mym: ready or knot

by thunderylee

Summary

Finding his mate by being saved from an aggressive alpha may be something straight out of a fairy tale, but Lu Han isn’t quite ready to accept being an omega princess.

Notes

baby's first abo fic. reposted from agck.

KNOT YOUR STATUS ROLES reads the bumper sticker on Kris’ car. Lu Han refuses to ride in it if he has any other mode of transportation, because nothing screams “omega-nazi” like defiant, anti-status propaganda. But no matter how much Lu Han protests that it invites unwanted attention and advertises their statuses to the entire world, Kris won’t take it off.

“You’re not the one they’ll go after,” Lu Han pleads for the thousandth time. “You’re claimed.”
Kris gets that stupid, dopey grin on his face like he always does when he thinks about his mate. “She’ll kill anyone who messes with either one of us. You know that.”

Lu Han does know that. Murder may be stretching it, but Amber is definitely an alpha he wants on his side. Despite his reservations, Kris was smitten with her the instant they met. Part of his reluctance to adhere to status roles has to do with fulfilling the social expectation of the omega as a breeder, and that’s one of two things Amber cannot do for him as a female. The other is grow a knot, which Kris doesn’t crave even in the worst of heats. If they decide to have children, they would have to use in vitro fertilization to implant the fetus into Kris’ womb because Amber’s alpha hormones prevent gestation, but it’s possible.

Meanwhile, Lu Han hates being an omega because it’s the knot he craves. He is forever jealous of Kris and those omegas who are attracted to other omegas (or no one at all), because he’s biologically dispositioned to submit to an alpha male to be satisfied. Lu Han cannot stand alpha men. At twenty-five years old, he has yet to meet one who hasn’t tried to mate with him within five minutes of meeting him. It’s his fault for being so pretty, they tell him. It’s his fault for smelling so sweet, especially when he nears his heat.

It’s certainly his fault when he punches them in the face and gets reprimanded for un-omega-like behavior, earning disappointed looks from members of all statuses. Lu Han is not popular even in the omega circles because he gets aggravated when all they do is talk about the alphas they want to mate with, living up to the omega stereotype of domestic caregivers. Lu Han had wanted to play soccer professionally, was probably good enough to do it too, but no team would scout him since he would undoubtedly distract the other players with his omega scent.

Instead, he works in an office with a bunch of mated omegas and fights nausea on a daily basis from the abundance of saccharine in the air. The government used to require omegas to take hormone suppressants in order to hold jobs, but the anti-discrimination acts of the last couple decades shot down that ruling. It’s not only alphas and betas who suffer; Lu Han has breathed in so many pre-heat omegas that he’s sickened by his own scent, wanting nothing more than to burn his nostrils so he can never smell anything again.

The world isn’t as bad as it used to be, when alphas and betas would simply force themselves on any unclaimed omegas they happened upon without bothering to court them first, but the social expectations are the same to Lu Han. He’s lost count of how many times he’s been called a cold bitch, a traitor to his role, and a broken human being for rejecting unsolicited advances. An omega is supposed to seek out protection from an alpha, whom he will happily serve and for whom he will bear children without complaint or hesitation. He is supposed to yearn for an alpha who will knot him to break his heat, whose knot he will gratefully accept whenever the alpha wants to give it.

The whole concept makes Lu Han more sick than when Kris goes into heat, when he and Amber stink up the apartment so badly that Lu Han has to seek refuge with someone else for a few days. Junmyeon’s a good choice, since he takes suppressants of his own volition and hasn’t had a heat since he was fourteen, but he’s also an incurable slob. Lu Han can only take so much filth. The instant Kris and his apartment airs out, he moves back home.

“I need to go to the store,” Lu Han says, rolling his eyes when Kris offers his car keys. “My heat’s going to start in a couple days, and you used the last of our supplies.”

“Want me to ask Amber to mark you before you go?” Kris offers. “It always confuses other alphas when they smell a female on me. I enjoy seeing the dumb looks on their faces.”

“I think I can make it to the store and back without getting mauled,” Lu Han says bitterly. There’s no reason why he shouldn’t be able to leave the house two days before his heat without being marked
by anyone. Marking doesn’t involve anything elaborate or uncomfortable, just Amber hugging him for a few minutes and maybe lending him her hoodie (which was probably Kris’ to begin with), but it’s the principle of the matter that pisses off Lu Han.

Not to mention that Lu Han’s not looking forward to his heat at all. He takes suppressants like Junmyeon and just about every unmated omega they know, but his body started reacting badly to them in high school. His omega physician had advised him to induce a heat once every couple of months to give himself release. Five to seven days of wanting to rip off his dick and claw out his womb is preferable over the constant anxiety and uncontrollable aggression he was experiencing. Lu Han is naturally angry at the losing hand of cards he’s been dealt in this life—he doesn’t need it enhanced.

He ends up taking Kris’ car after all, because driving is safer than walking. Once in the parking lot, he ignores all of the leers and scoffs he gets from the alphas and betas. One person gives him a thumbs up, but he can’t tell if it’s sarcastic or not and doesn’t want to chance provoking anyone to find out. Inside, he loads up his cart with omega vitamins and cold compresses, tossing in a few packages of disposable padding to keep his slick from ruining everything he sits on, then adds some food and commonplace household items to make it less obvious to the entire store that he’s going into heat soon.

Even in the omega-only checkout lane, he doesn’t meet the cashier’s eye as his items are scanned, face burning with shame despite the cashier bearing the same status. He would have made Kris do this if Kris wasn’t the cheapest bastard on the planet and insists on buying store brand everything. Lu Han’s ass would chafe for days if he spent an entire heat with store brand padding. Besides, he can’t stay inside forever. He’s already going to be cooped up for the next week, thrashing uncontrollably on his bed while Kris takes care of him and Amber conveniently stays away. He wants to breathe fresh air while he can.

He’s barely out of the safe zone when he’s approached by a tall stranger who reeks of alpha. “Heat coming up, pretty omega? I would be happy to help you out. You smell so tasty.”

“You don’t even know my fucking name,” Lu Han spits, nerves sparking as he fights his natural desire to seek out more of that scent, the promise of a knot more than tempting. “Have you no sense of moral decency?”

Lu Han hadn’t known how loud he was speaking until everyone around him goes silent. He’s even more embarrassed to be caught lecturing an alpha in public while laden with bags full of heat supplies.

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“Sorry for the outburst,” he mutters.

He dodges several people to make his escape, but a hand rests on his shoulder to halt him. It’s another alpha—Lu Han can smell him—but this one isn’t forceful. This alpha isn’t projecting his scent, nor is he trying to restrain Lu Han in any way. His fingers don’t curl around Lu Han’s bones to stop him; they only apply gentle pressure to make his presence known.

“It is with deep regret that you have been disrespected in my store,” a soft voice says. “Please accept my personal apologies and assurance that it will not happen again.”

Lu Han nods, wanting to disappear from this scene more than anything else, at least until the store owner turns to his assailant.

“And you.” The voice changes drastically upon addressing the other alpha. “You will never step foot in my establishment again. If I so much as smell a hint of you, you will regret it. Are we clear?”
“Yes,” the other alpha says, taking a few steps back from the dominance the store owner projects. Even Lu Han gets slammed in the face with it, the strong alpha musk affecting him more than usual since he’s pre-heat. It’s a combination of leather and fresh rain, which Lu Han would have never paired together until right now, when he can’t breathe in anything else. He doesn’t realize he’s swaying where he stands until someone holds him upright, his vision blurring before his eyes.

“I’m sorry, I don’t usually let go like that.” It’s that voice again, sounding like music to Lu Han’s ears. “I get so mad when human beings are treated like property. Most of us came from omegas, didn’t we? You should be revered for giving life, not chastised for the measures it takes to get there.”

Lu Han would speak if he wasn’t so woozy, slumping into muscular arms that grab onto him the instant he starts to fall. He vaguely notices the owner’s voice getting more insistent, trying to invoke Lu Han’s consciousness, but Lu Han’s body has given up on any type of coherence after being hit and run several times over by potent alpha scent. His instincts tell him he’s safe, despite being in the arms of an alpha he doesn’t know, and all he can do is breathe deeply, savoring the smell that’s even more pleasant now that the alpha is no longer protecting his territory.

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When he comes to, he’s in his own bed, and Kris is staring at him in a mixture of concern and disbelief. Clearly, he’d made it home somehow, the alpha’s scent still clinging to him strongly enough to make his eyes roll back into his head. Lu Han sleepily wonders how long he can go without washing his jacket. The lingering aroma of leather and rainfall drives him insane.

“What happened?” he asks, his voice barely working.

“What happened is that you went to the goddamn store unmarked and nearly got impregnated,” Kris replies, jumping into offensive mode. “I had a bad feeling, so I asked Amber to stop by and check on you. She said she was barely in the door before she saw you all over some alpha bro. He gave you up rather easily, handing you over the instant she growled at him, but you were clinging to him like a knot slut.”

“I wasn’t all over him,” Lu Han mutters, bitterness and residual shock curling his upper lip back. He can’t smell Amber anywhere on him, and she had to have carried him out of the store. “He saved me from being accosted by a real alpha douchebag, and I passed out from the pheromones.”

“Lu Han, I have known you since before we knew what we were,” Kris says firmly. “You have never once passed out from an alpha’s scent.”

“He doesn’t project it often,” Lu Han recalls. “It’s stronger when they don’t use it. He told me he doesn’t support alpha domination. He’s on our side, Kris.”

“He’s still an alpha and you should know better.” Kris sighs. “He made your heat come early. You can’t help it. Come on, I’ll help you get cleaned up. You’re so gross, I don’t know how you didn’t start a riot. Maybe you should look into that heat ablation surgery after all.”

Lu Han frowns as he considers permanent sterilization not for the first time. He doesn’t give much thought to the idea of having kids since he can’t stomach the thought of mating with anyone who can give them to him. Betas can be as bad as alphas, just without knots. He can’t think of anything worse than mating with someone who can’t actually break his heats.

A bath and some vitamins later, Lu Han feels much better. He doesn’t feel like his heat started early, but stranger things have happened. His junior Jongin goes into heat when the wind blows the right way, but Jongin also craves the scent of other omegas, particularly his childhood friend Sehun. Lu
Han smiles at the memory of how cute they were when they had claimed each other, neither quite sure how two omegas would officiate their union.

It’s too bad that omega scents turn Lu Han off. The government just legalized same-status unions, granting them the same rights as mates of different statuses. This pleased the betas, whose unions with any status had been socially deemed inferior to those of alphas and omegas. There aren’t very many alpha-alpha mates, but Lu Han knows they exist. Kris’ ex Chanyeol has found happiness with Minseok, who fits the omega aesthetic better than Lu Han does. (Kris likes to joke that Chanyeol’s lack of desire to compete with other alphas was one of the things that attracted him. Lu Han knows it was more because Chanyeol had no desire to claim *Kris*, even if Chanyeol didn’t realize it himself.)

Instead, Lu Han has the distinct misfortune of being attracted to alphas, who are essentially the bane of his existence. All except one, apparently. That store owner was a rare ally, the one in a million who would speak up if he saw an omega being mistreated. Kris and Lu Han frequent that particular store, even though it’s quite a distance away, because there’s a sign by the entrance that states NO OMEGA SOLICITATION. This whole time, they had thought it was omega-owned and wondered why it wasn’t an omega-only store. The alphas and betas would complain, claiming reverse discrimination, but there would be no legal merit—discrimination doesn’t apply when the party that is supposedly discriminated against has free reign of every other establishment ever. Clearly, this store is all-inclusive *because* the owner is an alpha.

Lu Han’s heat isn’t as bad as he had expected. Kris says nothing when Lu Han cuddles with his jacket for a straight week, pressing his face into the fabric and breathing in the scent of alpha. *His* alpha. Never mind that Lu Han doesn’t even know his name; never mind that the alpha wasn’t the least interested in knotting Lu Han. None of that logic stops Lu Han’s imagination, strong enough to have him nearly fisting himself with fantasies of taking this alpha’s knot, hot with visions of hearing that soft voice and feeling a heavy weight on top of him.

Even when he can function again, his mind isn’t as clear as it should be. The store owner still frequents his thoughts, though they’re not nearly as lewd. The most common line of thinking ponders how the alpha had come to be so supportive of omega rights. Perhaps his mother was a victim of alpha dominance? Lu Han’s mother certainly was. She’d catered to his father no matter what, never speaking out against him even when he was being unreasonable. She would soothe Lu Han late at night after his father had gone to bed, assuring him that he’ll understand when he’s older, when an alpha claims him as their mate. Now, at twenty-five, Lu Han still doesn’t see why someone would completely give up their agency for another person like that.

Kris had a much different upbringing. His mother was an unmated omega who was knocked up at a party while she was in college. Those days were the height of the “omega revolution,” as Lu Han has been told, where omegas sought out multiple alphas and betas left and right for heat satisfaction. Mama Wu wouldn’t have known her son’s father if he was right under her nose, and Kris has always resented her for it. At the same time, he was the first to stand up for her, beating up the alphas and betas and sometimes other omegas at their school who would make fun of him for being the bastard child of a knot slut. Kris is very large for an omega, often mistaken as an alpha before he’s scented out, which just led the other kids to call him a freak and a disgrace to omegas everywhere.

Ever since they were old enough to know what was expected of them, Kris and Lu Han had made plans to run away. College may have been a far cry from the intergalactic spaceship societies they’d imagined as children, but it got them out of their families’ houses. Their campus had omega-only dorms, where they met Junmyeon. Two years later came Jongin, then Sehun. Regardless of attraction, omegas who suffer through college bond together, and the five of them are still friends today.
Kris jokes that Chanyeol and Minseok are honorary omegas, despite their knots, and Minseok wrinkles his nose at the thought of being around so many omegas at once. Lu Han shares his sentiment. * 

Lu Han tries everything to keep from going back to that store. He writes Kris specific lists, including brand names, and even gives him money to ensure he won’t skimp on quality. He takes a different way home from work that won’t tempt him, because simply seeing the building reminds him of the safety its owner had provided. Lu Han never thought he could be charmed by an alpha, but apparently being protected and stood up for—without being expected to do anything in return—is the surefire way to win him over. 

Eventually, he has to accompany Kris to the store to pick up his suppressant prescription. Amber stands between them for added security. Kris had been right—it really is amusing to see everyone’s faces when they scent out Amber as the alpha, small and lithe between two larger omegas. Alpha females aren’t uncommon by any means; it’s the size differences that throw people for a loop. Kris loves it. Lu Han wants to make this a quick trip since Amber’s scent is suddenly bothering him. The cinnamon and spicy musk that has protected him for years is now unpleasant.

They’re in the dairy section when Lu Han smells it, perking up like a dog catching a whiff of bacon. Amber grabs onto his arm, but he’s already turned to find the store owner emerging from the back, pushing a cart of raw meat while wearing an apron just like any other employee. While Lu Han hadn’t gotten a good look at the other person’s face before being blinded by pheromones the last time they’d met, he sees him perfectly now, smiling at the hard angles and gentle eyes.

Those eyes light up in recognition even though he probably can’t smell Lu Han over Amber’s marking. Lu Han supposes there aren’t many cases of omegas passing out in his arms; his cheeks warm at the memory.

“Hello again,” the alpha says, flashing a smile, and something inside Lu Han aches at the discovery of a dimple. “You look well.”

“I am well,” Lu Han replies, forcing his voice to remain steady. Thanks to you, he barely stops himself from adding. 

Amber starts to growl again, but Lu Han nudges her. The other alpha holds up both gloved hands in surrender. “I believe we had a misunderstanding the last time you were here, fellow alpha. Another customer was attempting to court your mate. I made him leave, but managed to incapacitate this one in the process.” He dips his head. It’s not a show of submission, but rather an acknowledgement that he is making no claims over Lu Han. “It was very careless of me to do that so close to his heat. I should have had one of the omega employees tend to him. Please accept my apologies.”

“I’m not her mate,” Lu Han rushes to say, struggling to get out of Amber’s grip to put some distance between them. Naturally, she won’t let him budge, but he tries anyway. “The big, ugly one is her mate.”

Kris doesn’t even notice that he’s being insulted, too enamored by Amber’s sudden protection. Her scent is strong enough to threaten the other alpha, putting Kris in a trance while Lu Han’s lunch starts to make a reappearance in the back of his throat.

“Amber, it’s okay,” Lu Han attempts to talk her down. “See? He apologized. Now calm down before you start a war in front of the yogurt display.”
All at once, the scent dissipates. Lu Han is constantly amazed at how Amber can cut it off just like that. She absently pats Kris, who has managed to curl his giant body around her tiny one while she continues to stare down the store owner.

“I appreciate you coming back even though your last experience was unpleasant.” The dimple makes a reappearance as the alpha turns to Lu Han. “Along with everything else that happened that day, I regret that I did not get your name.”

“Lu Han,” Lu Han rushes to introduce himself. “This is Amber Liu and Kris Wu.”

Kris offers a faint wave at the mention of his name. Amber narrows her eyes, saying nothing.

“I am Zhang Yixing,” the other alpha says. “My mother started this business when he was attacked in an unprotected store while my beta father was away. He wanted a safe place for all statuses to shop in peace, handing it over to me after I got my MBA last year. He raised me to cherish and respect omegas—everyone, really, though I am not happy with my own kind lately.” He makes a disapproving face, and even that is cute. “Please don’t judge me based on your undoubtedly horrible experiences with other alphas. I do not mean any harm, nor do I wish to claim Lu Han as my mate.”

Even though Lu Han already knew it, the statement hurts worse when it’s spoken out loud. He manages to keep the disappointment off of his face, resigning himself to a fate of fantasies and knotted dildos, but maybe they could be friends. It kind of feels like he’d just met a unicorn, a beautiful one with a pleasant aroma of a scent, which Lu Han doesn’t quite want to let go of yet.

“Can I take you out to dinner?” he blurts out, earning the raised eyebrows of all three of them and the old betas nearby. “I mean, to thank you for saving me that day. I didn’t have a chance to say so before I passed out, but I’m grateful you stepped in to scold that other alpha. Nobody has stood up for me like that before.”

“I stand up for you all the time!” Kris exclaims, back to himself now that Amber’s scent has worn off.

“Shh, baby,” Amber whispers, and Lu Han notices she’s completely released his arm. Yixing must have her approval.

“Everyone should stand up for people who are being bullied like that,” Yixing says firmly, a sternness in his eyes that has something in Lu Han’s chest fluttering. “But I will gladly accept your offer. I don’t go out to eat much since I’ve taken over this store. May I give you my number?”

“Please,” Lu Han answers, pulling out his phone so fast that he almost drops it. Yixing smiles as he punches in his contact information, then returns the phone to Lu Han.

“I have to get back to work,” he says apologetically, gesturing toward the cart of raw meat. “Don’t hesitate to tell me if you encounter any unpleasant interactions in my store. And give the checkout person the code L-A-Y for fifty percent off your purchase today.”

They’re barely out of earshot before Kris is grinning, reaching around Amber to shake Lu Han’s shoulder. “I like your new alpha~”

“He’s not mine,” Lu Han mutters, his good mood darkened at the reminder. “He said he wasn’t interested, didn’t he? He’s just letting me take him out as friends.”

“Even if you’re just friends, he’ll still keep other alphas away from you,” Amber points out. She glances back toward Yixing with an eyebrow raised. “That was so weird, though. I didn’t get any sense of challenge from him at all. Even when he thought you were mine, he wasn’t the least bit
“Because he doesn’t want me,” Lu Han reiterates, the truth stinging with each time he has to say it. “It’s better this way anyway. I wouldn’t know how to act with my own alpha, and like Amber said, he can keep the other ones away. Win-win.”

“But then you don’t get his knot,” Kris teases, lowering his voice to keep from shocking the old betas even more. “I bet he’s got a nice one, too. He’s so lean and muscular.”

“Don’t be gross,” Lu Han snaps, fighting to keep from thinking about knots in public, specifically Yixing’s. He doesn’t need to slick through his pants in the middle of the store. “Amber, help me out here.”

Amber sighs and turns toward her mate, craning her neck to look up at him. “Leave him alone, or I’ll give you a knot to talk about.”

Kris looks intrigued, and Lu Han rushes to shove their shopping cart to the checkout lane. This is the last time he goes anywhere with them.

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Despite Lu Han’s resolve, Amber and Kris end up tagging along on his not-date with Yixing, purely out of concern for his well-being. Lu Han might have fretted the entire morning, multiple outfits spread out on his bed like his closet had exploded (or Junmyeon had moved in). His nerves are shuddering like when his body has gone too long without a heat. It’s nowhere close to that time, though—he’s just nervous. He hasn’t been out with someone new since college, and definitely not an alpha. He’s never trusted one enough to be alone with them.

They are far from alone when Jongin and Sehun join them, accompanied by Chanyeol and Minseok, who happen to already be at the same restaurant. It’s not too much of a coincidence, since Junmyeon works there and gives them all a discount, which is usually the only way Lu Han can talk Kris into going out to eat. Ordinarily, Minseok would balk at being around so many omegas, but most of them are mated and the ones who aren’t are on suppressants. Besides, the delicious smell of barbeque overrides even the strongest pheromones.

Since Lu Han had warned Yixing that it would be a group affair, Yixing had brought along some friends of his own—two small men named Baekhyun and Kyungsoo, and an even smaller woman named Taeyeon. Lu Han had thought they were all omegas at first, then learned that the two men are both betas and felt bad for stereotyping. Of course Yixing would befriend betas—they help neutralize the air. Taeyeon is actually an alpha, which Amber had sniffed out the minute the other female had walked through the door. The two women had just nodded and smiled at each other, acknowledging that they were sharing space and people—though Amber’s grip on Kris tightened as if to make it clear that one was hers.

With so many people at the table, there aren’t any awkward lulls in conversation, and Lu Han finds himself laughing more than eating. Baekhyun’s a big talker just like Chanyeol, the two of them practically yelling across the table at each other until Minseok offers to switch seats with Baekhyun. Kyungsoo looks pleased to have someone less boisterous next to him, making his impression on Lu Han as the quiet one of the group. He’s clearly not as shy as he looks when Baekhyun starts picking on him and he gives it right back, outing his friend as an alpha chaser to the entire table. They’ve known each other for a long time, it seems. It warms Lu Han’s heart to see people who are comfortable enough with each other joking around like that.

When the bill comes, Yixing tries to protest Lu Han paying for him, but he eventually gives up when
the rest of the group notices and comments about Lu Han being the one to court Yixing. It’s amazing how their friends quickly bond together to tease them, fusing into one massive group of hecklers instead of two separate ones. Lu Han already knows that Chanyeol and Baekhyun will hang out together again, maybe Amber and Taeyeon too. Personally, he enjoys Kyungsoo’s dry sense of humor and no-nonsense attitude, making it a point to add him to social media so they can keep in touch.

They relocate to a karaoke room after Junmyeon’s shift ends, which is more fun than Lu Han expects considering their mixed statuses. Then again, Yixing and Taeyeon are the only unmated alphas, and none of the omegas are close to their heats. Lu Han loves to sing, hogging the microphone more often than Baekhyun and Kyungsoo combined, entertaining the crowd with a questionable selection of sappy love ballads and trashy pop songs.

If this were a romantic comedy, Yixing would be hanging off of every note and looking at him with those gentle eyes, impressed with his voice and completely seduced by the melody. As this is real life, Yixing is paying him no attention, deeply engrossed in a conversation with Kris, which Lu Han overhears when Baekhyun and Kyungsoo take on another ear-piercing duet.

“…it’s not right, you know?” Yixing’s saying, or more like ranting as Lu Han notices the sharpness of his expression. “Omegas are expected to suppress their heats with medication, but there isn’t anything for alphas to suppress our ruts, or even subdue their dominant pheromones from marking everything in a five-foot radius. There is this whole stigma against unmated omegas going out in public or electing to have a heat, yet there’s nothing to stop us from wanting to take advantage of them. Even the strongest willed alpha still has that biological urge to mate. It’s as natural as your heats. Yet nobody seems to recognize that and help us so that we don’t hurt you.”

“You’re exactly right,” Kris replies, his face in evident shock at agreeing with an alpha about omega rights. “If I was smart enough—or rich enough—I would try to develop a medication that would do for your kind what heat suppressants do for us. Our society would be much more peaceful if there weren’t alpha markings all over the place…no offense.”

“None taken.” Yixing smiles despite his serious demeanor. “You know, I started out pre-med for that very reason, but biology was just too hard. That’s how I met Kyungsoo, actually. He’s a few years younger than me, but he has one of the most brilliant minds in the area. He’s about to enter his last year of medical school and start his residency at the local hospital. He’s our only hope at encouraging the medical world to acknowledge that alphas need suppressants too.”

“You’re doomed then,” Baekhyun mutters, and Kyungsoo punches him in the arm with his full strength.

“I was actually thinking about going into politics,” Yixing volunteers, looking sheepish for probably the first time since Lu Han’s known him. Admittedly, that’s not very long, but Lu Han’s so used to equating alphas with confidence that the brief hint of insecurity sticks out at him.

“Anyone would be better than the clowns we already have in office,” Kris hisses through his teeth.

By this point, the whole room is listening to them, Taeyeon abandoning her Beyoncé solo to nod along with Yixing’s words. Chanyeol looks uncomfortable, like he usually does when the topic turns to how harmful alphas are, and Minseok pats his arm comfortably. Lu Han doesn’t recall a single instance where Chanyeol had ever displayed any alpha urges, even when he was dating Kris, but Lu Han is not a fly in Chanyeol’s room. He has the feeling that Chanyeol dislikes being an alpha as much as Lu Han dislikes being an omega, at least as far as societal expectations go.

“It’s not that fun for us either,” Kyungsoo speaks up, braver and more opinionated after a few drinks.
“We’re affected by both of your pheromones, but we can’t really give anything back to defend ourselves. Nor do we want to be involved in your extreme reactions, like ruts or heats. It feels very unemotional to us, or at least to me. I can’t speak for all betas, of course.”

“It’s the knot,” Baekhyun says, incredibly drunk and loud. “Alphas have it and omegas want it. Where does that leave us? It’s not fair…haha, knot fair.”

“Don’t group people together like that,” Amber scolds him, and even Taeyeon looks up in surprise at the other woman’s tone. “Not everyone feels that way or is okay with feeling that way. Just because someone’s body is biologically coded to react to a certain stimulus doesn’t mean that’s what they want.”

“Arousal is not consent,” Yixing adds, and Lu Han stares at him so blatantly that Kris bursts out laughing.

“You’re wrong, anyway,” Taeyeon says to Baekhyun, snatching away the rest of his drink with the air of someone who has cut him off before. “Alpha females don’t have knots and we fare just fine. Amber is right—omegas may be biologically drawn to them, but the omega themself may not be. That’s why same-status attraction exists. We have evolved a long way from the wolves who only lived to conquer and breed, after all.”

Jongin raises his hand like he’s in school. “I can say for certain that I’ve never craved a knot in my life.”


Sehun climbs over Jongin to sit on Minseok, purposely rubbing his large body all over the alpha’s small one, and even the stoic Kyungsoo laughs at Minseok’s pained face. Sehun continues until Minseok mutters something about knot-slapping and Sehun quickly slides off, returning to Jongin’s arms while Minseok burrows himself against Chanyeol in an attempt to rid himself of sweet omega scent.

All this talk about knots has Lu Han feeling incredibly uneasy. Amber usually picks up on his mood and shuts it down before it gets to be too much, but she isn’t the one who speaks next.

“I’m glad you all feel comfortable enough with each other to discuss such intimate things, but let’s get back to the karaoke, okay?” Yixing suggests gently, though Lu Han feels the persuasive tone like it’s a direct order. “We’re not paying to sit around and discuss social justice, right?”

Lu Han spends the rest of the night wondering why Yixing’s words seem to pierce his soul more than his alpha scent. When they go to pay, the five alphas agree to split the bill and nobody argues. If Kris didn’t already like Yixing based on his political standings, this would have definitely sealed the deal. Amber rolls her eyes as Kris seems to hang off of Yixing’s every word, like he is the one trying to be courted.

It isn’t until much later, when he can no longer blame it on the alcohol, Lu Han admits to himself that he wants Yixing to court him. There haven’t been any signs that Yixing is any less than one-hundred-percent genuine when he gets heated up about omega rights, which Lu Han hadn’t realized was such an intellectual turn-on for him. The more Yixing goes on about omega discrimination and mistreatment in society, the more Lu Han wants to be his omega, regardless of what it entails, because Yixing recognizes his agency as a person. Even if Yixing becomes blinded by lust during his ruts, Lu Han will take it. He hasn’t forgotten the fantasies from his last heat. Yixing already respects omegas so much that the thought of submitting to him doesn’t make Lu Han hate his status. It actually makes him feel powerful, a feeling hasn’t been allowed to experience before.
Irony is wanting the one who doesn’t want you, Lu Han thinks bitterly as he remembers Yixing’s blatant disinterest in him as a mate. It’s not like Yixing had ignored him, but he hadn’t looked at Lu Han any differently than anyone else who was out with them that night. Don’t get him wrong, Lu Han is thrilled that Yixing gets along so well with his friends—particularly Kris, who can’t stand alpha males by default and is possibly the most difficult person to be won over by one. Even Jongin and Sehun like Yixing, who had offered them his phone number in case they run into any problems that they (unfortunately) require an alpha to fix. It wouldn’t be the first or even the tenth time the pair of omegas would be approached by an alpha—or several—who insist they need a knot, refusing to take no for an answer and luring them into a battle of hormones they can’t win.

The more Lu Han thinks about it, the more it sucks that he had managed to meet someone like Yixing only to be kept at a distance. Arousal isn’t love just as much as it’s not consent, but Lu Han is fairly confident that he’s not being led by his omega instincts here. He genuinely likes Yixing, enjoys his company and seeks it out whenever possible. He texts Yixing all the time, telling him random things like something stupid Kris said or a funny call he got at work. They follow each other on Instagram and Yixing likes all of his posts, even the dumb selcas and gratuitous food collages.

Lu Han finds himself craving Yixing’s presence, not because he’s an alpha who has a knot, but because he’s so understanding and supportive and somehow manages to be calm while raging about omega rights. He finds Yixing ridiculously attractive as well, dying a little inside every time Yixing posts a selca showing his dimple on his own Instagram, or calls him to pass the time on a long commute to visit his parents. Yixing’s voice is just as effective as his alpha pheromones, only it gently caresses Lu Han’s mind instead of igniting his omega urge to mate.

Kris teases him about having a crush, and after a while, Lu Han stops denying it.

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Before Lu Han and Yixing’s schedules can sync up, Lu Han runs into Kyungsoo on his lunch break. As a first-year resident at the hospital, Kyungsoo’s time is even more limited than Yixing’s, but he’s more than happy to let Lu Han join him at a nearby cafe. Naturally, Kyungsoo’s still too new to push his alpha suppressant agenda on any of the seasoned doctors, but he’s excited to share his research so far.

“It would be so easy to create a drug,” Kyungsoo’s saying with a sigh. “They just won’t. It’s upsetting. Every alpha I know hates how they get around omegas. Nobody likes being dependent on uncontrollable urges.”

“I understand that very much,” Lu Han offers, pausing to slurp up his noodles. “I don’t get how so many omegas are okay with it, welcoming it even. I’ve known omegas who will just roll over and bare themselves to the first alpha who looks their way, honored by their attention. It’s sickening.”

