts a hand and even Incendiary and Cheer Girl, standing so close their arms touch while they talk, fall silent. Phalanx hears the car pulling up, glances across at the edge of the building, murmurs, "I called . . ."

iBorg walks to the building's edge, lifts a hand and something whirrs on the back of his wrist, Phalanx sees the gleam of sharp metal poised to fire. "Wait," he says, hurrying to him, grabbing his arm. "I called -"

"That you up there?" a voice calls up from the street. "What's going *on*, man, what -?"

"It's the po-po," iBorg says over his shoulder, to the rest of the team.

"It's okay, come on up." Phalanx says, and makes a staircase of shields. "Careful, okay? They're slippery."

Agent Sylvester says, "Did you invite your entire phone book to this party? Because your partner has a much better grasp of the *secrecy* issue, we don't usually ask the police along with us."

"It's Officer Hudson, we - he's been okay to us before, the Ghost helped him out a couple of times. It's his girlfriend he was trying to protect when they both got - taken." Finn's making his way up the staircase very slowly, one hand on the wall of the warehouse as he goes. "We're going up against someone who wipes our powers out, don't we need people to help who don't *need* powers to help?"

iBorg gives him a look, then offers a hand to help Finn over the edge of the building. "Dude," Finn says quietly, then looks, face drawn and too pale, at Phalanx. "What happened?" His voice sounds too young. "Are they okay?"

He swallows, and he doesn't want to lie, but he doesn't want the worst of the truth ringing through Finn's brain right now because he does know that he has trouble focusing on more than one thing at once, he's watched him trying to dry the dishes with the football on the TV. "For now," he says, carefully. "We need to get them back. I'm sorry about - your girlfriend, I should have . . ."

Finn's silent for a second, and his jaw shifts tightly, and then he says like it's hard to say, "S'okay. I know what she's like. An' him." He looks around the rooftop, at all the superheroes standing there, clears his throat and says, "Okay. Who are you guys?"

"Agent Sylvester." She walks up to examine Finn more closely. "We can trust this one to keep his mouth shut? Because otherwise we're going to have a problem, and it's not like we don't already have one because if I'm supposed to work with *you* then we either need a razor or a very large hat because there could be lost civilizations under all that, you could scour pans with your head and I just cannot believe that it can be hygienic, shampoo couldn't penetrate that *mass*."

Phalanx does not understand the way she's staring at his hair, and says, "Uh."

"I'm not - you can trust me, okay? They've got my *girlfriend*, Jesus, they - who're you guys with, anyway, FBI, CIA -?"

Agent Sylvester, with some effort, tears her eyes away from the top of Phalanx's head. "No-one. If you mention us to anyone then we don't exist. Do you honestly think that the United States government is going to admit to running a secret team of superpowered ex-cons?"

"Not an ex-con," iBorg says, raising his hand. Psyche folds her arms and rolls her eyes.

"We're low on time, here."

"We need a plan." Phalanx says. "They have a guy who wipes our powers out, we - we need your help, Officer."

Finn glances at Agent Sylvester again, who says, "They have a traitor on the run from the government experimenting on citizens to turn them into supers, who's about to make an army of Ghosts and in all probability use your girlfriend as a test case. We want him alive." There's a gleam behind her eyes, the manic light of too much *want*. "We are very interested in taking him alive."

"So we need a *plan*," Phalanx says, because they don't have the time for all this, the longer they're talking the more they could be doing to the Ghost -

"Yeah." Finn says, and his hand's on his gun in its holster. "Yeah. I'm in. Yeah."

Incendiary says, "So what's the plan?"

Agent Sylvester says, "We blast in there and take them down before they realise what happened. I'm a front door sort of woman."

"I . . ." Phalanx says, ". . . do see some flaws in this plan. As in, um. They could kill both of them before we got anywhere near them."

"That's what the tin man's for." Agent Sylvester says. "Psyche, you can locate them in the building from outside?"

"I should be able to." she says calmly.

"You give their location to iBorg and the cop, speedy can lead them through the building, we distract the goons, and I would *like* to see Schuester try to fight a robot and armed police."

"Not actually a robot," iBorg says quietly, hand raised again.

"We're moving out. Time is of the essence."

"This is not a plan!" Phalanx yelps, because it's the Ghost's *life* they're tossing to chance here -

"Boy whose height is doubled by his own hair, if we had the time to be sneaky, believe me, I would love to see the look on Will Schuester's face when he realises he's been outsmarted. But I've seen what he did to some of his early 'experiments', and believe me, you want your boyfriend back before he starts getting too involved in his 'procedures'. Speedy there knows how many guards we're looking at and where they're stationed, and all you have to do is pin the ordinary thugs down so that C3PO and your cop friend can go after Schuester. Can we trust *you* to actually be an asset here or are you going to need to sit on the sidelines weeping while the professionals handle it?"

His hands are fists, and his breath comes hard. "No-one's going anywhere near him without me."

He's his shield, he's his protection, he should *be* there. Agent Sylvester nods, curtly, and calls to the team, "Move out, people."

And this is what he's bringing to save the Ghost's life, an ill-assorted gang of people Phalanx just met, half of whom have tried to kill him previously while the other half seem more interested in arresting the government traitor than saving his life - and himself, and Finn, too scared to think straight - he has to save his life and this is the best he can do?

And part of him does say, Fuck the plan. I don't care. I just need to be near him, with him, *now*. All the rest I'll work out, everything else will be okay, if I can just see him and touch him then everything will be fine -

Everything will be fine. Everything will be fine. Kurt, angel, it's okay. Everything will be fine . . .

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The Ghost doesn't know how a person can do this to another person. He doesn't know how you look into someone's eyes and look right past their humanity and just use them instead. He meets a lot of people in his work, he doesn't even know how many, he suspects by this point that they measure in the quadruple digits, all of the people he's been there with at the worst times. There's been a lot of tears and a lot of fear. And he doesn't know, he will never know, how you can look someone else in the eye and forget for even one second that they're looking right back at you, just as human as you are and just as capable of hurt . . .

He wets his lips, says, "What are you going to do to me?"

Schuester is checking his notes again, and he reminds the Ghost of himself, very young, only just learning to cook, following a recipe like it was holy writ; there's no actual innate sense of capability to him, like he knows what he's doing, like he *understands* the steps he's so mechanically taking. He's not a doctor, he thinks. He's not even a scientist, really. He 'adapted and refined' someone else's work. God, like it makes this better that I'm going to be pulled apart by an *amateur*?

Schuester says to his notes, "All you have to do is co-operate."

"I don't have any choice in co-operating, I can't *do* anything and you know it. You don't need her to be here. If this is going to - be unpleasant. She doesn't need to see it. Do you think this evening isn't hard enough on her already?"

Rachel grips his arm and whispers, "I am not leaving you on your own with them."

Schuester looks up at him. The Ghost looks back, and says, quietly, "What are you going to do to her?"

Schuester looks back down at the notes, and Rachel's hands have stilled on his arm. "People who don't have an innate super ability don't survive the procedure to draw latent powers out." Schuester says, too calmly, while Rachel hangs on to him and the Ghost stays standing because he has to, but god he could just lie down and . . . "The problem is that even when people do survive the procedure, whatever their powers turn out to be is unpredictable and it's usually something useless. I've only ever had one successful case of inserting an ability into someone who didn't already have the power inside them. I very rarely get true supers to experiment with, to draw the power out of to put into someone else. So we need someone to test your powers on before Ms Motta."

"You can't turn people into ghosts." he says, as Rachel's breath comes out shaking. "You don't know what it's like, you don't understand what you're *doing*. You can't do this to people -"

Schuester curls his lip. "And it's so hard being *you*, isn't it?"

The Ghost stares at him, then says, "After you're done with me the mob are going to murder me by inches. I don't know how *you* define 'hard' but if you wanted to swap lives with me then we could definitely discuss it about now."

"Because it's so hard being *you*. It's so hard being *different* and *special* and you get away with anything you want, you get to *rescue people* and the rest of us are just here to be rescued, we're just *cattle*, aren't we? You're the one with the powers, you're the one who put on the costume, you don't get to *whine* about how hard it is being you when all along you've been acting like you get to be special and everybody else -"

"You think I chose this? You think I thought, Hey, you know what would improve my life? If I had a superpower that everyone thinks is really creepy in a world full of people who *hate supers*! You're a super yourself, why the hell do you think I'm *trapped* here -"

Schuester's up and stabbing a finger at him, and his voice jars off the container's metal walls. "*What part of me is super?*" he bellows at him, and the Ghost doesn't flinch, just holds his eye, breath sucking in. "Any power in the world, any power I could have had and all I can do is make you *normal* like the rest of us, what the *fuck* gives you the right to walk through walls when all I can ever do is *stop* you -?"

His voice so barely shakes. "I didn't choose this any more than you chose that."

"I'm fixing nature's unfair allocation of privilege." Schuester spits, grabbing up a syringe. "All I'm doing is making it fair."

"Fair? You think - if you want the world to be *fair* then you fix education and social security and the justice system and the minimum wage, you don't experiment on people who can't help their own pow- *no* -"

Schuester grabs him by the *face*, grips his jaw and pulls his head sideways and holds the needle to his exposed throat inside the hood. "We can do this the hard way or you can shut up and do as you're told. You *know* you don't have a choice."

He stares at the wall, and he can't be touched.

He can't be touched.

He remembers those straps and chains.

He can't breathe.

It's Rachel who shoves Schuester back, chokes at him as the Ghost's breath startles back in again, "He can't do anything, alright, he can't *do* anything, you don't have to be such a jerk about it! He hasn't hurt anyone! All he did was *help* people and don't act like he's the one who ever did something *evil*, he used his powers to help people and what the hell are you doing with yours -?"

Schuester stands there, pale with rage, some trembling-mad light in his eyes on Rachel like he hates her; maybe he does, because he can reduce the Ghost to nothing but he can't do a thing to this woman. He runs his tongue across his bottom lip, and looks down at the needle in his hand, and lays it, with a careful click, on the table. He says, "This will be easiest for both of us if you just co-operate. Otherwise it really could get quite 'unpleasant'."

He feels shaky and sick and his head's too heavy, too light, for being *touched*. "This already is unpleasant," he whispers, and swallows, blinks it all back, holds his eye and his own head up. "I'm a person. I'm a human being, how - you can't do this to a person. Don't you *care* -"

Schuester walks back around the table to his notes. "I don't get many true supers to work with. You're a valuable resource."

"I'm a *person*, I'm not just a mask, I'm not just my powers, I have - a life, I have people I care about who don't know where I am or what's happening to me, I live just like you do, I make plans, I watch the news, I was halfway through a *book*. All those people - all those people you did this to, they were never just their body, they were never just what you were doing to them, they were *people*. You know what struggle is like," he says, and his voice is getting uneven. "You know what *pain* is like. Why would you put someone else through this, through something *worse*, you're using people like they're not people, they *don't stop being people*, not for one second, you're not doing this to a *resource*, you're doing it to *me*. And her, how can you hurt her, she's never done anything to you, she's a good person and you're not even looking at *her*, you're treating her like she doesn't even matter, she *matters*, we both do, *everyone* does, how have you got so far from understanding -"

Schuester pulls his hands hard through his hair, staring down at his notes. "Shut up while I'm working."

