Summary

lu han is afraid of heights, among other things.

Notes

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warnings for homophobia, hazing, mentions of past violence/bullying and past emotional abuse. please take this warning seriously!!!

some music if you’re curious.
"This is the most horrible thing that has ever happened to me," Lu Han croaks as he grips the bench, white-knuckled and tense. "The actual worst thing. Ever."

He tries not to look down at his leg. Instead, he takes calming breaths and focuses on the dirt under his fingernails and the swiftly drying sweat on his back. Yixing is humming the Chinese national anthem under his breath.

"You’re such a drama queen," Minseok replies. "Although I suppose this is more worthy of your drama-queen antics than last week’s overreaction." An accompanying eye-roll.

Lu Han had not overreacted. He just doesn’t like to be called pretty, especially by hot girls he would like to ask out because they are bomb-ass football players and also very hot. So maybe he had exaggerated a little about the magnitude of his broken heart.

At least Jinri hadn’t actually rejected him. Because he had never actually asked her out. Because she’d said you’re... very pretty? when he’d asked her what she thought of him. It had felt, at the time, a little like she’d ripped his heart out of his chest and ground it with her football cleats. He’d stuttered out an excuse to leave. He can still feel the shoeprint of her dismissal.

Coach prods his knee again with sharp fingers. Lu Han lets out an extremely masculine and stoic yelp.

"I’m going to be out for the whole season, Minseok!" Lu Han then bites his lip and holds back the moan of pain threatening to escape. He rests his head on Yixing’s shoulder as Minseok leans over their coach’s shoulder. There are tears pricking in the corners of his eyes from the pain. The locker room is too hot.

"No, you’re not." Minseok’s hair is curling with sweat over his ears. It makes his face even cuter. Lu Han wants to pinch his cheeks and squeeze until Minseok inevitably kicks him in the knee for touching him.

His fucked up knee. And ow! ow! ow! What is Coach even doing? Lu Han is grievously injured. Coach can’t just dig his hands into Lu Han’s leg like that. "Tell me the truth, Coach. I can take it. Are you going to have to cut it off?"

"Oh my god," Minseok says, like Lu Han is being insufferable. "You’re not going to be out the whole season and no one is going to amputate your leg. It’s probably just a sprain." He crosses his arms. "Don’t milk it."

"Do I look like I’m pretending to be hurt?" The truth is, Lu Han hides any minor injury that might keep him off the pitch. He has what is probably the lowest injury record on team file. This gives him
an aura of invincibility, which he appreciates.

"You like attention." Minseok frowns. "I never know what to expect with you. You bitched for three days when that stylist in Apgujeong made your hair too blond, even though you knew it looked fine. How am I supposed to tell your real problems apart from your fake ones?"

"Yeah, I like attention," Lu Han says, and his leg might as well be on fire. If Coach doesn’t end up doing it, Lu Han might cut it off himself. "Positive attention. Admiration of my awesome. Enjoyment of my superior skills in football." Not for his face. Not for failing. Not for being too weak to get back up after taking a fall.

One minute, Lu Han had been running. The next, his cleats were slipping, and he had felt something tear. Then he had tripped down into the grass, unable to rise. A dead ball. Carried off the pitch like a baby. More embarrassingly, he’s positive Jinri had been on the sidelines.

"Actually," Coach Jung Yunho says, "he really will probably be out for the whole season." He delivers the news like this doesn’t mean terrible things for everyone, and especially terrible things for Lu Han.

"What?" Minseok’s eyes go wide. "Are you serious?" He is looking at Lu Han with new eyes. Lu Han would stick out his tongue in an I told you so if that were not both incredibly immature and beyond him at the moment.

"Wait, what?" Yixing suddenly tunes back into the conversation. "Lu Han’s actually hurt?"

Lu Han whimpers. This, Lu Han knows, is his recruiting year. This, Lu Han knows, is the year he is supposed to get noticed. Disappointment, anger, and pain mingle in a terrible cocktail of unmet expectations on the surface of his tongue. There are only so many chances to get recruited on the college circuit. Lu Han is a third year.

"I think he has torn a ligament in his knee. I need an expert opinion on it. We need to get him to the emergency room immediately."

"Coach," Lu Han says, dizzy with the pain now, "what am I supposed to do?"

"And what is the team supposed to do?" Minseok has his hands on his hips. "Yifan is going to have a fit."