Kyungsoo stares at him, those big eyes regarding him contemplatively as he chews his own lunch and swallows before speaking. “I wouldn’t say that around Yixing if I were you.”

“Why?” Lu Han asks, confused. “He agrees with me.”

“Not with that,” Kyungsoo points out. “There’s nothing wrong with omegas who desire to be claimed by an alpha. To say otherwise is to bash your own kind, and that’s not something Yixing will stand for. He supports omegas as they are, not as they’re medically modified to survive in this world.”

Lu Han blinks. “But it’s so demeaning.”
“It’s not, though.” Kyungsoo’s posture slumps a little, taking on a position of surrender rather than defense. “Just because you don’t feel that way doesn’t mean all omegas shouldn’t.”

“I do feel that way,” Lu Han admits, his face burning at confessing something he’s only told Kris in the peak of his heats. “I crave the attention of an alpha male, and I resent it. I don’t want to be this way, so weak in the presence of the dominant status. There’s nothing I hate more in this world than being an omega.”

Kyungsoo doesn’t say anything for a long time, draining his noodles before placing his chopsticks down. “That’s unfortunate. Yixing really likes you.”

“What?” Lu Han abandons his humiliation to stare at the small beta in disbelief. “What on earth would give you that idea?”

“He told me,” Kyungsoo says simply. “He was enamored with you from the instant you lectured that alpha in his store. I can’t tell you how many times he recounted that story to me, swooning like an omega—sorry, that was rude. He was swooning like someone who had finally found his match on all levels, not just hormonal.”

“He doesn’t act like he likes me,” Lu Han mumbles. “He talked to Kris more than he even looked at me when we all went out together.”

“Lu Han, you give off the worst repellent pheromones I’ve ever smelled,” Kyungsoo tells him. “If you’re not marked by Amber, your own scent is so off-putting that even I am discouraged from approaching you.” He wrinkles his nose. “Aside from that, your body language and overall demeanor keeps others away worse than a growl.”

“I don’t mean to,” Lu Han says sheepishly. “I’ve been harassed by alphas and even betas so many times that it’s a default setting, I guess. I’m tall and worked hard to gain muscle, but that seems to attract them more.”

“You are a good looking person,” Kyungsoo says bluntly, and Lu Han twitches at the compliment. “I’m not a psychologist, but you obviously have a negative reaction to alpha attention based on your unfavorable experiences. I am not saying that’s wrong, or unjustified, but you need to realize that not all alphas are the same, just like not all omegas are. Yixing is incredibly aware of his hormones and can control them more than any alpha I’ve ever met. He’s not going to hurt you, and it’s insulting to imply otherwise.”

“I knew the instant he touched my shoulder that he wasn’t going to hurt me,” Lu Han says, his voice insistent because he needs Kyungsoo to understand this. “I was so close to my heat that the physical contact should have set me off, but it didn’t. He wasn’t trying to mate with me, he was protecting me. His scent was strong enough to knock me out because he was protecting me. It was probably the first time in my life that I was okay with being an omega, simply because I got to experience the surreal pleasure from being treated like something important.”

“You should tell him exactly that,” Kyungsoo says, offering a rare smile at Lu Han’s admission. “If I’ve learned anything in my studies, it’s that biology isn’t all garbage hormones. Sometimes it brings together two or more people who are perfect for each other in every way, even if they don’t know it themselves. Science is fascinating like that.”

“It really is,” Lu Han says, his spirits lifting for the first time in months.

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Kyungsoo’s words mull over in his head for a few more weeks until he’s due to have his heat again, tempted to put it off despite the consequences. Now that he has an alpha in his life, maybe it won’t be so bad. Kyungsoo had advised against it, having swiped Lu Han’s medical chart from the hospital with Lu Han’s permission. Perhaps if Yixing were physically close to him, it might be worth experimenting, but otherwise it’s no different than Lu Han having no alpha at all.

This heat isn’t nearly as easy as the last one. Lu Han practically lives on his knotted dildo for the entire week. He thinks of Yixing the whole time, too far gone to be ashamed by looking at his new friend in such a sexual way when he himself doesn’t like to be looked at like that. It’s natural, he keeps telling himself. All omegas do it when they go into heat, regardless of which statuses they’re attracted to, if any. Lu Han is an omega whether he likes it or not, and he learned a long time ago that fighting it is worse than giving in.

Lu Han has had help through his heat exactly one time in the eleven years he’s had them. Back in college, when he learned the hard way that recreational drugs lessened the effects of his suppressants, he was tutoring an alpha junior named Tao in statistics. Tao, the son of two omegas before it was socially accepted, had never properly developed alpha pheromones as a result of what is considered to be hormonal inbreeding. It was the only reason Lu Han permitted himself to be alone with the young alpha, who was actually taller than him with a lot of muscles from lifelong wushu training. They had become friends through the tutoring, Tao quickly adopting Lu Han as a mentor in the economics field.

Lu Han didn’t dabble in mind enhancers very often, but college meant parties and there was always someone trying to get him high. Something Lu Han quickly learned about drugs is that they are a social activity—smoking or snorting or slipping a pill under one’s tongue while others do the same is like some kind of bonding experience. It’s admittedly how he’d met Sehun, who had a way of acquiring anything someone would want to take. If there were any warnings about side effects when combined with other medications, they weren’t distributed along with the product that had been dug out of Sehun’s pocket along with some lint and Tic Tacs.

Fortunately, Lu Han had been with Sehun when it hit him. Being barely eighteen and a sexual deviant in his own right (Jongin may only be into other omegas, but Sehun is into anyone, and back then Sehun was known to engage in courtships that involved more than one other person), Sehun thought he was being helpful by finding Lu Han a knotted alpha to take care of him. To this day, Lu Han is grateful that it was Tao who found him before Sehun would let him mate with a complete stranger, even if Sehun had thought that Tao was a beta this whole time due to his genetic abnormality.

From what Lu Han can remember, Tao had been gentle with him, consistently amazed that he was capable of satisfying his senior this way. When they talked about it later, Tao admitted that he didn’t think he could attract an omega with the way he was, despite having a fully functional knot, which Lu Han had in turn admitted was the only thing he wanted. It would have been humiliating how desperate Lu Han’s body was for it if it wasn’t for Tao’s familiarity and insufferable politeness. He kept asking Lu Han what was okay and if it felt good, even when Lu Han was beyond answering, his entire being focused on taking Tao’s knot for several hours until his heat broke and he couldn’t move anymore.

Needless to say, Lu Han never experimented with drugs again, and he and Tao fell out of touch after Lu Han graduated. That night had made everything weird between them, mostly because Tao’s lack of hormones gave him no desire to claim anyone, let alone Lu Han. He was affected enough to make a knot, but he wasn’t actually interested in pursuing a mate. The whole interaction left Lu Han feeling even worse than before, like he was good enough to knot but not worth anything else even though he knew Tao had only done it to make him comfortable and to keep another alpha from
taking advantage of him. Tao had protected him the only way he could.

Tao was an unfortunate casualty of Lu Han’s omega instincts, which makes Lu Han resent them even more. Every time he remembers Tao, tall and nice and (figuratively) looking up to Lu Han like an older brother, he can’t help but think that they could still be together today, like all of his other college friends, if only his life wasn’t ruled by uncontrollable hormones.

It might be better not to court Yixing after all, he thinks miserably when his heat finally ends. He’d rather have Yixing in his life as a friend than not at all.

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Nightclubs are a cluster of pheromones, usually seen as courting grounds for anyone who is looking for a mate, even if it’s just for the night. Lu Han genuinely likes the music, but he can only go when Chanyeol’s in the deejay booth and Minseok’s tending the bar, both of them keeping an eye on him on top of their faint alpha markings. Any other time, Lu Han would have fun with it, dancing alone without any care in the world and making eyes at Minseok every now and then just to make him grimace. Tonight, he’s slumped over the bar, nursing a beer while Yixing dances with Baekhyun like they’re in a cage.

“If you get anymore jealous, everyone in this club is gonna notice, including him,” Minseok drawls, patting him on the head as he wipes the counter next to him. “Why don’t you just tell him how you feel?”

“Have you just met me?” Lu Han asks, slurring a bit while pointing his empty bottle at Minseok. “I can’t be courted by an alpha. It’s not in my programming.”

Minseok leans on his elbows, blinking devious eyes at Lu Han. “You say that, yet I’m not allowed to talk about knots around you or you get all worked up.”

Lu Han’s tipsy enough to shudder, lifting his bottle to tap Minseok’s head until the small alpha takes it from him and replaces it with a glass of water. Frustrated, he turns back to the dance floor and frowns even more at how Yixing and Baekhyun are laughing together, having a great time while Lu Han’s moping on a bar stool like a bitter old beta.

After a run of upbeat dance songs, Chanyeol slows it down, and Lu Han’s mood lifts considerably when Yixing and Baekhyun take the opportunity to grab a drink instead of dancing closer together. Even after a few beers, Lu Han knows that he has no claim over Yixing. The alpha is free to dance with whoever he wants, but Lu Han still wants that someone to be him.

“Wow, you’re wrecked!” Baekhyun yells over the music, clapping Lu Han on the shoulder. “You gonna be okay to get home?”

“Chanyeol takes him home when the club closes,” Minseok calls over. “He’ll be fine.”

“I could take you home if you wanted to leave earlier,” offers that pleasant voice, the one that feels so nice penetrating Lu Han’s ear canals. Yixing has broken a sweat, the droplets clinging to his face like they don’t want to fall yet, and Lu Han finds himself wondering what they taste like.

He barely resists telling Yixing exactly where he can take him. The alcohol dulls his control over his omega instincts, suffocating him with his own sweet scent. Yixing seems to smell it too, twitching where he stands as he grabs onto the bar to steady himself. He stares at Lu Han in a mixture of concern and disbelief.

“Damn, Lu Han, didn’t you just have a heat?” Sehun yells loud enough for the whole bar to hear.
“And you say I’m irresponsible with my pills.”

“I am not in heat,” Lu Han hisses through his teeth. “I need some air.”

“Lu Han, wait—” Minseok calls after him, but Lu Han’s already navigating his way through the crowds. He’s certainly not the only omega scent around, but he’s the one getting curious looks as he heads toward the smoking area. It’s warm enough that even non-smokers are outside, cool enough to calm Lu Han down, the open area and the distance from Yixing sobering him up in more ways than one. He breathes deeply, watching the puffs of white from the smokers disperse into the night sky.

When he’s cornered by an alpha male and a beta female the minute he walks back into the club, he knows exactly why Minseok had tried to stop him from leaving. He hasn’t been marked in over an hour, leaving him susceptible to be advanced upon by anyone. Not to mention he’d probably attracted every unmated omega chaser on his way outside, leaving them just waiting for his return like hunters in a field of deer. These two seem to know each other, mated even, blocking his path on either side as they guide him toward the dance floor.

“Don’t you wanna dance with us?” the alpha asks, eyes glazed over from his hormone euphoria. Lu Han can smell a permeance of black licorice over himself, and it’s revolting. “We’ve been watching you dance in your seat all night. If your alpha won’t dance with you, we will.”

“I don’t have an alpha,” Lu Han replies automatically, then realizes that was the dumbest thing he could possibly say. “I mean, not yet. I’m working on it.”

“You’re not talking about Zhang Yixing, right?” the beta asks, and Lu Han seethes at her knowing his name. “There’s no way he will claim you, you precious pretty boy. He’ll knot any omega that wants it, but that’s it. You’re better off with us.”

“No, I’m really not.” Lu Han shrugs them off, standing taller than her and matching her mate’s height. “You both need to leave me alone now.”

“Look at this little omega bitch!” the alpha exclaims, earning the attention of patrons at nearby tables. For the most part, they ignore the commotion, though a few alphas cheer. “Thinks he can talk back to an alpha. You should be grateful we are even bothering to court you first with as slutty as you smell.”

“That’s not for you,” Lu Han snaps. “That’s for him.”

He shoves past them, uncaring how bad it looks as he returns to the bar. Minseok breathes a sigh of relief, shaking his head as he gestures something to Chanyeol in the air, and Baekhyun looks dumbfounded like he just watched a cat mow the lawn. Yixing’s staring at Lu Han, expression unreadable, and Lu Han speaks first.

“I’m so fucking sick of this!” he explodes, slamming his fist down on the bar hard enough to upset a nearby drink; Yixing calmly reaches out to grab it. “My scent is not an open invitation for anyone to knot me! I can’t help my reaction to things. To you. I just wanna dance, and it’s bullshit that I have to pretend to be someone’s property in order to keep total strangers from grinding their dicks on my ass, because they think it’s theirs to own. Fuck this world and the status order!”

Someone applauds, but Lu Han doesn’t care. He’s raging so strongly that if he were an alpha, he would have scared off everyone in the building. Instead, he’s an omega whose scent gets sweeter the more riled up he gets, because anger and arousal are biologically formed in the same part of the brain. As children, omegas are taught not to get mad, because it sends off the same pheromones as when they want to mate. So while he’s halfway through his self-imposed heat cycle, to everyone
around him, he smells fertile and aroused.

“Baekhyun, you can get a ride home from Chanyeol, right?” Yixing asks. Nothing in his voice indicates that Lu Han had just caused a scene, technically screaming at him in public, and his hands are steady as they reach for his wallet to throw some money at Minseok.

“Yeah, sure,” Baekhyun replies, still dazed.

“Please let me take you home,” Yixing says to Lu Han, looking straight into his eyes.

“Um,” Minseok speaks up, stretching across the bar to clap Yixing on the shoulder, the unfamiliar scent of pine and citrus rising from the alpha’s rare display of protection. The only other time Lu Han had actively smelled Minseok this strongly was when Chanyeol first introduced him to Kris. “I know you mean well, Yixing, but I think you’re the last person who should be alone with him right now.”

“I’ll try to resist riding his knot the whole way,” Lu Han spits out at his friend, but Minseok just rolls his eyes as Lu Han turns and stalks toward the exit. Lu Han already knows that Minseok is going to do a dramatic reenactment of his rant for the whole group when enough time has passed that it’s funny, but right now he needs to get away from all the pheromones and everyone who thinks he needs to be babysat.

With as bratty as he’s being, he doesn’t expect Yixing to make good on his offer, inwardly calculating how long it will take him to walk to Junmyeon’s place from here. Then he catches a strong whiff of leather and rain, with no clouds in the night sky, and he stops short to wait.

“That was incredible,” Yixing says softly, his words so unexpected that Lu Han spins on his heel to stare at him. “I’ve never seen an omega display that kind of dominance before.”

“Did you see what happened?” Lu Han asks carefully, trying to control his tone. Yixing’s not the one he’s upset with, he reminds himself. Yixing might be the only one. “Did you hear what they said to me?”

“I saw, but I didn’t hear.” Yixing’s smile looks so out of place that Lu Han wants to kiss it off his face, the sight of that adorable dimple instantly calming Lu Han’s rage. “I was about to get involved, but then I didn’t have to! You took care of it on your own.”

Lu Han snorts. “Fat load of good that did me, didn’t it? I shot off enough pheromones to start an orgy. I honestly don’t know how you’re standing this close to me without trying to crawl into my pants.”

“I can control myself,” Yixing tells him. “I will insist on rolling the windows down for the duration of the drive, though. Hot-boxing omega scent isn’t good for anyone.”

The wording makes Lu Han burst out laughing, the release cathartic after the tense night he’s had. As his amusement fades, he notices that Yixing has joined him, tears of mirth shining from squinted eyes. A smile spreads across Lu Han’s face, straining his cheeks that haven’t stretched this way in a while.

“This is probably the worst time to ask this, but do you need to go home right now?” Yixing looks at him with those gentle eyes, inviting all the trust in the world. “There’s somewhere I want to take you. It’s a safe place, I promise.”

“I’m staying at Junmyeon’s anyway,” Lu Han answers with a shrug. “Kris is in heat and howls at decibel levels that I’m positive are deafening.”
Yixing frowns. “Is Amber away?”

“No. He howls out of enjoyment.”

“Oh.” Yixing glances at the front of the club, where a small line of people are waiting to get in and eyeing them. “We should go. Why don’t you text Junmyeon to tell him it will be a bit? Minseok undoubtedly told him we left already.”

“Those alphas are too protective for their own good,” Lu Han says affectionately as he pulls out his phone. He already has one message from Junmyeon, who is probably more protective than any alpha Lu Han knows. He’s warning Lu Han against inviting Yixing up to his apartment, since his alpha neighbors are arguing seriously enough to fill the hallway with threatening scents. Lu Han shoots off a message saying they’re going to grab a bite to eat, which should buy him some time.

Yixing makes an honest person out of him when he takes him to a basement pub, speakers bumping with obscure hip-hop and pool tables dimly lit by neon lights. It’s an older crowd, mainly mated pairs, the atmosphere predominantly omega. Lu Han feels safe here, walking in the door Yixing opens for him without hesitation.

“Another one, Yixing?” the bartender greets them, looking disappointed, and Lu Han thinks the worst until the older beta lady starts wiping his face with a cold, damp rag. “I should be a doctor with as often as I care for helpless omegas.”

“He’s not helpless, Auntie,” Yixing says, chuckling at how Lu Han sighs from the pleasant coolness. “He told off an alpha-beta pair who tried to corner him, and his hormones went haywire.”

“Did you really?” Auntie asks, gazing up at Lu Han with her crinkly eyes. “The newer generations of omegas are so brave, aren’t they?”

“This one is,” Yixing says, the pride evident in his voice, and Lu Han thinks his blush could melt ice. “Please give him your specialty, then send him back to me.”

Lu Han’s head darts to the side as Yixing walks away, but Auntie just tsks at him and turns him back to face her. “Don’t you worry about him now. He may be the sweetest person ever to be born with alpha genes, but he’s still affected by your scent. Sit up here with me at the bar and let him breathe for a bit. He’ll still be here when you’ve calmed down.”

Nodding obediently, Lu Han slides onto a bar stool. The other patrons offer him a wave, but otherwise don’t pay him any mind. He’s glad. Auntie presents him with a glass of seltzer water, a slice of lemon, and an omega vitamin still sealed in the package.

“I know you’re not in heat, but it will help,” Auntie tells him. “Trust me.”

Lu Han does. He takes the pill and downs the water, sucking on the lemon until his body surprisingly calms itself. “Lemons?” he asks, checking his teeth for seeds before placing the peel neatly on the small cocktail napkin. “Really?”

“The sourness cancels out the sweet,” Auntie explains. “It’s a natural supplement for omega hormone neutralization. Goes back ages.”

“I’m buying a bag of lemons tomorrow,” Lu Han says incredulously. If Kris wasn’t otherwise indisposed, Lu Han would be texting him right now with this amazing revelation.

“Yixing would probably give you some,” Auntie says. “Bless his heart, he purposely orders too many just so he has them on hand if needed.”
“He really is our biggest ally.” Lu Han starts to smile, then remembers what she’d said when they had walked in. “Does he bring a lot of omegas here?”

Auntie sighs fondly. “Only ones who need help. I don’t even know how he finds them—he must have distressed omega radar. I’ve tended to omegas whose mates have unclaimed them, and those who have been mated with against their will. Those are the extreme cases, though—mostly it’s just omegas whose heats have broken, but still can’t seem to cool down. I even delivered a baby once when Yixing came across an unmated omega in labor who was trying to get himself to the hospital.”

“Wow,” Lu Han says, feeling a bit silly for being brought here for his hormonal overload when those others clearly needed Auntie’s attention much more. “Thank you for taking care of me.”

“It’s no problem at all.” Auntie feels his cheeks, then runs the rag under the cold water spout again. “You’re the most pleasant-smelling omega I’ve encountered lately. It feels like I have spent all day baking cookies in a garden.”

Lu Han wrinkles his nose as she wipes his face again. “I hate my own smell. It’s too sweet.”

Auntie hums. “Maybe for you, but I can assure you my nephew is beyondenthralled by it. It’s a mixture of two things he loves: lilies and vanilla.” She winks at him. “Give him another ten minutes, then you should be okay.”

His wait time does not pass without conversation. Auntie is happy to tell him all about their family, how Yixing’s parents retired to a farm up north after he took over the store. He makes it a priority to visit every few months no matter how busy he is. His mother is Auntie’s late mate’s brother, and Yixing has one omega cousin who’s trying to make it big as a pop idol.

Auntie makes him drink another glass of tap water before she gives the all-clear for him to return to Yixing, who’s playing pool with a group of older alphas who take no interest in Lu Han. Yixing’s in the middle of a shot when Lu Han arrives, standing to the side as to not be a distraction. With how crazy he gets around Yixing lately, though, he’s probably a distraction just by being there.

Yixing misses the shot, sighing before he flashes a grin at one of the other alphas. “I have to go now. It’s been fun. Thanks for letting me play.”

They offer their pleasantries, and Yixing leads Lu Han to a booth close to the speakers. “You didn’t have to stop playing,” Lu Han tells him.

“Oh, it’s okay, I’m horrible at it,” Yixing says with a laugh. “Are you feeling better? You smell more balanced.”

“Yeah, I’m fine.” Lu Han decides to let a pout slip. “Sorry.”

“Are you kidding? This is the best night I’ve had out in a while.” Yixing leans back in the booth, flicking his eyes toward the speakers. “You can dance now, if you want.”

Lu Han sucks his bottom lip back in. “What?”

“Nobody will bother you here,” Yixing assures him. “You can dance all you want. Go ahead.”

“Really?”

In response, Yixing points toward the corner of the room, where the floor is scattered with a few tiles and flashing lights emulate a disco ball. Lu Han jumps to his feet, already feeling the syncopated rhythm in his bones as he stretches the tension of the night away.
“Dance with me,” he says, extending his hand to Yixing, whose eyes widen like Lu Han is the dangerous one here. Maybe he is right now.

Either way, a strong hand clasps his, and Lu Han leads Yixing the short distance to the tiny dance floor. It’s not club music, but it’s upbeat enough to dance to, the pair of them moving together easily. Yixing dances so fluidly, like a trained professional, and Lu Han’s face must show his surprise because Yixing laughs and leans toward his ear to speak.

“Self-taught jazz, contemporary, and hip-hop,” he explains. “You can learn anything on YouTube these days.”

“You never took lessons?” Lu Han asks in awe. “You’re so good!”

“Couldn’t,” Yixing answers. “Alphas aren’t allowed on teams with omegas, and there wasn’t enough interest to make a non-omega dance squad. That didn’t stop the neighborhood kids from teaching me, though.”

He winks, then grabs Lu Han’s hands to spin him around in a swift ballroom move. For one terrifying second, Lu Han thinks Yixing’s going to dip him, but it doesn’t happen. Lu Han belatedly realizes that the terrifying part was that he wanted it to.

“I used to play soccer,” Lu Han admits. “We had enough omegas to make a team in high school, but when I got to college they told me not to waste my time. I could never go pro, no matter how good I was.”

“Status roles affect everyone,” Yixing says sadly, his hands coming to rest on Lu Han’s arms, and Lu Han lays his head on Yixing’s shoulder. They don’t press close together, both knowing better after the events earlier tonight, but it’s enough for Lu Han. He breathes in leather and rain, which calms him like usual, filling him with a sense of protection and safety.

“You look like someone just killed your cat,” Junmyeon greets him when he gets back, Yixing dropping him off at the curb as requested. “Wanna talk about it?”

“The world sucks,” Lu Han mutters as he kicks off his shoes and face-plants on Junmyeon’s couch. Junmyeon throws a blanket at him and pats him on the head. “Nothing new, then.”

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Lu Han sighs as he drafts an email to Yixing for probably the fifteenth time. If this were twenty years ago, he would have a wastebasket full of crumpled up paper from his false starts, but the Internet age has him simply highlighting and deleting text. It’s not nearly as climatic; Lu Han is more frustrated at the words that won’t come out right than what he actually wants to say. He’s not much of a writer, particularly when it comes to feelings, and as much as he loves music as a medium, there’s not a song that accurately represents what he wants to tell Yixing.

When I’m with you, or talking to you, or even just thinking about you, I don’t hate myself; he finally types. I have spent so long resenting who I am that I don’t know how to handle not feeling that way. Your scent doesn’t threaten me; in fact, it does the exact opposite. I am attracted to you, more than just physically, because you are more focused on protecting me than claiming me. I like that very much. I like you. I want to get to know you better, without our friends around, with the intention of courting you. I know it’s not conventional for the omega to court the alpha, but we can just add it to the list of things that deviate us from the norm.

Lu Han hits send before he can change his mind, hoping the joke at the end lightens the serious tone
of the message. He means every word he said, his nerves bristling with anticipation that’s not unpleasant for once. He’d purposely waited until a good few weeks before his heat to confess to Yixing, when it couldn’t be blamed on hormones or clouded judgment. He knows Yixing is familiar with his cycle, since Kris confiscates his phone for the entire duration of his heats, a noticeable break in their otherwise constant communication.

He nearly falls out of bed when his phone buzzes not ten moments later, amazed at receiving a response so fast.

_I don’t have an answer for you right now, but I want you to know that I received your email so you don’t worry about that. I am touched by your honesty and pleased that you acknowledge your internalized bigotry. Regardless of what happens between us, I would be honored to help you overcome your own limitations to learn to respect yourself and live as a proud omega man. I am deliriously happy that I have inspired you in that direction even a little bit. Maybe I could make a difference as a politician after all._

_That being said, I need time to process your proposition. Do not misunderstand me—I am flattered that I am worthy of such important feelings, and I want to consider it properly. As an alpha who is not afforded any assistance in suppressing his hormones, it’s difficult for me to separate my own feelings from biological instincts. I wish to make this decision in the best interest of us both, so I ask your patience in allowing me to sleep on it for a few days. I will contact you when I have a proper answer, and I apologize for any stress this adds to what was undoubtedly a life-changing admission for you to make. If it is at all helpful, as of right now, it’s not a no._

Lu Han reads the email several times before rolling from side to side in his bed, overcome with a mixture of joy and pride and other feelings he doesn’t quite understand. Even Yixing’s typing has his usual tone, thoughtful of Lu Han’s demeanor while expressing his own concerns. Lu Han wholeheartedly understands the lack of distinction between feelings and instincts, frowning at how alphas don’t really have a way of separating the two. It’s probably the first time that Lu Han has felt more privileged as an omega, even if he can’t consistently take suppressants like many others.

There’s nothing to do but wait for Yixing’s answer, so Lu Han busies himself with extra work and looks into furthering his own advancement in self-acceptance. He joins Junmyeon at the local unclaimed omega meeting, trying to keep an open mind at all of the unbridled alpha attraction discussed. Nobody is trying to push an agenda on him—they’re simply sharing their own experiences. Lu Han finds himself relating to a few of them who express concerns about knotlust and how it makes them feel inferior to alphas, offering his own perspective on alpha self-restraint and how alpha males don’t have any medical help available to curb their carnal desires. Many of the omegas had never considered it from that perspective before, and Lu Han feels like Yixing would be proud of him for promoting his—their—beliefs.

Even Junmyeon’s regarding him like he’d grown another head, jokingly asking him who he is and what he’s done with the notorious alpha-hater from their college days. Lu Han responds by pointing out that he hasn’t yet asked Junmyeon about the unfamiliar scent clinging to him, so he should leave Lu Han to his own business. That ends up backfiring when Junmyeon spends the entire night flailing about his potential new mate, a beta named Jongdae whom he’d met at the post office of all places. Lu Han silently hopes his life is never that boring.

Finding his mate by being saved from an aggressive alpha may be something straight out of a fairy tale, but Lu Han isn’t quite ready to accept being an omega princess.

* Yixing’s answer comes in the form of a present. Lu Han hadn’t told him where they lived, but it
wouldn’t be hard for him to find out. He had it on good authority that Minseok often had to hose down his mate to get the beta’s scent off of him. Amber’s been meeting Taeyeon periodically for food or just conversation, expressing to both Kris and Lu Han how nice it is to have another alpha female to talk to. While Lu Han hasn’t seen Kyungsoo since their impromptu lunch date a while back, they follow each other on Facebook and occasionally like each other’s posts. It’s the most interaction one can steadily have with an intern doctor, anyway.

As for Yixing himself, he hasn’t cut off contact completely. They still like each other’s Instagram posts, commenting every now and then about whatever the other was doing. Social media is considerably less intimate than texting, but Lu Han is happy that Yixing thinks about him at all, even if that’s what he was supposed to be doing this whole time. Lu Han doesn’t want to rush him, understanding the importance of Yixing taking his time. This decision will affect the rest of their lives, after all, but he can’t help but be impatient when their communication is so limited in the interim.

It hasn’t even been a whole week when Kris bursts into his room with a package, but it may as well have been several months with how long Lu Han feels like he’s been waiting already.

“How can you knock?” he asks sarcastically. “What if I was jerking off?”

“Lu Han, I’ve been present for almost all of your heats,” Kris points out. “I’ve seen you do things that will haunt my nightmares.”

Lu Han flushes and stares at his bedspread. “You’re no saint either, you know.”

“Stop feeling ashamed and open the damn box,” Kris demands, plopping right onto Lu Han’s bed next to him and flinging the present into his lap. “If we’re all lucky, you won’t have to be alone next time.”

Lu Han scoffs. “Just because he agrees to court me doesn’t mean he’s gonna jump right into bed with me. If he agrees.”

Kris starts to retort, undoubtedly to lecture Lu Han on exactly how knots work, but Lu Han’s already torn into the box and unearthed a shiny gold chain with a single music note charm on it. It might be the first time Kris has ever been speechless, but that doesn’t hold a candle to what Lu Han is feeling right now.

“There’s a…there’s a note,” Kris whispers, like using his full voice will make the necklace break. “Should I leave you alone while you read it?”

“You would make me tell you what it says anyway,” Lu Han answers, and Kris’ resulting laugh pierces the too-serious atmosphere that had surrounded them upon opening the box.

Slowly, Lu Han unfolds the note, which is a half sheet of college-ruled notebook paper with a neatly perforated edge. He’s not sure what he expected, possibly some more of Yixing’s eloquent statements explaining the sentiment of the gift and what it meant about the two of them.

Instead, there is just one word, and suddenly that’s all Lu Han needs to see.

Yes.

His omega instincts are sobbing, tears springing to his eyes before he can stop them, but Kris squeals and bounces so forcefully that Lu Han is nearly thrown from his own bed. He laughs as he reaches for the necklace, lifting it up with shaky hands.
“Will you help me put it on?” Lu Han asks, his cheeks hurting from his uncontrollable grin, and Kris’ eyes are shiny as he nods profusely, the big sap.

“I thought you two weren’t into omega-omega relations?” Amber comments from the doorway where she’s folding her arms and looking entirely too amused at catching the pair of them in a rare display of affection.

“Yixing said yes!” Kris announces first, and Lu Han punches him in the gut.

“That’s my news to share!” he exclaims. “Fasten the fucking necklace and leave already.”

“So much for your same-status moment,” Amber says with a smirk. “Congrats, Lu Han. Try not to mess it up.”

Lu Han frowns, but he knows she’s right. “I’ll do my best.”

He’s admiring his reflection in the mirror, appreciating how the gold stands out from his skin, when he notices Amber scowling at Kris’ hands.

“That thing is laced with alpha scent,” she informs them as she shoves both of Kris’ hands under her hoodie to re-mark him. “Mine.”

“Yours,” Kris replies, grabbing her hips to pull her close. “No other alpha comes close.”