"- that everyone's just a person? I know the powers you get aren't something you choose, do you think I don't know that? But they don't make you any less human and they don't make anyone else less either, you could *help* people, you need to stop this, you still have a choice, you could *help* people with those powers, you don't need to help the mob to murder people, you could be making the world better for people instead of worse, don't you want to -"

One of the gorillas says, "You want me to gag him?"

His hands are shaking in the cuffs. He doesn't want to be touched. He desperately doesn't want to be touched. And his voice right now is the only thing he has, he *can't do anything*, all he can do is speak, desperately, he doesn't have many words left to him in this life, he thinks about being silenced before he's murdered and the fear fills his throat, the horror of it tightens his chest - because as bad as this is and as bad as it's going to be oh hell it can always get *worse* and his voice -

He feels like he's been gagged for half his life, and he can't face it again now.

"I want him to understand what's happening." Schuester puts his pen down again, stops the whirr of the spinning test tubes, picks one out and holds it up. "Do you know what this is?"

He swallows, and finds his weakening voice. "Is it your conscience?"

Schuester's hand tightens on it, and then he takes another syringe, presses it through the test tube's seal and drains the liquid inside. "We took some of your blood while you were unconscious." he says, which isn't remotely creepy and sickening. "I've been running it through certain chemical processes, isolating particular signatures in it. A transfusion of this, at this point, will give your powers to someone else."

He can't stop himself shaking but he is scared of not being able to speak, he has to find words because the idea of silence is as bad as death right now. "Then why the hell do you still need me?"

Schuester watches his face, not even like he hates him particularly, just sort of despises him a little bit for the Ghost just so not *getting* it. "I worked for the government during the registration period. I worked extensively with as much information on supers as anyone on the planet has ever had access to. Most supers begin displaying their powers in adolescence, a handful later on. In most cases their emergence is

triggered by a traumatic event. The powers are an evolutionary mechanism, and when your body is put into enough stress to 'need' them, they activate as a form of self-defence."

The Ghost holds his eye, and Rachel's fingers press his arm. Triggered by a traumatic event. Like wanting to not exist more than you want to exist. Like wishing that no-one would ever be able to touch you again. Like wishing that your body just *wasn't* because as long as it *is* then something unspeakable can happen to it . . .

There are so many things he's never told Rachel, who holds his arm and he can feel her terror and her *concern*, too, for the things she doesn't know, thrust into his world and suddenly seeing what it's *like*.

Schuester holds the needle up. "You have mechanisms for controlling your powers. Your body and your powers are adapted to each other and you can control them, they're natural to you, they're a part of you. If I put your powers into someone else, there are a number of potential issues. Their body could reject them; I've had a number of experiments just die after the initial transfusion. They could handle the transfusion but fail to manifest the powers anyway. Or their body could accept the power but fail to control it. So tell me what would happen," he says, watching the Ghost's eyes watching his, "if someone were to take on your powers without being able to control them."

He breathes, slowly. Rachel's holding his arm.

Schuester lets his breath out through his nose. "I can make you tell me, you do know that."

He closes his eyes, and Rachel is holding his arm, and his breath comes out shaking. "Fall," he whispers, very dry. "You would fall. No solidity. You would just fall through the ground and keep on falling."

Through the deafening blinding suffocating dark, you would fall until the blackness pressed in on you and snuffed you out. He understands the threat that's being made if he doesn't co-operate. *Rachel* would fall through the dark and die his death, if he won't help them to work around it . . .

"If it's all so dangerous," Rachel says, in a shaky, *angry* voice, "why does *she* want it? If it could kill her anyway -"

"There are tests I can perform. Little inoculations." Sugar grins behind his shoulder, and snaps her gum. "If it's safe, we can follow the procedure through."

The Ghost swallows, says, "Did you dump those people in the river because they failed your tests? Or didn't you even bother with the tests for them?"

"That gag is still an option." Schuester says flatly, and puts the syringe down. "I need to work out what exactly controls your powers. There are things I can do to help bodies adapt to them if I understand how they working."

The Ghost doesn't look at the straps and chains on the wall. "How?" he whispers, very dry.

"It's nothing even unpleasant, this is the gentle part. That's an MRI scanner through there. I need you to behave while you're inside it, you know we can do anything to her if you don't, and I'll stand at enough of a distance so you can use your powers on command and I can read -"

A hole has opened in his head, his brain feels like it pours through it like sand, too heavy, plummeting through itself, and his voice comes on automatic; "No."

Schuester looks almost most weary than annoyed, and says, "I'm getting tired of running through this. You don't have a choice."

He stares at the machine, the hungry open mouth of the machine, and sickness rises in his guts, because of everything they could ask of him -

He tries to step backwards but he can't, he can't make his body *move*. He shakes his head. It's all he can manage. Desperately, fear like a hand closing on his throat, he shakes his head.

He'll have to lay still on his back half-inside a machine and trust them. That's what's making his knees weaken and his breath catch. The vulnerability of it. The *helplessness* of it. He's helpless already but he's on his feet and he can see them, in that machine he wouldn't know what was happening and he would have to force himself to lay still and do as he was told and the fear makes him want to gag, the fear -

His breath catches; the fear is pulling his breath like a fist, snatching it back into his chest so it can't escape.

He tries to say 'no' again but can't, can't get the breath in to do it, and Rachel's voice stumbles over itself before she manages, "Ghost -?" because he's slipping, under her arm, his body too heavy with lack of breath and oh fuck not here not now he can't *breathe* -

He can hear Schuester say, "What -" and the snap of the guns aimed at them again, and Sugar says, "Is he alright?" and his ribs jar with the impact, he's on his knees not-breathing at the floor and Jesus not here not this not *now* -

Rachel crouches next to him, catches his shoulders and whispers, almost whimpers, "Okay it's okay -" but he can't breathe, his eyes are watering and his head is pounding and his chest is as tight as if he's having a heart attack and he can hear everything too intensely, everything's so horribly clear including his own ugly, gulping attempts at forcing his breath, can hear one of the gorillas mutter, "Some fuckin' superhero." and Schuester murmuring, "He's having a panic attack."

He is, and there's no Blaine to fix him now. Rachel is still chanting to him, desperate with fear, that everything's *okay* while he can't breathe, the edges of his vision have tunnelled, his head just *weighs* too much he's going to go down and he can't, like this, the fear of what happens if he passes out just feeds back into the fear already suffocating him and he can't, can't -

Rachel rubs his back, whispers to him, "I don't know what to do I can't - *don't touch him* god just let him *breathe* -"

Schuester is crouching in front of them, as Rachel wraps her arms protectively around his shoulders and he's hanging from his own lack of breath, blackness swarming his vision, a swarm of locusts moving in. Schuester says, sounding mostly confused, "You can't be claustrophobic."

He can't explain it, he couldn't even if he could breathe to speak right now, that it's not anything that they think that's doing this to him, it's *helplessness*. And not just helplessness, not just that he's cuffed and powerless and trapped but that they're asking him to lay on his back and put himself utterly at their mercy and it's the cruellest thing they could ask of him, he *can't*. Nothing panics him more than his own vulnerability, and having to trust that vulnerability to anyone else. The only person it has *ever* been okay to be vulnerable with is Blaine. No-one else. Ever. He either can't trust that they wouldn't hurt him or else he loves them and he can't burden them with it, with how much of it there is. It's only Blaine who's ever taken the weight for him. It's only Blaine he can offer his throat to and know that it's okay. It's only Blaine who has ever, ever made him feel *safe*.

"You understand," Schuester says, his voice too-steady to hold the impatience down, "that this is going to happen whatever you do. You are going to co-operate with us. So the sooner you get this under control -"

"Give him the room to breathe you *bastard*, like you haven't done enough to him already? Get-"

Rachel's voice and breath stop in one second, and the Ghost hauls his leaden-heavy head up, tries to focus through the draining of his not-breath at the thing in Schuester's hand aimed at her neck, while he's got Rachel's head twisted to the side by the hair and her panicked hands don't know what to grab. Syringe. Syringe -

He just drained a vial of the ability to turn someone into *half* a ghost, and now he's got Rachel with tears in her eyes trying not to make a sound out loud, and he's watching the Ghost's eyes, while he tries to control his breathing and can't.

Except he can. He has to. Rachel. He *has* to.

He closes his eyes, hangs his head and nods his submission, and tries, *tries* to breathe. Schuester must have let go of Rachel because he hears his steps back off and she's holding his face through the hood again, saying so shakily, "It's alright, it's alright it is alright I've got you I've got you -"

Breathe, breathe, for Christ's sake just *breathe* fucking hell you're *lungs* it's what you're *for* -

Nothing else ever made him feel safe.

He thinks about Blaine. He thinks about Blaine's arms around him, how solid they were, how Kurt could close his eyes to the skin of him and god he looked like he should taste of caramel but he tasted so much better, tasted of Blaine, warm and smooth and real. He thinks about how Blaine's hands would run down his back, stroke the tension out of his muscles with a long rolling press, god he always was too good to be true, the physical therapist who knew just how to massage the muscles in Kurt's back to satisfied *calm* . . .

He thinks about his eyes dark in the lamplight before sleep, drowsy and peaceful on his, intent on him, watching him so Kurt was seen and safe. He thinks about his laugh, so easy to stir out of him, thinks about how his voice twisted a little higher whenever he was anxious, thinks about how it would fill lower when he meant something too much. He thinks about him huffing over his iPad, over god knows what nonsense on the internet, how funny and how *sweet* it always was. He thinks about the shape of him in the t-shirt he slept in, bend of his back, curve of his shoulders, sides running slim down to his waist.

(And his breath comes a little longer, a little longer.)

He thinks about how he kissed him, and Kurt had never known that a kiss was supposed to be like that. A kiss meant that you hadn't been able to communicate *please don't touch me* loudly enough to the guy you hadn't been able to communicate *please don't get close to me* to before; a kiss meant frozen, rigid panic-revulsion at someone else's mouth and skin and scent too close. No: a kiss meant Blaine, slip of his hot tongue, warm lips catching his, and his hands sliding around Kurt's body so he felt him all over, so his skin shivered the length of him with Blaine. Taste, scent, heat. A kiss meant his stubble in a morning and his toothpaste at night. A kiss meant Blaine pressing his mouth to every part of Kurt's skin, hungry during sex, gentle before bed, like he *wanted* to kiss every part of Kurt. Like Kurt was precious. Kurt was precious, once, when Blaine loved him.

And his breath comes slower, longer, easier.

Blaine loved him. It's the only thing he'll take to his death with him; Blaine loved him, he really did. Blaine actually loved him. *Blaine* loved him, that good, funny, gentle man who never wanted to hurt him, who came careening into Kurt's life like a miracle, just as unlooked for; Blaine loved him. With all his heart, Kurt knows it, he did.

And Kurt loves him so much it overfills his heart, he feels it spill over inside him, hard to keep the tears inside. He loves him and it's the only thing he has left. What is left of his life will be a nightmare, he doesn't need to believe in hell because hell is happening right now, but he loves Blaine. All he can do is think of that. Forget everything else. You can't save yourself and you can't help Rachel, not at all, you're nothing like a hero anymore. All you can do is think of him and let them do whatever they like. Think about how much he loved you, focus on the best thing you ever had, that he loved you and he let you love him. Because he's breathing, now, heavy and painful but almost normal, and Rachel is stroking his hair through the hood, and he swallows, swallows again and she lifts her hand to unscrew one of the water bottles, to offer him another drink.