“Get out of my room before you send me into heat,” Lu Han snaps, prepared to get up and slam the door in their faces if they don’t comply. Thankfully, they move, or more accurately Amber drags Kris across the apartment to his room, and Lu Han spends an entire minute spraying his doorway with pheromone neutralizing deodorizer to get rid of Amber’s dominating scent. He’s used to smelling her by now, but when she gets possessive, she spews hormones everywhere and Lu Han’s eyes burn from the cinnamon overload.

His next inhale is all leather, and Lu Han starts as he learns what had set Amber off in the first place. Yixing had to have worn this for the past week with as much as it is permeated with his scent, wafting up toward Lu Han’s nose like the necklace’s entire purpose is for Lu Han smell its gifter constantly. Maybe it is, the concept both frightening and exhilarating. It’s Yixing’s way of marking him without physically doing so, protecting him against other alphas like any other mated omega, but it will also help Lu Han get used to Yixing’s strong alpha scent. Lu Han supposes that Yixing doesn’t want Lu Han to pass out on him again.

“You’re so smart,” Lu Han says the instant Yixing picks up the phone. It’s a weird response to the blatant acceptance of his feelings, but he’s a weird person. “Did you purposely send me something that took several days to prepare just so you would seriously consider courting me?”

“Actually, I just held it for a few minutes before I put it in the box,” Yixing replies, a hint of amusement in his aesthetically satisfying voice. “I can be rather forceful with my scent when I want to be. I wasn’t going to answer you this way, but I walked by a store and saw it in the window display. It made me think of you, so I bought it.”

“You’re still smart,” Lu Han tells him. “And strong, and gorgeous, and genuinely a nice person, and —”

“Not that I don’t appreciate the compliments, but can I see you now?” Yixing cuts him off. “I can take off the rest of the day and come to you, or we can meet somewhere neutral if you aren’t ready for me to be in your space yet.”
“You can come here,” Lu Han offers, throwing a quick glance around his room to pinpoint what he’d need to clean to be presentable for company. “Kris helped me put on the necklace and Amber stunk up the place when she noticed your scent on his hands. They’ll be busy for the next couple hours at least, but it would be nice to have more of your scent around here.”

“Maybe I better not then,” Yixing says with a slow hum. “I don’t want to compete with Amber. She’s used to being in your apartment, right? The necklace is as much for her as it is for you, to get you both accustomed to having me around. The closer you and I get, the less I’m going to hold back around you, and the last thing I want is a territorial dispute with another alpha. The first couple times I do come over, we should stay in your room until her alpha instincts are satisfied that I’m not trying to overthrow her. Eventually, we should be able to share the space without any conflict.”

“I had no idea alpha immersion was so complex,” Lu Han says, fingering the necklace as he cradles the phone to his ear. “Is it really okay to skip out on work just to see me?”

“It’s my store,” Yixing replies with a laugh. “I won’t make a habit of it, don’t worry. I would prefer to talk to you in person about the details of our courtship, if that’s okay with you.”

“Of course,” Lu Han agrees. “When and where?”

“The store and right now, if you’re not busy,” Yixing replies, sounding rather insistent. “We can meet here and go from there.”

Lu Han considers showering before he leaves, but he doesn’t want to wash off Yixing’s scent quite yet. He throws on a hoodie and heads to the store, electing to walk instead of helping himself to Kris’ car on such a nice day. Immediately, he notices a difference in the way passersby regard him. They keep their distance when before they would stare and leer. He even caught a smile from an omega he didn’t know and walked with his head a little higher. With Yixing’s protection, he feels invincible.

* 

Meeting at Yixing’s place of business turns out to be a bad idea when all Lu Han wants to do is fold himself into Yixing’s arms the instant he sees him, pressing their bodies close together until he knows nothing but Yixing all around him. Judging by the way Yixing’s eyes darken, his feelings are echoed, but it would be impolite to pollute public air with their combined pheromones.

“I look good on you,” Yixing says, and Lu Han’s skin burns beneath the gold. “Did you run into any problems on the way here?”

Lu Han shakes his head and recounts how much more pleasant it was to be outside with an alpha’s mark. “Even when Amber would mark me, I still got stared at—they just kept their distance.”

“Amber can only platonically mark you,” Yixing explains. “You’re not her mate, so while she cares for your safety and wants to warn off other alphas, it’s not as strong as someone who has deep feelings for you.”

“You have deep feelings for me?” Lu Han asks, giving Yixing his best grin.

“You know I do,” Yixing says, reaching for Lu Han’s arm to grab onto his hand. “Let’s go before I unintentionally ward off my omega customers for the next couple hours.”

Like everything else he does, Yixing’s fingers lace together with his both gently and firmly. It’s light enough for Lu Han to pull away if he wanted to, but strong enough to keep a hold on him, making it clear to everyone they pass that Lu Han belongs to him. Lu Han likes this feeling more than he’d thought he would. Yixing isn’t forcing Lu Han to be his property; he’s leading Lu Han with
permission.

“Have you courted an omega before?” Lu Han blurs out, voicing the thought as it occurs to him. “I mean, of course you have. I haven’t been courted before—or, that is to say, I haven’t trusted an alpha enough to get this close—so I don’t really know what to do. Will you teach me?”

Yixing’s quiet through the whole babble, steering Lu Han through the afternoon crowds and toward a nearby park at a somewhat brisk pace. “I don’t want you to feel like you have to act any particular way to keep me around,” he finally says. “However you want to act, I will adapt. I am incredibly flexible that way. About my experience…that’s part of why I wanted to meet with you. Let’s sit.”

It’s moderately chilly outside, but not too cold to enjoy the fresh air. They sit together on a bench and face each other, Yixing playing with Lu Han’s fingers as he prepares to speak. Lu Han can’t imagine a situation where Yixing would be at a loss for words, so he must be putting them together in his head, devising the best way to tell Lu Han whatever it is he wants to say.

“Being an omega rights activist means earning the affections of many omegas,” Yixing starts, and Lu Han flinches at the implication. He hasn’t forgotten what that beta at the club had said the night they went out, wondering deep down if there was any truth to it. “It’s exactly what you think, but at the same time it’s not. They would go into heat and ask for me, because they trusted me inexplicably, and I would tend to them if I could. So yes, I have broken the heats of many omegas in my time, enough to be frowned upon in today’s society, but I have never courted or been courted by one. I have courted exactly one person in my life and he was a beta—still is, as we are close friends to this day.”

“Kyungsoo?” Lu Han guesses.

“Close. Baekhyun.” Yixing smiles fondly. “He was happy enough with me, but I always felt like something was missing. Since he’s not an omega, he was safe from any heat-induced misjudgment, but I couldn’t deny that it’s omegas to whom I am attracted. Not for traditionally horrible reasons, mind you—I can take care of myself just fine, and any children would be born out of a mutual desire to raise a family together. It’s…there’s no less crude way to put it—I like the heats. I love cuddling and talking and everything romantic that one can do with another person, but when it comes down to my personal satisfaction, it can only be an omega whose instincts crave me and what I can provide for them.”

Lu Han’s blood runs hot, though it’s nowhere close to anger. He hadn’t thought to take precautions despite the heavy topic of conversation, but he also didn’t think it would escalate this quickly. He breathes deeply to keep from slicking the bench beneath him, because at this temperature he might just freeze to it and Kris would never let him live that down.

“Why did you never court any of the omegas you were with before?” he asks, trying to keep the jealousy out of his voice. All signs are pointing to this beautiful, perfect alpha being there through Lu Han’s next heat, and the last thing he wants to do is change that.

“They didn’t like me that way,” Yixing says with a shrug. “The feeling was mutual. You know how it is, right? You go into heat and any knot will do. At least—and forgive me if I’m being presumptuous here—that’s what I have been led to believe from the numerous omegas who used me for their heats and then went back to their normal lives with no lingering attachment.”

“I don’t know anything about that,” Lu Han answers honestly. “My past couple heats were spent thinking about you.”

Yixing exhales harshly at that, releasing a gust of pheromones that has Lu Han feeling faint. “You
shouldn’t say things like that until you can handle my reaction.”

“I’m not sorry,” Lu Han says, struggling to sit straight despite the slick dampening his boxers. “Speaking of heats, I’m due again in two weeks. If that’s too soon for you, I can probably make it another month on the suppressants without too much of a problem, but I think it’s obvious that we both want to do this.”

“Isn’t that my line?” Yixing asks, and they both laugh nervously. “Honestly, Lu Han, if I wasn’t getting diabetes right now from your scent, I would peg you for a beta, if not a fellow alpha.”

“I will take that as a compliment, thank you.” Lu Han smiles, and Yixing squeezes his hand. “Though I’m getting closer to being okay with my birth status. It was always the weakness and submission that bothered me about it, but that’s really dependent on whom I mate with, right? Not every alpha is like my father.”

He feels Yixing’s eyes on him, burning holes in the side of his face where he’d turned away. “I can assure you, Lu Han, that you will hold both the power and the dominance in this courtship. I am incredibly skilled at keeping my hormones under control after spending so much of my life with omegas. While I would be grateful for some medical relief, I am capable of resisting even if you go into heat right in front of me. I wouldn’t be able to stay the whole time, but I could make it long enough to get you to a safe place.”

“How are you so different?” Lu Han asks, amazed at Yixing’s self-restraint. “Chanyeol and Minseok aren’t into omegas. Amber and Taeyeon are females. Tao is genetically abnormal—you don’t know him. He’s an alpha without a scent.”

“Must be nice,” Yixing says under his breath.

Lu Han gives him a weird look. “Anyway, you are literally the only alpha male I’ve ever known who is into omegas and doesn’t get lust-rage around me.”

Yixing swallows hard before he answers. “Do you remember learning in history class about our ancestors travelling in wolf packs?”

“Yes, of course,” Lu Han responds. “I always think about how strange it would be to be covered in fur, limited to howling for communication.”

That gets a laugh out of Yixing. “We’ve definitely come a long way since those days. But remember how every pack had a leader, the head alpha who took care of everyone and protected them from outsiders?”

“I think so,” Lu Han says. “Didn’t the head alpha get first dibs on all the omegas and then distribute them to the other members of the pack to breed?”

“In the horror version of history, maybe,” Yixing answers, shuddering at the thought. “The head alpha actually had to go through rigorous training in order to deny themself the temptation of omegas. Many of the art sculptures and paintings created during the wolf era depict an alpha turning away while omegas dance or gather around him. It was considered the highest form of power to resist an omega in heat, the only way an alpha could rule their pack with a clear mind. It’s something today’s generation likes to forget about, because it shows that omegas have been revered and honored throughout history.”

“I wish I had known that before now,” Lu Han mumbles, recalling night after night when his mother would remind him of his role in society before bed. “Might have saved myself a lot of internalized
“It’s never too late to reverse that,” Yixing says, lifting Lu Han’s spirits considerably. “I told you all of that just now because as time went on, that extreme level of resistance became a trait that wove itself into an alpha’s genetic makeup. Not all alphas, obviously, but every now and then one will be born who can control himself better than the others. My mother told me it’s nature’s way of ensuring there are alphas who can be pack leaders if we ever have to resort to that way of life again.”

“So you have head alpha genes?” Lu Han asks. “That’s so cool.”

“Yeah, but it’s not without its consequences,” Yixing says gently. “Having the head alpha mentality means thinking of everyone, not just one person, hence why I helped so many omegas through their heats in high school and college. I have an urge to lead like other alphas have an urge to mate. I’ve been thinking about going into politics, but I’m not qualified. I involve myself in running the store because it satisfies my instincts. I jump on every omega rights campaign for the same reason. I need to be needed, not just by my mate but by many, even a whole community.”

Lu Han offers a sympathetic look. “That sounds exhausting.”

“It won’t be very fun for you either,” Yixing goes on. “My instincts are only interested in you because we haven’t mated yet, but if I help you through your upcoming heat, that will be it until the next cycle. I don’t harbor the same carnal desires as other alphas—and pretty much everyone, really. I do have feelings for you, I need you to understand that, but I’m not going want to mate with you outside of your heats. That’s not to say I won’t take care of you if you want it, but I won’t yearn for you that way like other mated pairs do.”

“Will you yearn for me other ways?” Lu Han asks, struggling to wrap his mind around Yixing’s confession. “To be close to me, hold me, or breathe in my scent?”

“Yes, for sure,” Yixing answers, his face breaking into a relieved smile. “That’s the only concern you have about everything I just told you?”

Lu Han shrugs. “I only want that kind of attention during my heat anyway, and it has to be a knot. I’ve always found it odd that Kris and Amber do it even when he’s not in heat, but I figured it was a thing some people like to do, just like there are omegas who don’t crave knots and alphas who are repulsed by omegas. Diversity or whatever.”

Yixing’s grin is so big that Lu Han thinks he said something amazing.

“What?” Lu Han asks. “What did I say?”

“Everything,” Yixing answers. “Kyungsoo was right. Sometimes science knows what it’s doing with this whole biological attraction thing after all.”

“Are we courting now?” Lu Han gives him a hopeful look. “I know you marked me with this necklace, and we’re talking about breaking my next heat together. But I’d like to know where we stand as far as courtship goes.”

“We are definitely courting,” Yixing tells him. “Shall we make it official with a kiss?”

“Please.”

Yixing leans in right away, lips brushing Lu Han’s before Lu Han can close his eyes, his free hand rushing to cup Yixing’s face. He feels Yixing lean into the touch, whining softly at the knuckles that drag along his jaw, and their next kiss is longer, hot breaths against cold cheeks while wet lips part to
grant entrance to curious tongues. Lu Han has kissed before, but nothing compares to the feelings that accompany this one, swirling around him and keeping him warm even in the cold afternoon that turns to early evening.

Their hands stay laced together on Lu Han’s lap, Yixing’s free one holding onto Lu Han’s arm for some semblance of balance. Lu Han forgets how to breathe when it’s over, choking on the air that demands to be inhaled when his body does it for him. Yixing looks concerned for a second, but then Lu Han laughs uncontrollably, and they must look like a pair of idiots falling over each other in maniacal laughter in the middle of the park.

Lu Han’s face ends up pressed into Yixing’s neck, breathing in nothing but alpha, and Lu Han’s the one to whine this time, his entire body taken over by Yixing’s natural scent. Yixing isn’t even putting off any pheromones, just existing, and Lu Han can’t get enough of him, wrapping both arms around him to pull him closer.

“Alpha,” he whispers, succumbing completely under the surface of consciousness by his own will this time. “My alpha.”

Yixing takes a deep breath, bringing Lu Han up and down with the rise and fall of his chest as his fingers thread in Lu Han’s hair. “Remember, until your first heat, things like this will ignite my hormones and make me want you.”

“Pervert,” Lu Han teases him. “I’m not even slick anymore.”

“Anymore?” Yixing repeats, his voice cracking as his hands tighten on Lu Han’s arms. “But it’s getting so cold outside!”

“Tell me about it,” Lu Han grumbles. “Talking about knots always riles me up. It’s embarrassing. Kris does it just to be a dick.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Yixing’s hold on him relaxes as he gently urges Lu Han back. “We should return to our respective homes for the night. Let’s go on a date this weekend, okay? I’ll give myself Saturday off—I’ve been working hard lately.”

Lu Han laughs. “Saturday’s perfect. It’s Amber’s weekend in the guard, so we can introduce your scent into the apartment while she’s gone.”

“Guard?” Yixing repeats. “Military?”

“Yeah, Air Force,” Lu Han explains. “She served three years after high school and elected to stay in the reserves. She’s really good at it, as you’d expect.”

“I bet,” Yixing says. “I wouldn’t want to invade anyplace on her watch.”

He walks Lu Han back to his building, hugging him properly for quite a long time before reluctantly pulling back.

“Good night,” Lu Han says, squeezing Yixing’s hand before he turns toward the door.

“Lu Han?” Yixing calls after him.

“Yeah?”

“If it’s okay with you, you could stop taking your suppressants.”
The implications of that statement have a rush of heat coursing through Lu Han, but he nods in agreement. “Yeah, okay.”

“Good night.”

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Amber being gone for the weekend means that Kris is up his ass, metaphorically speaking, to the point where Lu Han wants to lock him out of the apartment to get some peace.

“It’s been three days and you still smell like him,” Kris says in awe. “Are you sure he didn’t claim you during your romantic stroll in the park?”

Lu Han bares both sides of his neck so exaggeratedly that he stretches the collar of his shirt. “He didn’t claim me, idiot. It’s the necklace. Somehow, it contains his scent even after I shower with it on.”

Kris snaps his fingers. “He’s a wizard. That’s how he controls his alpha hormones too! Lu Han, how big is his wand?”

“GET OUT,” Lu Han booms, and Kris scurries out of the room like a frightened cat.

Finally alone, Lu Han flops onto his bed and stares at the ceiling, wondering how he’s going to get through the day without jumping Yixing. He hasn’t even seen Yixing yet, and already he’s overcome by alpha lust. Jerking off helped a little, unlike during his heats, but he still wants to be close to Yixing. He hopes their plans involve skinship and privacy.

Their plans involve lunch and a movie, which is so cliché that Lu Han can’t help but make fun of him. Yixing smiles and holds his hand on the way to the cafe, opening the door for him and pulling out his chair to push in as he sits. Lu Han feels appropriately wooed, something that would have ignited his rage six months ago, but now he finds it insufferably charming. Yixing’s not trying to claim him, Lu Han keeps telling himself. If Lu Han wants that, he has to be the one to ask for it.

The realization makes him feel incredibly powerful. It’s a struggle to keep it from going to his head, because the last thing he wants to do is take advantage of Yixing’s unnatural submission. Yixing is still the alpha in every way, as Lu Han is fiercely reminded every time Yixing guides them somewhere or makes a gentle suggestion, but just like Yixing had said the other day, Lu Han is in full control of their courtship. They will not mate until Lu Han wants it. Yixing will not claim him until Lu Han asks for it. And no matter how long it takes, Yixing won’t resent him or get bored, because Yixing with his head alpha mentality is not fixated on mating.

Everything about this arrangement is perfect.

“What are you smiling for?” Yixing’s enticing voice pulls him out of his thoughts. “I can’t imagine duck is that satisfying to your palette.”

“You underestimate my appreciation for food,” Lu Han points out, laughing when Yixing shakes his head. “I was thinking about how amazing you are, and how lucky I am to be here with you right now.”

“Lu Han,” Yixing says in mild shock. “I didn’t think you were so romantically oriented.”

“I wasn’t,” Lu Han admits with a brief shrug. “Then I met you.”

“Next time I’ll bring you flowers,” is all Yixing says, and Lu Han is still grinning when the waiter
comes to see if there’s anything else they need. “Just the check,” Yixing orders casually, and the dominance courses through Lu Han’s body without the scent of any pheromones.

The movie is awful. The best part is that the theater is almost empty, even in the middle of a Saturday afternoon, and Yixing isn’t opposed to making out like teenagers in the back row. Lu Han made the analogy in his head, but he hasn’t quite made out before, not unless kissing his high school girlfriend counted. She was a beta who was more than happy to ride his dick, which felt good enough when he wasn’t in heat and craving a knot, but once they started having sex, every other aspect of their courtship faded. They broke up when he went away to college, and last he heard, she’d mated with a different omega male and had a litter of kids. Good for her.

Kissing Yixing is nothing like kissing her. Yixing kisses like he’s devouring Lu Han’s entire being, sucking his soul out through his tongue and everywhere those lips make contact on Lu Han’s neck. It would be so easy for Yixing to claim him, to sink sharp teeth into his skin right here in this movie theater, but the lightheartedness of the encounter is what makes it fun. All of their clothes are on, hands above the waist and mostly wrapping around each other, or grabbing onto muscled arms. Their mouths slide together, tongues licking and exploring, drowning in each other’s pheromones.

Lu Han makes it until he’s confident that the few other people in the theater will seek out their mates or a suitable substitute the minute they leave before pulling back, desperately catching his breath as Yixing’s soft eyes are illuminated by the movie screen.

“Wow, we’re inconsiderate assholes.”

“We did them a favor,” Yixing says, struggling to maintain his own breathing. “It’s such a bad movie that they had to get their money’s worth somehow. I promise I’ll take you to see something better next time.”

“Next time is my treat,” Lu Han says, leaning his forehead against Yixing’s when the alpha moves to protest. “No arguments! I’ll be your omega, but you have to let me treat you too. Okay?”

Yixing smiles against his cheek. “You said it.”

“I did.”

“How does it feel?”

Lu Han considers his demeanor, pushing aside his reaction to Yixing’s kisses and close proximity and focuses on the weight that has suddenly lifted from his shoulders. “Like breathing fresh air for the first time.”

“Which definitely is not in this room,” Yixing points out with a laugh. “Wanna get out of here? I have ten thousand movies at my place that are undoubtedly better than this trash.”

“Your place?” Lu Han repeats. “Is that okay?”

“I live alone,” Yixing tells him, the words pressed into Lu Han’s neck. “It’s not much, but it’s home. I’d love to have your scent linger after you leave.”

It sounds dirty but really isn’t, not when he’s still a week and a half away from his heat and has no intention of doing any more than curling up with Yixing on his couch, or bed, or pile of blankets on the floor to watch something that actually stimulates his mind. Upon walking into Yixing’s studio apartment, he thinks he’ll be more comfortable here than the plastic seats in the theater. The TV is just as big, anyway.
“It was a gift from my mother,” Yixing answers the unspoken question as Lu Han gapes at the 72-inch display. “He was so happy I took over the store that he helped me get this apartment and furnished most of it. I’ve replaced the bed since then, but only because I wanted something people could sit on without being in my sleeping space.”

Lu Han spins around the small living area, which is sparingly furnished to make it look bigger than it really is. A sectional with two loveseats and an armchair takes up one corner, the entertainment center dominating an entire wall and two end tables allowing for surface storage. Yixing shows him the kitchen and the bathroom, off of which is the closet where Yixing has shoved a dresser and basically everything else he owned.

“I could probably afford something bigger, but I like it here,” Yixing muses happily, smiling at the white walls that he’s decorated with various portraits and flowing designs. In the dining area, where there would ordinarily be a table and chairs, Yixing has a makeshift office slash music studio, complete with amplifiers and a keyboard.

“You play?” Lu Han asks, gesturing toward the keyboard.

“I do,” Yixing answers. “Would you like to hear something?”

“I’d love to.” Lu Han settles on the closest armchair, draping himself over the back to watch Yixing play. “You didn’t sing when we were at karaoke.”

“I was more interested in socializing,” Yixing says with a laugh. “I’ll play for you now. It’s something I’ve been working on, so don’t get the wrong idea. It’s not about you.”

Lu Han scoffs at the implication, but as Yixing starts the song, he’s glad that the alpha had clarified. It’s a deeply riveting piece about being with someone but yearning for something more, a theme that Lu Han can relate to more than he’d like. Along with the rest of the world.

“You’d hit Top 40 with that easily,” he says when Yixing’s hands fall from the keys. “Baekhyun?”

Yixing nods. “I feel horrible for what I did to him. He’s forgiven me—hell, it’s been two years—but not a day goes by that I wonder why I had to be the one to tell him he wasn’t enough for me. Now that he’s with Taeyeon, I’m not as upset with myself anymore, but art exists to encapsulate a snapshot of feelings for eternity.”

“Wait, he’s with Taeyeon?” Lu Han gasps. “Seriously?”

“They’ve been off and on again for so long I can’t keep track,” Yixing tells him. “He met her through his work right after I broke his heart, and they’ve been hit or miss ever since. I’m grateful to her for being there for him, but their personalities clash so much that they’re better off apart than together. Yet they keep trying.”

“Sounds frustrating.” Lu Han rests his chin on his hands on the back of the armchair. “I understand what you’re saying about art and feelings, though. I don’t write or compose, but I feel other people’s lyrics when I sing, or dance, or just listen to music. Just now, I felt the pain of your memories without having experienced it myself.”

“I got that from your karaoke performances,” Yixing says. “That’s part of why I thought of you when I saw that necklace. I hope that maybe you’ll find a song that makes you think of me too.”

“Right now, probably everything makes me think about you,” Lu Han says honestly, smiling at how Yixing’s eyes light up. “You said something about movies?”
“Oh, right.” Yixing kneels in front of the massive DVD rack beneath his wall-mounted TV. He hadn’t been kidding when he said he had ten thousand movies, though that might be a slight exaggeration. “You can pick next time, but I have a particular one I want to show you. Have you seen this before?”

Lu Han glances at the cover and shakes his head. “I don’t watch a lot of alpha-omega romantic comedies,” he admits.

“Understandable,” Yixing says. “I promise you’ll like it, and if you don’t, I’ll make it up to you somehow.”

Lu Han would probably watch whatever Yixing shows him right now, but he jokes about holding him to his word anyway. Yixing joins him on the loveseat, and Lu Han gravitates toward him, making himself comfortable on Yixing’s lap while strong arms wrap around him. He expects to make out some more but finds himself engrossed in the movie within the first two minutes. It’s about an omega who runs her own company and hires a retired alpha as an intern. While they each have romantic relationships throughout the course of the story—she with her stay-at-home beta mate and he with another senior omega in the office—the movie is focused on the dynamic between the CEO and her intern. He not only helps her organize her life, but he also talks her down from hiring a seasoned CEO, because there’s no reason why she can’t have both a family and a career.

Lu Han’s crying when it’s over, so moved at watching a media representation of an alpha supporting an omega in personal and professional success that he doesn’t bother to suppress his emotions. Yixing says nothing, squeezing him tightly throughout the end credits, and Lu Han doesn’t know what he did to deserve such a wonderful, thoughtful alpha to court, but he wants to find out so he can do it over and over again.

“I knew you’d like it,” Yixing finally says, speaking into his hair. “It’s one of my favorite omega power films.”

“It is so nice to see an alpha and an omega paired together without the focus being on mating,” Lu Han sobs out. “I mean, he was old, sure, but clearly his hormones were still working since he attracted that omega guy.”

“I hear hormones weaken as one gets older, particularly alphas,” Yixing says. “The head alphas of the wolf era would have to retire when they got too old to project their scents. Omegas stop having heats at a certain age too. That’s why I think an emotional connection is so important, because mating for life means after the hormones go away.”

“Can you just run for President?” Lu Han asks, and Yixing shakes them both with roaring laughter. “I’m serious! The world would be such a better place if your wisdom was common knowledge.”

“If I become President, would you be my First Mate?” Yixing teases.

“I’ll be your any mate,” Lu Han says, and he twists in Yixing’s hold to kiss him, cutting Yixing off halfway through his comment about Lu Han not making any sense.

It’s different kissing Yixing in his own home, his scent overwhelming as they stretch out on the sectional to lie down together. Yixing’s halfway on top of him and Lu Han’s not scared, hands perched on Yixing’s thin waist to keep him right where he is as they kiss slowly, taking their time to let the pressure build between them. One of Yixing’s arms curls around Lu Han’s shoulder and the other partially holds him up, fingers brushing through the very back of Lu Han’s hair where he can reach.
The hem of Yixing’s shirt teases Lu Han’s hands and he slides them up Yixing’s back, feeling the firm muscles through the thin fabric everywhere he touches. Yixing whines into his mouth and Lu Han drops to the sides, thumbing each of Yixing’s ribs before reaching the soft flesh of his abdomen. Lu Han barely gets a squeeze in before Yixing’s kissing him harder, increasing their speed by about two hundred percent, and Lu Han’s mind is still spinning when Yixing pulls away abruptly.

“I should put down a towel,” Yixing’s rushing to say in a breathy voice. “Sorry, I wasn’t thinking.”

“I’m wearing three layers of padding,” Lu Han says with a grin. “I came prepared today.”

Yixing eyes him under hooded lids. “How many have you soaked through?”

“Probably just one. You can find out, if you want.”

Yixing’s eyes darken. “Lu Han.”

“Or not, whatever.” Lu Han shrugs. “Just giving my consent.”

“Consent is important,” Yixing says distractedly, his one useful arm dropping to Lu Han’s waist. His body rolls toward the dip between Lu Han and the back of the sectional, settling on his side with a leg slung over Lu Han’s. His fingers dip under Lu Han’s shirt, making Lu Han shiver so violently that Yixing pulls back in concern, but Lu Han just shakes his head and presses Yixing’s hand right back where it was, nosing out Yixing’s mouth to kiss him again.

Yixing touches him much more confidently when his tongue is wrapped around Lu Han’s, a low growl sounding from Lu Han when Yixing presses his palm against the front of Lu Han’s pants. He’s as hard as he is wet, hips rocking up into the promising touch. It’s been so long since another person has touched his cock that his body reacts on its own, both hands reaching down to unfasten his own pants before reaching for Yixing’s.

Yixing’s deep growl shocks him so much that he jumps back, nearly falling off of the sectional. “Sorry, I should have asked first.”

“No, it’s okay,” Yixing says, then his face splits into a grin. “Oh, right, you’ve never been with an alpha before, at least one with functional hormones. We get…primal when we mate. Nothing to worry about, though. I won’t attack you—unless you want me to.”

“Tempting, but I’ll save that for my heat,” Lu Han says, curling back beneath Yixing like he’d never left. Yixing’s further on top of him now, the solid weight pressing him into the cushions, and it feels nicer that he could have ever imagined. “Are we mating today?”

“Do you want to?” Yixing asks. “I can’t decide if it would be better to do it before your heat so that you’re used to my touch, or if we should wait until you actually…crave it.”

“We don’t have to mate for me to get used to your touch,” Lu Han tells him. “I want to touch you too. Is that okay?”

“Yes, absolutely,” Yixing says, kissing his way down to Lu Han’s neck that automatically stretches out to offer all possible access. “Let’s just get to know each other’s bodies today.”

Lu Han nods, squirming beneath Yixing’s attention that drops down his chest. Yixing’s hands tug at Lu Han’s shirt, and Lu Han lifts his arms obediently, pulling Yixing back into his mouth as Yixing’s weight settles completely on top of him. Yixing straddles his lap, and it’s frustrating because Lu Han can’t spread his legs. Maybe that’s the point. He feels around for Yixing’s cock and expects the growl this time, trembling from the force of alpha pheromones bursting all around them. Yixing’s so
hard, straining the front of his pants, that Lu Han doesn’t waste any time unfastening them to touch him directly.

Omegas aren’t actively aware of their heats to remember many details, and it’s not like Lu Han would have made the effort to learn how to work alpha dick while he was burning alive anyway, so his experience in this department is very slim. He tries stroking it like his own, twisting the tip and thumping the slit, which seems to be good enough judging by the continued growls and gasps that die on Lu Han’s tongue. Then he starts meeting resistance on the downstroke and tentatively pokes at it.

Yixing bursts out laughing as he breaks their kiss. “That’s my knot, babe. You don’t have to do anything with it if you don’t want to. What you were doing felt really good. Can I do it to you too?”

“Please,” Lu Han whines. He feels like the helpless omega pinned under the strong alpha, and it’s the hottest he’s ever felt outside of his heat.

Then Yixing’s hand slips into his open pants to pump his cock, and he arches, flinging his head back from the contact. His own hand falls away from Yixing, but Yixing doesn’t seem bothered by the way he kisses down Lu Han’s bare chest, free hand feeling out his muscles as the first one works his length slowly but steadily. He licks a nipple and Lu Han moans out loud, hips thrusting up into the funnel of Yixing’s hand.

“Wait, I’ve got something better for you,” Yixing says, shifting enough to knock his hand away, which has Lu Han whining in his own primal way until his cock is enveloped in something warm and wet.

“Yixing, what—” Lu Han cuts himself off with an abrupt intake of air, his eyes flying wide open as he leans up on his elbows to see if that’s really what he thinks it is. And it is, Yixing’s lips stretched around him and sucking him in and out, dark hair falling into his eyes as his head bobs.

Lu Han can’t speak, just threads both hands into Yixing’s hair to encourage him to keep going, hips rolling to feel more. The head of his cock hits the back of Yixing’s throat, and he sobs out loud because it feels so good, nearly crying when Yixing swallows around him.

Now that he’s not pinned down anymore, he’s free to spread his legs to appease his omega instincts. He doesn’t necessarily want Yixing’s knot right now (how wide was it even?!) but he wouldn’t mind a finger or two. He’s likely slicked through his second layer of padding by now, each slurp of Yixing’s mouth initiating a fresh throb inside him.

“Yixing…” he gets out, reaching for the hand that’s firmly on Lu Han’s bare hip. “Touch me…”

Being as his dick is currently in Yixing’s mouth, it’s blatantly obvious where Lu Han wants to be touched, and feeling Yixing’s growl around his sensitive flesh almost pushes him over the edge. Yixing complies immediately, leaning up to shove his hand in Lu Han’s pants without pushing them down any further. Lu Han feels fingers behind his balls and moans in anticipation, easily accepting two at once.

“Yes,” Lu Han cries out, his body rocking back and forth between Yixing’s hot mouth and probing fingers. Yixing knows just how to touch an omega—as he should, being the community knot for so long—and Lu Han’s grateful for it when Yixing quickly finds his prostate and presses just right, bringing Lu Han to the brink of orgasm. “Yixing, I’m gonna come.”

Yixing doesn’t let up, growling again when Lu Han’s fingers tighten in his hair, and he drinks down everything Lu Han gives him. His fingers don’t stop, gently applying pressure even when it’s too
sensitive, and Lu Han didn’t know how good that could feel until right now, satiating his body’s urge to be penetrated.

He focuses in time to see Yixing obscenely licking the slick off of his fingers, resting his head on Lu Han’s thigh, and Lu Han’s breath hitches before he catches a whiff of the smell and wrinkles his nose. “I can’t stand my own scent,” he explains apologetically.

“No problem,” Yixing says calmly as he finishes cleaning his fingers. “I’ll brush my teeth in a second.”

“Do you—do you want me to get you off?” Lu Han asks, struggling to speak after that mind-blowing orgasm. “I probably can’t fit the knot in my mouth, but I might be able to manage the rest.”

“In due time,” Yixing answers. “We don’t have to do everything there is to do with another person today just because we’re decidedly not mating yet.”

“How are you so relaxed?” Lu Han asks with a breathy laugh. “I can’t even smell you anymore.”

“You’re not in heat,” Yixing answers, absently tracing the exposed lines of Lu Han’s groin while he squirms. “It feels good, but it’s nowhere close to the blinding lust of a rut.”

Lu Han hums noncommittally, figuring he doesn’t really have to understand it as long as Yixing enjoys being with him. True to his word, Yixing gets to his feet and walks to the bathroom with his pants shoved down his hips, no concern about showing off his hard cock and mostly-formed knot. It’s the first time Lu Han has seen one outside of pornos, and he tries not to stare, though he’s fairly certain Yixing brushes his teeth in profile to give Lu Han a better look.

He’s back on Lu Han faster than Lu Han is ready for it, the air he’d just managed to reacquire knocked out of him when Yixing pounces. “Hi.”

“Hi.” Lu Han lowers his hand to drag knuckles along Yixing’s cock and takes pleasure in the way Yixing’s eyes roll back into his head. “Now what should I do with this?”

“Just…that,” Yixing answers, pressing his mouth to Lu Han’s as Lu Han touches him properly, twisting his wrist like Yixing had done to him. “Yes, that’s good. Oh, **Lu Han.**”

He’s growling more than kissing, but Lu Han can’t find it within himself to complain when what he’s growling is Lu Han’s name and praises. Lu Han would probably jerk him off all day just to hear more of that, or at least until his hand fell off. Yixing’s releasing pheromones left and right, thankfully overriding Lu Han’s own sickeningly sweet scent, quickly bringing Lu Han back under the alpha’s spell.

Yixing snaps his hips firmly, giving Lu Han a small taste of what’s it going to be like when they mate, and Lu Han feels another wave of slick pour out of him at the connection. Maybe three layers wasn’t enough after all, Lu Han thinks regretfully; he’ll have to ask the mated omegas how they make it through foreplay without wearing enough padding to feel like they’re sitting on a pillow.

The alpha scent thickens almost suffocatingly just before Yixing comes, growling so loudly that Lu Han’s going to hear it echo in his head for quite a long time. Yixing’s release lands mostly on Lu Han’s stomach, and Lu Han dips his fingers into it, bringing it to his lips. He’s always wondered what alpha tastes like.

Yixing offers an amused expression even as he regains his breath, shakily readjusting his limbs on top of Lu Han. “Well?”
Lu Han smirks as he licks his lips. “Delicious.”

“So are you, even if you don’t think so.” Yixing smirks right back. “More for me.”

“I’m tempted to tell you to have as much as you want,” Lu Han jokes. “Then I won’t be uncomfortable going home.”

Yixing’s eyes flash before he disappears between Lu Han’s legs, ignoring Lu Han’s feeble protests as his pants and boxers are shoved completely off of one leg to bare him to the room. It’s just Yixing, who has the decency not to stare for too long before lifting Lu Han’s thighs to his shoulders and licking up everything he can find. It’s weird until Lu Han feels a tongue on his rim, making him jerk and gasp as fresh slick undoubtedly catches Yixing in the face.

“This is defeating the purpose!” Lu Han exclaims, not that his body stops pushing back against the touch, cock waking up for a second round.

The vibrations of Yixing’s laugh have him moaning again, tongue flicking its way inside him long enough to have him arching before pulling back. “Sorry,” Yixing mutters, not sounding sorry at all as he speaks between heavy breaths. “I get carried away. I’ll brush my teeth again.”

A sigh escapes Lu Han’s lungs as he struggles to recover from the impromptu dining between his legs, but it’s not one of exasperation. He does feel better, even if his thighs are tingling with alpha saliva instead of his own slick. “Thanks.”

“Anytime,” Yixing says, the promise melting through Lu Han’s wrecked mind. “You don’t have to go home, you know. I wouldn’t mind if you slept here.”

“That might happen, because I don’t think I can move,” Lu Han says, half joking.

Yixing leans up and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. “You’re gonna have to move, since my bed is beneath these cushions. It’s a proper mattress, just folded up when I’m not using it.”

“You pull your bed out every night?” Lu Han asks incredulously. He would get tired of doing that after the first day.

“Sometimes I sleep on the sectional,” Yixing replies. He’s getting to his feet, happily skipping back to the bathroom to wash his mouth out for a second time. “It’s actually really comfortable. But since there are two of us, it’s worth making the effort to pull out the bed.”

Lu Han grunts his acknowledgment and hopes that Yixing knows he’s going to have to pry Lu Han’s dead weight off of these cushions if he wants him to move. Yixing figures that out quickly, laughing as he just transfers Lu Han to the other loveseat and gets to work setting up the bed. It’s one of those memory foam mattresses, a fold-up one, and Lu Han easily rolls onto it when Yixing guides him under the covers, which are so saturated with Yixing’s alpha scent that he almost passes out again.

“I might have to sleep here more often if it’s gonna smell like you,” Yixing whispers, and Lu Han laughs softly as he seeks out Yixing’s body heat. It’s not that cold, but Lu Han isn’t wearing any clothes and notices immediately that Yixing has shucked his as well. He curls up to Yixing’s chest and slings an arm around him, feeling out the muscles of his back without any barriers this time as Yixing holds him close.

It’s probably not even that late, but Lu Han keeps feeling himself slipping away even when Yixing kisses him again. Yixing’s breath is minty enough to perk him up again, though that’s about as far as it goes as everything within Lu Han is screaming at him to go to sleep.
Yixing laughs as he notices Lu Han’s struggle, threading fingers through his hair as he settles back to press his face into Lu Han’s neck. Lu Han’s omega instincts wake up enough to yearn for being claimed, but they quickly die down when he succumbs to his slumber, Yixing’s strong scent surrounding him.

* 

Jongin laughs for twenty straight seconds while Lu Han struggles to not commit violence against his junior. “Are you seriously asking me this?”

“I’ve never been attracted to someone like this before!” Lu Han replies defensively. “Stop being an asshole and tell me what to do.”

“I can’t,” Jongin says, grinning. He clearly takes enjoyment from being the one Lu Han goes to for mating advice, despite being four years younger. “I don’t have that problem.”

“What do you mean? We all have that problem.” Lu Han makes a face.

“I mean, Sehun is an omega too, right? We don’t get that way with each other unless we’re mating. Maybe you should be asking Kris.”

“Kris mates with Amber every time it happens,” Lu Han says with a sigh. “Yixing and I aren’t there yet.”

Jongin raises an eyebrow. “Didn’t you stop taking your suppressants? You’re gonna be there any day now, right? I can smell that you’re close.”

“It’s still a week out,” Lu Han mutters, but he can’t deny that he’s starting to feel pre-heat. “I usually don’t stop taking my pills until a few days before it’s supposed to start, though. I’ve been doing that for so long that I’ve forgotten what it was like when my heats came naturally.”

“You’re also being constantly set off by Yixing,” Jongin points out. “You may not want his knot right now, but you want him. Until you get him, your body is gonna remind you of what you’re denying it, especially if his scent is everywhere. It’s omega nature.”

Lu Han fingers the gold chain around his neck, remembering how Yixing had played with it in the morning when they’d woken up in a tangle of limbs and a pleasant mixture of pheromones. Since it was Sunday, they could laze around and enjoy each other, and they did exactly that until Lu Han had reluctantly dragged himself home and successfully repelled Kris for the entire evening by reeking of alpha.

“It won’t be as bad after your first heat with him,” Jongin says, patting Lu Han’s arm. “Which, judging by how pink your face is getting, will be sooner than later.”

“I’ve never looked forward to a heat so much in my life,” Lu Han mutters, slumping onto Jongin, who frowns and gently pushes him back up.

“You smell like alpha,” Jongin says apologetically.

Lu Han blinks. “Oh, right. Sehun would ignore you if he smelled it on you, right?”

“Are you kidding? He’d jump me.” Jongin rolls his eyes. “It’s me who doesn’t like it. Sorry.”

“It’s fine. Half the time I feel stoned around Yixing, but not in a creepy date-rape way.”
Jongin snorts. “I’m glad you found someone, Lu Han, but the longer you wait to mate with him, the more miserable you’re both gonna be.”

Junmyeon is marginally more helpful, at least as helpful as he can be as he approaches his first heat in ten years.

“Jongin’s right: it’ll go away after you mate,” his old RA tells him, somehow managing to still look authoritative while curled up in the fetal position on his couch. “That’s what your body is craving when you get slick. As humans, we want to take our time and go slow, but as wolves, we want to mate first and cuddle later. You get it?”

“I get it, but…” Lu Han trails off as he finally admits to himself the real issue he’s having. “He told me that he’ll only want to mate with me during my heats.”

Junmyeon gives him a confused face, though it his state it looks more pained. “An alpha who doesn’t want to consistently knot his omega? Was he genetically manufactured in a lab?”

“Close,” Lu Han answers, laughing despite the severity of the topic, and he launches into the whole backstory about head alpha genes and what they mean for Yixing’s instincts. “He said he’ll still want me and take care of me outside of my heats if I want him to, but he won’t actively crave me.”

“Honestly, first Tao and now this?” Junmyeon shakes his head. “You’re striking gold in the alpha department.”

“I wouldn’t exactly consider Tao striking gold,” Lu Han mutters at the memory. “He didn’t want anything to do with me after my heat ended.”

“That’s not true, and you know it.” Junmyeon’s expression turns stern. “You’re the one who made it weird with him. He would have stayed by your side forever, but you were so focused on being like all the other couples that nothing he did was good enough. You gave up on him before he could even try.”

Lu Han flinches like the words had physically slapped him in the face. “He told you that?”

Junmyeon sighs. “Lu Han, do you remember how you were in college? You hated being an omega so much that you would douse yourself in neutralizing cologne every time we went out. We thought you’d be first in line to get heat ablation surgery when it was legalized and happily live the rest of your days without a mate. Imagine our surprise when you were suddenly all fucked up over an alpha, even if he was hormonally challenged. And he adored you.”

“Then why didn’t he want to be with me?” Lu Han demands. “He had literally no interest in courting me after my heat ended. I am terrified that will happen again with Yixing.”

The truth of the admission burns Lu Han’s face as he realizes it himself, curling up in his own ball a safe distance away from Junmyeon. Lu Han can still smell him, sweet honeysuckle and cherries, but it’s not high on his discomfort list considering he’s being lectured about mistreating alphas instead of the other way around.

“Are you kidding me right now?” Junmyeon asks, staring at Lu Han in disbelief, like he’d just asked how babies are made. “That man loves you. I can smell him on you so strongly that it’s sending me into heat faster.”

Lu Han frowns. “When is Jongdae getting here?”

“After his shift at the post office,” Junmyeon answers. “I told him I’d make it until then. Apparently
his boss is so happy he’s found a mate that she gave him the next week off with no hassle. Usually betas get a hard time about taking heat leave since they’re assumed to be unable to break it.”

“And he’ll be able to break yours?” Lu Han asks carefully.

Junmyeon shrugs. “We’ll see, I guess. The downside to taking suppressants for so long is that I don’t know what my body wants. I had a knot in college and didn’t care for it very much, but then again I wasn’t in heat. We got one of those knot rings for him to wear just in case.”

Lu Han nods, his face burning as he tries not to think about Yixing’s knot that’s all natural. For the past week, he hasn’t been able to go anywhere without padding.

“You know what I think your problem is?” Junmyeon asks, volunteering his unsolicited opinion just like any other time. This might have been why Lu Han came to him. “You’re focusing too much on the mating part of a courtship. Heats and ruts are a natural part of life to those who experience them, yes, but there’s a whole other world of companionship and developing an emotional connection that you’re ignoring in favor of the raw carnal desire. You’re only attracted to alphas with lower libidos, yet you feel inadequate when they don’t want to knot you because that’s the only way you’ve ever known alpha attention.”

It sounds very intro psych, but it makes sense. Lu Han’s definitely aware of his internal conflict regarding alphas—cognitive dissonance, to pull another psych term out of his memory—but he didn’t think he was projecting his lifelong fears into expectations until right now. He thinks Yixing should want to mate with him every time they meet because that’s how most of his experiences with alphas have gone. He thought Tao should want to keep mating with him after his heat broke, because that’s what he’d been told that his role was as an omega.

“I need fresh air,” he says suddenly, the combination of Yixing’s mark and Junmyeon’s impending heat clouding his head too much to think. “Thanks, Myeon. Good luck with your heat.”

“I am definitely not doing this every month,” Junmyeon mutters. “I like Jongdae’s dick just fine when I’m not burning alive.”

Lu Han leaves the other omega to his fate as he considers the possibility of heats being fazed out through evolution, much like the wolf appearance and packs had been. Heats were really only necessary to conceive, and now that they are human beings whose lives are more complex than hunting for food and breeding, it is nothing more than an inconvenience. Hopefully, future generations of omegas would only have a few days of heat, the intensity turned down considerably so that they could still function and control themselves. Then they wouldn’t be so dependent on knots or whatever it took to break their heats, and courtships could be built based on mutual affection and adoration instead of hormonal attraction.

If only.

It’s getting colder outside, which only serves to make Lu Han want to be around Yixing even more. He’d thought he was capable of separating his feelings from his hormones, but Junmyeon’s lecture had left him unsure. He didn’t think it was entirely his omega instincts that wanted to be close to Yixing, to have Yixing claim him and mate with him, but he’s spent so long resenting that part of himself that any type of submissive urges were automatically attributed to those instincts. Lu Han the reluctant omega doesn’t want anyone to claim him. Lu Han the internalized bigot believes in the status order where omegas are at the very bottom, only existing as fucktoys and breeding machines—not because he supports that mentality, but because that’s all he’s ever known.

Lu Han the human omega male who is doused in (head) alpha pheromones walks down the street
without conflict, other alphas and betas practically diving out of the way to let him pass. Along with subdued heats, he dreams of a world where unmarked omegas can commute freely, perhaps sniffed out but not threatened by domination. He recalls the many campaigns and protests he’d participated in back in college (led by Kris, naturally) and how they’d really only served to change campus regulations, but that’s all they wanted at the time. There were certainly enough omegas around to overthrow the status order, assuming they would want to make the effort to try.

“I think you should run for city council,” Lu Han greets Yixing, having run all the way to the store to share his idea before he could dismiss it for being impossible. “I know you don’t think you’re qualified for politics, but you gotta start somewhere, right? You look great on paper—MBA, business owner, historically documented omega rights activist. You can push your alpha suppressant campaign so that even if you don’t win, it will plant the idea in everyone’s mind.”

Yixing stares at him, along with the nearby employees and customers. Lu Han doesn’t bother to scent them out, uncaring what their statuses are, because he’s had an epiphany that encompasses everything that he and Yixing have both worked hard for their entire lives. If that’s not an emotional connection, he doesn’t know what is.

“Okay,” Yixing says, dimple flashing as he grins. “I’ll run.”

“You’ve got my vote, son!” an elderly woman calls out, followed by several other spectators voicing their agreement. Lu Han feels the strong alpha pheromones dispersing throughout the room, as he’s sure everyone else does, but they’re not the kind that invoke hormonal reactions. They’re the same as Lu Han had felt the first day they met, when Yixing was protecting him from another alpha, and all at once Lu Han understands what Yixing had meant when he had tried to explain his head alpha urge to lead.

“I’ll help you,” Lu Han offers, struggling to focus through the mixture of Yixing’s scent and his own excitement. “My background is in business. Kris is sociology. We’re the ideal campaign team.”

Yixing shakes his head, but it’s more in disbelief than protest. “You’re hired.”

Lu Han hugs him right there in the middle of the store, pressing up against Yixing’s apron that’s probably covered in raw meat juice, and he’s confident it has only has a little bit to do with his omega instincts drawing him in. Even if nothing changes, the fact that Yixing is willing to try is enough to have Lu Han swooning on an intellectual level. Already, he’s so proud of his alpha.

He smells Yixing’s determination, uplifting instead of threatening. It’s still territorial but in a comforting way. Yixing’s scent invites others to trust him, assures that he will take care of them. As a leader should.

Lu Han pulls back enough to regard Yixing’s shocked face, like he has no idea what’s happening to him or how influential he is. He grabs both of Yixing’s arms in his hands and gives him a firm shake, speaking the words the air around them is screaming.

“You were born to do this.”

Recognition flashes in Yixing’s eyes and his face hardens, his posture straightening to his and Lu Han’s full height. “I was.”

The crowd gathered around them applauds, and Yixing has the decency to blush, unaccustomed to all of the attention and support. His employees are already offering to set up information booths outside the store, and a group of retired betas enlist their services to make pamphlets and spread the word.
“Better get used to it, City Councilperson Zhang,” Lu Han teases.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself,” Yixing says, but he’s grinning, his alpha instincts visibly preening.

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Lu Han’s so involved in Yixing’s campaign that he forgets all about heats and mating.

“The elections are this spring, but we can still get Yixing’s name on the ballot if we get enough signatures,” he addresses his team, falling right into his self-appointed position as campaign advisor.

When Amber raises her hand and waits to be acknowledged, Lu Han sees a future where omegas can run meetings without being interrupted or overruled. It looks beautiful.

“You can speak freely, Amber. It’s just us.”

“Hey, I’ve never been on a campaign committee before. I don’t know the etiquette.” Amber shrugs. “I wanted to offer a few obstacles we might face.”

“Okay, downer,” Sehun teases, and Amber flicks him in the ear without turning.

“No, that’s actually a good idea,” Lu Han tells them, uncapping a dry-erase marker to write on the whiteboard he’d set up in his and Kris’ living room. “You should always consider threats and weaknesses when embarking on a new venture, planning for them early so that you’re prepared when they appear.”

“When did he become Professor Lu?” Jongin whispers loudly, but Junmyeon grins proudly with a pen perched over a notepad, their self-appointed secretary. Next to him, the newly introduced Jongdae looks right at home with the unconventionally mixed status group, unbothered by the array of new scents that surround him.

“Econ major,” Kris hisses pointedly. “He was lecturing me on supply and demand when we were twelve.”

Lu Han ignores them. “Hit me, Amber.”

“Okay, so we all know Yixing is awesome,” she starts. “But to everyone else, he’s just another alpha male running for office. What makes him different? What is he going to do for minority statuses?”

“Good questions,” Lu Han replies, marker squeaking as he writes them on the board in mind map format. “When it comes to politics, voters take on a ‘what’s in it for me?’ mentality. If the foundation of Yixing’s campaign is going to be status equality, he’ll need more than just alpha suppressants to appeal to all statuses. Since all statuses are represented here, let’s hear some more platforms.”

“Hormone suppressants for alpha women,” Taeyeon calls out, Baekhyun curled around her like a human octopus. Apparently they are on-again. “We have wombs, but we can’t use them.”

“Some women have wombs,” Amber corrects her. “But I second this.”

“That will appeal to the family market for sure.” Lu Han adds it to the list. “More!”

“Omega enrichment programs in schools,” Jongin suggests. “Accurate status education without alpha-washing history.”

“Good, good.” Lu Han turns to Kyungsoo and Jongdae. “And from the resident betas who aren’t under a spell?”
Baekhyun pays him no mind.

“Just more acceptance,” Jongdae says, squeezing Junmyeon’s shoulders. “That’s all anyone really wants these days, isn’t it?”

“Definitely,” Lu Han agrees. “Kyungsoo?”

Kyungsoo cowers under everyone’s eyes. “Medical advancement for all status hormones. Alpha suppressants are certainly beneficial for everyone, but there are undoubtedly more discoveries to be made by studying betas and omegas too. Also, on a personal note, I’d like to see betas given more of a functional role in society. There are a lot of issues with alpha and omega rankings, and those absolutely need to be addressed, but we seem to exist without any real purpose, and it feels very…”

“Worthless,” Baekhyun supplies, speaking into Taeyeon’s hair.

“Worthless,” Kyungsoo agrees. “Long gone are the wolf days where betas were needed to neutralize the overdominant alphas and submissive omegas. In fact, the more we suppress your hormones, the less there is for us to do. Please find a place for us in your world.”

“That’s the saddest thing I’ve ever heard,” Sehun says, turning toward Kyungsoo with a frown. “Let me hug you.”

“No, really, that’s o—” Kyungsoo starts, but the rest of his protest is muffled as he’s swept up into Sehun’s arms.

Jongin cackles because this is his life.

Lu Han turns to Chanyeol and Minseok. “How about you two? Just because you’re alpha males doesn’t invalidate your suggestions.”

Minseok looks up at Chanyeol, squeezing his hand before regarding Lu Han solemnly. “Adoption options for those of us who can’t reproduce naturally.”

Kris spins his head around to face them. “You two want kids?”

“I’ve always wanted kids,” Chanyeol speaks up, looking serious for one of the first times in Lu Han’s memory. “That’s why I tried courting an omega.” He sighs. “I’m sorry, Kris.”

“It’s okay,” Kris says gently. He always did care about Chanyeol, even if they didn’t work out as mates. “I hope Yixing can help make that happen.”

“I would have a baby for you,” Sehun offers brightly. “I love the thought of being pregnant. I’m just not ready to be a mother yet.”

Jongin rolls his eyes. His life.

“That’s the only way it can be done now, and it’s all on the honor system,” Minseok explains. “The adoptive parents don’t have any legal claim to the child until they’re born and the surrogate signs over guardianship. Eight times out of ten, the omega becomes attached to the child and decides to keep them.”

Sehun frowns. “I don’t think that would happen with me, but I see why you’re apprehensive.”

Kyungsoo clears his throat. “They’re currently researching alternate methods of in vitro fertilization at the hospital, where multiple sperm can be fused with manufactured omega genes to form a fetus
which is then implanted into the womb of a—well, I guess that only applies to people with wombs. I’m sorry.”

“No, that’s helpful,” Minseok tells him, and Kyungsoo’s face lights up. “With a surrogate, we would only have one of our genes combined with the omega’s, but what you’re saying sounds like it would be Chanyeol’s and mine together, placed into a host womb?”

“Something like that, yes,” Kyungsoo answers. “The recent legislation legalizing same-status unions led to more funding for artificial procreation research. They haven’t studied how the lack of ‘genuine’ omega genes will affect the babies, but it can’t be any different than when alphas breed with beta females.”

Chanyeol’s grin returns as he and Minseok look considerably happier and more hopeful. Lu Han feels a warm ache in his heart at how his and Yixing’s friends are bonding together to formulate Yixing’s candidacy, brainstorming platforms that will not only benefit themselves but most of humankind. It’s so touching that Lu Han needs to sit down, feeling dizzy from the unconditional support and dedication of his team, which affects him more than he’d expect considering he’s nowhere close to his—oh, no.

“Lu Han?” Amber notices first, picking up on his scent like she always does. “Are you okay?”

Her voice sounds so far away, and Lu Han struggles to focus, seeing blurred versions of people moving across from him. The warmth isn’t just in his heart anymore, spreading throughout his entire body like a persistent fever. He brings a shaky hand to his forehead and feels the burn for himself, cursing the timing under his breath.

“He’s going into heat,” Junmyeon announces, and Kris gasps. “Alphas and betas clear out. All of you.”

“I’ll get Yixing,” Taeyeon offers, heading for the door with Baekhyun clinging to her back. Minseok has to drag away Chanyeol, who lingers out of concern for Lu Han’s health more than any primal attraction. Amber presses a kiss to Kris’ forehead and follows. Jongdae echoes her with Junmyeon, and Kyungsoo stares at Lu Han in pure scientific fascination until both Kris and Jongin shove him out into the hallway, leaving only the five omegas gathered in the room.

“You moron,” Kris says affectionately as he wipes the sweat that has taken over Lu Han’s face. “You usually feel this coming.”

“I was distracted,” Lu Han mumbles, leaning into Kris’ touch. “It’s so hot.”

“I know,” Kris soothes him. “Yixing will be here soon. He made arrangements to have someone cover him all week so he’d be able to leave when it hit.”

“He’s so great,” Lu Han whines, grinning despite his discomfort. “I’m so lucky to have met him.”

“You are, you big idiot.” Kris pets his hair, and to his credit he doesn’t comment on how gross it is.

“I got some cold compresses from the freezer,” Jongin’s voice sounds from behind him. “Should we take him to his room?”

“That’s probably a good idea,” Junmyeon answers. “He’s been gushing since he and Yixing started courting.”

“You don’t have to tell everyone that,” Lu Han mutters, but he can’t even feel embarrassed around this group. He’s seen every single one of them through their heats at least once, save for Junmyeon,
but Junmyeon was always the one who took care of them in college.

Sehun picks Lu Han up effortlessly, and Jongin applies the compresses the minute he’s laid down in his own bed. The icy feeling helps, along with the cold water Junmyeon pours down his throat, followed by with a handful of pills.

“You’re gonna be okay,” Sehun says, offering his arm for Lu Han to cling to. “You’re gonna get a knot this time.”

Lu Han moans, thrashing from side to side as the thought of Yixing breaking his heat overwhelms him. Already, he’s soaked through his pants. Kris helps peel them off of him while Junmyeon covers him with a blanket for some sense of modesty.

“You smell different this time,” Jongin comments. “Are we supposed to smell different after mating?”

“They haven’t mated yet,” Junmyeon answers. “Yixing has some kind of potent head alpha scent that permanently marks him. I don’t think anyone else could approach him if they wanted to.”

“It doesn’t bother me,” Sehun says dismissively, then raises his voice for Lu Han’s benefit. “Lu Han, do you want me to stay with you until Yixing gets here?”

Lu Han nods, curling toward him for the contact. He can barely smell Sehun’s faint mocha scent over himself, which isn’t as nauseating now that his scent is mixed with Yixing’s. Sehun’s touch is gentle as he pushes Lu Han’s damp hair out of his face, holding the cold compresses in place while Lu Han rubs against his sheets for any kind of relief.

“Don’t help him,” Jongin warns. “You’re already gonna need three showers when we get home.”

“I’m not gonna help him, Jongin,” Sehun hisses with the air of someone who has this argument a lot. “I certainly don’t want to ignite the wrath of a head alpha.”

“He’s a puppy, really,” Lu Han mumbles. “He wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

“Unless that fly hurt you first,” Kris comments, the humor in his voice evident even through Lu Han’s clouded mind. “Then he would disintegrate that fly and terrify every other fly in the world from getting remotely close to you.”

Lu Han laughs. “You’re ridiculous.”

“Flies would cross the street when they see you appear,” Kris goes on. “Warn the other insects of your power and keep them away too. All of the bugs would disappear from the planet because one fly dared to mess with you.”

“And we would all die, because there would be no bees to pollinate the flowers,” Sehun adds. “Spare the bees, Lu Han. Tell Yixing to grant amnesty to the bees!”

“I will,” Lu Han promises. “You are both so dumb.”

“But you love us,” Kris says, and Lu Han snorts noncommittally. “Okay guys, let’s leave him be. Amber won’t touch me if I smell like Yixing.”

Lu Han blindly reaches for Kris and grabs onto one of his giant fingers like a newborn baby. “Meant to do this at his place,” Lu Han gets out. “Amber’s territory is threatened.”
“Nah, she doesn’t care about that,” Kris says, squeezing Lu Han’s hand as his weight lifts off of the bed. “Yixing’s scent isn’t challenging to her. She just doesn’t want it on me.”

“Relax, Lulu,” Junmyeon whispers, using the silly nickname they’d all called him in college. “Relief will be here soon.”

“Baekhyun called Chanyeol who just texted me that Yixing’s on his way,” Jongin reports. “Let’s go, Sehun. He’ll make it five minutes alone.”

Lu Han reluctantly lets go of his human anchor, and offers a weak wave as the omegas start to pile out of his bedroom. “Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it,” Sehun says before he presses a kiss to Lu Han’s forehead. “It’s the Oh Code!”

Jongin grabs him by his arm to drag him out of Lu Han’s bed. “That was not funny two years ago, and it’s not funny now.”

“It’s hilarious!” Sehun’s still arguing when the door closes behind them, and all Lu Han can hear is the pounding of his own heart. His friends had done a good job of distracting him, but now that he’s alone, all he wants is release.

His cock twitches for friction, his body throbbing for a knot. Soon, he promises it. For the first time in three years, Lu Han’s going to have help breaking his heat.

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The front door opens, and Lu Han smells Yixing right away. The scent only gets stronger and more alluring as Yixing heads toward his room, knowing the way by following his nose. Lu Han’s legs fall open, his body shuddering with the force of his want, slick coating his thighs and most of his sheets.

“I swear I could smell you from the street,” Yixing hisses as he crawls right into Lu Han’s bed, flinging off his clothes with practiced ease. “You probably sent the entire building into rut.”

“Yixing,” Lu Han breathes, reaching for him with shaky arms that get caught in the blanket. “Alpha.”

“I’m here.” Yixing flings the blanket aside to press their bodies together, skin to skin. “I’ll take care of you now.”

Lu Han opens his mouth to ask, beg, plead, but his attempts of speaking are thwarted by Yixing’s mouth crashing down onto his. Lu Han doesn’t have enough coordination to kiss properly, but Yixing takes full control. Lu Han falls pliant beneath him, thighs spreading invitingly as Yixing’s hands slide up them both.