He swallows it, and wets his lips. "I'm sorry," he whispers, head very low, they can't hear them down on the floor like this and it's hardly like it matters at this point anyway. His breath is rough, but it's there. "I'm sorry, Rachel. If I could have saved anyone I wish it was you."

"Stupid." she whispers, very raw, and caps the bottle again. "Do you think I don't feel the same?"

He wonders if she means that, if she understand what that means. He breathes, breathes. He's almost come down to calm enough. Calm enough to . . . "If they take my powers," he says, quietly. "They could do anything with them. This city . . ."

She puts the bottle down. "I know."

He looks at her. She's white-faced, drawn and exhausted and blank, like she *has* to hold her face blank. "They're going to kill us either way." she says, and swallows and shakes her head, Rachel Berry, the most stubborn person he has ever known, and he does mean that in a *good* way. "Not because of me. Don't let them because of -"

"Are you ready to go through with this yet?" Schuester says from the table, moving something that clinks. The Ghost just watches Rachel's eyes, because -

Because they both know that neither of them is walking away from this alive, whatever they do at this point. But they can't kill *him* yet, not until Sugar's father is ready for it. It's Rachel who doesn't mean a thing to them, they can always get someone else to use as a test subject, someone else to hold the life of over the Ghost's head to make him surrender. If he won't co-operate then *she's* the one who suffers, and this isn't a decision that can be taken back. If Rachel understands what she's saying - what the cost will be, what this could -

But they're already both going to die, that's been inevitable since the docks, they have no choice but in how they face it. Doesn't Rachel have the right to choose to meet her death in the eye, just as much as he does . . . ?

He murmurs, very low, "Are you sure?"

"Yes." Furious brightness builds in her eyes, tears of utter *rage*. "*Fuck* them."

He swallows. "You know - they'll make it - bad."

"*Fuck* them."

He draws his breath in, lets it all go. He nods. They'll make it bad. They'll make it very bad. They will do things to try to make them change their minds. It will be *bad*. But at least they'll die knowing that they didn't make anything worse for anyone else, because what the hell else can you do?

She helps him shift to a better sit, kneeling mostly upright with her support, so he can look up at Schuester and say, "Neither of us are co-operating with anything. I'll ghost for you when I'm dead, I'm not doing a thing to help you wreck anyone else's life."

He sighs so *angrily*, and lifts the needle. "Do I need to remind you -"

Rachel holds him with shaking hands and snaps, "Go stick your head in your own stupid machine."

Schuester strides at them, and the Ghost's jaw sets, if he can time his surge upwards right he should at least be able to break that fucking syringe of -

An alarm starts, somewhere outside the container, wailing in a lonely way out there in the huge high warehouse. Schuester stops, and voices start calling in panic outside, and then there's the sound of an explosion so loud Schuester stumbles back a step and Sugar jumps like a startled cat, and one of the gorillas behind them swears and runs out. "Stay he-" Schuester yells, but it's too late; the Ghost tries to look behind his shoulder but his multiply-battered ribs crackle pain at him, and he hunches again, hissing.

"What the fuck-" the other gorilla says, and gunfire rattles around out there, shouting and yelling, another *boom* like a bomb went off and someone yelps and wails in its aftermath. "The girl," Schuester snaps. "Get that gun on the girl before -"

The Ghost is between the gorilla and Rachel, with his hands cuffed behind his back, as powerless as any ordinary person, aching and battered and angry as all fuck. And here's the thing about the Ghost: for five years he survived the streets of this city on his own on a night, he fought people usually bigger and heavier and stronger than he was, usually armed, usually outnumbering him. And yes, he had his powers, and yes, there was a time he went to martial arts classes almost every night of the week. But the main reason he survived was that when things got bad, when it was his life on the edge of someone else's knife, he always had two things left to rely on. One was that they would usually underestimate him, because he was young and skinny and softly-spoken and they hadn't realised that he was more skilled than them and *smarter* than them.

Two was that when it really comes down to it, if he's fighting for his life then he's fighting for it for his dad, and he's fighting to *win*. Back to the wall, the Ghost fights dirty.

He's maced, tasered, crotch-kicked, throat-punched and on one early desperate occasion *bit* his way to safety in the past. He survives. He doesn't enjoy hurting people but he is not going to down to some pettily evil fuck in the night. He does what he has to do. He has people counting on him to survive, to protect them, to *survive* -

He has a fraction of a second to time this to, because he, and Rachel, will never get a second chance. So he judges the guy's step behind himself and slams his head backwards into his crotch with all the strength left in him, so hard his skull *hammers* off his pelvis.

Asshole pulled his *hair*.

The gun hits the floor and the guy goes down with an inbreath-noise like the Ghost just cut off the air in his throat, and Rachel shrieks and they're now down one gorilla making *uhuhuhuhuh* noises on the floor but there's still Schuester and Sugar and he doesn't have many *options* -

The gunfire's mostly stopped out there, but he can hear running feet. He shifts on his knees to be able to turn enough to see, throbbing head a little ducked in the hood, not knowing what this might be until he sees - that blond super, running - just running like a normal person, not zipping along like lightning chasing the earth - stagger up, panting, and he calls over his shoulder, "Here -!"

Schuester barks, "Sam, I need you to -"

"No go, doc, sorry." Sam says, as more feet run in their direction. "You're on your own."

Because -

iBorg clangs to the ground from mid-flight, and strides into the container with one wrist raised, aimed at Schuester, saying, "Stay seriously still or I will seriously kick your ass, dude." and running up behind him yelling, "*Freeze!*" is - Finn. Finn, who comes charging into the container aiming his gun at Schuester and then at Sugar who throws her hands up in surrender with tears in her eyes, and Rachel sobs, "*Finn-*"

"Rachel, Jesus-"

Rachel stumbles up and Finn throws his arms around her, they hug so tight it looks painful, and the Ghost blinks dazedly from his kneel, he doesn't understand - doesn't understand -

"Ghost -"

He looks up, and Phalanx runs into him so hard he knocks him back on his ass, arms snatching in around him, grabbing the back of his head to press him in close, dug painfully into his armour and his heart *pounds* its disbelief there. "Thought I'd never see you again," Phalanx chokes, chest jumping with breaths close to sobs jarring the Ghost's chest, as the Ghost stares disbelieving at his neck in extreme close-up. "Thought I'd never -"

... so hard to understand, this ... he's not dead, he's not going to die, he's ... Phalanx ...

Here. Holding him. Here. He's safe.

He's *safe*.

His breath falls out of him into Phalanx's throat, and Phalanx squeezes him so hard it hurts and he can't care. "I thought I'd never, I thought-" Phalanx's hand finds his face, he manages to unpeel himself from his body just enough to check his eyes, he looks *pale* with terror, gasping at him, "Are you okay, you're not hurt, you are okay -?"

He just starts laughing. It jars his chest, every jump of it hurts enough to raise tears but he can't stop it, relief like he's hauled himself out of the dark, because he never has had much experience in being rescued, not by anyone but him. And Phalanx's thumb strokes his cheek, and he lifts the Ghost's face just enough to kiss his forehead, under the hood, and whisper, "Thought I'd lost you. I thought ..."

"I'm okay," he whispers, the exhaustion really flooding through his body now, now that fear isn't keeping him manic on the edge of despair. Now he really feels the night; he's been drugged, knocked around, battered on his unhealed bones, *terrified*. He's so so so hurting and tired, but here's Phalanx, and it's okay, he's okay, they're *okay* ...

Behind Phalanx's back, a voice he knows says, "Seriously, go right ahead and move if you want to, you don't need your oesophagus for anything, right?"

He blinks, a little dazed and dreamy with how surreal this moment is (*safe*), over Phalanx's shoulder. At Incendiary, who's standing with the dangerous heel of her boot pressed over the throat of the gorilla on the ground, while Cheer Girl is leaning down to look into the Ghost's face before she *smiles* a happy little 'oh hi haven't seen you in forever!' greeting.

And his body is tense, and he doesn't understand.

He understands even less when Puckzilla walks in, human-formed, hands still fisting at his sides. "That's the guy?" he snarls. "That's the dick who did this to me?"

"Easy, lizard, he's going into custody." The woman who walks in beside him - it takes his now-panicking brain a second to place her - is the woman the Ghost saw in Puckerman's cell, what - ?

He whispers, very quietly, "Phalanx -?" because he's rescued him from the mob to dump him on the floor in front of a bunch of supervillains -

Incendiary glances across at him, *leers*, says, "Hey spooky, looking well." and Phalanx rubs his back, says, "Uh, they're on our side. They're um, reformed."

"Not so reformed I won't pound that bastard -" Puckerman snarls at Schuester, and the woman behind him says, "*Down* boy, don't make me drop you, he's coming in for questioning. Schuester. We do indeed have a *very* long list of questions for you."

Phalanx rubs the Ghost's back through his cloak, says, "Can someone - we need to get these cuffs off him, his arm -"

"I'm on it." iBorg says, lowering his arm from aiming at Schuester, who's got a roomful of angry superheroes in front of him and okay, they don't have powers around him, but the Ghost still wouldn't want to face Puckerman wearing that expression. "No probs."

"Careful," the Ghost says, suddenly panic-aware of those cuffs again. "Pressure sensors, if the pressure on them lessens I get -"

"S'cool. I'm good with technology like you wouldn't believe."

He hooks the Ghost's cloak out of the way, and Phalanx catches his face to kiss his forehead again, then whispers to him, "Jesus I thought they would kill you, I thought -"

He closes his eyes, hangs into the hypnotic closeness of him, safe, safe, safe. "Phalanx," he breathes, because he doesn't really dare to speak, not to say what he needs to, what the hell can he say after tonight - ?

Finn's voice says overhead, "He okay?" and the Ghost lifts his drowsy head, blinks, looks up at him, smiles.

"Officer Hudson."

He's got an arm around Rachel still, and her fingers are tight in his shirt. "You alright?"

"I've been better." Phalanx kisses him again, like he can't stop doing it, on the mask beside his eye. "I've definitely been worse."

"There you go." iBorg says behind him, and - his wrists slip loose of the grip of the cuffs, he braces for *pain* but nothing happens, and iBorg dangles the empty cuffs over his shoulder. "Clever. Even I wouldn't've thought of it. Someone really wanted to keep you in."

Phalanx helps to draw his hurt arm forward, rest it to his chest; the pain of the bending has to be endured but it's better when he can just press it there, and let his breath out. "Okay," Phalanx whispers, and would probably kiss him again except -

It happens behind them, so the Ghost doesn't see what happens, just the aftermath; Sugar staggering to the side with a syringe sticking out of her arm, and Puckerman punching Schuester so hard he bangs off the wall and hits the floor already unconscious. Finn has his gun up, iBorg's tense and aiming his wrist at Sugar again -

And a woman's voice calls from outside, "Agent Sylvester, my powers just cut back in, what -?"

- no.

The Ghost stares at Sugar, who, fingers shaking and suppressing little whimpers, takes the syringe in her hand and pulls it from her arm. It drops from her hand like it's too nerveless to grip it. And she says, "I feel -" and comes heavily to her knees, and it's Rachel who sucks her breath in and drops to her knees in front of her.