He doesn’t tease, pushing two fingers past Lu Han’s rim that offers no protest. Lu Han’s body comes to life, hips snapping to push back on those fingers that are quickly joined by a third. Yixing’s other hand wraps around Lu Han’s cock and tugs, sending him into a frenzy of moans that don’t stop even after he comes, still hard and desperate for a knot—Yixing’s knot.

“Yixing,” Lu Han says again, breathing deeply when Yixing abandons his mouth to kiss down his throat. “Knot me, please. I need you”

“Yeah,” Yixing replies, jerking like his own blinding lust is electrocuting him. “Yeah, I will.”
Lu Han moans even louder as Yixing settles between his legs, his fully hard cock protruding from his body with just the base of his knot formed. Lu Han wants to touch it, but he probably can’t lift his arm on his own right now, and besides, it will be inside him soon enough.

“Did you take a contraceptive?” Yixing asks, and Lu Han nods. At least, he’s confident that was a part of the cocktail of pills Junmyeon had given him. “I brought condoms in case you want me to wear one.”

Lu Han shakes his head so forcefully that Yixing laughs, leaning down to kiss him again as he presses the crown of his cock against Lu Han’s rim. Lu Han gasps, hands flying to Yixing’s back to hold onto him as he pushes in, filling Lu Han in one thrust and pulling a melody of high-pitched whines from Lu Han’s lungs.

“You okay?” Yixing asks, and Lu Han nods again. “You feel so good, Lu Han. I've managed to hold back this far, but I’m gonna rut into you now, okay?”

“Please,” Lu Han gets out, and the only thing he knows after that is Yixing and pleasure. Yixing ruts unapologetically hard and fast, growling into Lu Han’s neck. Lu Han wishes he would just bite him already. Yixing hits him in just the right spot and he comes again, arching as his cock spurts aimlessly between them, making Yixing rut even harder to push through the added resistance of Lu Han’s body.

“You ready for my knot?” Yixing growls against his skin, low and rushed and enough to get Lu Han off a third time. “I’m ready to give it to you.”

“Yes, yes,” Lu Han says, spreading his legs even wider, baring himself for his alpha. “Knot me, Yixing.”

Yixing’s thrusts become particularly rough, pushing the beginning of his knot past Lu Han’s rim. It’s not that much, but Lu Han knows it’s going to get bigger, yearns for it to fill him and lock them together as Yixing falls apart on top of him. As it is, Yixing’s clinging to him with both arms, his sweat mixing with Lu Han’s and driving them both crazy. Lu Han can’t breathe in anything but alpha, specifically Yixing, his heat subdued with Yixing hard inside him, knotting him so perfectly. The growls drop to his collarbone as Yixing angles his body flat against Lu Han’s ass, pushing all of his knot inside before it catches. Lu Han chokes on his air, the rest of his breathing audible and laced with moans as Yixing’s knot continues to grow, filling him beyond capacity while Yixing himself starts to tremble. He’s still rutting despite being unable to move in and out, his scent practically solidifying as he gets close.

“Lu Han,” Yixing gasps out, and Lu Han feels the release inside him, contained by the knot that continues to stimulate Lu Han. “Ah, I’m not done.”

“Good,” Lu Han tells him, a little more in control of himself now that he’s gotten his knot. The extremity of his heat has subsided for now, but he still enjoys the feeling of Yixing inside him and is happy to stay like this as long as it lasts. Yixing is still rutting, but it’s not as desperate. Another orgasm sneaks up on Lu Han as the combination of Yixing’s noises and scent pushes him over the edge again.

“You looks so good when you come,” Yixing says, voice like sin, and Lu Han preens beneath him. “You look so good taking my knot. You are by far the hottest person I’ve ever been with through a heat, in both meanings of the word. How are you feeling?”

“I feel okay now,” Lu Han answers, grinning under Yixing’s caring eyes. “I’m still hot, but it’s not
nearly as bad.”

“It’ll flare up again,” Yixing says. “Heats don’t always break right away, but that’s okay because then I get to keep knotting you. If you want.”

“I want,” Lu Han assures him, and Yixing’s mouth returns to his, fusing them together as he ruts out a second wave of come. Lu Han feels so full, very aware of the fluid secured inside him, rolling his hips to rub his inner walls against Yixing’s knot until he comes one last time, barely anything joining the mess already on his belly.

“Finished?” Yixing asks, and Lu Han nods. “We’re gonna be stuck like this for a while. I haven’t knotted since grad school.”

“Take as long as you need,” Lu Han says, wrapping his legs around Yixing’s waist in an attempt to alleviate some of the strain, and Yixing’s hands lower to massage Lu Han’s thighs. It feels incredibly nice and intimate despite Yixing’s knot locking them together.

“Did something set you off?” Yixing asks. “When I talked to you this morning, you still felt that it was a few days away.”

“I think…” Lu Han trails off, smiling as he remembers the meeting. “We were brainstorming for your campaign, and I was thinking about everyone was bonding together to help you change the world. I guess I have a leader kink.”

“We really are made for each other,” Yixing says, and Lu Han’s smile gets bigger as he lifts his arms to loop around Yixing’s shoulders. “Any good ideas? Or should we wait until my knot shrinks to discuss politics?”

Lu Han laughs. “It might just bring on the next wave.”

“In that case, we better discuss it now.” Yixing’s dimple looks out of place in the midst of their sweaty limbs and harsh breathing, but so is this conversation. Yixing listens intently as Lu Han relays their friends’ suggestions, pouting adorably when he hears about Chanyeol’s desire for a child and Kyungsoo feeling like he doesn’t belong.

Lu Han had already filled Yixing in on the cut-off dates and candidacy requirements, collecting the paperwork he needs to fill out and listing the steps they should take from now until the election. He goes over it again now, the organization pleasing his scattered mind, and when he stops to solicit Yixing’s input, the alpha is curled up on top of him, snoozing lightly on his collarbone.

A wiggle of his hips determines that they’re still stuck together, but Yixing is so cute while he’s sleeping that Lu Han can’t be annoyed. He strokes Yixing’s hair and holds him tight, kissing his forehead like Yixing is the one going through heat and Lu Han’s taking care of him. Yixing’s body is covered in a thin layer of sweat and Lu Han draws in it, tracing patterns all over his back to entertain himself until he can move. He doesn’t remember Tao’s knot holding up this long, but then again Tao was different. He recalls his conversation with Junmyeon and feels a sting of guilt, making a mental note to contact Tao when he’s not lying naked with his mate. The past may be the past, but if Lu Han is responsible for causing his old junior any pain, it’s only right that he apologizes.

Finally, he can lift himself off of Yixing’s knot and falls still at the come that spills out of him. A shower is definitely in his future, but for now he slips out from beneath Yixing and chugs the gallon jug of water his fellow omegas had left him. Heats are incredibly dehydrating, and Lu Han is still so hot that he can feel the water make its way down to his stomach and disperse through his limbs, the sudden chill making him sigh in relief.
“Ah,” Yixing gasps from the bed, and Lu Han turns to find the alpha stretching on his stomach, unbothered by the mess they’ve made of Lu Han’s sheets. “I fell asleep on the job.”

“You worked too hard,” Lu Han teases. “Want some water?”

“Yeah,” Yixing answers, dragging himself to the edge of the bed where Lu Han is. “You drank some?”

Lu Han nods. “Gotta stay hydrated! Junmyeon practically ran a hose into our dorm rooms in college. One omega dies of heat exhaustion ten years ago, and suddenly everyone’s paranoid and gulping water like air.”

“I remember when that happened,” Yixing says, accepting the jug and draining the rest of it in one gulp. “I’ll fill this up again before the next round.”

“You may want to do that soon,” Lu Han warns, the familiar heat slowly spreading through his chest again.

Yixing’s eyes widen. “Already? How long was I asleep?”

“Maybe ten minutes?” Lu Han guesses. He shrugs. “The sooner it breaks, the sooner it’s over, right?”

“Lu Han, I am prepared to knot you all night,” Yixing says firmly. “I’ve worked out every day this week, taken all kinds of alpha enrichment vitamins, and ate healthier than I ever have in my life. If your heat breaks within an hour, I will be severely disappointed.”

Lu Han bursts out laughing at the serious expression on Yixing’s face, leaning forward to kiss it away. “Better go get that water, City Councilperson Zhang. Wouldn’t want your omega to pass out under your care again.”

“That hardly counts,” Yixing scoffs, pulling him close for a mind-blowing kiss that jump-starts his heat all over again. “Be right back!”

Lu Han whines, reaching after him until he loses his balance and falls onto his stomach, his legs folding under himself. That’s how Yixing finds him, his eyes darkening as he sees Lu Han’s ass in the air for his taking. He barely puts down the jug before he’s kneeling behind him, hands gripping onto his hips roughly enough for Lu Han to whine, the need flooding him even more.

“Shall I take you like this?” Yixing asks, and Lu Han nods as much as he can with his face pressed into the covers. He makes it until Yixing pushes inside him before craning his head to the side, gasping for air and moaning at the angle from which Yixing thrusts.

Then Yixing stops, making Lu Han whine again until he’s gently urged up and placed atop a couple of his pillows. This is much more comfortable, his chin hanging off the edge as Yixing rocks into him, the low groans and growls pressed into his spine. Yixing lasts longer this time, knotting him again after a good while of hard rutting, and splays out over his back to move with their bodies pressed flush together. Even though Lu Han is turned away from him, it feels more intimate than when they were face to face, Yixing’s arm wrapped around Lu Han’s waist to jerk him off in time with his rhythm.

They come together, Lu Han’s fingers digging into the bed while Yixing’s dig into Lu Han’s hips. Lu Han bites the pillow as Yixing keeps going, not for his own benefit but for Lu Han’s, the friction of his thick knot getting Lu Han off harder each time.
“Stretch your legs out,” Yixing whispers when they finally fall still, and he actually has to help Lu Han with this task since his limbs feel like jello. “This position is not kind to your knees.”

“It’s so good, though,” Lu Han says through a harsh exhale of air. “That was so good.”

Yixing hugs him from behind. “I’m glad you think so. Still feel hot?”

“I think I’m okay for now.” Lu Han grimaces at the hair that sticks to his face. “I really need a shower.”

“We can do that,” Yixing says. “Is your bathtub big enough for two?”

“We can make it big enough,” Lu Han replies, and Yixing kisses the top of his spine. “Why won’t you claim me?”

Yixing settles on Lu Han’s back, tracing the right side of his neck where his teeth would go. “Do you want me to?”

“Yes,” Lu Han hisses, the word coming out far too angry for an omega in hour three of his heat. “I want to be yours. Officially.”

Yixing hums thoughtfully, the continued touches of his neck keeping Lu Han calm. “I suppose I should be mated before the election, since mated alphas are trusted more. Is it okay to wait until after your heat, though? I want you to be in your right mind for it.”

“I’m fine now, but I can wait.” Lu Han stretches out beneath Yixing as much as he can with a knot lodged inside him. “Won’t that go against the whole no sex outside of heat thing?”

“Claiming isn’t inherently sexual,” Yixing tells him. “That’s part of why I want to do it later. It’s true that many alphas claim while mating, but it’s a separate feeling for me.”

Lu Han makes a noncommittal noise, and Yixing strokes his hair.

“Don’t worry, Lu Han. I definitely want to claim you. Just not tonight, or even right after your heat breaks. I want you to be mine too, more than anything. I’ve wanted you since I first saw you stand up to that alpha in my store, but I didn’t want to be just as bad as him by approaching you first.”

Grinning into his pillow, Lu Han snuggles back into Yixing’s embrace, the heat that envelops him nothing but pleasant. “I’ve always known you were safe. Your scent is not threatening to me. Whenever you’re around, even if it’s just your marking, I feel like nothing can hurt me.”

Yixing holds him tighter, saying nothing as they fall into a comfortable silence. Even after his knot shrinks, they just roll to the side and lie together, Yixing absently stroking Lu Han’s skin with his knuckles. If it wasn’t for that motion, Lu Han would think he’d fallen asleep again, but Lu Han is the one to drift off this time, succumbing to his exhaustion and Yixing’s rhythmic touches. He dreams of Yixing playing his body like the keyboard in his apartment, strumming chords on his ribs and writing lyrics on his arm. It feels incredibly romantic and he wakes up pressed so close to Yixing, breathing in his scent over air until his heat takes him over once again.

Overall, it takes two days for Lu Han’s heat to break, but most of that time is spent knotted together and talking, temporarily sated. Yixing bathes them both more than once, washing Lu Han’s hair and carefully cleaning him until he doesn’t feel like a disgusting mess of hormones, and Lu Han returns the favor as his strength slowly returns. By the last round, Lu Han’s steadily on top, riding Yixing’s knot even after Yixing is spent. Yixing’s hooded eyes watches him intently as he gets himself off two more times before collapsing on top of his alpha, completely limp.
“That’s it,” he breathes, his temperature returning to normal as he sweats out the last of his heat. “It’s over.”

“How do you feel?” Yixing asks, forever concerned about Lu Han’s comfort over his own. Despite his preparations, he’s clearly worn out, looking like he could sleep for the whole rest of the day while Lu Han airs out his room.

“Great,” Lu Han answers, his body protesting when he tries to move and winces. “A little sore, but I’ll take that over the misery of being alone.”

“That was all you,” Yixing says with a laugh, teasing. “I’ve never had an omega mount me so confidently like that. It was fucking hot.”

Lu Han grins as he leans up on his elbows, dropping a kiss to Yixing’s lips. The urgency to mate is gone, but it still feels nice, especially when Yixing responds gently instead of devouring him like before. He manages to push himself up enough to roll over, but Yixing’s hands on his hips hold him steady.

“I know you feel gross, but give me a couple more minutes,” Yixing says, and Lu Han can’t do anything but obey as he settles back on top of his alpha. It’s worth his while as Yixing’s hands move up and down his body, massaging his strained muscles and finding tense spots Lu Han’s probably had for years. Yixing is slow and thorough, leaving Lu Han incredibly seduced in a way that isn’t inherently sexual. It’s so intimate, leading Lu Han to loop his arms around Yixing’s shoulders and press his face into Yixing’s neck, and right now, everything is perfect.

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He notices the change immediately, no longer needing to pad himself before he meets up with Yixing. The alpha scent is still attractive and pleasant, but it doesn’t arouse him anymore. Lu Han supposes it never did, just ignited his omega reaction to mate. According to Junmyeon and the omegas in their support group who have mated with alphas, this is normal. Lu Han hadn’t needed to worry about Yixing’s disinterest in mating with him outside of his heats, because Lu Han doesn’t want it either.

Now that he’s not overcome by his instincts, he buries himself in campaign preparations and drives all of their friends crazy with his planning. If Kris wasn’t so on board himself, he would have thrown Lu Han out the window by now, but instead he’s making phone calls and recruiting volunteers because he’s infinitely better with people than Lu Han. For the first month after they get Yixing’s name on the ballot, the alpha doesn’t have to do anything except smile for pictures and sign off on promotional material.

“You’re already at thirteen percent without even speaking,” Lu Han reports as he obsessively refreshes the website. “That is unheard of for a late candidate before the first ad war. This community must adore you.”

“Ad war?” Yixing repeats. “What’s that?”

“It’s where the candidates dig up each other’s dirty laundry and bash each other publicly in order to make themselves look better,” Taeyeon explains. She’d been appointed to lead the advertising team because of her background in marketing, a whole department of which Lu Han had been surprised to learn she actually supervises for a living. Sometimes he forgets that she’s the oldest out of them all and has more experience than he does, because she doesn’t flaunt her success around like many alphas do.
Yixing frowns. “I don’t like that. Do we have to do that?”

“We don’t have to do anything,” Lu Han says, giving in to the pull that has him supporting his alpha with a pat on the arm. “This is your campaign. But if you have anything that they might try to use against you, you should tell us now so we can prepare to rebut it.”

“Just, you know, my past with omegas.” Yixing shrugs. “I had quite a few brawls in undergrad, but they never went on record because it was always out of defense for others.”

“You’d be hard-pressed these days to find an alpha who hasn’t fought before,” Amber points out. “Even I have a criminal record for assault. Bitch deserved it.”

Kris looks proud, and Lu Han rolls his eyes. “Yixing is an angel compared to the other candidates,” Lu Han says. “Still, if you think of anything even remotely incriminating, let us know, okay?”

“Sure thing.” Yixing grins. “You’re really good at this.”

Lu Han beams under the praise, ignoring Jongin’s mocking shoves from next to him. “Four years of econ makes me think in terms of market prediction. It’s just how I operate.”

“I’m grateful to have you running my campaign,” Yixing tells him, giving him a fair amount of undivided attention before turning to address the others. “All of you, thank you so much for your time and dedication. I will make it up to you as soon as I figure out a way.”

“You can make it up to us by winning!” Sehun exclaims, then seems to realize the pressure of his statement. “Or, you know, a barbecue is okay too.”

Both Lu Han and Jongin rough him up a little at the careless comment, but Yixing doesn’t seem to be bothered by it. “I’ll do my best,” he says, and Lu Han’s positive that he’s not the only one who believes him unconditionally.

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Monthly heats are inconvenient when one is busy with campaigning; even Kris goes on suppressants as the propaganda starts to fly from all sides. Yixing’s competition (or more likely, their advertising teams) seem to be frustrated that they can’t discredit him on anything other than his omega count and unmated status, which anyone with a brain can see are irrelevant to the job. They didn’t even have to explain why he was unmated, because most of the community knew him and could vouch for his domesticated demeanor even without claiming a mate. It was looking like Yixing’s reputation may win him this election all on its own.

If anyone wants an explanation as to why Yixing is unmated, it’s Lu Han. It’s not for lack of trying, but there never seems to be a good time. Lu Han keeps telling him it’s only a bite, it will take five minutes tops, but Yixing is still reluctant to do it, despite his agreement during Lu Han’s heat. Lu Han tries not to compare this to election, how Yixing’s word isn’t as strong as everyone thinks it is, but this is about the two of them, not the whole community. A head alpha would never renege on a promise to his pack even at the expense of his mate.

It’s been almost a year since Lu Han had first collapsed into Yixing’s arms at the store, and he’s already changed so much. He turned up his nose at omegas who behaved this way in the past, then went and did the exact same thing. He only feels guilty about it when Yixing’s not around, when that familiar gust of leather and fresh rain isn’t there to calm him, despite being marked for days at a time. Lu Han hasn’t had so much of a smirk from anyone since the minute he put on Yixing’s necklace, still not accustomed to being respected on the street. He hopes he never is, because then he might
forget what he’s fighting for, the privilege he only has because he has an alpha. Regardless of how nice and caring Yixing is, it’s his marking that keeps away unwanted attention, not any recognition of Lu Han’s agency as a person.

He thinks that’s part of what’s discouraging Yixing from claiming him, because deep down, Lu Han believes he shouldn’t have to be claimed. His instincts want to be protected for life, but that’s it. As an omega, Lu Han’s emotions are transparent to anyone who smells him, and as Yixing’s omega, he doesn’t even have to speak to tell his alpha how he feels. Yixing probably sensed his apprehension before Lu Han did. In fact, if Lu Han’s heat-infested memory serves him right, Yixing had said that he wanted to claim Lu Han, not that he was going to. A carefully planned sequence of words from a budding politician.

“Can we talk?” Yixing asks after a long shift at Lu Han’s actual paying job which doesn’t leave him much down time to check interest polls. Yixing was already in his room when he got home, likely let in by Kris without a thought, and Lu Han braces himself for the conversation he’s not sure he wants to have.

“Yeah,” Lu Han answers as he changes out of his work clothes into something more comfortable. If Yixing is affected by the sudden striptease, it doesn’t show on his face. “Of course.”

“One of my customers approached me today and told me his mate works on one of the other candidates’ campaign,” Yixing starts, and Lu Han abruptly shifts gears because this is actually about the election and not their courtship. “I don’t know if this is illegal insider trading or anything, so I wanted to tell you alone—”

“It’s a city council election, not the stock market,” Lu Han jokes, plopping down cross-legged on his bed next to a rigidly seated Yixing. “Chanyeol and Baekhyun are sniffing out the others’ platforms as we speak.”

“Also, it has to do with you,” Yixing adds, like Lu Han hadn’t said anything, and Lu Han frowns at being blatantly ignored. “Because we haven’t claimed each other officially, it’s not common knowledge that you’re my mate, at least until the ads start running next week.”

“What ads?” Lu Han asks. “What could they possibly find out about me that affects you?”

Yixing is quiet for entirely too long, and it occurs to Lu Han that he can’t smell Yixing at all. Whatever apprehension he has about this information has blocked his scent projection. He must actually be upset.

“They say you’re an omega hater,” Yixing finally speaks, the accusation shocking Lu Han into silence. “They say you’ve always publicly denounced your status, speaking out at college rallies about suppressing omega instincts and promoting heat ablations. Several of your classmates submitted video evidence, and I’ve been looping them all day. It’s like I don’t even know you, Lu Han.”

Lu Han’s attention perks at the shift from business to personal, recognizing the disappointment in Yixing’s eyes. “That’s…that’s mostly true, but not the omega hater part. I never said I hated omegas! I just hated being one.”

“You hated being one, because you did not approve of their behavior,” Yixing adds, and Lu Han can’t argue. “Not because you didn’t care for it yourself. I watched you say that alpha lust is disgraceful, and alpha-chasing omegas should be ashamed of themselves. These videos, Lu Han… they can ruin my campaign. They go against everything I stand for.”
“I don’t…” Lu Han trails off, unsure how to explain himself. “It’s because of the stigma, Yixing! If it were socially acceptable for omegas to fawn over alphas without being seen as lower beings or submissive knot holes, it wouldn’t be disgraceful! Why are you suddenly getting on my case about this? You’ve known this whole time that this is how I’ve felt.”

Yixing nods. “You’re right, I did. What I didn’t know is that you were furthering the problem by doing the exact thing we’re fighting to stop. You were telling omegas to not act like omegas because it’s wrong. You were encouraging, quite passionately even, omega-bashing behavior by influencing others to look down upon omegas with alpha lust which, might I remind you, you also have.”

Lu Han hangs his head. “You don’t have to tell me that. I’ve been aware of it my whole life.”

“It’s one thing to have internalized bigotry toward your own status,” Yixing says, his voice calm and even despite his stoic appearance. “But this is external. This is blatant propaganda against status equality. After next week, these videos will be viral media. Those who know you may write it off as college rebellion, but that means nothing to the voters who want to see change.”

He pauses for a second, refusing to look in Lu Han’s direction.

“Lu Han, I’m going to need you to resign from my campaign.”

Lu Han gasps. “You’re firing me?!?”

“Do you blame me?” Yixing asks. “If it had been Kris, you’d let him go without a second thought.”

“Kris was at those rallies with me!” Lu Han yells. He knows he’s being loud, and he doesn’t care. “He said the same things I did!”

“He didn’t, though.” Yixing continues to look straight ahead. “I watched his videos too. They were wonderful. He spoke of eliminating the status order and establishing an equality that accepted all instincts in societal harmony, including omegas.”

“Maybe Kris should run your campaign then,” Lu Han says bitterly.

“He’ll be taking over as of tomorrow,” Yixing tells him, and Lu Han’s eyes narrow at the pair of them deciding this already. “I spoke with him when I got here. I am actually impressed he didn’t warn you of my discontent, because I had asked him to let me talk to you first. I know how close the two of you are, so I am pleased that I can trust him to be my advisor.”

“Get out of my room,” Lu Han hisses, anger boiling so fast that Yixing should be knocked over by the smell. Instead, Yixing simply gets to his feet, adjusts the creases on his pants, and looks straight into Lu Han’s eyes.

“That makes this next part easier,” Yixing says. “I don’t think we should court each other anymore.”

“I agree,” Lu Han spits. “Now get the fuck out, and never come near me again.”

“As you wish,” Yixing says, heading to the door before adding over his shoulder. “Because since the first moment I met you, I have done nothing but adapt to what you want.”

It’s a low blow, but Lu Han deserves it. Yixing’s not even out the front door before he’s wracked by sobs, his conflicting emotions releasing the only way they can. It’s even worse that he still smells like Yixing, and will for at least another day since Yixing hadn’t re-marked him while he was here.

After an hour of self-pity, he realizes he’s still wearing the music note necklace and practically rips it
off, shoving it into the back of a drawer until he can bring himself to pawn it. His neck feels incredibly naked without it, a faint tan line visible when he looks in the mirror.

Kris and Amber are out shopping, and Lu Han figures he better leave before he takes this out on Kris. There’s no way that Kris didn’t try to talk Yixing out of his decision to hold Lu Han accountable for his actions several years ago, unconditionally defending him as his best friend. Lu Han isn’t mad at Kris, nor does he want to incur Amber’s wrath by starting a fight with him. He doesn’t want them to feel sorry for him, either, so all signs point to him getting away for a while.

He’s barely down the street before he gets leered at, Yixing’s protection weak without the necklace, and he ducks into the closest market to buy a bag of lemons. They’re sour, like his attitude, and thankfully no one approaches him. At this rate, he’s liable to pick a fight and unravel everything he’s worked so hard to overcome.

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His parents are too far away to make the commute to work, and he’s not about to take time off over a stupid scandal. Junmyeon’s in heat again—Jongdae’s beta dick seems to break it just fine, they were pleased to report—and as much as Lu Han loves his juniors, he can only tolerate mated couples for so long. After spending a couple nights on Jongin’s couch, his feet lead him back to the campus where he’d spent four years of his life, walking past the courtyards and auditoriums where he’d been filmed saying things that would come back to bite him in the ass as an adult.

Now a graduate student, Tao’s not in the dorms anymore, but that works out in Lu Han’s favor. He wouldn’t be allowed in the alpha dorms even as alumni. An omega working at the library is happy to help out a senior and points him in the direction of off-campus housing, where Tao now lives with several roommates.

“It’s a mixed status house,” she tells him. “They throw a lot of parties, and everyone looks out for each other. He’s really great.”

Lu Han has no doubt in his mind that Tao takes care of the current student body just like he’d taken care of Lu Han back then. Mating implications aside, Tao was always caring and thoughtful of others, and it doesn’t surprise Lu Han one bit to hear that his junior’s home is the campus safe space.

“Hi,” he greets the omega who answers the door of the large two-story house. It’s only been three years since Lu Han graduated, but somehow everyone looks so much younger than him. “I’m looking for Huang Zitao.”

“He’s not here,” the omega replies, but he stops Lu Han when he turns to leave. “You’re Lu Han, right? I’ve seen pictures of you. I know Tao would want to see you, so please come in. I think he’s just at a study group. I’ll send him a text.”

Tao’s housemate is a bit of a chatterbox, but it’s nice to sit and listen to someone else talk after all of the speaking he’s done lately. Apparently, Yixing’s campaign is a big deal at this school, and everyone is pleased that his committee is mostly alumni. Now one less, Lu Han thinks bitterly as the kid flails about their platforms, but he’s not about to bring that up with a stranger.

The lights flash at the same time the doorbell rings, and it’s an omega sorority collecting for a fundraiser. They look thrilled to see Lu Han, who tries to smile at them despite spending his entire four years here trying to ban status-exclusive groups, particularly sororities that encourage alpha lust and domestication. Now he sees them as necessary to promote acceptance and siblinghood, even if one of Yixing’s videos undoubtedly has him aggressively saying otherwise.
He donates more than he should, earning an awkward hug from both omegas before one of them grins up at him. “You’re an inspiration to us all,” he says, and Lu Han feels like the scum of the earth.

A shock of purple hair catches his attention, attached to a familiar face he won’t forget even if he lives long enough to see an omega become President. Regardless of haircut or color, Lu Han can always spot Tao in a crowd by his eyes, thin and catlike on his perfectly chiseled face. Tao is a beautiful person, inside and out, and Lu Han must really feel that way because Tao doesn’t release any alpha pheromones to lure him in.

“Lu Han,” Tao greets him, not bothering to hide his surprise. “You look exactly the same.”

Lu Han bursts out laughing because it’s such a Tao thing to say. Tao’s slowly spreading smile makes him feel like it’s senior year all over again and Lu Han’s trying to explain scatter plots to him.

“I’m sorry,” Lu Han blurts out, calming himself enough to face Tao completely. Tao’s still taller, but he’s looking down at Lu Han like he doesn’t know why Lu Han is apologizing. “For what happened between us—or didn’t happen, more accurately. I am learning that I wasn’t the best person when I went to school here.”

“Come inside,” Tao replies, gently guiding him through the door and up a flight of stairs. His room is already occupied, but it’s another familiar face. Suddenly, Lu Han understands why the lights flashed when someone was at the door.

Tao carefully rouses the other man with a shake to his shoulder and Chenchen looks up, grin splitting his face when he sees Lu Han. Lu Han waves excitedly, the universal sign for hello, and Chenchen flies off his bed to fling his arms around him. Tao and Chenchen have been best friends since high school, and Tao would never let anyone make Chenchen feel different or inferior for his disability. Tao taught Lu Han sign language himself, not that Lu Han remembers any of it now.

He does catch Chenchen’s smarmy expression, hands signing something that seems suspiciously like “I’ll leave you two alone” as he packs up his books and retreats. Tao’s laughing when Lu Han turns to look at him, then all amusement ceases.

“What’s wrong, Lulu?” Tao asks, and Lu Han bites his lip as everything comes crashing down around him.

“I fucked up, Taozi,” Lu Han says, shoulders shaking, and suddenly he’s enveloped by unscented alpha. “I fucked up, and I don’t know how to fix it.”

“Shh,” Tao soothes him, leading them to his bed where they can sit. “Start from the beginning and tell me everything.”

“The beginning is you,” Lu Han says, laughing through gulps of air. “I fucked up with you.”

“I forgave you a long time ago,” Tao says, hands tightening on Lu Han’s arms like he’s physically ingraining the words into Lu Han’s body. “Lu Han, I forgive you! You are not a bad person for what you did to me. You didn’t…you weren’t…” He sighs. “You’ve grown up since then.”

“Have I?” Lu Han asks. “I’m almost twenty-six years old, and I still resent being born an omega. It just lost me the only mate I’ve had since you.”

“What?” Tao exclaims, eyes wide and jaw dropped. “That selfless, loveable alpha running for city council broke up with you? Why would he even do that?”
“Because I’m harming his campaign,” Lu Han answers, then launches into the whole story that Tao listens to without interruption. Tao’s eyes flicker with recognition when Lu Han recounts the speeches he’d made in college—Tao had been there for the later ones, after all—but he winces when he learns how Yixing’s opponents are using it to their advantage.

“That’s rough,” Tao says, one long arm slung around Lu Han to squeeze him comfortably. “I understand where you’re coming from because I knew you back then, but I can also see why he reacted that way. Can you see it too?”

Lu Han frowns as the gentle way Tao is speaking to him, like he’s a child who needs to learn the weight of his mistake. “I can, but I swear to you I’ve been working on it. I was going to let him claim me, Tao! That is a big deal for me!”

“I know it is!” Tao insists. “I believe you, but I’m not the one you need to convince.”

“I shouldn’t have to convince anyone of anything,” Lu Han mutters. “That was how I felt back then, and while I’ve since learned that influencing others to think the same way was problematic, I refuse to feel guilty for my feelings! I didn’t mean for it to be interpreted as omega bashing, and I don’t deserve to be thrown off the committee and dumped for it.”

“Lu Han, you know I respect you and cherish you as a mentor,” Tao says slowly, and Lu Han hears the but before it’s said. “But you’re being a stubborn brat. Nobody is making you feel guilty about anything. You did something problematic, you admitted that, but now you need to own up to it.”