"God - oh god we need an ambulance, he just injected her with -"

(He'll never know why that man did that; spite, or to know if it worked, or just because he *could* - ?)

"S'posed t'do tests," Sugar mumbles. "'case it was danger- oh wow. Look."

Her raised hand is fading out of sight, and coldness grips the Ghost from low inside. "Look at *that*, oh my god," Sugar says, turning her hand about, beginning to grin. "Ghostette in the *house*, now I ca-"

She gives a little shriek as she first jolts down, looks down disbelieving at herself buried to the knees in the floor. "What -" she says, just staring, her whole body now a little faded, like a -

"No," the Ghost says, and turns properly in Phalanx's arms. Phalanx tries to grab him tighter but his powers are working again too with Schuester unconscious, and his hands slip through the Ghost's body like he's not even there, because the Ghost knows what happens next.

When his powers came in, they crept in bit by bit, and he had the time to adjust; he lost pencils and mugs through his fingers and he put his foot right through the stairs on a few occasions and tripped face-first, but he had the time to deal with things, he never just found his entire body intangible and impossible to keep from falling. What Schuester just put into Sugar has nothing natural about it, and -

"Why won't it -" she says, jerking down again, sinking and grabbing at the floor with hands that go through it, sliding lower. "Why won't it - ?"

"The hell is she -" Incendiary says, and then Sugar *screams* as she slides into a smoother fall, through the floor and gone, and the Ghost dives after her. He hears Phalanx yell. There's no time to reply.

Through solidity, black and pressing in, kicking himself after the route she fell. His flailing hand is reaching blindly for something else semi-solid, concentrating as hard as he can, feeling desperately for -

His hand swipes through something that feels *different* in the dark, and he alters his own solidity again, matches hers, grabs her *hard*. It's her arm. But then she's falling faster, jerks him with her - his ribs wrench - through into open air, oh, *fuck*.

He tries to grab on and hold them in this ceiling but his right arm -

He falls, ghosting, body stunned with pain, still holding her arm as tight as he can as she finally has enough air to *scream*. They hit solidity again and sink through it and he slows them, braces himself, *hauls* with all the strength he has back for the surface, for whatever space that was they just fell through, too dark to tell - but his right arm is screaming, useless, and she's kicking and fighting in panic even as he *drags* her back the way they came. No air left in his lungs he kicks, *fights* for the surface, feels the back of his head in open

air, jerks himself higher and gasps a breath in, braces himself on his right elbow with no other choice and *heaves*.

It's all he can do to pull her up, she comes up flailing and panicking and *wheezing*, choking down air once he gets her head clear. "You have to concentrate!" he yells at her. "You have to -"

She grabs at him blindly, sobs, "Don't let go, don't let go of -"

"Kick yourself out. Make the soles of your feet more solid, kick yourself *up* -"

"You have to help me you have to pull me -"

He's *shaking*, there's no strength left in him, in the pitch black god-knows-where all alone with a mobster's daughter he doesn't even know if he can *save* or if his own powers will kill her down here in the dark. "You have to push yourself up! I can't -"

She grabs his shoulder and *pulls* rather than pushes, and his ribs would really rather that she hadn't done that. He grips her arm hard, clenches his teeth, concentrates on keeping both of them solid. He can make solid things intangible, he knows that; now he puts everything he has into making her solid, into making her exist, into keeping her from turning into a ghost in the dark.

"Oh god - oh god -" she pants.

"Where are -" he says, and feels - too much, too much pain, so much he's dizzy with it, he feels like his head is going to roll off his neck -

"Basement under - my dad, for storing - if cops come check -"

"Cell," he says, nausea rising. "Do you - ? You have to call someone. They have to get us out of -"

He has to stop speaking to lean over and throw up; he spits and swings clumsily back, startled, too dark to see, gripping Sugar's arm to keep her solid and weird white bubbles keep bursting in his vision. His teeth are chattering. Too much, he wants to say, but all he makes is a confused noise. Too much. The whole night's been too much. He can't -

Sugar's cell lights up, reveals the reinforced basement they're in, the stacked up crates and her face lit sickly green like this. "Are you alright?" she says, and then the bang of hitting the floor reverberates through his whole body, but he doesn't remember falling.

She's shaking his shoulder and yelling at him. He can't make the words out. Too much; the whole night's been too much.

Tell, he thinks. It's important that someone gets told something. Tell. Tell . . .

Dad?

Blaine, he thinks, and then it's just black.

*

Well, he thinks, during some confused jostling and noise that he understands in a detached way is happening to him, sometime later, somewhen, somewhere. There's always some silver lining. At least no-one's actually going to be able to tell you that it really was your fault.

*

He's somewhere quiet, and still, with light behind his eyelids and his body gradually letting him know which parts of it are *really* unhappy with him. He breathes, and his heart beats. After some time he finds the energy to summon up the thought, I don't think I'm dead yet.

Which means that he really ought to open his eyes and deal with things.

There's just colour and shape at first, none of it making much sense, though it settles - slowly - into a white-panelled institutional ceiling, and institutional white walls. His arm is encased in something stiff and alien; back in a cast, wonderful. He can tell there's an IV in the other arm, cold and strange. He has a conversation with the muscles in his neck, who as part of the union of his body as a whole are refusing to co-operate. He resorts from cajoling to bullying. He turns his head.

There's a woman sitting next to him, the blonde-haired woman from earlier, flipping through a file. She looks up when he turns his head, says, "You have a certain genius for getting yourself almost killed that I do in a twisted way admire, Casper."

He closes his eyes, swallows, can't find the strength to speak. He turns his head to check the rest of the room instead; there's no window, but there is another bed, and lying on it on top of the covers with his back to him -

He's even still wearing his armour, crashed out on his side, apparently profoundly asleep. He closes his eyes, draws his breath in, turns his head back to the woman and wets his lips, forces the whisper out; "... 's he okay ... ?"

"Mm? He's fine. You've been out for ten hours, he only fell asleep a little while back. It's a good thing he did, I was more than willing to sedate him to get him out from under our feet all the time. You are taking him back with you when you go. We are not pet-sitting your attention-needy puppy for you."

He watches her face, because he's too tired to do much else, swallows again and says, "Mask?"

"Still on." she says, and shuffles the contents of her file straight. "If we wanted your uncostumed ass we would have it. Take it as a gesture of goodwill on our part that we don't."

"... that girl, Sugar Motta, is she ..."

"In custody, safely solid again. Whatever Schuester did to her, it gave her a very intense but very brief burst of your powers, and by the time we broke through into that basement she was pretty convinced that she didn't want them anyway. Other people, however, do retain an interest in what you're capable of doing."

He's really just far too tired for any more of this crap, he wants to sleep *forever*. "Who the hell are you?"

"Agent Sue Sylvester. I represent the United States' government's interest in supers, though they will deny without qualification any interest in supers should you pass that information on to anyone else. Government's got their eye on you, spook. You have a unique skill set and we're very interested in working with you."

"Bullshit." he says, then closes his eyes. "Pardon my French. But *c'est des conneries* all the same. After all that registration crap and I've got the entire NYPD chasing my cape on a night, like hell the government gives a crap about me."

"There have been some changes in policy. Very much from behind closed doors, because the super situation is touchy in terms of public opinion, but it's really not a case of more of the same, Casper." She steeples her fingers, speaks over their tips. "The registration policy was a mistake. It was a mistake pushed for by one Agent Schuester, before he went rogue - or at least before anyone beside me suspected him of going rogue - so that he could track down as many supers as possible to try to work out how to supplement his own admittedly pathetic power. We performed no maniacal experiments on anyone who wasn't a volunteer trying to help us understand the super phenomenon, spooky. We didn't murder anyone. All of that was him."

He murmurs to the ceiling, "I'm sure that the rest of you are angels," and contemplates not being dead. It's an exhausting, aching business, not being dead. But Phalanx is asleep on the next bed, and it might yet be worth it. "People died," he says. "Because of that policy. Supers died. There was that mob down in -"

"Like I said. The policy was a mistake, and did lead to some isolated and regrettable incidents. The United States government would like to apologise wholeheartedly for that."

He looks at her. Interesting that she doesn't state that *she's* sorry about it. "Why would I ever help them?"

"Well," she says, and flicks through the file, "out of the goodness of your disgustingly sweet cotton candy heart, for one thing, because we have pretty good evidence that you'd do some pretty stupid things for other people. Like jumping through the floor to rescue a mobster's daughter who was just about to have you killed anyway. You could help a lot more people than just the population of that city, Casper. This is a big country and it faces big threats. "

He closes his eyes. It's hard enough *just* helping his city. Agent Sylvester ignores his sigh and says, "For another, if there was certain back scratching coming from your side then we could maybe return the favour with a little itch of yours here and there too. Like having some words with the New York police commissioner about laying off the ghost hunt for a while. We could get you on a government wage - I'm assuming you have some way of supporting yourself but if you could drop the day job with our not ungenerous aid and devote yourself full-time to -"

He says without even thinking about it, "You are prying that job out of my cold dead fingers."

"Given last night, I wouldn't be surprised if one day soon we did." Agent Sylvester says calmly. "Think about it, spooky. We could help each other out here. We're already working to set up a police unit to deal

with super incidents - we need some way to use the testimony of superheroes in court, in case you haven't thought through how many criminals you bring down end up walking free because 'the Ghost said he did it' can't stand up in a trial. Your friend Officer Hudson seems a good man to bring into the squad. Stupid as a horse but biddable enough. Seems to take the territory pretty much in stride."

He stares at the ceiling, says slowly, "And what would you want from me? Why would I give my identity to an agency that you just told me housed a rogue agent who went around murdering supers for personal gain *without any of you noticing* for god knows how long -"

"Due to recent events, I accept that you're probably twitchy of giving us your name and the address of whatever sinister haunted house you live in. That's fine. As a gesture of support from the government, we're not asking you to unmask yourself for us. All in good time, maybe, but for now we'd just appreciate your expertise. Casper, I'm trying to knock a team of supers into shape who spend more time fighting amongst themselves than they ever devote to their actual job and frankly, if we came up against a serious threat I doubt I'd get half of them back at the end of the mission right now. They need to see how the professionals do it. Might shame their lazy, feckless asses into giving a crap about how *pathetic* they are right now, since my current combination of invective, contempt and verbal abuse doesn't seem to be having much effect."

He gives her a tired look. "Half of them tried to kill me *more* than once."

"Tells you the quality of what I'm dealing with that after multiple attempts not one of them managed it, huh?"

He sighs. He doesn't know if she thinks that he's actually going to be bought over by some weak flattery, like his life isn't already more than complicated enough without - without *this*. He is not ready to be unmasked by the wider world. He has hell to look forward to when he gets home to Rachel, he really - he can't face anything more. Every time one more person sees *him* he feels frozen with fear all over again, and he can't trust them, *won't* trust them, not when it's Phalanx and his family who pay for it if it turns out that they're not trustworthy. He doesn't want them anywhere *near* them.

But...

It is a very big world, he knows that. He's seen super incidents in other cities - in other *countries* on the news and felt the helplessness, watching normal cops trying to deal with it, himself so, so far away and by the time he could get a flight over he'd be too late to do anything anyway. And more than that . . .