Lu Han blinks at the way his junior is speaking to him, strangely proud at the adult Tao has grown into when Lu Han (purposely) wasn’t looking. “I did own up to it, Tao. He’s the one who can’t seem to understand my feelings, despite courting me for months. He’s more concerned about his political reputation than me.”

Tao sighs, rearranging both of their limbs so that they’re sitting facing each other, Lu Han cross-legged and Tao sitting on one heel. He’s still incredibly flexible from all of his martial arts training. “Let’s back up a bit. If what you told me is correct, in a few days those videos from your and Kris’ anti-domination rallies will be all over the Internet, conveniently cropped to paint you as an omega hater, and omegas everywhere will be angry with you.”

“I don’t see how.” Lu Han pouts. “I was looking out for myself and other omegas! Suppressing instincts, resisting alphas, that’s what we have to do to survive! Otherwise we’ll get raped every time we leave the house! Any omega who has been unmated in this world should understand that!”

“You, my friend, are preaching to the choir.” Tao smiles sympathetically. “At the same time, isn’t the battle against the status order that demeans those traits that make omegas omegas? That’s why everyone loves your Yixing and what he could potentially do for all statuses. He’s got my vote, whether or not he takes you back.”

“Thanks,” Lu Han says dryly. “I know Yixing is perfect, that’s why I’m so pissed off. He walked away from me for being the exact person he’s fighting to protect.”

Tao sighs for the second time in two minutes, and Lu Han feels like the end of his impromptu therapy session is near. “I can’t make you see why he’s upset with you, but surely you know that sometimes you just have to take responsibility for the way your words affect others? Regardless of what you meant by them.”

Lu Han’s sets his jaw. “And as an alpha, even one with no scent, you have no idea how it feels to be constantly put down by higher statuses, expected to live up to our roles and apologize for who we
“You think I don’t get put down too?” Tao barks, his own face hardening, and Lu Han cringes at the sharp tone. “You’re not the only omega to shun me when I don’t act like an alpha, you know. Chenchen may be deaf, but I’m not. I hear everything people say about me. They call me deformed, question if I can make a knot—someone even suggested I warn others that I’m socially retarded. To my face. I’m not going to sit here and act like I know what it’s like to be you, but don’t you sit there and act like you know what it’s like to be me either. I know you didn’t come here to compete over who’s more oppressed, so let’s just calm down and try to figure out a solution to your problem together.”

Lu Han stares at him, struggling to process all of the words that were just thrown at him rather loudly. “I’m so sorry, Tao. I had no idea you were being bullied like that.”

“Forget about it,” Tao waves him off. “What are your plans for the next week? How are you going to deal with the backlash?”

“I don’t know yet,” Lu Han admits, pulling at his collar that’s starting to feel too tight. Tao’s never yelled at him before, even back when he probably deserved it. “I’ve been staying with Jongin until Junmyeon’s heat breaks, but they’re both mated and being around mated couples just reminds me of what I can’t have because I’m a shitty person who can’t accept my inferior hormones.”

“They’re not inferior, that’s the thing,” Tao says. “That’s what this is all about. They are part of you and need to be recognized as such, by the other statuses and by you. If you go around preaching that it’s wrong, it shows others that it’s okay to think that way too. Why can’t you see that?”

“I can’t…” Lu Han starts, choking on his next breath. It’s getting incredibly stuffy in here. These old houses must not have central air. “Can you open a window?”

Tao tilts his head at him in confusion, because it’s still rather chilly outside, but the next second has someone bursting through the door. It’s Chenchen, who’s signing frantically to Tao and pointing at Lu Han, and all Lu Han catches is the sign for ‘hot’ before he curses under his breath.

Tao’s face quickly turns frantic, the backs of his hands pressing to Lu Han’s cheeks. They feel cool and very nice; Lu Han sighs at the contact.

“You’re burning up. Chenchen says he can smell you from downstairs, and he thinks you’re going into heat.”

“Not possible,” Lu Han mumbles, leaning his dizzy head against Tao’s hands. “I’m not off my suppressants yet. Was supposed to stop a week from tomorrow.”

Tao lifts his hands to sign to Chenchen, and Lu Han slumps right against him. He must have the flu or something. Maybe all of his stress about Yixing and the scandal has lowered his immune system. Or maybe it just stopped his suppressants from working.

He knows he’s doomed when he starts to feel that familiar itch of arousal, thankfully not heightened by any nearby alphas, since Tao doesn’t have a scent and Chenchen is a beta. Tao must be the only alpha in the house, otherwise Lu Han would be clawing at the wall—or Tao himself. He is very aware that Tao can make a knot.

“It’s okay, Lulu,” Tao says gently, and Lu Han feels guilty for even thinking about doing that to him again. “There are six omegas in this house. We’re prepared for this.”

He’s not kidding; someone yells “OD!” and the lights flash again, then Tao picks him right up off the
bed and carries him down the hall.

“OD stands for ‘omega down,’” Tao explains. “When we have house parties, that’s our code for when an omega needs help. We have a special scent-proof room we can keep you in until someone can come get you. Any one of us can stay with you, or we can leave you alone. Your choice.”

“This is it,” Lu Han says, his voice barely a breath as he’s laid down onto something soft. It’s a pile of towels on top of a mattress, which is plastic-wrapped undoubtedly to keep omegas in heat from staining it. Lu Han sobs as omegas he’s never seen before in his life start taking care of him, pressing cold compresses to his face and tipping his head back to swallow vitamins with water.

“This is what, Lulu?” Tao asks. His fingers thread through Lu Han’s dampening hair, and Lu Han’s instincts seek out his touch even if they don’t think he’s an alpha.

“This is the inferior part,” Lu Han tries to explain. He opens his eyes, finds Tao’s, and scoffs at the concerned expression on his face. “We can’t control this. It can happen anytime, anywhere, and suddenly we’re ruining our clothes and furniture, sending all of the nearby alphas into rut. It’s humiliating, and there’s nothing we can do but endure it and hope nobody takes advantage of us.”

Nobody says anything, and Lu Han feels justified in his feelings for the first time in days. Every omega in this room agrees with him, and he doesn’t even know their names. Tao, who has now seen him like this twice, cannot argue with hard evidence. If Yixing were here—well, Lu Han’s not going to think about that, because Yixing’s presence is less about agreeing with him and more about knotting him.

It only takes ten minutes for him to lose it, his body aching to find relief in a room full of strangers, and he finds enough coherence to grab Tao by the collar. “Hit me.”


“Punch me in the face, knock me unconscious,” Lu Han begs. “Then I won’t feel it until later, after Kris has taken me home and locked me in my room. Please, Tao.”

Tao sucks his bottom lip into his mouth. It’s incredibly cute. “I don’t think I can do that.”

“You have to,” Lu Han insists. “Otherwise, I’m going to do what I did to you before, and we’ll regret it even more this time.”

“I didn’t regret it last time,” Tao says, but Lu Han’s too far gone to explain his choice of wording. “Are you sure this is what you want?”

“I know you can knock me out cold with one punch,” Lu Han tells him. “You’re a fucking wushu master. Don’t let me down for the first time ever.”

It’s the last line that gets him, just like Lu Han knew it would, and Lu Han braces himself as Tao pulls his arm back.

“I’m so sorry, Lulu.” And then everything goes perfectly black.

* 

The first thing he notices is the intoxicating scent of leather and rain. Kris must have given him a jacket that was still marked from when he and Yixing were courting. Lu Han wonders if he pleaded for it like a pathetic, needy omega, his instincts taking over since his brain was out of commission.
The second thing he notices is that his face fucking hurts, particularly around his left eye. He groans in pain, his heat flaring up all throughout his body as he learns the hard way that the only thing worse than being in heat alone is being in heat alone with a throbbing face.

At least he’s not still at Tao’s house. Even in his heat-infested mind, he knows that he was safe there, that everyone in that house looked to him as a senior and would have taken good care of him no matter what, but he didn’t need anymore reminders of his place in society after his conversation with Tao. He doesn’t for one minute think that Tao has it easy as a hormonally challenged alpha, but that doesn’t change the fact that Lu Han’s entire life is planned around (or upended by) his heats.

“Sleeping beauty.”

Lu Han shoves both fists in the general direction of Kris’ voice, which just serves to bunch up his sheets. “Fuck you.”

“Fuck me?” Kris replies, faking offense as he switches out the cold compresses on Lu Han’s face. Lu Han moans at the added coolness, the familiar weight dipping next to him. “I carry your fat ass all the way across campus, and fuck me?”

“My ass is not fat,” Lu Han mumbles. “Your ass is bigger than mine.”

“My ass is amazing,” Kris says. “While it was great seeing Tao and Chenchen again, I’d rather it be under better circumstances.”

“Tao became such a good adult,” Lu Han coos, rolling around to get relief without actually touching himself. “Why do I smell like Yixing?”

“Um, about that.” Kris falls silent, and Lu Han struggles to glare over his shoulder at Kris’ uncharacteristically sheepish face. “I guess one of Tao’s housemates thought you two were still together and got a hold of him. He ran to you, saw Tao above your unconscious body with his fist in the air, and got the wrong idea.”

“Oh no,” Lu Han exhales out. “He didn’t try and fight Tao, did he? How bad are his injuries?”

Kris laughs. “From what I heard, he was about to, but Tao was crying and three of his housemates insisted they saw you ask for it—which, by the way, is the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Noted. Go on.”

“Anyway, during all of this pleading, Yixing ran to you and checked you over, which probably marked you for a week. He was a mess. He assured them he could stay with you until I got there, which was like a half hour later because nobody had thought to fucking call me before then. You need a bracelet that reads ‘in case of heat, contact Kris Wu’ or something.”

Lu Han snorts. “There is no way I’m wearing something like that.”

Kris just shakes his head, appearing unaware that Lu Han had even spoken. “I’ve never seen anything like it, Lu Han. He wasn’t rutting at all, or even putting off pheromones. He was upset, his scent strong enough to ward off every alpha on campus. He’s been having this whole internal debate about you for the past couple days, like he wants to forgive you but he can’t bring himself to condone your actions.”

“Kris,” Lu Han says slowly, fighting to stay coherent long enough to ask this one thing. “Was it really so horrible, what I was saying back then?”
The way Kris darts his eyes away says more than his words ever could, but Lu Han waits for him to answer anyway. “It was and it wasn’t,” he finally says, and Lu Han wants to give him a matching shiner for being so unhelpful. “It’s just…not conducive to our goal here.”

“I can’t process your vague bullshit right now,” Lu Han grumbles. “Thank you for bringing me home.”

“You’re welcome,” is all Kris says, then leaves Lu Han to six straight days of hell on earth. At the worst of it, he thinks about begging Kris to call Yixing to see if they can put aside their differences long enough for Yixing to break his heat, and the only reason he doesn’t is because he can’t control his voice enough to call for Kris instead of howling incoherently. At the best of it, he considers getting the heat ablation surgery after all, because Yixing was the closest thing to a mate he’ll ever have and there’s no point in going through this crippling heat every three months if he’ll never birth children.

Maybe Yixing will win, he tells himself hopefully. Maybe Yixing will keep winning and eventually hold a position where he can actually make a difference. He’ll get funding for his alpha suppressants, figure out a way to make omega heats less brutal, and end the stupid status order once and for all so that everyone can coexist in harmony. That is the real dream of every omega, most betas, and maybe even a few open-minded alphas, yet it’s so far from reality that Lu Han wonders what they’re all living for.

That last thought terrifies him enough to roll over, banging his wrist against the wall so hard that he might have a bruise to match his eye. Kris falls over himself to run to him, pretending not to wrinkle his nose at the potency of Lu Han’s scent as he finds Lu Han cradling his hand and quickly grabs it to examine.

“I’m having bad thoughts,” Lu Han whines. “Help me.”

“I’m calling a doctor,” Kris says, so decidedly that Lu Han just nods.

Kyungsoo is technically a doctor, stopping by after his twelve-hour rotation with a stethoscope and some other swiped instruments from the hospital, including a sugar water IV drip. “I think you’re having a bad reaction to your medication, on top of being dehydrated,” he diagnoses after taking Lu Han’s vitals and dousing him in cold packs. “You haven’t been evaluated by an omega physician since they determined you couldn’t take heat suppressants permanently, right?”

Lu Han moans out what he hopes is an affirmative noise.

“You need to do that,” Kyungsoo says, not even bothering to sugar-coat his tone. “It’s been almost ten years, Lu Han. There have been incredible advancements in medical research since then.”

“Are you this mean to all your patients?” Lu Han asks, feeling better now that he’s got some fluids in him. “Don’t they frown upon that at the hospital?”

Kyungsoo flicks his forehead, and Lu Han whines. “You are not my patient. I am only here because we’re short-staffed and nobody could get away to make a house call. Sadly, overemotional omega heats are not a top priority.”

“Omega anything is not a top priority,” Kris mutters. “That’s why Lu Han never got a new script. That’s why battered omegas are forced to suffer at the hands of their alphas. That’s why unmated omegas go through this torture every month.”

“Yixing should put that in his speech,” Kyungsoo says, then darts his big eyes to Lu Han. “Sorry.”
“It’s fine,” Lu Han dismisses, then swallows hard. Kyungsoo’s the doctor right now, and he needs to know why he’s here. “I was thinking about how awful the world is, and how it might never change, and I thought…I wondered what’s the point of being alive.”

“Lu Han,” Kris gasps, shaking the arm that doesn’t have an IV stuck in it. Lu Han purposely does not look at him.

“It’s a side-effect of going into heat on suppressants,” Kyungsoo tells them. “Omegas have been known to show symptoms of depression when that happens. If you still feel that way after your heat is over, I can recommend you someone to talk to, but I really think it’s just the chemicals in your brain clashing with each other.”

“Oh okay.” Lu Han nods as much as he can. “I trust you.”

Kyungsoo gives him a halfhearted smile and turns to Kris. “I’ll leave you another bag of sugar water to switch out when this one’s done, and I’ll come back tomorrow to check on him.”

“It’s late,” Kris protests. “You can sleep on the couch.”

“Thanks, but just because I’m a beta doesn’t mean I’m not affected by an omega in heat.” Kyungsoo makes an unflattering face. “If I spent the night here, I would very likely be overcome by my instincts, and it wouldn’t be good for either one of us.”

“Your loss,” Lu Han jokes. “I’m amazing.”

“So I’ve heard,” Kyungsoo says, flashing a quick smirk before returning to his usual stoic self. “Take care of yourself, Lu Han. And don’t take these suppressants anymore. I’m taking your remaining bottles with me and cancelling your prescription at the pharmacy first thing in the morning.”

“Harsh,” Lu Han says.

“You’re welcome,” Kyungsoo says pointedly, then sees himself out.

Lu Han can tell by Kris’ expression that they’re about to have an awkward serious talk.

“Lu Han, we were two years old when we met, right? I’m pretty sure we were still in diapers.”

“You were in diapers until kindergarten, but I digress,” Lu Han teases, trying to lighten the mood.

“I don’t actually know a life without you in it,” Kris says, taking a deep breath before flopping his giant head onto Lu Han’s torso. “Don’t make me think about it.”

“I’m not going to do anything drastic,” Lu Han insists. “It’s just so hard lately to find hope that things will change. Every omega goes through this, I know, but I guess…I guess they’re stronger than me.”

“Lu Han, you are the strongest person I know,” Kris tells him, and Lu Han rolls his eyes. “I’m serious. Don’t tell Amber I said this, but you are stronger than even her. I don’t know anyone else who has spent their entire lives resenting how they were born, yet stands tall and faces this unfair world every day despite it. I don’t care if you get heat ablation surgery and live the rest of your days as a beta—I will always admire you for staying true to yourself, whoever that may be.”

“Kris,” Lu Han whispers, lifting a hand and dropping it right onto Kris’ face. “Your head weighs a ton, and if you stay in here any longer, I might try to fuck it.”

“So much for our heart to heart,” Kris scoffs, pulling himself to his feet and making his way toward
“Yixing’s gonna win, Lu Han. He’s gonna win, and it may not happen immediately, but I promise you, he will change the world.”

“Excellent,” Lu Han says, sighing as Kris closes the door behind him.

Yixing may change the world, but Lu Han won’t be by his side while he does it.

* *

On the day of Yixing’s public debate, Lu Han agrees to work late. Everyone in his office is suddenly involved in politics, discussing the good-looking candidate who came out of nowhere spreading a gospel about status equality. Many of the older omegas think he doesn’t stand a chance because they remember the days when omegas had zero rights, but the younger crowd flutters in hopeful excitement. It makes Lu Han happy in a bittersweet way because everything he’d worked so hard for was coming true—it just didn’t include him anymore.

When he gets home, Kris and Amber are in front of the TV. This isn’t an uncommon occurrence, but this time Amber grabs his arm as he tries to sneak by. There’s no way he can get out of sitting with them, watching a replay of the city council election debate from earlier that evening.

“Candidate Zhang, the floor is yours,” the moderator is saying, and Yixing looks so good standing at that podium in a suit, his dimple undoubtedly melting the hearts of unmated omegas everywhere.

“Thanks, Heechul,” Yixing’s voice booms through their surround sound, and Lu Han closes his eyes as he lets it wash over him and calm his nerves, at least until Yixing speaks again. “Before we get started, I want to address recent accusations about a past member of my campaign committee, if I may.”

“You may address anything you’d like, Candidate Zhang,” Kim Heechul, world-renowned news anchor and debate moderator, says in his booming announcer voice.

The camera zooms in on Yixing who meets it with passionate eyes. “The foundation of my campaign is status equality. So when my opponents dug up old videos of my campaign advisor and chosen mate leading rallies promoting anti-omega ideals, I let him go. My duty is to the community, and I couldn’t have a member of my team encouraging the exact behavior I am trying to put an end to.”

A few people cheer and it feels like knives thrown at Lu Han’s soul. Amber grabs onto his hand and he feels a little better, settling back against the couch cushions to see what happens next.

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“This was not the right decision to make,” Yixing goes on, and Lu Han sits up straight. “You see, citizens of this great city, what he hated was not omegas for being as they are, but the system for making him hate who he was. Now, I don’t know about you, but I was a rebellious hellion in college too.”

There’s a ripple of laughter at that, because the ad war had made everyone well aware of Yixing’s college years and how the only remotely questionable thing he’d done was break the heats of most of the omega student body with consent. Being as the most popular omega response was, “I wish he would break my heat,” it didn’t exactly lose him any points.

“I watched the videos over and over. I was sickened by them the same as you were. But I know him. I’ve seen him at his worst, plagued by unbearable heats and cornered by alphas and betas who look down on him as a lowly omega whose only purpose is to mate and breed. After a lifetime of that, I would hate myself too.”
Lu Han catches himself staring open-mouthed at the TV, forcing his jaw up before he drools on his shirt. Is Yixing defending him? After everything they’ve been through, is Yixing actually taking his side on live TV?

“I’m not going to stand here and condone the horrible things he said back then,” Yixing says, pausing to swallow—the first sign of discomfort thus far. (Lu Han remembers Kris coaching him on public speaking, discouraging such nonverbal communication.) “I’m saying that I understand why he said them. And I think if you try to see things from his perspective, you will too. He’s been trying so hard to get over his internalized bigotry and find happiness in living as an omega, which is where I come in.

“I want to live in a community where omegas are free to do as they please without fear of alpha or beta harassment. I want to fund medical research to reduce heat length and pain, as well as suppressants for alphas, solving the problem at the source instead of placing the blame on omegas for attracting us. My dream is for all statuses to coexist peacefully, helping each other through the trials and tribulations of life. And you may say that I’m a dreamer, but I’m not the only one.”

Lu Han’s grinning so hard at the John Lennon lyric that his face hurts. He’d suggested it for Yixing’s campaign slogan, which Yixing had nixed under fear of copyright, yet it had gotten thrown into his speech anyway.

“Candidate Zhang, you have thirty seconds left,” Heechul chimes in.

Yixing smiles warmly at the camera. “I didn’t talk about education reform, the real estate market, or any other issues plaguing this community tonight,” he says firmly. “To see my positions on those topics, you can simply drive around town and look at my signs, visit my website, or turn on the TV at…well, any time.” He grins at the laughs he receives. “What I did say, however, is what I’d like to leave you with. And Lu Han, if you’re watching this, I’m so sorry. If elected, I will devote my term to making this community a better place for you to live in, so that you can learn to accept being an omega without shame. If I’m not elected, I will use my alpha privilege to protect you forever. Please forgive me.”

Amber squeezes his hand, and Lu Han belatedly realizes that both she and Kris knew that this was going to happen. Yixing planned to address him directly on live TV, and they were going to make him watch it because one would have to be a supreme asshole to ignore a public apology, right?

“To the citizens of this wonderful and prosperous city, I hope I have not led you astray with my personal business. They say that behind every great alpha, there is an even greater omega, and although that phrase is dated and exclusive, I would really like it to apply to me. Vote Zhang, and be a part of the status equality revolution.”

The applause from the audience is deafening, Yixing’s stupid dimple blurring from Lu Han’s reluctant tears. He can’t hold them back, the hot emotional release burning down his cheeks as Yixing’s words replay over and over again in his mind.

“I don’t deserve him,” he mutters, and Amber smacks him upside his head. “Ow!”

Kris turns to address his mate. “Amber, what did we say about hitting my best friend even when he’s being dumb?”

“Don’t do it,” Amber says flatly. “Sorry, Lu Han, but you’re being really dumb.”

Kris leans over her to look right at Lu Han’s face, nearly punching him in both cheeks as he uses his sleeve to wipe Lu Han’s tears.
“I’m going to take you over to his place,” Kris says. “But first I’m going to say something really embarrassing for both of us.”

“Thanks for the warning,” Lu Han deadpans.

“I think you need to talk to someone,” Kris says bluntly, and Lu Han notices Amber squeezing his hand now. “I want you to be happy, and I know that you can be happy with Yixing—but first, you have to be happy with yourself.”

Lu Han nods, taking a deep breath to hold back the fresh wave of tears that want to flow.

“Will you see a counselor?” Kris asks, looking at him with pleading eyes that Lu Han hasn’t seen since they were eight years old and Kris was begging Lu Han to cover for him when he broke a window. “Amber and I will go with you if you want, or it can be just me, or neither of us. Kyungsoo knows someone who can help you. I’ve met her. She’s great. She won’t make you feel like a therapy patient. I just…I want you to love yourself like we love you. Status and all.”

Lu Han stares at him as the words process in his mind. This whole time, since the moment he’d found out which status he was destined to spend the rest of his life as, he’d been so focused on disclaiming his omega traits that the possibility of accepting them wasn’t even an option. He had thought that Kris was the same way, but recent events have proven that he’s not. Yixing’s willing to forgive him—asking for Lu Han’s forgiveness in return, even—and as mean as Kyungsoo is, he’s still a medical professional whose opinion is worth something.

All of their opinions are worth something to Lu Han. These are his friends, his family, and if they all think that he needs to get help, he’ll do it.

“Okay,” Lu Han agrees, giving a sharp nod that flings a tear onto the back of his hand. He looks at it, watches it shine with his life and his emotions that he keeps trying to suppress, and licks it in one swipe of his tongue. It tastes sweet. “Thank you for always looking out for me.”

“See, I told you he wouldn’t kill you,” Amber hisses, then turns to Lu Han with a sympathetic smile. “We’re here for you no matter what, okay? I knew going into this that I was getting both of you as a package deal, so you’re mine to protect too. No matter how much Yixing marks you.”

She winks at him, and he breaks into laughter.

“I definitely deserve you both,” he says, and they tackle him into a hug he doesn’t bother struggling out of.

* 

Yixing doesn’t look at all surprised to see Lu Han on his doorstep, and Lu Han is confident that his new campaign advisor had warned him of their arrival. “Lu Han.”

“Yixing.”

They stand facing each other, the exact same height, and Yixing breaks first. “Come in.”

“Thank you.”

Yixing’s apartment looks the same, if not a bit untidy. He’s been busy preparing for the debate, after all, undoubtedly pacing in the small amount of walking space while rehearsing his speeches. He’s still wearing his suit from earlier, though the tie is loosened and the first two buttons are undone. It’s attractive in a way that doesn’t have Lu Han fearing for the state of his pants, the way he’s come to
associate with Yixing’s head alpha urge to lead.

“Can I get you something to drink?” Yixing asks politely, and Lu Han shakes his head. He wants to be sober for this.

“Have you composed lately?” he finds himself asking. “Music or lyrics. Either one.”

“I have not,” Yixing says, sounding sad about it. “You see, someone I care deeply about suggested that I run for office, so I’ve been devoting every waking moment to making that person proud.”

“You’re so full of shit,” Lu Han tells him, finally breaking the overly polite atmosphere by cracking a smile. “You wanted to be a politician before I even met you.”

“Yes, well, you made it happen.” Yixing holds up a hand before Lu Han can point out the prematurity of that statement. “Win or lose, I still have the experience of running, which is—if I might be a bit dramatic—life-altering.”

Lu Han gives him a sympathetic face. “I think you threw your chances by turning your campaign speech into an apology to me.”

“Oh, but that is where you are wrong, my dear omega,” Yixing says, frowning at how Lu Han flinches at the word. “My voters, see, they are incurable romantics. Ninety percent of our community is mated. Ninety! And if you know anything about mated pairs, it’s that they thrive on seeing others find a mate, succumbing to the same fate that they have. My website polls have shown more of an interest in my courting life than my platforms.”

“I suppose we have reality television to thank for that,” Lu Han scoffs. “On the next season of The Unmated Alpha, we have an attractive budding politician named Zhang Yixing, who enjoys music and breaking heats.”

Yixing bursts out laughing, nearly falling over the back of his sectional from the force of it. “Can I just give you my rose and save us thirteen episodes of angst?” he asks, sighing into a smile.

“That depends,” Lu Han answers. “Do I get my job back?”

Yixing vaults over the sectional and grabs Lu Han by the waist, taking his breath away. “I’ll give you a promotion.”

“And a raise?” Lu Han teases, his eyes fluttering shut as he breathes in Yixing’s distinct alpha scent for the first time in over a month (while conscious, anyway).

“That would imply I was paying you to begin with,” Yixing rebuts with a grin. His hands firmly grip Lu Han’s hips, foreheads leaning together as he blatantly inhales Lu Han as well. “I missed you so much, Lu Han. If I comment on how fucking intoxicating you smell, are you gonna shrink away from me?”

Lu Han bites his lip, but shakes his head. “Kris suggested I see a counselor. You know, to help me work out my self-acceptance issues.”

“I think that’s a good idea,” Yixing says, abandoning Lu Han’s hips to wrap strong arms around him. “I’ll support you however you need. I want you to love yourself, because, well, I love you, and I want you to see what I see.”

“Dammit,” Lu Han hisses, nearly punching himself in the face in his attempt to wipe his tears before they streak his cheeks. “Stop making me cry!”
“There’s nothing wrong with crying,” Yixing tells him, pushing Lu Han’s fist out of the way to wipe the tears himself. “Even the strongest alpha cries when they’re moved by something incredible. In fact, I’m devising a movement called Alpha For Omega, which calls attention to status inequality by pointing out how alphas are demoralized by status roles forbidding them to show emotion, care for children, and work jobs previously allotted for omegas, such as teachers and nurses.”

Lu Han pokes him in the side. “Are you seriously campaigning at me right now?”

“You did this to me,” Yixing reminds him. “This is all your fault.”

“Best thing I’ve ever been blamed for,” Lu Han says, then leans in to press their lips together.

Yixing kisses him back, tightening his hold until they’re pressing together. Lu Han’s arms lift to encircle Yixing’s neck as they sway from the force of it, both struggling to maintain balance. After they’ve sufficiently reacquainted themselves with each other’s mouths, Yixing pulls them the short distance to the sectional, and Lu Han curls up in his lap, leaning his head against Yixing’s collarbone and feeling his alpha’s heartbeat thump in his ear, gradually luring Lu Han’s to the same rhythm.

“Yixing,” Lu Han whispers, and Yixing pulls away to face him, regarding him with those gentle eyes, which flash in recognition when Lu Han pulls the gold chain out of his pocket. “Will you put this back where it belongs?”

“Yes,” Yixing answers. He accepts the necklace from Lu Han and drapes it carefully around Lu Han’s neck, pressing his lips all over Lu Han’s face as he fastens it. Forehead, both cheeks, chin, and he’s done, the familiar metal returned to his neck and reigniting the faint buzz under his skin. “I hope you don’t need to take it off again.”

“Don’t give me a reason to,” Lu Han replies defiantly, and Yixing’s eyes flash again for a different reason. “You really like it when I stand up for myself, don’t you?”

“I like it when you’re confident,” Yixing answers, lifting his hand to stroke Lu Han’s face. Lu Han’s head tilts toward the contact, eyes fluttering shut as Yixing’s scent and touch starts to take him under. “I may have to protect you for the time being, but that doesn’t mean you are weak. You are the strongest person of any status I have ever met, and I find it wildly attractive.”

“You should know,” Lu Han says slowly, barely hearing his own voice over their combined heartbeats, “I got new suppressants last week. They don’t give me a heat at all, unless I want one. My omega physician suggested them, since I can just stop taking them at any time if I want to have a heat.”

Yixing noses at his temple. “Are you trying to tell me something?”

The flush in Lu Han’s cheeks is pleasant for once. “Just that we have to plan our marathon mating sessions now.”

Yixing’s laugh shakes them both. “I told you in the beginning, didn’t I? I’ll do it for you anytime. I simply won’t be the one initiating it. If you’re not in heat, my instincts are focused on leading and protecting, but that doesn’t mean I can’t switch gears if you tell me you want it.”

Lu Han hums, snuggling closer and taking a deep breath as Yixing embraces him, surrounding him with the scent of leather and rainfall that fills his lungs and infiltrates his bloodstream. “Maybe...I want to see what it’s like outside of a heat.”

“Which way do you want to do it?” Yixing asks casually, and Lu Han gasps. “What? They make special lubricant to use on alphas and betas. How do you think mating without omegas works?”
“I know that, but you…” Lu Han has to force himself to blink when his eyes get dry from how wide open they are. “You would want me to do that to you?”

Yixing shrugs. “Sure. I haven’t actually tried it before. I might like it.”

It’s ironic that Lu Han’s slicking down his thighs when his thoughts don’t require it. “Well, now I want to do it,” he mutters.

“Up,” Yixing directs, lifting a bewildered Lu Han off of his lap as he gets to work pulling out his bed. Lu Han notices a pile of towels set to the side and wonders if that’s for his benefit, smiling at the thoughtfulness. Once they’re spread out, Yixing settles on his back, lifting his eyes to Lu Han with an expectant expression. It’s nothing short of inviting, and Lu Han feels like the alpha here or maybe just a predator as he crawls toward Yixing.

“Hi,” Lu Han says.

Yixing holds up a small tube, which he must have grabbed while he was setting up the bed. “Hi.”

“What do I even do with this?” Lu Han asks, grinning when Yixing gives him a knowing look. “I mean, I get the general idea, but…”

“I have faith that you can figure it out,” Yixing tells him, reaching up to stroke his hair, and Lu Han leans into the touch. “Taking off my clothes would be a good place to start.”

“It would,” Lu Han replies facetiously, reaching behind him to pull his own shirt over his head. “Or I could start with mine.”

“By all means.” Yixing lifts his arms over his head and leans back against them, his eyes dark as Lu Han drops his hands to his belt. “Your body looks so nice.”