This has always been, for him, about the person in front of him who needs help. About the fact of another human being, and how they *matter*. But Blaine barrelling into his life knocked some of the old ways out of kilter, and now he sees a wider world, more than just the *now*, in front of him. He can look into the future and the past, now. He can face a longer view, he can see the wider vista. The person in front of you will always be the most important thing, but how they got to be in front of you matters too.

Systems within systems within systems lead to the crap he deals with on the streets; that harmless, helpless super was murdered by a mob because the country allows a seething undercurrent of anti-super feeling to run through its media, its police force, its culture. Kurt is wary of kissing his boyfriend in Columbus airport because it's too easily accepted that some people would *despise* them for it and their contempt is treated as worthy of respect in a way that Kurt and Blaine's safety and self-respect isn't. There are too many women who suffer because of a cultural undercurrent that says that men can't be expected not to act on their desires, whatever the cost to other people. There are too many crimes committed because poverty and hopelessness lead to petty crimes and then less petty crimes and no way out but a gun and nothing to lose . . .

He's only beginning to face what he can actually deal with and what he can't, as an individual, out in the dark. But . . . but any little extra he could do, anything . . . if the government would come out in support of supers, so teenagers just learning *themselves* wouldn't have to feel so terrified and alone. If the Ghost and Phalanx could be accepted as superheroes in love like nothing else matters by more than just an emotionally incontinent rabble of fans on the internet, if they were *respected* for it, if *it* was respected. If he could talk to the police about what is *just not helping* on the streets but what *could*, if they would let it. If he was part of the most powerful system in the country, and he could do - something, tell them, you *have* to fix this, you don't understand the cost, you don't understand the oppression, I know it all looks so small but it adds up to low-creeping and constant *evil* and you *can't let this go on* . . .

He's so, so tired. He closes his eyes, drifting through the exhaustion, and murmurs, "May I have some time to think? I need to discuss it with - him, anyway."

"Sure. He knows how to contact us when you need to. In the meantime, given that last night could repeat itself any time in your line of work, is there anything you want to settle right now? Some way we could contact you if we needed to, things we should know?"

"If Officer Hudson's on your side, we see him around often enough, if you need to pass anything on to us." Not a lie, after all. "What else would you need to know?"

"Potential threats that might be coming up."

"Nothing I'm aware of. Supervillains are oddly reluctant to tell me their plans beforehand." He opens his eyes again, murmurs to the ceiling, "If this brings the Mottas down, the New York crime world will be chaos for months now. Power vacuum. We'll be busy."

"Perp-on-perp crime is the least of your worries, Casper."

"No. It's not." Systems within systems within systems; most people don't end up trapped into what they're doing because they're evil. It doesn't mean that what they're doing isn't wrong; it also doesn't mean that he's leaving them unhelped, either.

"Anything we should know about your powers? Only definites we have listed for you is the intangibility, the invisibility and that weird psychic bitch-slap of yours. Any weaknesses we should know about?"

"A disinclination to share potential weaknesses with people I have literally had half an hour's conversation with?"

"I'll just put 'trust issues'." He looks across at her, and her smile is more of a smirk, really. "You might be alright yet, Casper."

He doesn't understand, he's too *tired* to, but then there's a shifting behind him and Phalanx mumbles something, then jolts up so quickly his hand flails behind himself for purchase and finds - nothing but air, so he goes backwards off the bed with a yelp. He scrambles up as the Ghost turns his head, tries to lift his hand and *hell* even the left one won't move as Phalanx thumps to his knees by the bed and chokes at him, "-awake you're awake oh *god* I was so worried I can't even -"

Agent Sylvester sighs, and closes her file. "I'll leave you two some 'alone' time. Mostly because I suspect that this is about to become *nauseatingly* sentimental."

Because the Ghost has closed his eyes, face held in Phalanx's hands and Phalanx's forehead pressed to his, lulled by his closeness, safe with him touching him. "Thought I'd never see you again," Phalanx whispers, his voice too full, and the Ghost thinks, Blaine, do you think I did . . . ?

The door closes, and they're alone in the room. Phalanx swallows like it hurts, and lifts his head a little, brushes the Ghost's hair back, whispers, "Hey."

"Hey, you." he murmurs, and smiles, because there's nothing else he can do, he hasn't got the strength to twitch his *fingers*. "Are you okay?"

"I think I'm better than you." He settles his cheek on his folded arm against the mattress, his other arm draping the Ghost's stomach, to put his hand over his. "Mike is *pissed*."

"Mike -?"

"I called him, I didn't really think, but he already knew your condition so he was kind of the best doctor to have right then. Agent Sylvester seemed pretty happy with him, she said they need an in-house medic who knows how to keep a secret."

The Ghost thinks, They have Finn, and they have Mike, and frankly it would take *me* less than ten minutes to finger me as the Ghost after all this. Fear is sour in his stomach, but there's nothing for it; he has no choice but to trust that they do want him to *actually* trust them enough to not go looking for his name if he's not willing to give it. "It's not like I wanted any of this to happen," he says, quietly. "I thought . . ."

"It's over now. It's all over now."

"I thought they were going to kill me. I thought I'd never see you again." His throat hurts. "I thought they'd get my mask off me and it wouldn't take them any time in the *world* to find you and my dad and -"

"Hey, hey hey hey, they didn't. Okay? It swung right back and bit them in the ass. We're fine. We're about as safe as we'll ever be, right? And - and as long as you're alive I don't care about any of it." His fingers wrap the Ghost's, and squeeze. "I really thought . . . I couldn't *find* you. I thought I - wouldn't." His voice is too thick. "Not alive."

"I'm fine," he whispers.

Phalanx's eyebrows go low. "You have a weird definition of 'fine'."

"I'm alive." It feels like all he needs, suddenly, because - god. He wants to hold him and he can't *move*, it's the most frustrating - "I love you," he says, too desperately. "It was all I could think about, when I thought they'd kill me, *you* and - and how I'd been so -"

"Ghost -"

"- *lucky*," he chokes, and then can't stop the dry cough. Phalanx stands up, does something behind the Ghost's head, comes back with a beaker of water. He sits beside him on the mattress and helps him drink, oh, they've been here before, then kisses him while he's got his head lifted before he settles him back on the pillow. "I feel lucky too." he says, quietly. "I can't even tell you. This still feels like it's not happening."

"It's happening. I keep . . ." He closes his eyes, says, "God, my office, what time is it? I need to call -"

"Rachel, um, she's taking care of stuff like that. Called your job and your dad."

"What did she - ?"

Phalanx glances at the door, then says, "She told them you tripped down the stairs."

"Wonderful. I remain the clumsiest idiot in the office." He rolls his eyes. "No-one to blame but myself, I suppose."

"I can't *believe* you went out like that, I still can't -"

"I can't believe you didn't answer your *phone*, what the hell were you -"

Phalanx puts a hand to his face, screws his eyes closed, mumbles, "It's a long story. Can it wait until we're - out of here, at least . . . ? But god I am - I can't even tell you - how *sorry* -"

"It wasn't your fault. It wasn't, I - do you think when I thought I was going to die I was laying there bitching you out in my head? All I thought about was how . . ." He stops, and his left hand does manage a puny little lurch on the covers, but that's as close to reaching for him as he can manage, as his throat goes tight again. "All I thought about was how good you were to me."

His hand grabs over the Ghost's and it drops out of Phalanx, shocked too quiet, "Don't ever say that in the past tense."

He just shakes his head, watching his eyes. He should . . .

There's so much to talk about. That team. How the hell Phalanx got hold of them to come help. What the 'long story' is. What Rachel's going to do, what his *dad's* going to do, what's going to happen now they're *known* and they have to play a dangerous game of keeping this group just distant enough to stay safe, just close enough to keep an eye on them . . .

But Phalanx holds his hand, and stares at him like he doesn't even believe he exists, and he's so, so *tired* . . .

No, he thinks. You have to deal with at least some of it right now. It's happening right now.

He murmurs, "Do you trust them?"

Phalanx's lips part, and he's still for a second, then says quietly, "I don't know. You don't."

He shakes his head again, just a little, any more makes him hurt just out of *exhaustion*. "We don't get a choice about how deep in we already are," he says, thinking it through. "But I'm not giving them a thing more than I have to. I want to see what they'll do. She said they wouldn't come after our identities if we weren't willing to give them, and we're already . . . they're already dangerously close to us. So we need to see what they do." He swallows. "After last night, I really - I really don't want people getting near my dad, not . . ."

"I know." Phalanx strokes his cheek a little, resettles the covers over him, takes his hand again. "I don't want people getting near *you*."

"Things aren't going to be the same." he says, watching his eyes. "They can't be. Not if Finn's helping them out, Mike . . ."

Phalanx shrugs with one shoulder. "New York still needs us."

There is always that. There will always be that. His throat feels too tight. "I still need you."

"You have me." He holds his hand, and watches his eyes. "You always, always have me."

He will always exist just enough, just as much as Blaine holds onto him; it's *more* than enough for him.

Phalanx's gloved thumb strokes the back of his hand. "Soon as it won't hurt you worse to do it, we can get out of here and get you home. Mike'll chew you out but you'll be fine, angel. You know you're going to be fine."

He's so, so tired. And he does know that he's going to be fine, after all; Blaine's here.

Phalanx murmurs, "Go back to sleep."

The world is bigger than it was yesterday, scarily so, and full of questions and worry. But he has a shield, and he's alive. So long as that's true then he'll cope with the rest. So long as he has Blaine he feels like he is actually capable of being the hero that Blaine thinks he is: he will cope, because someone who has so much has so, so much that they can give.

Phalanx leans down and kisses his forehead, above the mask, like he can't not. And the Ghost of New York lets his whisper of, "Go back to sleep, angel, I'm right here." lull him back down into the safe warm dark, knowing that someone is watching over him.

What does he think that an angel is . . . ?

Chapter Thirty

now officially the longest ghost drought ever. fml.

That's it, obviously. He quit. He trained Phalanx up to take his place and he quit. I wonder if he'd come back if there was some giant supervillain problem, like if we really needed him?

Fanart, pucklanx, bondage and ballgags, really NSFW...

Fandom's totally shrunk too, everyone's jumping ship to another super. Nearly six fucking years you ungrateful dicks. I'm never forgetting what he did for us, not ever. Fuck all of you.

*wtf Puckzilla siting?? Helping out with that busted damn that was on the news?? it seriously looks like he's *helping* why is he not in jail I do not understand 0_0*

yessssss

*

"You stay in bed," Mike says, putting the pills on the nightstand in close reach. "You do not, repeat, just in case this is somehow a new concept for you, you do *not* mess with your cast, and you stay on your ass and off the streets until I say so. Agreed?"

"I have absolutely no intention of going out like this, Mike."

Blaine squeezes his hand. "I'll keep him safe."

Mike picks up his bag and says from the doorway, "I'm back to check on you tomorrow night. If I catch you so much as upright then I'm stapling you to that mattress."

"No-one trusts me to just stay down." Kurt says bitterly.

"No-one trusts me to keep you down," Blaine says morosely.

"No-one trusts you two to do anything *sane*," Mike snaps, and closes the door behind himself.

Blaine takes Kurt's hand, and runs his thumb over his knuckles. And Kurt looks at his eyes and thinks, I don't know what he's talking about. This is the most rational thing in the world.