Lu Han’s cheeks heat up again, but he keeps going and leans down to kiss Yixing as he disposes of the rest of his clothes. There’s something about being completely naked while Yixing is still fully dressed that thrills him, making him take his time unfastening Yixing’s tie the rest of the way and starting in on his buttons.

“Hey, alpha,” Lu Han pokes him. “Just because you’re on the bottom doesn’t mean you don’t have to do any work.”

“Oh?” Yixing brings his hands down to ghost along Lu Han’s sides, sending a chill up Lu Han’s spine that he’s never felt during a heat. It leaves him breathless, gasping against Yixing’s lips that gasp in return. “Wow.”

“Touch me,” Lu Han whines, getting sloppy with the rest of the buttons in favor of his desire to feel Yixing’s flesh. “I’ll be the one inside you tonight, but I want your hands on me. Please.”

Yixing slowly moves his head from side to side, seeming mesmerized by Lu Han’s words. “Yes, of course, whatever you want.”

He complies immediately, palms sliding up Lu Han’s back and around his sides, down his thighs and up his chest. He’s touched Lu Han more in twenty seconds than Lu Han has touched him at all because he still has all of his fucking clothes on, aside from the wide strip of skin stretching from his throat to his belt. Lu Han leans down to lick it, starting at Yixing’s jaw and not letting up until he feels the trail of hair that disappears under the fly of his pants.

“Lu Han,” Yixing breathes, both hands grabbing onto Lu Han’s shoulders. “It’s so hot.”
Lu Han snorts, “You don’t know what hot is.”

“Maybe not.” Yixing grins as he realizes what he said. “You should still relieve me of my discomfort though, like a good alpha.”

“Am I the alpha tonight?” Lu Han asks, already feeling the power surging through his veins as he leans up to shove Yixing’s shirt off of his shoulders rather forcefully.

“Until you’re okay with being the omega who tops his alpha, you can be,” Yixing answers, and Lu Han pauses in his aggressive disrobing to bite his lip. “Don’t worry, baby. We’ll get there.”

Lu Han nods as he bares Yixing’s chest completely, more gently this time. “You’re really built,” he comments, running his hands along Yixing’s bare arms. “I like it.”

“I get a workout lifting boxes at the store,” Yixing tells him, back arching when Lu Han trails fingers down his chest. “Your touch feels so good, Lu Han.”

Lu Han just hums, circling Yixing’s nipples with both hands until they harden. He runs a single fingertip over each one and revels in the way Yixing jerks, a belated gasp slipping through his lips as his hips roll up toward friction that isn’t there. The whine he lets out breaks Lu Han’s heart, and Lu Han makes quick work of Yixing’s remaining clothing, leaving them both gloriously nude and warm to the touch, like they’re creating their own (tolerable) heat together.

Lu Han lowers his knees between Yixing’s legs, urging them open, and he feels a twinge of pleasure when Yixing’s thighs spread easily for him. His hands drop to touch them, pleased to find that they feel as nice as they look, the muscles hard under his fingers with each squeeze as he leans down to press kisses to Yixing’s sternum.

Yixing moans, not a growl but an actual moan, his cock close to Lu Han’s chest with no direct contact. He’s genuinely enjoying Lu Han’s touch, his noises addicting as Lu Han rushes to touch more just to hear them again. He licks his way over to a nipple and earns another jerk, accompanied by a hitch of breath when he flicks his tongue against it. On his way to do the same thing to the other one, he pries one hand away from Yixing’s thigh to wrap around his length, drinking in the low groan as Yixing pushes up pointedly.

“Impatient,” Lu Han hisses, squeezing him firmly for effect.

“If this were your heat, we’d be mating already,” Yixing says, and Lu Han’s arousal soars at how the words are laced with breaths.

“I shouldn’t rush through this,” Lu Han tells him, like he knows a single thing about doing it this way aside from the obvious. “Your body doesn’t work the same as mine does. It’s my job to relax you and take care of you so it doesn’t hurt.”

Yixing looks like he has something to say about Lu Han being the one to take care of him for once, but all he does is run his hands over Lu Han’s body in silent encouragement. Yixing’s touch is electric, bringing life to every nerve and muscle it encounters, and Lu Han’s kissing his way down Yixing’s chest before he actively thinks about doing it. He repeats his earlier path, only this time he doesn’t stop at Yixing’s waist.

“Lu Han,” Yixing moans, the beautiful sound reverberating between Lu Han’s ears as Lu Han licks at the tip of his cock. It’s wet with precome, bitter but enticing, and Lu Han’s lips slide easily around the length, carefully taking him in as far as he can. “Oh…that’s perfect. You’re perfect.”

Lu Han would reply, but his mouth is full and he’s determined to make Yixing at least start a knot.
this way. He slicks more at the thought of a knot, which he tries not to think about because that’s not the goal tonight. Instead, he distracts himself by uncapping the bottle and pouring some of the contents onto three of his fingers, then slowly makes his way between Yixing’s thighs.

Ears perked for any uncomfortable noises, Lu Han swirls one finger around Yixing’s rim, waiting until he stops squirming and inhaling sharply before proceeding. He feels so hot inside, Lu Han’s temperature rising almost dangerously at the thought of feeling that around his cock. He’s already sweating, his own breath coming in pants as he sucks Yixing in and out faster, stretching him enough for a second finger.

“Lu Han,” Yixing says, firmly enough for Lu Han to pause in his actions and look up. “Come up here.”

He may be the alpha tonight, but his omega instincts won’t let him ignore a direct order from the real alpha in the bed, and he reluctantly pulls off of Yixing’s cock with an obscene pop. Leaving his fingers where they are, he pulls himself up Yixing’s body and finds himself in Yixing’s mouth, lips soft and tongue persistent.

“Bend your knuckles a little,” Yixing whispers between kisses, pulling his tongue out of Lu Han’s mouth just to thrust it in again when Lu Han complies. “Yes, like that. Move them back and forth rather than in and out…yeah, like that.”

Lu Han follows directions, searching for the spot Yixing clearly wants him to touch, and he jumps at Yixing’s sudden howl when he presumably finds it. “There?”

“Yeah,” Yixing answers, his breaths coming rushed. “Wow. No wonder omegas love this so much.”

With Yixing’s head thrown back like this, Lu Han has free reign of his neck, pressing his lips wherever he can reach and lightly dragging his teeth along the sides. He could claim Yixing right now, not that it would mean anything coming from an omega, but that’s all legend anyway. He’s not going to do it, but the thought has him even hotter, cock hard and pressing along the dip between Yixing’s hip and his lower abdomen.

He slips in a third finger when Yixing feels ready, and Yixing rocks back against them, thrashing beneath him like an omega in heat. Lu Han is amazed, because Yixing isn’t in heat. He’s purely reacting to Lu Han’s touch deep inside him, continuously grazing that spot that has him whimpering adorably.

Lu Han uses his free hand to guide Yixing’s mouth back to his, this kiss fierce as Yixing wraps both arms and legs around him. He’s as open as he can possibly be, submitting everything he has to Lu Han, and Lu Han wants it all. He spreads out his fingers as far as he can, stretching Yixing one last time before he pulls them out and kisses the pout on Yixing’s lips.

“I’m gonna do it now, okay?” Lu Han asks, and Yixing nods. “If it’s too much, just tell me to stop.”

“I will,” Yixing tells him, his hands making fists out of Lu Han’s back muscles, which spurs Lu Han to grab him by the ass and position himself at the rim. “Lu Han?”

“Yes?”

“Don’t hold back.”

Lu Han pushes in, mouth gaping at how tight it is, hips rolling to work his way in until they hit the back of Yixing’s thighs. Lu Han recalls how nice those thighs feel and loops his arms around them, guiding them up toward Yixing’s chest while his hands massage the muscles once more. He bides
his time this way until Yixing relaxes around him, finally breathing out into his hair, and Lu Han starts moving in a slow rut—if it’s even possible for him to rut—which is as much for himself as for Yixing.

Another moan from Yixing wrecks his resolve, throwing all propriety out the window as his mating instincts take over. He fucks Yixing hard and fast as he clings to Yixing’s torso, pinning his legs to his chest. “Yixing…”

“So good,” Yixing’s gasping out. “It’s so good, Lu Han. Angle up a bit.”

Lu Han grabs Yixing’s ass instead, lifting it clear off the bed, and Yixing howls again, his body clamping around Lu Han at the stimulation. Lu Han chokes through his breaths, so close to overheating, but not in the way that incapacitates him for a week. This is a good heat, a pleasant burn, words he thought would never go together until right now.

His orgasm hits him by surprise, his body shuddering as he thrusts deep and lets go. It’s been so long since he’s come inside someone that he’s forgotten what it feels like, surrounded by muscles that keep squeezing him, even after he’s too sensitive for contact.

Yixing’s breathing harder than he is, pulling him close as he stretches out his legs with a hiss and runs his hands through the thin layer of sweat on Lu Han’s back. Then he drops to Lu Han’s thighs, pausing when he feels more than just sweat.

“You’re so slick,” Yixing whispers, and Lu Han shudders again. “You can still have my knot, if you want it.”

“Yes,” Lu Han agrees immediately, and Yixing laughs as Lu Han straddles his lap and takes him right in. It’s a bit of a strain since he’s not in heat, but he’s wet enough to easily accept the length, closing his eyes to appreciate how it feels without being desperate for it.

“You okay?” Yixing asks. “I would have used my fingers first.”

“Couldn’t wait,” Lu Han gets out as his hips start to move. “Want it now.”

Yixing’s breath hitchs. “I’m gonna knot really soon. I’m so fucking turned on from your mouth and cock, I can’t see straight.”

“Knot me,” Lu Han tells him, already feeling it start to stretch him like it was just waiting for his command. “Yes…this is so much better when I’m not dying of heat.”

“You ride me so nicely.” Yixing rests both hands on Lu Han’s hips, no need to guide him back and forth since he’s doing that well enough on his own. “Here comes your knot, baby.”

Lu Han just moans, rocking down as hard as he can to take in the knot deeper, reducing his motions to quick snaps of his hips when he can’t move anymore. A deep growl forms in his lungs when the knot presses right against his prostate, bringing his cock back to life. Yixing’s hand is around him right away, sending Lu Han’s head flying back while his body protests the immobilization.

“Come for me,” Yixing says, his voice sounding so far away. “Wanna see you lose it.”

“Yixing,” Lu Han gasps out, jerking as much as he can as Yixing pumps his orgasm out of him. It’s a struggle to remain upright, but he manages and catches his breath, blowing the sweaty hair out of his eyes. “Your turn.”

“Fuck,” Yixing swears, thrusting up from below to add to the pressure. “Gonna come…Lu Han…”
Lu Han inhales as Yixing’s release fills him. It feels completely different than during a heat. Not only is Lu Han more aware of himself and in control of his actions, it’s also moderately uncomfortable when they’re both done and they can’t actually move.

“Your face tells me it’s not as good this way,” Yixing observes, but he’s smiling when Lu Han opens his eyes to look at him. He’s so beautifully wrecked, flushed all the way down to his chest, and it’s all for Lu Han, all because of him.

“Maybe we should save the knots for my heats,” he says, and Yixing laughs out an agreement. Since they’re stuck together for a while, he leans down on his elbows and presses a kiss to Yixing’s lips, which Yixing gently returns.

* 

Minseok knows everyone in the city, and they are reminded of that fact every year on his birthday. Lu Han supposes that being a bartender lends itself to meeting a lot of people, especially since Minseok has been doing it since he was old enough to sell alcohol, but they could probably rent out a sporting arena and still have wall to wall people of all statuses congregating together to celebrate his birth.

“What do you even do with all of this shit?” Baekhyun teases him, gesturing toward the Christmas-tree-sized stack of presents in one corner. “Your apartment isn’t that big.”

Minseok laughs heartily, already a little tipsy. “I can guarantee you that most of those big boxes are just gift cards wrapped in tissue paper, and maybe plushies.”

“You friends know you so well,” Chanyeol teases him, leaning down to kiss the top of his head, where he’s wearing a ridiculous crown made out of construction paper.

Minseok snorts. “You says that like your plushies aren’t taking up half of our spare room.”

They wander off to mingle, closely followed by Baekhyun, which leaves Lu Han and Yixing at the bar. “Maybe he should have run for office,” Yixing says with a laugh. His tone is fond and faintly nervous.

“You’re gonna be amazing,” Lu Han tells him, nudging Yixing’s arm with his elbow, and Yixing nods firmly. “You’re gonna change the world.”

“No pressure,” Yixing says quietly, staring out at all of the people dancing and having a good time as he brings his beer to his lips.

The club where Chanyeol and Minseok work doesn’t allow any kind of commercial solicitation, but Yixing’s mere presence invites campaigning. As election day gets closer, the ad wars get nastier and voters get more skeptical. Yixing’s opponents question whether Yixing can really make a difference in the status order, or whether he’s just another alpha male telling people what they want to hear so he can get elected and line his pockets with tax dollars.

They’ve already been approached three times since they walked in the door, two of whom were nice and supportive. The third one didn’t acknowledge Lu Han at all, asking Yixing point-blank what he was going to do about the environment. Yixing launched into his energy conservation plan without missing a beat, satisfying the beta enough to pledge his support and buy Yixing a drink (which Yixing gave to Lu Han), but Yixing’s smile didn’t reach his eyes and Lu Han knows that this whole ordeal has started to wear him down.

Already, Yixing had to stop helping out at his store when his customers and persistent journalists
kept roping him into making impromptu speeches, limiting him to hiding out in his office or working from home. It kills Yixing not to have a hands-on involvement in his own business, his boredom and growing concerns about the election leading him to think too hard about everything and text Lu Han all day. Not that Lu Han minds hearing from him during the weekday, but he actually does have to work and more than once he’s had to call Yixing on a break and talk him down from some ridiculous ledge, like building a robot version of himself and disappearing to an island to control it remotely.

Win or lose, they will all be glad when this election is over. Minseok is just the beginning of a long string of birthdays—Sehun is next, then Lu Han, Baekhyun, and Junmyeon, all in the span of two months—so at least there’s something to look forward to other than obsessing over support polls and being stopped on the street to defend their views. Lu Han may not be harassed for being an omega when he’s with Yixing, but that doesn’t discourage anyone from interrupting their day to question their stance on sociopolitical issues.

It’s bad enough that someone had followed Lu Han to his first counselling appointment, broadcasting his “mental illness” all over social media. Yixing recorded a YouTube video just to address it, squashing the rumors that Lu Han was unstable and lecturing about the severity of untreated mental illnesses. He scolded the media for exploiting Lu Han’s private business, deeming it unconducive to anyone’s recovery to be mocked and judged by the public for taking the steps to overcome something they’re already socially ridiculed for. While Yixing’s public support was appreciated, along with the many positive responses to Yixing’s video cheering him on, Lu Han felt incredibly exposed and didn’t talk to anyone for a week, even Yixing.

Being the mate of a politician is more stressful than he could have ever imagined. It would only get worse after he’s elected, with the media following their every moves, just waiting for them to make a mistake or say something problematic. Especially Lu Han, who is still not very trusted by many omega support groups. His own had spoken up in defense for him (led by Junmyeon), but they were not very successful. Omegas may collectively support Yixing, but they don’t care very much for Lu Han.

Meanwhile, counselling helps more than Lu Han would have ever expected. It doesn’t even feel like counselling, at least what Lu Han has been led to believe counselling is like from TV and his psychology classes. Somehow he leaves every appointment feeling stronger and more empowered. He should have known that anyone recommended by Kyungsoo would be no-nonsense and straightforward with her thoughts, which is exactly what Lu Han needs to recondition his brain to disassociate the omega status with low-level importance and submission.

Boa, which she insists Lu Han calls her to lessen the hierarchy between them, shares her own experiences as an omega female striving for individual success in an alpha-dominated society, inviting Lu Han’s comments and opinions without judgment. He opens up to her immediately, tossing away the filter he usually uses with Yixing and sometimes Kris to express his raw feelings, all of the resentment and self-destruction he’s kept inside for years just pouring out like a volcano explosion, and Boa listens without batting a glittered eyelash. She’s probably heard worse, probably experienced worse, and that’s what has Lu Han trusting her completely.

Yixing doesn’t ask him about the specifics of their sessions, and Lu Han is grateful for it. What he does comment on is the positive increase in Lu Han’s overall demeanor, which couldn’t come at a better time as the pressure of the upcoming election slowly breaks Yixing down. Yixing is the one who needs Lu Han now, not for any hormonal protection but for emotional support, clinging to him at night for the kind of strength that doesn’t come from words. Yixing may have head alpha genes, but he’s only human. He was in no way prepared for the stress that came from trying to please everyone in the public eye, not that anyone who saw him in the daylight would notice anything less than a completely put-together leader.
They’re both wound up so tightly that Lu Han induces a heat just for the release. His new suppressants are amazing, giving him complete control over his cycle. They even subdue his heats enough to function as an active participant, remembering it all clearly afterward. He doesn’t get nearly as overheated, not that Yixing gives him much time to burn when he’s on him at the first whiff of ripe omega scent. Yixing needs this as much as he does, knotting him off and on for twenty straight hours before they pass out, waking up after a nap to do it all over again.

“I couldn’t do this without you,” Yixing whispers while they’re locked together, Lu Han collapsed on top of him as his nerves continue to spike with pleasure. They’re sweaty and gross and it’s perfect, Yixing’s fingers dragging lazily up and down Lu Han’s spine, all of their worries and apprehension fucked right out of them.

“Me neither,” Lu Han agrees, and the kiss they share is stronger than any orgasm.

* 

For the first time in Lu Han’s memory, Sehun’s birthday isn’t celebrated in a blur of drinking games and clouds of questionable smoke. They go out to a fancy dinner like adults, which feels more like a business meeting than a social gathering with people he’s known since college. Lu Han didn’t think he’d see Kris in a suit until the day he was buried, even if Amber wears it much better.

“I have news!” Sehun exclaims over the table of barbeque. “Jongin and I…are expecting!”

“Expecting what?” Baekhyun asks, and Taeyeon rolls her eyes from a few seats away. They must be off again.

“A new couch, obviously,” Jongin says sarcastically, scoffing when Baekhyun just looks confused. “A baby, you idiot! We’re having a baby!”

He’s so loud that nearby tables applaud and offer their congratulations, and Jongin face-palms while Sehun stands up and waves proudly like he’d just been crowned royalty.

“You’re gonna be parents?!” Kris exclaims. “That poor child.”

“Babies having babies,” Minseok says with a sigh.

“You’re all assholes,” Sehun tells them, but he can’t keep the grin off of his face.

“Aren’t you worried?” Lu Han asks. “About, you know, reduced hormones and other side effects of having a child born from two omegas?”

Everyone at the table stares at him, and he frowns.

“That’s one of those things I’m not supposed to say, isn’t it?” Lu Han asks flatly, and Yixing pats him on the shoulder. Lu Han finds the strength to bow his head toward his juniors. “I apologize.”

“Honestly, it would be doing everyone a favor if they did have reduced hormones,” Jongin comments. “They wouldn’t need suppressants, and they could go through life without being ruled by their instincts, no matter what status they become.”

“We should all be so lucky,” Kyungsoo comments.

“Well, congratulations, you two,” Yixing calls out, lifting his glass. “To baby Kim-Oh, may you grow up in a world of opportunity and love.”
“Hear, hear!” the others chorus, and Sehun proudly toasts with his pineapple juice.

“Don’t worry,” Jongin says to Chanyeol, who’s wearing an uncharacteristic frown. “You’ll be able to have your own child soon. I just know it. In the meantime, you can play with ours!”

“Most spoiled baby ever,” Minseok says, but he’s smiling at the way Chanyeol grins.

That night, Yixing is in much brighter spirits, despite the three percent drop in his ratings. “This is why I’m doing this,” he says out loud to Lu Han as they get ready for bed, brushing their teeth at the sink with matching palm tree bangs. Lu Han’s omega urge for domesticity is so pleased that he can’t even be bothered by it. “To make the world a better place for our children…metaphorically, of course.”

“Do you want kids?” Lu Han asks, meeting Yixing’s stunned eyes in the mirror after he spits out his toothpaste. “I feel like this is a conversation we should have probably had before now.”

“I didn’t, for a long time,” Yixing answers, and now Lu Han is the surprised one as he drops his toothbrush with a loud, messy clatter. “I couldn’t make the active decision to bring a child into a world full of such hate and mistreatment. Now that things have the potential to get better, I’m more open to the idea.”

Lu Han smiles. “Between the two of us, I think our kid would be genetically programmed to change the world if we can’t manage to do it ourselves.”

“You’re probably right.” Yixing laughs nervously, capping the toothpaste harder than necessary. “That choice is completely up to you, anyway. It’s your body. If you decide you want to birth a child, we can talk about it then. If not, we can just babysit our friends’ kids. I’m positive that once Chanyeol and Minseok find a way to procreate, they won’t stop until Chanyeol has an entire litter of babies to coo over.”

“That is the truth,” Lu Han says, smiling as he recalls how happy Chanyeol is around kids. Chanyeol’s a naturally happy person, but his face lights up in a way that could illuminate the entire city when he sees tiny people out with their parents. Like that, Chanyeol is more of an omega than Lu Han is, and it’s not the first time he’s wished they could just switch statuses. He sighs at the thought, the reality of his self-deprecation weighing heavy. “I still have a long road ahead before I can comfortably consider that,” he adds.

“No rush,” Yixing says, slinging an arm around his waist to squeeze him. “Like I said, I’m on the fence about it too. And I know it feels like you haven’t made any progress, but I think if you look back at the road behind you, you’ll see how far you’ve already come.”

Lu Han thinks about his mindset when he was growing up, leading to the college rallies and his adulthood filled with nothing but bitter resentment, which he’s slowly learning to channel into acceptance with each counseling appointment. He has to forgive himself over everything else, Boa tells him, because he can’t move forward while he’s being held back by the past.

“I wish for you to claim me,” Yixing says suddenly, and Lu Han’s initial thought is that he’s glad he has already spit out his toothpaste, or he’d probably choke on it. “I was going to save this request for your birthday, but that felt horribly cliché.”

“I…” Lu Han sputters, grabbing onto the bathroom counter for support. “Me?”

Yixing nods firmly. “Yes. It has to be that way, because I won’t claim you like this, not when you are working so hard to become independent of your status. You may never fully accept it, and that’s
okay. The last thing I want is for you to rush your recovery because it’s putting off our union. If you’re the one to claim me, that will eliminate the stigma that I own you, because you’ll be the one to own me. Unlike you and many of my fellow alphas, that thought appeals to me very much.”

“Does it even work that way?” Lu Han asks as he struggles to focus on the specifics of the ritual. “Alpha saliva is supposed to heal the wound it leaves when the omega is claimed…”

“That’s incredibly old-fashioned,” Yixing tells him. “Alpha saliva has healing attributes, that is true, but we don’t draw blood anymore when claiming. The rising number of same-status unions and unions with betas has led the act of claiming to be no more than a sharp bite, enough to leave a mark, and it’s more emotional than physical. Many same-status mates claim each other to avoid the social hierarchy altogether, and mates of all statuses will periodically renew their claims as non-alpha marks fade over time.”

Yixing’s scent takes over Lu Han’s air, making him light-headed as he tries to make sense out of the new age method of claiming. “I could…I could do that.”

“I’d really like you to,” Yixing says, patting him on the hip before leaving the bathroom. “Whenever you’re ready.”

Lu Han stares at his reflection in the mirror, momentarily amused at how dumbfounded he looks while he processes Yixing’s request. He could do it right now, bonding them for life, and file with the government first thing in the morning to legally declare them united. But when he joins Yixing under the covers, all he wants to do is press against him, feeling the warm skin and soothing heartbeat relax him after such a serious conversation.

“The election is the day before my birthday,” Lu Han whispers. “You were thinking about asking me to claim you instead of focusing on the poll results.”

“The world isn’t going to end after the election,” Yixing replies, pulling him closer to bury his face into Lu Han’s hair. “Even if I win, that will just be my job. You’re my life.”

“You’re my life too,” Lu Han says, because that’s one thing he can say with utmost confidence. “I’ll do it, but not tonight.”

“Thank you.” Yixing hugs him tightly before falling slack, sleep slowly overcoming his consciousness. “In this world of uncertainty, the only constant I need is you by my side.”

Lu Han blinks back tears against Yixing’s shoulder, his omega nature beyond touched by the words. Gradually, he admits that it’s his own being that wants to hear it; it’s him who is pleased to be Yixing’s most important thing, separate from his status hormones. It feels like such a huge step in his recovery that he wants to share it with Yixing, but his alpha is already asleep.

That’s okay, Lu Han thinks happily as he lets himself drift off too. They have the rest of their lives to talk about it.

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Lu Han claims him in the morning. He’s not even fully awake yet, subconsciously sinking his teeth into Yixing’s neck the minute he stirs, and the growl Yixing releases will echo in Lu Han’s head for the rest of his days. Yixing clings to him for the duration of the bite, nails digging into Lu Han’s back harder than when Lu Han was inside him, and he doesn’t take another breath until Lu Han lets him go, gulping down his own air at feeling something so intense before his eyes are even open.

“Lu Han,” Yixing gasps, and his whole body is shaking, arms covered in goosebumps. “Lu Han…”
“Are you okay?” Lu Han asks, quickly waking up and focusing his full attention on Yixing’s concerning reaction. “Did I do it wrong?”

“You—you did it perfect,” Yixing gets out, pressing them flush together like he’s trying to fuse them into one entity. “Just…stay here with me for a while, please.”

“Of course,” Lu Han agrees, leaning in to lick the blossoming mark on Yixing’s neck in case it helps. Yixing shudders at the contact, but he seems to calm down, his breaths evening out as Lu Han kisses his skin and strokes his hair. “I’m sorry, I should have warned you first. It just kind of happened.”

“That’s how…that’s how it’s supposed to be,” Yixing struggles to speak. “A mindless act, like wolves in the wild, unpolluted by hesitation or fear of consequences. I’m yours now, Lu Han. I belong to you.”

“My alpha,” Lu Han says out loud, the power coursing through him as a result of the union. “How long does this honeymoon period last? We have a big week of last-minute campaigning.”

Yixing laughs. “That is something you should have probably asked before now. Typically, the biological urge to be close will fade after a couple days, but we should be able to function independently in the meantime. I’m interested to see how the public will react to me sporting a claim mark, though.”

“They might see you as less of an alpha,” Lu Han theorizes carefully. “Which, while insulting to you, may help voters see you as less threatening.”

“I’m not insulted,” Yixing points out, finally coherent enough to stretch his limbs. “I like that you’re the dominant one in our courtship, now union. I like it when you take charge, when you’re on top or inside of me when we mate, and if that makes me less of an alpha in society’s eyes, so be it. Status roles do not dictate my feelings and preferences. You and I match well, not because I’m an alpha and you’re an omega, but because we complement each other in basically every way.”

Lu Han’s still thinking about that when they finally drag themselves into their makeshift campaign office, which has been relocated to Sehun’s place due to his delicate condition. Jongin’s already moved in, their combined decor a battle of styles that they had clearly agreed to disagree on, but they’re so happy together that Lu Han ignores the eyesore in favor of the pleasant atmosphere. Even with Sehun’s ripe gestation scent, they smell good together.

Kris notices first, his shriek alerting the entire room and probably the neighbors to the mark on Yixing’s neck. Lu Han starts to shrink away from the attention, but Yixing stands tall and it inspires Lu Han to do the same. These are their friends, after all. Nobody jokes about Yixing being the omega in their union, only offering their congratulations and a few well-placed slaps upside Lu Han’s head for not telling them ahead of time.

“You two are next,” Kris says to Junmyeon and Jongdae, who exchange a stare that looks more challenging than romantic, and Lu Han doesn’t think he’ll be asking for the details of their courtship anytime soon.

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The public doesn’t react nearly as viciously as Lu Han expects them to, wishing them well on social media when the pictures inevitably leak. Those who oppose it are the ones who haven’t forgiven Lu Han for his past behavior, opposing the union itself instead of who claimed whom. Naturally, the other candidates jump at the opportunity to discredit Yixing in the eleventh hour, questioning the
leadership capabilities of someone who would give up their independence like that. This pisses off united mates everywhere, bringing more attention to the inequality of the status order and the need for its elimination, and Yixing’s carrying almost half of the city’s support going into election day.

In the midst of his flailing about the positive reaction to Boa, who had purposely scheduled a session with him that morning to help alleviate any anxiety, Lu Han learns that he’s the one who is giving the status order such a strong influence in his own mind. Yixing couldn’t care less what is expected of him as an alpha, nor does Amber or any of their alpha friends, and while Kris goes out of his way to shove his omega status into everyone’s faces solely to battle stereotypes, the rest of the “Oh Code” as Sehun calls them are indifferent, simply accepting what life gave them and overcoming adversity in their own ways.

This realization leaves Lu Han encouraged and disappointed at the same time, because now that he’s been enlightened by the very thing everyone’s been trying to tell him for the past year, he feels like he’s wasted a lot of time conforming to society’s standards. Boa is quite possibly more excited than he is, declaring it an incredible breakthrough and suggesting they meet more often to build upon this new foundation of thought. His ingrained prejudice isn’t going to reverse itself overnight, she warns him, but now that he’s isolated his own thinking as the source of the problem, he can start working toward unlearning it.

It’s so hopeful that he’s sporting a grin at the live election coverage that night, beaming like they’ve already won. Lu Han feels like he’s won, anyway, both in his union with Yixing and the battle against himself. He stands next to Yixing in their section of the auditorium, along with just about everyone they know and half of the community. To anyone else, Yixing presents himself as the calm, confident leader who will lead these people through the status equality revolution, but the hand that grips onto Lu Han’s is damp and squirmy.

Lu Han gently strokes Yixing’s knuckle with his thumb, relaxing his mate in the only way he can right now. He’s grateful that Yixing trusts him enough to show him this nervous, not always put together side of himself. Yixing has been meeting with Boa too, purely for coaching on how to support Lu Han during this emotionally vulnerable time, and part of that is exposing his own weaknesses to Lu Han. Lu Han hears all about Yixing’s insecurities, what happened to his mother to inspire an omega-safe store, and how all of the other alphas ostracized him from their circles when he started supporting omega rights. Lu Han’s consistently amazed when such a strong alpha breaks down in front of him, happy and proud to be the one to comfort him.

He squeezes Yixing’s hand when Heechul announces the final votes, thinking that no matter what, the stress of this election will be over in a few minutes. Heechul used to host a reality show, so he draws out the results for added suspense, at least until the combined scents of hundreds of anxious people start to become noticeable.

Then the numbers are up and Lu Han can’t believe his eyes—they won, they had actually earned the majority of their community’s votes. Yixing is a city councilperson, beginning his political journey that will undoubtedly not end after his term expires.

Lu Han is still staring in disbelief when Yixing pulls him into his arms, sobbing openly into his shoulder, and the numbers blur in Lu Han’s own vision as his emotions also overflow. All he can do is hold onto Yixing as the reality of their victory crashes down all around them, the deafening cheers of their supporters adding to the already incredible feeling. Lu Han could fly right now, but that doesn’t hold a candle to the scent of Yixing’s success, his instincts ready and raring to lead. It’s probably more than Yixing can feasibly handle, judging by the way he sways as he tries to compose himself enough to make an acceptance speech.
Lu Han accompanies him to the podium, mostly because Yixing refuses to let go of his hand, and he stares out at all of the eyes watching them intently while Yixing speaks of revolutions and a better future. Every word that comes out of Yixing’s mouth is entrancing the audience just like they entrance Lu Han because Yixing really was born to be up here, passionately addressing the public and influencing them to not only believe in him but to also strive to inspire others to do social good on their own.