*

omg Blackbindings updated

WHOA THERE BLACKBINDINGS UPDATE

god now the ghost's not around her writing is the best thing in my life wish that was a joke

DKSFLGAskkjfldsdhjk i can't with my feelings

Blackbindings update I want to have sex with her braaaaiiiiiinnnnnn ;_;

*bb oh my *god* you just get better and better, I don't know how you *do* this :D :D :D*

Me: will I ever read blackbindings and not cry

Magic 8 ball: pfffft

*

The first time he hears his dad's voice, he cries.

He doesn't mean to and didn't think he would before he calls, he does know that he has to make the 'yes Dad, something happened but I'm home now and safe now and Blaine will look after me' call - but his voice, his *voice* rushed down the line, "*Kurt, you okay? Rachel called me-*"

And his throat's so full he chokes and then he's just crying, holding the phone a little away, trying not to let him hear because -

- because he thought he'd never see him again, he thought he would die doing the thing that his dad never wanted him to do in the first place, he'd thought they would do obscene things to him and his dad would have to *know*, they were going to film it, he would *see* what was done to Kurt before death was a mercy to him and then they would know who Kurt's dad was anyway to go after *him* if they wanted -

Because that was actually the worst thing that he's ever lived through, and he has lived through a lot of things he'd have to assess and rank quite carefully under that heading, and his dad's voice . . .

His dad falls silent for a second, then says, *"It's okay. It's okay, Kurt, everything's okay, buddy."*

His voice sounds far too much like a whimper, as he wipes his cheeks off which is pointless if the tears still won't stop. "I'm sorry -"

"Don't be sorry, everything's okay. I already bought my ticket, I'll get in late tonight -"

"Wh - you don't have to -"

"Tough, 'cause I am."

His dad. Here. Tonight. He can have a hug from his dad *tonight* -

Superhero, he thinks, and cries like a child, half of it from happiness while his dad talks him down on the phone; Dad, Dad, tonight, Dad . . .

*

Almost more Phalanx fansites than Ghost stuff now. I'm trying not to be bitter. I really am.

New kitten!! She's white and kind of shy so guess what I called her XD

Fic: Never Better, ghostlanx, R, angst; 'Now he lives by the sea and does tai chi on the beach as the sun rises and tells him he doesn't miss it, with his hands tight on his coffee mug and one leg unconsciously jigging.'

If I jumped off a bridge I could get Phalanx to rescue me and then grab him by the shoulders and scream at him to tell me where he is

That woman he rescued last month said he said he was okay

*Of course he'll *say* that. Like he wants to tell anyone if he's not?*

Odd how he haunts us even more when he's not actually around . . .

*

"Hummel, Hummel, Hummel."

"I'm sorry, Sophie, I know, it's almost every week -"

"I am having you wrapped in cotton wool and escorted between this office and your apartment in the future. You okay?"

"Yes. Just - bruised. I'm supposed to be more careful with my arm now."

"I thought you wouldn't be any good for drafting stuff for a while -"

"I can still work, I mean I wanted to do a collaboration with Robbie anyway on the men's-"

"- so I thought about moving you into one of the upstairs offices for a sort of mini-apprenticeship. There's a couple of people I think you should interact with."

". . . like an intern? Because, um, I make pretty bad coffee with just the one -"

"No, Hummel, not like an intern. Like a beautiful glistening brain we need people of insight to pick at before you get hit by a wrecking ball or whatever else is next on the cards. Seriously, I can think of two designers specifically you could have a very interesting relationship with, besides you getting the experience they would get a hell of a shot up the -"

"Sophie?"

"- hm?"

". . . actual designers?"

"They need access to your gorgeous little brain before you get hit on the head one too many times, Hummel. Kurt, yes, I want you to talk to some people, they have the experience but those tangents your mind swings off at just *excite* me, okay? I want to mix things up. Let them know about the lethal young things snapping at their heels and all the crazy things they can do. Also I want you in an office with more cushioned seating in case of further accidents."

"... I don't know what to ... thank you?"

"Yes. Yes, I think that's a start ..."

*

Dear Draxie,

I don't write to you very much, not on paper, I hope you can read my handwriting!

I got this box in the post and it said it was for you, so I should send it on if I could. They didn't leave a name but I think I know who sent it. They put cash in with it to cover postage but American money's probably more use to you than me so I just put it in the envelope with this letter, postage wasn't that much anyway, you can think of it as part of your wedding present if you like!

I hope you're okay and I hope whatever's in the box is good. Let me know when you open it, dying to find out what it is!!

Lots of love, from across the ocean,

bb xxxx

*

There's a *thump* from the bedroom and Blaine, just through the front door with his binders from class in his arms, scrabbles to hurry through because if he fell if he hurt himself if he -

Kurt's sitting on the bed, crying, laptop in front of him, and his pillow's on the floor from where he threw it at the wall. "This *show*," he snarl-howls, striking the tears off his cheeks so hard the skin burns red. "Why the *fucking hell* am I watching *this show* when all it does is *ruin my life*?"

Blaine opens his mouth, closes it, puts his binders down and walks over to sit beside him, to rub his arm and glance at the rolling credits. "Who died this time?"

"You *wouldn't understand*. You have to watch the *entire thing* from the beginning with me so that you can begin to *grasp my pain*."

Blaine rubs his arm, murmurs, "We'll make a fanboy out of you yet." and kisses the side of his head.

*

Dear Draxie,

I have actually met you once before but I'm afraid that I wasn't really coherent enough for a proper introduction at the time. He told me what you did for us, and I knew I needed to contact you, for two things.

One is to say I'm sorry, because I know that that was a terrible situation to bring you into. I know it will have been stressful and upsetting and I know that it was dangerous, and it was ridiculously brave of you to come out for us like that, especially since we should never have asked you to in the first place. We understand the risk we take every night, we made our choices, but we don't want to hurt other people with those choices.

We understand the risk we take but that doesn't mean, of course, that on any given night we actually want to die because of it. Which leads me to the second thing I need to say to you.

Thank you, for what you did. Thank you for not telling anyone about it, because it is so, so dangerous, for you and for us. I'm so sorry that I'll never even know your face, because I know this is the sort of thing that should be said eye to eye; thank you. I made my choices a long time ago with regards to this, and I will remain devoted to it for as long as I'm able to be, but that has never meant that I wanted it to kill me. Especially not now. Now he's here things are different. I'm sure you understand.

I know that you're getting married this summer, and we won't be able to look in on the occasion - a crowd full of people who know our masked faces is a problem if we come in 'civvies', and the masks can't be anywhere near you, we've already put you in far too much danger. But I do offer you (and I know he does) my absolutely wholehearted warmest congratulations; I hope you're both so happy together. I hope it's a wonderful day. And I hope that you can accept this gift with my gratitude, and my very best wishes.

I'm healing, slowly, and I'll be out again as soon as I can be, with him fussing over me like a mother hen and I do know that. I hope that your own life has healed over since that night, and that the people who love you can help, even if they don't know what they're helping with. What you did that night to help us was incredibly brave, and I know that people call us superheroes, but everyone we're able to help after that night is partly helped by you as well, because we might not still be here if it wasn't for you. You never know how far a kind

action can reach. I have learned that, on the streets, over the years. You never know what will save someone's life. All you can do is hope and try hard.

In all probability, our paths will never cross again; it's a big city and a huge world, and he and I aren't the safest friends to have, and we have to protect these masks for other people as well as ourselves. But I will never not be grateful for still being here. I have him, and I'll have another chance to help people. I don't regret any of my life, even the dangerous parts. I don't really regret anything if it means that I have him. So even though we'll never see you again, I know that we'll remember you, often, and we'll always be grateful. Thank you, for rescuing me. It's not often that people do that for me, you are in very select company. Thank you.

Have a wonderful, wonderful life, and I hope that night hasn't hurt you too much, and that mostly all it's done is to let you know that you're a hero too. Always.

Thank you, and my very warmest regards.

- g

*

He's slumped on the sofa - the news is predictably miserable - when Rachel's bedroom door opens, and she looks out at him with a smile. "Are you free to proofread something for me?"

Kurt murmurs to the TV, "But how could I *possibly* fit it into my schedule, Rachel, here I had at least another hour's being angry at news reports inked in."

She walks over, sits next to him and passes her iPad into his hand. "My final assignment."

He glances down at it and pauses. "Do . . . I want to read this?"

"Yes." she says, very firmly. "Yes you do."

It's called *How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Ghost*.

"Rachel, I -"

"It doesn't mention a thing about that night." she says. "I'm not *stupid*. I went through old news reports, I assembled *pages* of statistics and interview data. You should read it. You really should, Kurt."

He gives her a long wary look, and then, mouth pouted with nervousness, looks over the screen.

She fetches the box of tissues while he's still mostly pretending that he's not crying, until his breath has to leave him one way or another and it does it with a choking juddering noise he can't stop, and she puts her arms around him and rubs his arm, and kisses his cheek, hard.

He blows his nose. He tries to say something. He cries a bit more, while she rubs his shoulder and blows her own nose.

He says, rough and rasped, "If your teacher doesn't like *this* one then I'm writing your college a nasty letter. How do you -"

"They're all true. Aren't they? I managed to track down that woman on the subway, it actually was her daughter's birthday the day I called her. And Finn got me one of the cops from the scene of that terrorist plot to talk to. And that women's shelter -"

"Can you stop because I'm going to start - again -"

Her smile wobbles and twitches. "Does it start to say 'I'm sorry'?"

"I don't blame you Rachel, not for not knowing things I never told you -"

"I don't care. I need to say it. Is it enough?"

"It's *more* than enough."

"It's only the beginning. You just *wait* until I start on my internship -"

With Blaine watching the internet and Rachel obsessively scouring the newspapers, Kurt's never going to have to read an article he doesn't want to again. She ruffles his hair and he moans, tries to shove her arm away one-handed while she laughs, until she shrieks because her hand goes right through his head when she next attacks his hair.

"Cheating!" she shrieks, as he combs it back, and smirks at her, and god, he has *missed* his best friend . . .

*

*The Draxie wedding belt fund is now closed with a bang and our drinks budget just trebled. You know who you are and what you did and I don't know why you're the one who's grateful to *me*, because I don't know how you did this and I still can't stop *crying* the fiance thinks I've gone mad but - thank you. Thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, *thank you*. Thank you. *Thank you*. Thank you. Thank you . . .*

Share the love Draxie, write some fic? ;P

I have something in mind, this fandom could use some fluff . . .

*

"I know we offered to make dinner but I don't cook," Tina says, emptying noodles onto a plate. "And Mike literally just walked back in from a shift and picked this up on the way, so . . ."

"Take-out is great." Kurt says. "Honestly, thank you."

"Can't beat MSG," Blaine says, and rubs Kurt's left arm. "You want me to cut anything up for you?"

"I think I can manage with the chopsticks, Blaine. What're you guys up to, anyway? We never really speak unless it's about . . ."

Tina puts a plate in front of him, and Mike carries his and Tina's plates over to sit with a heavy sigh, weary from a hospital shift. "Tina has good news," he says.

"Tina has amazing news." Tina says, sitting next to him and banging his arm and smiling. "Tina sold a print series to a gallery downtown - my *Invisible Cities* series. Tina actually has some money for the first time since college."

"That's incredible, Tina."

"If you wanted to pick your favourite you could have one," she says. "They're sort of about you anyway. 'Inspired by'. Let me go get -"

"Tina, it'll get cold -"

She comes back from the bedroom with some photographs in a folder. Walls and graffiti again, she photographs and photographs and photographs like there are ten thousand cities made of these walls that do/don't match, everything everyone's screaming to say on the surface of the city . . .

I believe in the Ghost, the underlined white text says over the tags and doodles, in every picture.

Blaine murmurs, "I like that one." Almost covered by a couple more tags, one of the photographs has also caught a scribble of a strange hexagonal phi, a love heart, and a pale ghost cloak, running downwards. Kurt glances sidelong at him, and Blaine smiles back, and Kurt's cheeks heat, a little.

Fortune cookies afterwards. "This is why we like take-out," Blaine says, as Mike jiggles them in the empty rice carton and hands it around for them to pick. Blaine snaps his, reads, "'If you want the rainbow you must learn to tolerate the rain.'" He tilts his head. "I don't mind rain."

Rainbows all the way for Blaine, Kurt thinks, and can't not smile. Tina reads from hers, "'To see far is one thing, going there is another.' Like I need telling that, I'm an *artist*. Kurt, what's yours say - ?"

He unwraps it, snaps it, slithers the paper free. He reads, "'A career opportunity is blossoming for you.'"

"You said something was happening at work," Blaine says.

Kurt thinks of a woman in shades and a sharp-cut suit, and just murmurs, "Hm." because, because . . .

*

A Ghost a day gif: first sighting in the happy!cloak.

There are two kinds of people in this world: people who aren't fans of the Ghost, and people who cry all the time

Shadwell Stair makes me think of the Ghost. But then, walking down a street and waking up in a morning make me think of the Ghost.

draxie updated!!

Superheroes, I thought. It'll be cool, I thought. It'll be fun, I thought. Just kill me now.

*

"Blaine -"

"Mm?"

"Can't you - harder."

"No. Like this. Do you think you can come just from this?"

"- god, Blaine . . ."

"We could find out."

"- Blaine . . ."

"Gently, angel . . ."

*

Reblog if you've ever been rescued by Phalanx. (let the new guy get a look in!)

MY HAIR STILL REEKS OF SMOKE BUT THIS IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN SHOWERING he said the Ghost was 'fine' but he couldn't say much more?? Some kind of secret identity thing and anyway then he had to run off to help with stuff but basically OH MY FUCKING GOD

*He always says he's 'fine'!! What does 'fine' MEAN??? Fine and retired? Fine and on vacation? Fine in *traction* wtf???*

*Children, can I just remind all of you that any information that Phalanx gives us about the Ghost ends up being shared with the entire internet and thus with any supervillains with access to a computer who, friendly reminder, *hate him*. *Anything* could get someone closer to who he really is. Maybe it's an indication of how stupid I must really be that I remain consistently surprised by your staggering inability to grasp their need for secrecy and their need for you to respect their fucking masks, which they don't wear just to fulfil your costume fetishes, hard as this may be to wrap your heads around given how entirely absorbingly mind-numbingly self-centred you appear to be.*

... almost forgotten how much paleandghostly bitchslaps sting ...

(Still making the world a better place, one fanghost at a time?)

(I may shout the world into submission yet ...)

*

"Hey, you. How was yoga?"

"I sat in with the beginners' class and I was still as stiff as a board. I'm glad to have that damn cast off but now I just feel pathetic and *god*, I ache ..."

"It's a good thing you've come back to your physical therapist, then."

"Do I look pitiful and creaky enough for a massage?"

"You look like someone I would quite like to see shirtless about now if that's the same thing ..."

*

Fanart for Draxie's All the Other Ghosts - Grand Central Station and everyone in a cloak <3

Sometimes when I'm out candy striping I want to smack some noisy whiny brat and I stop and think, What would the Ghost do? and then I think, He'd be able to haunt the little shit instead.

Fanfic, Around the World in 80 Days, ghostlanx, NC-17: The Ghost's on a secret mission fighting terrorists overseas and Phalanx is holding the fort in New York - but some distances are worth it for the reunions ...

Photo of graffiti I snagged in the city - not the first time I've seen an 'I believe in the Ghost' tag around . . .

We don't forget. We're the fandom that holds its vigils. We're holding on for you, spooky, as long as it takes <3

Half of the time we're gone but we don't know where, we don't know where . . .

*

Blaine kisses him and Kurt's hands are too tight on his waist. "Not yet." Blaine says, before he can even say anything.

"Mike said next week."

"He said he'd take another look at you next week, that does not mean -"

"Just - just be careful. Until I can - just be careful."

His eyes look afraid, and Blaine leans up to kiss him again, murmurs to his mouth, "You know I'm coming back to you, Kurt."

He still remembers how bad he looked when he was kneeling on the floor, hands cuffed behind his back, face bleached and shadowed with pain and fear; he'll always remember how much worse he looked when Puckzilla picked him up off the floor of that basement, one arm crooked surprisingly tenderly to support his head from hanging back, grey boots dangling. He thinks that they both know what their worst fear is, what the other's worst fear is. For Blaine, it's that. It will always be that, that will haunt him for the rest of his life, the way his boots hung like there was no life in him. For Kurt, it's knowing what that actually is, and Blaine ever having to face it . . .

This is what love is: fear, and facing it.

This is what a hero is: fear, and facing it.

He hugs him, rubs his back. "Of course I'm coming back." Kurt's cheek settles to the top of his head, and Kurt's arms dig in around his waist. "Of course I'm coming back to you."

He convinces him back into bed with his book - he's moved on to E. M. Forster now - and runs his fingertips down his pale bared arm where the t-shirt's sleeve cuts off. Because people have been feeling this for as long as there have been people, he thinks, and who knows who he needs to rescue tonight to go home safe to someone who needs them as much as they need each other. He leans down to kiss him, one last goodnight kiss, so when he raises his head Kurt's eyes are still closed and lips a little parted . . . perfect framing lashes as he blinks, focuses on Blaine's face, says very low, "Be careful."

"Shields, Kurt." He runs the backs of his fingers down Kurt's white arm. "I'm always careful. Just - one last thing -"

Rachel's in the living room, typing away on a laptop. Blaine says, "Do you have a hot water bottle?"

He brings it back through after the kettle's boiled, and Kurt gives him a confused look. "Your feet get cold when I'm not in the bed," Blaine says, and there's something too much behind his eyes, his suddenly tighter jaw, looking at him like he can't . . .

Of course he's always careful. If he doesn't come home to Kurt, who does these things for Kurt . . . ?

*

MRS & MR DRAXIE FUCK YEAH

Having a drink on their behalf, have FUCKING AMAZING LIVES YOU GUYS \o/

SO MUCH CRYING OMG

*The Ghostbride and her sidekicks, that's Blackbindings on the left and Paleandghostly on the right, Blackbindings is just the sweetest thing in all of creation and Paleandghostly is *weirdly* mellow when she's drunk, she's currently teaching Blackbindings to dance and it's really strangely adorable I think I'm starting to ship them??*

When paleandghostly gets back online you are fucked, my friend.

*The most awesome bride in all of NY and her totally awesome husband who allowed a pack of phanghosts to invade his wedding day, *massive* respect dude, fuck yeah <3*

~confetti!!~

*EVERYONE IS SO WASTED OMFG I just passed the bridesmaids, Blackbindings was bouncing up and down clapping her hands and P&G was *shouting* 'YES YES FUCK YES' and they were talking about the Wire?? Draxie is dancing with Mr Draxie, who just looks really happy, they both do, she's crying again, omg best wedding evar*

so much loooove around todaaaay <3

The only thing that could make today better would be knowing he's okay.

Why would you ;_;

When I am hungover I am coming back here and finding whoever called me 'adorable' and bringing the wrath. On a related note, there is no way in hell England is ever getting Blackbindings back. Mine now. Draxie, draw up the adoption papers.

*The barman wouldn't serve me because I'm underage here so Ghostly gave me something out her hipflask and I fell over at one point but now I know how to dance! Weddings are *magical*, all the love and luck forever to Draxie and Mr Draxie, I love you both so much!! <3*

*I *can't*. *Stop*. *Crying.* ;_; can't even type like this thumbs are all weird, just wanted to upload photo of me and my chosen sisters, best women in the world, before the husband has to actually carry me out of here. you guys are all so amazing I just can't even i just love everyone in this fandom ok acTUALLY EVERYONE you *guys* I just ;_;*

*Congratulations you guys, have an *amazing* day :)*

Kurt in costume, putting his arms up over his head in his room; head back, eyes closed, mouth a satisfied smile at the stretching strength of his muscles. Phalanx touches his back and the Ghost opens his eyes, smiles at *him*, now, says, "Did you miss me?"

Phalanx runs his hand down the line of his spine under the cloak, until his hand just rests on his waist. "You will be careful."

"We will be careful." the Ghost says to him, and there's a knock at the door, the handle turns, and Rachel peeks in shyly smiling.

"Do you know when you'll be back?"

"It depends on the evening, Rachel. Two-ish?"

She's got her iPad in one hand. "Will you tell me about anything newsworthy?"

The Ghost says flatly, "Secret identity." and Phalanx says, "Maybe you should ask Finn for that kind of thing."

"He won't tell me anything, he says everyone would know it was him if he did. Don't be *mean*, Kur-"

"No."

She rolls her eyes and growls, "*Ghost*." like it's silly, then walks into the room and leans up - he obediently ducks his head - so she can kiss his cheek, and then Phalanx's. "Be careful. Be really, really -"

The Ghost puts his hood up. "We always are. Don't wait up for us."

"Don't expect me to sleep tonight." She walks back into the living room, already skimming her iPad alive. "You don't have me there to look after you tonight."

The Ghost tries to make his smile smaller at her back but doesn't really succeed; Phalanx catches his gloved hand, squeezes it. "Just - take it easy tonight. Okay? Ease yourself back in, just, gently."

"I'll have your back. So, my evening depends on how many risks *you're* going to take."

"Hmm."

The Ghost tips his head a grin, and then tugs him by the hand for the window, beginning to fade them out of sight. "Yes, I'll be careful. But you better be too, you know we're always in this together."

Everyone is. It's amazing how tangled-up together Phalanx has discovered people are, the little repercussions of every kindness, every cruelty, and the Ghost struggling to settle the balance. He can see

the blinds over the window through his fading body; if they were open he would be able to see the view of New York through him, as he touches his back again - his own hand is ghostly, half-there - and says, quietly, "Gently. For me."

The Ghost looks back, and says, "Why would I do anything to risk getting taken away from you for any longer than this?"

The night's warm outside, as they step onto the platform of shields no more visible than they are, the Ghost keeping them unseen, Phalanx guiding their footsteps. And Phalanx admits, quietly in the dark, "I did miss you."

The Ghost's arms wrap his waist, and he leans his hooded cheek into Phalanx's from behind. He whispers there, "I'm here now. I never wanted to leave you on your own."

It's strange how he wasn't on his own, though. Like there was always someone at his back, always someone in the shadows, watching him; Phalanx feels the ghost of him in everything he does, because everything he is he owes to him. There is no-one he's helped who wasn't helped because of the Ghost. *You know we're always in this together.*

Always. Everyone.

He puts a hand over the Ghost's, closed at his stomach, and he murmurs, "Gently."

And he tilts the shields into a slide.

*

Rereading Mirror Mirror, Blackbindings' meditations on the happy!cloak!fic. Not getting choked up. Not at all.