Both he and Lu Han are absolute messes in the pictures published all over the media, all tears and big smiles, but neither can find it within themselves to care. Kris and Lu Han’s alma mater hosts Yixing’s victory party, renting out an entire reception hall with a banquet and an open bar. Chanyeol deejays, Yixing makes a slightly tipsy speech, and Sehun inhales several plates of food like he’s eating for four instead of two. Lu Han doesn’t leave Yixing’s side even when a familiar voice calls out to him from across the room.

“Taozi!” Lu Han exclaims, quickly waving over the tall alpha and smaller beta. Yixing releases him long enough for him to hug his old friends, then Tao looks sheepishly over at Yixing.

“I think I might have made a bad impression on you that time,” Tao says, holding out his hand politely. “Congratulations, City Councilperson Zhang.”

“Just Yixing, please,” Yixing corrects him, shaking the proffered hand and grinning at them both. “Thank you for taking care of my Lu Han back then, and before.”

A ripple of tension shudders through Lu Han at the possessive wording, but he can’t quite determine whether it’s unpleasant or not.

“Thank you for taking care of him now,” Tao replies, and the two alphas exchange a look of understanding.

Yixing’s mark still shines brightly above his collar, declaring to everyone who sees it that he belongs to Lu Han, so it shouldn’t bother him one bit to belong to Yixing in return. Yet, the way they’re discussing him now makes him feel like a helpless omega who can’t do anything on his own, even if that’s not how either one of them means it.

Tao’s hands are flying around, translating everything for Chenchen’s benefit, and he pauses to read Chenchen’s comment out loud after the beta tugs at his sleeve.

“Not that he needs it,” Tao adds.

Chenchen offers Lu Han a sympathetic smile, and Lu Han subtly signs him a thank you.

“He definitely does not,” Yixing agrees, abandoning Lu Han’s hand to slip an arm around his waist, fingers resting intimately on his hip. Lu Han is much more comfortable with this type of possession, inhaling deeply to breathe in a little of that pleasant alpha dominance mixed in with Yixing’s calming leadership scent.

It’s all wasted on Tao, but Chenchen gives him two thumbs up as the pair of them head off to mingle. Lu Han doesn’t see them again until much later, when he’s in danger of carrying Yixing out of this hall himself, and he smiles at the sight of Kyungsoo’s wide eyes regarding Tao like a mirage, struggling to imitate the signs Tao makes so he can talk to Chenchen too.

If Lu Han had thought about it, he would have introduced Tao and Kyungsoo before now, because Kyungsoo doesn’t care for hormonal instincts one bit and Tao doesn’t have any, but Lu Han was too wrapped up in his own business to spare a thought about anyone else. They seem to make up for it
now, laughing as they get to know each other, and Lu Han finally understands what Yixing had said a long time ago about mated pairs wanting the same happiness for others.

“If I couldn’t smell you, I’d think you were jealous,” Yixing teases him, slumping onto Lu Han’s shoulder because he’s celebrated a little too much. “I’m drunk.”

“Really?” Lu Han feigns surprise. “I couldn’t tell.”

“It’s midnight,” Yixing announces, flinging his arms around Lu Han and pressing a sloppy kiss to his cheek. “Happy birthday, baby.”

Lu Han makes a face as he struggles to keep Yixing upright. “Just what I wanted, a drunk politician.”

“Stop making fun of me and take me home,” Yixing whispers, too whiny to be demanding, and Lu Han rolls his eyes as he picks up the newly elected politician bridal style, hoping that Kris will excuse their sudden departure and apologize for them. Most of the people still here are college students anyway.

“Looks like you’re the omega princess this time,” Lu Han says, angling Yixing carefully through the double doors and out into the cool air.

Yixing beams up at him, happily holding onto Lu Han’s neck. “Either way, we have our happy ending.”

“Nah,” Lu Han says, grinning into the night. “This is just our beginning.”

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Just like Lu Han’s counselling, Yixing’s election doesn’t yield instant results. His first six months are spent much like the last six months were, only now he’s campaigning for government funding to roll out all of the programs that had gotten him elected. Now that he’s earning a paycheck, he hires Kris and Taeyeon as his official staff, Kris running public relations while Taeyeon continues to oversee the marketing operations. His backup manager at the store takes over full time, periodically filling Yixing in on anything dire that requires his attention, but mostly he just checks in every now and then to make sure things are running smoothly.

Working as a city councilperson, they quickly find out, means a lot of speeches and persuading others to do things. Yixing is great at both of those things, and he accomplishes two incredible feats by the end of the year: passing of an ordinance prohibiting street harassment, and approval for a hand-picked team of scientists and doctors dedicated to hormone suppressant research—including second-year intern Do Kyungsoo. This gets the attention of the federal government, who calls a hearing and grants additional funding after moving testimony by not only Yixing and Lu Han, but also Amber and Taeyeon.

As for Lu Han himself, he reaches a crucial point in his counselling where Boa suggests that he might benefit more by sharing his story with others, much like Boa herself had done by becoming a counselor. Lu Han’s happy to quit his meaningless job to travel around the area and speak publicly, namely at universities and omega support groups, where he emphasizes the importance of personal worth and not falling victim to status roles. He gets a standing ovation every time, and the public opinion of him gradually improves. He must be doing something right.

Of course, he’s happy to be Yixing’s arm candy as well, attending political functions as both a supporter and a role model. He’s managed to get Yixing into a bigger apartment, one that includes all
of Lu Han’s things as well, and he considers performing omega stereotypes—such as cooking for his exhausted mate after a long day—a type of behavioral conditioning.

He adapts much better to his role as a politician’s mate when Yixing has a few days to breathe and takes him to meet his parents. Yixing’s mother is a strong omega who inspires Lu Han with his unapologetic opinions and positive outlook on life. Naturally, he’s incredibly proud of his son, and he wishes Lu Han luck in keeping up with him.

“I didn’t think he would ever settle down,” Mama Zhang says, staring out the window at his acres of land. “I guess there really is someone for everyone.”

Lu Han’s attention wanders over to where Yixing is outside helping his dad, leaving the two omegas to bond. “I never thought I would meet an alpha who respected me, let alone one who fits me so perfectly.”

“I’m glad you found him, Lu Han,” Mama Zhang says, resting his hand affectionately on Lu Han’s arm. He smells like grapefruit and chamomile, refreshing and relaxing, making all of Lu Han’s anxiety just melt away. “Whatever brought you two together, I hope you never forget.”

What brought them together, Lu Han realizes later, was the unfairness of the status order. It’s ironic because the very thing they’re fighting to overthrow is the very reason why they know each other at all. Yixing disagrees when Lu Han brings it up, saying they were bound to cross paths eventually since Kris and Lu Han always shopped at his store, and Lu Han’s too serene from the pleasant company of Yixing’s family to argue. It doesn’t matter anyway. Whether the status order is to credit for their meeting or not, Lu Han has no reservations about watching it go up in flames.

“Lu Han,” Yixing says one morning after they make breakfast together, leaning over to fix Lu Han’s tie because Lu Han can’t ever seem to get it right.

“Yes?” Lu Han answers, tilting his head to give Yixing his full attention. Yixing may like it when Lu Han takes charge, but Yixing’s words still compel Lu Han to listen and adhere to his wishes. Yixing doesn’t take advantage of him, so Lu Han’s grown to enjoy it, finally acknowledging his omega instincts to please his alpha.

“It’s getting cold outside,” Yixing says vaguely, and Lu Han waits for him to go on. “How long has it been since your last heat?”

Lu Han’s taken aback as he counts the months. “Wow, it’s been a long time! I’m so spoiled by these suppressants that I completely forgot. Should I have one soon?”

“Yes,” Yixing rushes to agree, shaking his head so fast that Lu Han thinks it will snap right off his neck and roll across the floor. “Please…if you want to.”

“I think you want me to,” Lu Han teases, grinning as he nudges Yixing’s arm. “A little wound up lately, City Councilperson Zhang?”

Yixing sighs into his hands. “You have no idea. This job is more stressful than running my own store and grad school combined. It’s worth it when I get positive results, and at the end of the day I really feel like I’m making a difference in abolishing the status order—but to be completely blunt with you, I’ve gotta have a rut. I’ll bring it on myself if I have to.”

“I’ll stop taking them right now,” Lu Han assures him, his fingers lingering on Yixing’s bare wrist. He can almost feel Yixing’s pulse race. “Don’t worry, baby. Your omega will take care of you.”

Yixing exhales in relief, making Lu Han laugh until Yixing takes his breath away in a promising
kiss. Lu Han’s skin tingles all day, or maybe that’s because he didn’t take his pill for the first time since before the election. It’s not supposed to onset heat that fast, giving the omega at least two days for their hormones to resurface, but it wouldn’t be the first time Lu Han’s body has done what it wanted, especially around Yixing.

It doesn’t happen that night either, which works out because Jongin calls them around two in the morning, babbling entirely too fast for someone who had just been dead asleep to comprehend. After a few mumbled versions of questionably accurate words, Lu Han finally gets it out of him that Sehun is going into labor, and then Lu Han’s wide awake, shaking Yixing through similar incoherence until they’re both racing to the hospital.

Luckily, Kyungsoo’s on duty that night because none of them are in any condition to be an adult right now. They listen to Kyungsoo’s instructions with panicked attention, like they’re in a plane that’s going down. The only one who isn’t completely freaking out is actually Sehun, who rolls his eyes at them all as he taps on his giant belly and tells his daughter that Mommy’s friends are crazy.

Kris and Amber show up not long after, but Kris is any help once he gets around the others, and Amber somehow manages to project her alpha scent enough to calm them down. Even Yixing is affected, his own instincts subdued from a combination of his job stress, being half asleep, and Lu Han in pre-heat.

“By the way,” Lu Han says once they’re ushered into the waiting room, save for Jongin, whom Kyungsoo had to remind to join his mate in the delivery room. “I’m off my pills, so I might go into heat while we’re here.”

“Oh no.” Kyungsoo appears at his side, placing cold hands on his face. “Did you have a bad reaction to the new suppressants?”

“No,” Lu Han answers, and Kris has the audacity to give him a lewd look.

Satisfied with Lu Han’s current body temperature, Kyungsoo returns to his feet. “If you feel it coming on, let someone know. We have rooms we can put you in.”

“Do they rent by the hour?” Kris asks seriously, and both Amber and Kyungsoo smack him upside the head.

“Yes, I’d like to take my mate’s knot,” Lu Han says pointedly, staring Kris down as much as he can with halfway-opened eyes. “What of it?”

Kris looks impressed, Amber grins, and Kyungsoo just shakes his head.

“Can you not talk about that right now?” Yixing asks quietly, pushing his face into Lu Han’s shoulder. “I’m dying here.”

“Sorry,” Lu Han says, lifting a hand to stroke through Yixing’s wild bed hair. “I should be okay for another day or two, anyway. I don’t feel hot, just tired.”

“It’s going to be a while before Sehun gives birth,” Kyungsoo tells them. “You may as well get settled in.”

Minseok and Chanyeol, who had been closing up the club when they got the call, trail in about an hour later with coffee, making them everyone’s favorite people. Yixing actually falls asleep on Lu Han’s lap, stretched out across several seats, and if there was any chance at all of Yixing going back home to get well rested for work tomorrow (later today), Lu Han would suggest it. Because he knows Yixing wants to be here as much as the rest of them, Lu Han lets him sleep.
The hustle and bustle of a hospital waiting room blurs through Lu Han’s tired mind, but his fingers stay active in Yixing’s hair.

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The sun is high in the sky when Kim-Oh Hwanhee makes her grand entrance into the world, and Chanyeol is the only one even remotely awake enough to appreciate her. He must have baby radar, sitting up mid-snore a second before her first cry, and he nearly knocks Minseok to the ground in his scramble to run toward Sehun’s delivery room. Lu Han’s half conscious, not one to sleep well in public, but he gets his second (or fourth) wind when he sees Chanyeol race down the hallway, quickly rousing Yixing to follow.

She’s got Jongin’s eyes and Sehun’s nose, singing her shrill song of life for them when they crowd into the small room with the new parents. Sehun’s already passed out and Jongin’s close, struggling to stay awake and upright while Chanyeol is happily the first one to hold the baby.

“Look at that,” Jongin says to Lu Han, pointing a shaky finger at his daughter while he sways where he stands. “I made that.”

“Good job,” Lu Han praises, letting Jongin slump against him while Chanyeol coos over the baby girl. Next to him, Minseok only has eyes for Chanyeol, watching how natural his mate is with someone else’s baby. Lu Han’s heart aches for them, hoping Yixing finds a way for them to have their own child soon.

“Can I hold her?” Yixing asks, looking from Jongin to Chanyeol, like he’s not sure who should give the permission. Jongin just waves his consent as he glances longingly at the bed Sehun is snoozing in.

All at once, Lu Han understands Minseok’s fascination. His attention perks at the gentle way Yixing holds the newborn infant, taking care to hold up her head. She screams at him in greeting and he baby-talks in response, telling her how cute she is and how spoiled she’s going to be. Lu Han is beyond enamored—if this were an anime, there would probably be hearts floating around his eyes and cute pop music playing in the background.

“You two are next,” Jongin whispers, quietly enough for only Lu Han to hear, and Lu Han doesn’t twitch or frown, just hums noncommittally. Maybe.

“Sorry I’m late!” Junmyeon falls in the doorway, dragging an exhausted looking Jongdae behind him. “My heat just broke. I came as soon as I could.”

“That’s what he said,” Amber jokes, bumping fists with Kris without looking.

“I think my dick is gonna fall off,” Jongdae greets them, bracing his hands on his knees. “How do alphas do this every month?”

“We don’t,” the four alphas in the room respond, and Jongdae rolls his eyes.

Junmyeon hadn’t even showered before he left, still sweaty and disheveled from his heat, but the aroma of honeysuckle and cherries is oddly pleasant now. He’s the next one to hold Hwanhee, who likes him a lot more than Yixing. The frown is evident on Yixing’s face as he returns to Lu Han’s side, where he sulks on the shoulder that Jongin hasn’t commandeered.

“Aww, don’t take it personally,” Lu Han says to him. “Babies are usually more comfortable with omegas.”
“Chanyeol’s an alpha!” Yixing whines, sounding like a child whose toy had been taken away.

“Chanyeol’s more maternal than half of the omegas I know,” Junmyeon points out.

“He’s also not halfway in rut,” Amber adds, sending Yixing a pointed look. “Honestly, you’re both a mess. Go home already.”

“I’m fine,” Lu Han insists. “I want to hold her too.”

“It’s not you I’m worried about!” Amber exclaims. “Yixing may have incredible restraint, but this is just inhumane.”

Lu Han turns to look at Yixing’s face, searching for truth in Amber’s words. “Is it really that bad?”

“You’re enough to drive me insane,” Yixing tells him, followed by a harsh exhale. “Add Junmyeon post-heat and Sehun postpartum, and I don’t actually know how I’m standing up right now.”

“Let me hold her, and we’ll leave,” Lu Han promises, waving over Junmyeon who gently transfers the tiny person into Lu Han’s arms. She’s so little, squirming like she can’t get comfortable, and Lu Han shifts her so she’s looking at Jongin. “Is that Daddy? Do you see Daddy?”

Jongin lifts a hand to touch her face, his own fruity scent strengthening as his instincts rise to protect his daughter. “Mine,” he mumbles, the warmth from Lu Han’s heart spreading even more, clouding his mind.

“Dammit, Lu Han!” Kyungsoo calls out from the hallway, shoving past all the bodies in the delivery room to stare up at Lu Han with unimpressed eyes. He has to be approaching the end of his shift by now, looking as tired and worn out as the rest of them. “I’ve smelled you in heat so many times that you may as well be my omega.”

Yixing growls so sharply that Lu Han shudders, using the last of his coherent thought to hand Hwanhee over to her father while Kyungsoo eyes Yixing.

“You don’t scare me, alpha,” Kyungsoo says to his longtime friend. “If I was in the business of breaking heats, I could have had him a long time ago when you were off being an idiot. Lucky for all of us, I’m not interested in any of your hormones, so stop acting like I’m gonna steal your mate and come with me to one of the emergency heat rooms.”

Lu Han catches Amber’s amused wave before they’re both dragged out by Kyungsoo, who is surprisingly strong for being such a small person. Lu Han ends up in Yixing’s arms when his knees give out, Yixing’s alpha instincts giving him the strength and coordination to carry his mate to safety, which, in this case, is a scent-proof room with a bed and a counter stocked with heat supplies.

“You really need to work on managing your cycle,” Kyungsoo lectures Lu Han before closing them in, and Lu Han has approximately three seconds to be offended before Yixing’s on him, pinning him to the bed and tearing off their clothes.

“Lu Han,” Yixing whines, already rutting against Lu Han’s leg as he struggles to get out of his shirt. “I can’t stop.”

“It’s okay,” Lu Han tells him, lifting his heavy arms to help Yixing undress. His body throbs in need, Yixing’s hands all over him the instant they’re released from the tangled sleeves, Lu Han’s thighs wrapping invitingly around Yixing’s waist. His own fingers push between his legs, stretching himself enough for the cock that’s pressing against the back of his hand. “Almost.”
“I’m sorry,” Yixing gasps, frowning as he buries his face into Lu Han’s neck. Lu Han is reminded of every omega who has ever gone into heat in front of him, recalling how their faces would cringe in mortification at their uncontrollable behavior.

“It’s okay,” Lu Han says again, nudging Yixing’s cheek with his nose. He brushes fingertips against his prostate and moans, earning a fresh gust of alpha pheromones that has him moving faster. “Yixing…now.”

He barely gets his hand out of the way before Yixing’s pushing into him, bottoming out with one thrust and rutting so fast that Lu Han immediately comes untouched. Yixing’s growling fills his head, their hands rushing to touch every expanse of sweaty skin they can reach as Yixing’s knot starts to form. Yixing’s so far gone that he keeps trying to thrust even after they’re locked together, a deep, guttural moan tearing from his lungs at the stimulation.

Lu Han fists himself and comes again, arching beneath Yixing so sharply that the knot rubs against his prostate. His nails catch on the skin of Yixing’s neck, just under his claim mark as he tries to press closer to feel more of the stimulation. Yixing fuses their mouths together, tongues swirling wildly, and Yixing shudders on top of him, moaning into their kiss and releasing inside him. He deflates as fast as he’d attacked, collapsing right on top of Lu Han, who accepts the added weight with open arms and legs.

“You didn’t…” Yixing starts, choking on his air as his lungs demand oxygen. “You didn’t take anything.”

Lu Han’s eyes widen. “I didn’t.”

“Kyungsoo can probably get something,” Yixing rushes to say, likely assuring himself as much as Lu Han. “There’s a post-heat contraceptive, I think.”

“Or we could see what happens.”

Lu Han opens his eyes to find Yixing gaping at him, looking more terrified than when he was overwhelmed running for office. Truth be told, Lu Han’s scared too, but his omega instincts won’t let him be too freaked out about it, since the entire purpose of having a heat is to breed.

It wouldn’t be too bad to be pregnant, he thinks—technically unemployed, he had been there through Sehun’s last two trimesters, the main one to take care of their youngest omega when Jongin was away. Sehun was happy the whole time, showing off his growing belly and eating everything in sight. He also reported that the sex was just as good as during a heat, and much more comfortable.

Then Lu Han thinks about a tiny person with his nose and Yixing’s gentle eyes, their child who is wholly reliant on them for everything. Lu Han would ring in the second year of Yixing’s city council term while very pregnant. He’d become more and more useless as time goes on, only to have his days and nights completely monopolized by the baby after they arrive. His parents would be thrilled, having long since written off any hope of grandchildren with the way Lu Han vehemently denied his status, but they wouldn’t babysit nearly enough.

“We’ll get a pill,” Lu Han decides, and Yixing sighs in relief as he leans in to kiss him. They make use of the knot binding them together and get off again, Lu Han’s body trembling at the come trapped inside him. This only feels good when he’s in heat, he remembers, wiggling his hips from side to side to feel it swirl around.

Yixing’s rut is so fierce that he comes twice more before he’s spent, knotting Lu Han for much longer than he’s used to. They take the opportunity to relax, knowing that they’ll have to use the
small reprieve between heat waves to relocate to their home. At this point, Lu Han has more confidence in himself making it home without incident than Yixing, who’s still moderately out of it despite being clearly done for a while.

Lu Han has never thought about what ruts are like for alphas, aside from deeming them less serious than heats. Seeing Yixing now, he retracts his prior statement, adding that an alpha’s rut can be set off by any omega in heat while an omega’s heat is usually on a predictable cycle no matter what.

“I’m sorry,” Lu Han whispers, pressing kisses to Yixing’s face. “I had no idea it was so bad for you.”

“We need contraceptives for alphas too,” Yixing mutters. “We can’t be sure the omegas will always take theirs.”

“Hey!” Lu Han exclaims, grinning when Yixing smirks down at him. “We are clearly not responsible enough to be parents.”

“Definitely not,” Yixing agrees. “Okay, my knot’s about to shrink. Get ready to move.”

Lu Han whines, but he’s the one who’s swiping most of the heat supplies while Yixing’s still trying to get back into his own pants. Maybe Lu Han should help him, but he’s already starting to feel warm again and they live ten minutes away. He loads himself up with padding and makes sure they’re both presentable, then drags Yixing all the way to the car where Yixing breaks more driving laws than a politician should as he rushes home.

They barely make it, falling to the floor on the other side of their door as Lu Han’s scent takes Yixing over again. Lu Han’s knees will be angry with him later, but for now he’s happy to ride Yixing’s knot right there in the entryway, his energy replenished from the water he’d chugged in the car. Yixing ruts up from below, making Lu Han bounce and use his full weight to slam back down, lodging Yixing’s knot deeper than before. It’s constant stimulation on his prostate and he comes hard, moaning at full volume while Yixing growls. His fingers dig into Lu Han’s hips to keep him where he is—like he could move even if he wanted to.

“I think my heat has broken already,” Lu Han says in amazement, and Yixing lets out a long whine. “Kidding.”

Yixing narrows his eyes, still managing to be gentle even while he’s glaring, and Lu Han leans down to kiss the unamused expression off of his mate’s face. Yixing gets him back by luring him into a filthy battle of tongues, releasing enough pheromones to send his heat rising by several thousand degrees, and all it takes is a hand around his cock to make a liar out of him. Lu Han rocks back and forth as much as he can, building up to another mind-blowing orgasm, and then everything stops, right at the brink of climax.

“I’m beat,” Yixing says, stretching beneath him with a big, fake yawn. “Good night.”

“You’re hilarious,” Lu Han deadpans. He’s aching, unamused with Yixing’s antics. “I could just never have a heat again. Make you rut all by yourself. I did this for you, you know.”

“I know.” Yixing drops the act and reaches for him, pulling him into a much more tolerable kiss. “I’m sorry my rut took you away from your friends on such an important day.”

Lu Han shrugs. “It’s not like the kid is going anywhere. She’ll still be there when my heat breaks.”

“Which was two minutes ago,” Yixing teases.
“Yeah, right.” Lu Han squeezes his muscles around Yixing’s knot, earning a surprised growl and a retaliating hand around his cock, jerking him off so fast that his orgasm is practically forced out of him. Then Lu Han collapses, his energy completely depleted after marathon heat mating on two hours of sleep.

He’s out before Yixing’s knot shrinks, waking up considerably cleaner and wrapped in Yixing’s arms on their bed. Yixing’s passed out, his hair still damp and smelling strongly of shampoo, which Lu Han breathes in along with Yixing’s familiar protective scent. He needs to drink some water, but he can’t bring himself to move, resorting to poking Yixing in the side until the alpha reluctantly stirs.

“Hey,” he says, his voice groggy with sleep. “Take care of your omega.”

Yixing’s eyes flutter open, the corners of his lips lifting into a smile as he reaches a hand to cup Lu Han’s face. “I’m so happy you can say that now.”

“I can,” Lu Han says. “I’m your omega. And I am very in heat, so please get me some fucking water before I die of thirst.”

“Ah, sorry,” Yixing mutters, falling all over himself to get to his feet. He doesn’t quite find his balance, bumping into walls and corners on his way to the kitchen, but he returns with a giant pitcher of water that Lu Han practically dives for, clinging to Yixing as half of it is poured down his throat.

Yixing gives him vitamins too, including a contraceptive pill, and Lu Han flops onto his back, feeling much better. The fire still rages inside him, but it’s contained for now. He blindly reaches out for Yixing, wanting to feel his cool skin, and ends up getting Yixing’s entire body flush along his side.

“I made a few phone calls while you were sleeping,” Yixing whispers into his hair. “Taeyeon already knew Kris and I wouldn’t be at work today, rescheduling all of our meetings after giving me an earful about not being my secretary. I suppose I should get one of those. Sehun finally woke up and held his daughter, and Chanyeol hasn’t left the hospital yet. Your physician says that regular contraceptive pills within a couple hours should be good enough, but we scheduled an appointment for you to take a test in a few weeks, just in case.”

“You called my physician?” Lu Han asks. “Are you that paranoid that I’m pregnant?”

“Yes,” Yixing answers bluntly. “If you are, we should know as soon as possible so that we can make arrangements.”

“Arrangements such as…” Lu Han trails off, his instincts raging at the implication.

“Lowering your workload and making sure you’re taken care of, of course,” Yixing replies, and Lu Han relaxes so suddenly that he feels like a deflated balloon. “I don’t think you’d stop working completely, but I’d support you if you did. We can hire help if you don’t want to be a stay at home mom. It wouldn’t be the end of our lives, Lu Han. We could make it work.”

“Let’s just wait and see what happens,” Lu Han says, shuddering as another wave of heat crashes into him. “Take care of me now.”

“Always.”

*  

Lu Han’s not pregnant, but Junmyeon is. Jongdae freaks out about it until Yixing gives him a stern lecture about stressing out a fertilized omega, and Baekhyun puts him in touch with other beta dads.
to help him adjust. Sehun preens at being the pregnancy expert as the youngest, happily taking his senior under his wing to share his infinite wisdom. It’s probably the first time Lu Han has ever seen Junmyeon so uncertain and out of control of his emotions, at least until Jongdae gets over himself and lives up to his role of the supportive mate.

It opens Lu Han’s eyes to the personal sacrifices involved in having a child, and he starts taking a contraceptive every day along with his heat suppressant. He’s definitely not ready to risk his sanity yet, if ever, their close call more than enough for now. Jongin and Sehun’s daughter is there to appease any maternal urges, though Chanyeol probably has those more than Lu Han does. Lu Han is pretty sure that Minseok and Chanyeol share custody of Hwanhee with as often as she stays with them.

The second year of Yixing’s term kicks off with a bang as his research team makes a breakthrough in devising a drug for suppressing alpha urges. He offers himself up as a test subject, but Lu Han shuts that down real fast, and the entire community gets a kick out of hearing that City Councilperson Zhang’s mate is the only one who has veto power over him. Unsurprisingly, there are a lot of unmated alphas who are willing to suffer unforeseen side effects for science, in the hopes that they will be able to control themselves around omegas and not want to fight each other every time they have a territorial dispute.

Lu Han didn’t even know that Kyungsoo and Tao were courting each other until they get united, throwing a party in lieu of the traditional private ritual. The concept of claiming is quickly phasing out anyway, leaving only the legal paperwork showing government recognition of claimed mates. Lu Han doesn’t yearn for Yixing to claim him anymore, nor is Yixing any less satisfied with Lu Han being the one to claim him. Junmyeon and Jongdae didn’t claim each other at all, nor are they united by law, yet they’re having a child together.

No matter how progressive society gets, no matter how privileged he feels with his suppressants and his alpha protection, Lu Han doesn’t forget the fear and ridicule he endured as a young omega in an alpha world. He still sees Boa once a month, continuing to work out his personal issues despite the incredible progress he’s made battling his status dysphoria. He doesn’t want to relapse, struggling every day to look into the mirror and accept himself as a mated omega man, despite not being solicited in over a year.

This whole experience just makes him want to prevent others from going through the same thing, and giving speeches isn’t enough. He enrolls in a master’s of education program at his old university, amused that “Professor Lu” could become a reality after all. He might rather teach at lower levels, where his influence is more susceptible to impressionable minds, but that’s not something he has to decide right now. Yixing supports him two hundred percent, bragging to anyone who will let him ramble about his mate dedicating the rest of his life to molding future generations, and Kris offers to write letters of recommendation based on his fifteen years of experience being lectured on economic statistics.

Lu Han’s walking past Yixing’s store on the way home from class when he smells something frightening—an unmarked omega going into heat. He drops his bags rather dramatically and runs down the street, his nose leading him to a park where two alphas are crowding the small omega, who is too weak to fight them off.

Lu Han may not be an alpha, but that doesn’t mean he can’t protect anyone. He races toward her, prepared to fight in her honor, then stops abruptly when he hears what the alphas are actually saying to her.

“Come on, you need to drink some water,” one of them says. “You’ll dehydrate if you don’t.”
“Are you sure we can’t help you home?” the other one asks. “It’s not safe for you to be out here alone. I know you’re scared, but we’re not gonna try to mate with you, I promise.”

“Go away!” the omega yells, her shrill voice scaring even Lu Han. “I can’t be around either of you! Please leave me alone!”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t do that,” the first alpha says gently. “My father taught me better than to walk away from an omega who needs help. Can we call someone for you? Your parents, or a friend?”

The omega starts shaking, and Lu Han knows she doesn’t have much longer before she loses her mind. He resigns himself to interrupting what might be the turning point of the status order, inserting himself right between the two alphas and the omega to run hormone interference.

“Thank you for trying to help her, but I’ve got it from here,” Lu Han tells the alphas firmly, and they nod and scatter. He vaguely notices that their scents are more protective than hormonal, briefly wondering if head alpha genes aren’t more common than Yixing had theorized.

“Help me,” the omega begs, pulling Lu Han from his thoughts. Her floral scent is potent enough to give Lu Han an allergy attack. “I needed supplies, but I got lost on my way home, and those two sent me into heat just by being nice. What the hell, right? I hate being an omega so much.”

Lu Han understands her more than she will ever know, but he just scoops her up into his arms. “What’s your address?”

She rattles it off, her forehead burning hot when she rests it against Lu Han’s collarbone, and he tries to make small talk with her to keep her awake for the short journey. Her name is Krystal, she’s twenty-two, and she has just moved here with her older sister, Jessica, who is Lu Han’s age and manages a clothing store. Krystal’s starting her last year of college at Lu Han’s university, which is brand new to her, and she sounds much less stressed about it when Lu Han speaks highly of his alma mater and offers to help her acclimate as a senior.

Once he has her safely in her room, he gathers up a large amount of water and makes sure she takes some vitamins. The house smells of beta as well as omega, which leads Lu Han to leave Jessica a note with his phone number in case Krystal needs anything else. He wants to leave as soon as possible to give Krystal her privacy, but she gives him such a pitiful look that he pets her head and tells her everything will be okay. One day she’ll meet someone who matches her perfectly, making her heats enjoyable instead of miserable. Failing that, she can get on suppressants.

“Fuck that. I’m gonna get a knot with benefits,” she scoffs at him, and Lu Han’s faith in the future of humanity soars.

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