Phalanx plush covered in cat hair, not cool. They wouldn't have shown up if you'd sat on the Ghost I mean FFS

I hope the Ghost never has a tequila hangover

FUCK

FUCK

FUCK

FUCK

NO

YES

*shit. Oh shit, I'm not breathing properly. It's him? It's *him*??*

i actually just cant

(GHOSTLY GHOSTLY GET ONLINE GHOSTLY)

(BB!!!!!!)

(ONE OG YOU FOR FUCK'S SAKE!!!)

Draxie have you seen the pics yet???

crying too hard to type

can't. can't.

Where were they taken where did you get these??

WALKING HOME FROM A BAR. I AM STILL SHAKING. I WILL NEVER TYPE IN LOWER CASE AGAIN.

... I didn't know what I was feeling like until I wasn't feeling it anymore. Oh god, oh my god, I'm so happy for them both <3 <3 <3

*(WHY AREN'T YOU TWO ONLINE FUCKING HELL *NOW??*)*

WTF I CAN'T STOP CRYING??!?

but where the hell was he ;_;

I knew you wouldn't leave us I knew you wouldn't leave us

hands shaking can't tupe

I think I just came.

Fuck me the reblogs on those photos already

it is him it's not someone else in the cloak?? T-T

(omg OMG DRAXIE!!! =D)

(BB HOLD ME)

(I don't know why I'm crying ;_:)

*(I've already given myself a *headache* crying go get Ghostly!!)*

(She's with her mum.)

(SHOUT.)

(I don't want to disturb them ;_:)

*Never doubted you, spooky, *never* doubted you.*

God I feel so much I feel sick I don't know what I expected I just don't know anything anymore

SPOOKY

he's alright he's actually alright he's alright I just

(Ghostly's gone really pale omg ^^:)

(GHOSTLY ;_;)

(I don't know why you're so emotional. You knew he was alright.)

(Don't listen to her, she's really really happy too, Draxie <3)

(YOU GUYS WHY AREN'T YOU STILL IN NEW YORK)

(You will come get coffee with me in the airport when I fly back through and we'll cry together and it'll be okay <3 <3 <3)

*(Everything is ok everything will be ok everything's *ok*)*

(Oh Draxie, my dearest. Look what you did.)

YES FUCK YES FUCK YES FUCK YES

Every heartbroken second was worth it

*I want to hug him so hard I squish his *bones* god I get creepy when I'm too happy*

*AKJLSRAGHDFULZSTANDING IN THE SHADOWS WATCHING PHALANX LIKE NOTHING EVER HAPPENED
FUCK YOU FOR DOING THIS TO ME YOU KNOW WHAT FUCK YOU WHO GAVE YOU THE RIGHT I JUST I CAN'T*

I can't do this superhero fangirling thing I think I'm having a heart attack

shit it looks like I just took up smoking again never get my fucking hands to stop shaking otherwise

spooky I just I just

superboyfriends, they're just, they're super ;_;

HOW

*I just. *Feelings*.*

Yes you guys I have seen the photos and like every fanghost on the internet I am literally shitting myself and GHOSTLY DON'T YOU DARE START ON ME ABOUT 'LITERALLY' RIGHT NOW THIS IS FUCKING THE MOST SERIOUS ANYTHING EVER thank you spooky I'm so glad you're alright I'm so glad I'm so glad I'm so glad

sobbing

All this capslocking is giving me a headache. Blackbindings would post to tell you how happy she is but she's crying on my floor with the dog licking her face. And me? I need a drink . . .

OH MY GOD WHAT THE FUCK TWO MINS AGO IN EAST HARLEM????

sjkfd;skdalfgBUSY EVENING BOYS??

WELCOME BACK I CAN'T STOP CRYING

WE JUST STOPPED CRYING AND STARTING SCREAMING FUCK YES SPOOKY KICK ASS

Oh Christ it begins anew.

GHOSTLYYYYYYYY ;_;

I don't think I will ever ever ever feel this again

**Dude*. bout time.*

Ahhhhh, here I am . . .

SPOOKY TO CELEBRATE COMING BACK COULD YOU STRADDLE HIM AND SUCK HIS FACE FOR THE PHOTOGRAPHERS OR SUCK ANYTHNG ELSE YOU FEEL LIKE IT'S ALL GOOD

puckzilla's out of jail and the ghost is back is anyone taking prompts??

oh but dat ass was far too young and pretty to die

Reblog if you've ever been rescued by the Ghost. Let Figgins know what an assbutt he's being. We love you, spooky <3

Reblog if you've ever been rescued by Phalanx. (let the new guy get a look in!)

Reblog if you've ever been rescued by the most courteous gay supercouple in New York, and fuck the right wing media asshats. SUPERBOYFRIENDS ARE SUPER

Thank you, thank you, for ever and ever and ever, amen

*

The Ghost doesn't do daytimes, but he always does Pride. He tells Phalanx that he can't bear the thought of anything happening there, it shouldn't be allowed, not if he can stop it, not there. People need somewhere to feel safe and respected and loved. He has never, never missed Pride, invisible above it, following the route on the rooftops, keeping his vigil over his city. And it occurs to Phalanx, a little sad, that the Ghost has never missed Pride but he's never *been* to Pride, either; watching over it invisible he's no part of it, just its ghost, making sure everyone else is safe and never even touching the joy and chaos of it.

At least he won't be alone, this year.

It takes place late in the summer, nearly autumn, it almost wasn't held at all since the night following a nuclear bomb threat in this city, there was a sniper at a Take Back the Night march; Commissioner Figgins allowed the parade at the risk of its being held unofficially and angrily, instead merely delayed, and with heavy security across the entire route (Detective Hudson of the NYPD Super Incident Unit is working down there, while Rachel Berry, junior journalist, is collecting quotes).

One of the signs waving its happy way through the crowd reads, *Who needs cops when we're all super!*

That the Ghost of New York was gay was always rumoured; that he's now running around on a night being physically affectionate with a man in skintight Greek armour is about as good a confirmation as the city needs. The signs and banners that year are pretty amazing, and Phalanx clings to a pair of binoculars but god, he misses his camera at moments like these.

My superpower is I'm fabulous!

We're not invisible anymore

Our soldiers don't carry guns and our ghosts aren't scary

My mommies are my heroes

We're super thanks for asking!!

If it's only ever a mask, choose yours wisely

Our superpower is love!

They saved my life = I support equal rights = Otherwise I would be an assbutt.

We have all the best dressed supers

Haters gonna mumble that they got no problem in front of the kickass queer superheroes

They can rescue me anyday!

Thank you superboyfriends from New York City! xxx

I saw them on the news and I got back in touch with my son.

That sign - it's held by a middle-aged man with a younger man walking arm in arm with him - brings a stone to his throat, hard with too much. "Look," he says, tugging the Ghost's arm from their perch on a building's edge overhead, invisible in the sunlight.

"Look where, Phalanx?" the Ghost says wryly, and has no idea he's even waving the binoculars at him.

"Look, before they get past us, like - ten o' clock?"

"There are a *million* people down there, who am I looking -"

"I'm pointing! Make us visible, I'm pointing! No-one's even looking up, who'd want to miss any of this?"

He sees his own arm fading into view, watches the Ghost's head tip to follow it as he reappears. "Older guy and a younger guy with a sign -" Phalanx says, holding the binoculars out to him, but he doesn't know if the Ghost spots them before someone shouts. They both swing their heads, immediately alert for danger -

but someone on a parade float is pointing upwards, right at them, and faces are turning upwards the whole length of the street, and the sound *rushes* underneath them.

"Oh," the Ghost says, taking a step backwards, beginning to fade again. Phalanx has gone stiff, slotting the binoculars back onto his belt, but he doesn't let go of his arm.

They've been in front of crowds before, in the dark, barely seen. This is . . . a sea of faces, and the galaxy of flashing camera lights . . .

Too high up, he thinks. There's not a zoom in the world could get through our masks at this distance, no way in hell the average cell camera could.

He doesn't know who started applauding, but it spreads through the crowd like thunder hammering through a valley, rolling and rumbling, rising up from the street disorientating and deafening, he doesn't know if it's just the sheer weight of sound hitting his brain but it feels like the *building* shakes. And the Ghost hangs back behind him, his hand slack with surprise on Phalanx's arm, and Phalanx remembers - every time he's slipped away, every time he's turned invisible, every time he's hidden, fled, every time he's *not* been thanked - he escaped through the dark from that last march, he missed his own vigil and his response to the photographs Phalanx showed him was mere bewilderment - he never has understood the ripples that he's made, has no clue how many people care - *if everyone who's grateful got together* -

He takes his other arm, as the Ghost's mouth opens round with surprise, and hauls him in front of himself. His boots scrabble, he whimpers, "What are you -" but Phalanx plants him there stubborn with pride, because god knows if he'll ever have another chance to take a bow.

The cheering kicks up a pitch, *woooooo-!* rising from the street so loud Phalanx *laughs*, and the Ghost hangs his head in the hood; Phalanx can only see the edge of his cheek under the mask, crimson, his mouth doesn't know what to do with itself, as the city cheers and applauds and hammers its feet and Phalanx's heart could crack with pride, because he's deserved every drop of it and it's long past time he knew it.

He begins to fade properly, under Phalanx's hands, and as the *aawwwwww* rolls around the crowd he tucks his head lower to his own chest and vanishes, leaving just Phalanx standing there feeling about as surprised as they do. The applause begins to drum higher again, backed by whistles, and he gives a little grinning bow before he feels ghostly hands slip around his arm, and his voice says from nowhere - thickly, fondly, helplessly, "*Phalanx.*"

And then he's invisible too, and the crowd goes crazy.

You never know what the smallest gesture will mean to someone. And if ten thousand other people are clapping along with you, it might even finally get heard.

Down in the streets, the people party.

Up on the rooftop Phalanx holds him, face dug to his throat, hidden by his hood, his invisibility, Phalanx's invisible body. He hums, cheek to his forehead, and strokes his back. He's never been prouder of him, not ever.

The Ghost says into his jaw, still close to tears of too much, "You are *such* an asshole."

He laughs, and strokes his back, invisible and appreciated, masked, unknown, and known; they know the most important thing about him, just as much as Phalanx does.

"My hero," Phalanx murmurs, nuzzling his cheek closer. The Ghost's hand finds his face.

"Cannot believe you." the Ghost hisses to his mouth, and kisses him. "You . . ."

The door leading into the building jars, then bangs open on the second attempt. They break apart hand in hand expecting armed cops but what falls through is - a group of young women, one of them panting, "Definitely this one, definitely this one -"

"Oh god."

Phalanx squeezes his hand. "I am *impressed* they got up all those stairs that quickly just to get a glimpse of you."

"Don't blame *me*, that's your face on her t-shirt!"

Phalanx jerks him into the run for the edge of the building and sees his own body flickering back into sight, hears the Ghost's laughter dancing out behind them. The girls - scream. And Phalanx kicks up onto the building's edge and off onto the slide of shields, still holding the Ghost's hand tight, as the Ghost turns, cloak spilling out like a cloud-pale flag behind them, and tugs his hood a grinning little salute at the girls running to the edge of the building as they *swing* into a slide over the parade, and vanish.

New York rushes by below, faces rainbows hot dogs yelling windows voices coffee concrete -

And the Ghost's laughter, running as invisible behind them as joy.