"Maybe he’ll cry," Yixing says, sounding kind of hopeful. It is totally inappropriate when Lu Han’s world is crumbling. (Lu Han is a great friend, and doesn’t remind him that the last time Yifan cried, when they’d been handed the championship trophy, it was only because Yixing had been crying. A chain reaction of crying. Minseok and Lu Han hadn’t cried. Mostly. Lu Han had been suffering from allergies. Manly allergies.)

"We just went from being shoo-ins for champion to being extreme underdogs if Lu Han’s out."

"Sit tight," Coach Jung says. He kindly pats Lu Han’s good leg. Yixing runs a soothing hand up and down Lu Han’s back. Minseok, for the first time, looks legitimately concerned. "We still need an official prognosis."
An official prognosis turns out to be a rare surgery, eleven months of no football, and extensive rehab. Lu Han is out for the season. And maybe half of next season, too, if his luck doesn’t turn around.

"You won’t lose your scholarship or place here," Coach Jung informs him. "As long as you keep your grades up, you’re okay to miss this season but continue forward in your education. I’ll still expect you at practices."

Why bother? Lu Han wisely does not say this aloud. Instead, he limps his way on crutches to the library to meet his friends for a few minutes to tell them the news.

"My life is over," Lu Han whispers, throwing himself prostrate across the table in the library. "I might as well just lie down and go to sleep until next year."

"There, there," Yifan whispers back. "Think of this as your chance to get off academic probation."

"I don’t know what you’re talking about." There is nothing wrong with Lu Han’s grades. He likes to think of his grades as Pokemon, and he has to catch one of each letter. That makes it more of a game. Lu Han is good at games. Better at games than anything else. He is also good at Rubik’s Cubes and making friends while drunk at parties and still remembering their names through his hangover the next day. "I have an A in Korean."

"Your parents—"

"Would not have an 'A' in Korean, because they can’t speak it," Lu Han says. "They don’t even know what classes I’m taking." He keeps his voice hushed. It is mostly muffled by the table his face is currently mashed into. "Nothing matters but football. I am football. Football is me. We are one."

He makes exaggerated hand gestures, and Minseok looks vaguely amused.

"Having a busted leg is not going to make Lu Han suddenly care about economics, either." Yixing’s voice carries across the library, and he blinks when everyone in the whole room turns to look at their table. "What did I say?"

"It is more how you said it." Yifan smiles at Yixing. "Loudly."

"You’re not just football, Lu Han," Minseok says. "You are also melodrama and terrible pop music and the continuous invasion of personal space and horrible laughs that make you look like you have a dislocated jaw and—"

"Thank you for your efforts, Minseok," Lu Han says. "I feel genuinely better about the emptiness of my entire existence right now than I did before you started speaking." He rubs at his jaw. There is stubble, and wow, Lu Han should shave immediately.

"Did I mention invasion of personal space?"

"Yes, I think you got that one," says Yifan, shaking his head. His hair gel appears to be completely solid. He is also wearing a cardigan. Lu Han has long since given up on him.

"The point is, I know you love football with your whole being, but maybe this is your chance to rediscover some other interests." Minseok’s tongue licks at his teeth. "Explore new depths of your
personality."

"Rediscover?" Lu Han peels himself up from the table. It is almost noon. He has to pack. For his surgery. Which is today. "I have no other interests," he says. "I play football, I watch football, I think about football."

"Then think about something else. Get a girlfriend. Get into a television show. Take up pottery." Minseok is actually looking at Lu Han. That makes Lu Han all warm and fuzzy. Minseok is one of the few people on this earth immune to Lu Han’s numerous charms. "There’s a pottery class at the student center—"

Lu Han throws an arm around Minseok’s shoulders. Minseok frowns and scoots his chair away. So it is not entirely a new leaf.

Yifan coughs something that sounds a lot like *personal space* into his hand and Lu Han sighs and withdraws his arm.

"Pottery can be very soothing," Yixing says. "Jongdae and I are taking the intermediate class this semester and I’ve found it very relaxing. You’re very high-strung, lately, Lu Han."

"Am I?" This is stupid. Lu Han’s torn up knee is stupid and his friends are saying stupid things. "I wonder what could possibly be making me stressed." Stupid.

"Not that we don’t welcome your enthusiasm for football," Yifan says. "Because we need you on the team. We just don’t want you to be miserable while you’re waiting to play."

"Great," Lu Han says, grappling with his crutches. He cannot quite get the hang of them. "I have to go." He lifts himself up, refusing Yixing’s aid as he carefully swings his messenger bag so the weight of it hangs from his good side. "I can do it myself."

"Maybe this whole injury thing will teach you how to accept help, too," Yixing says, this time only loud enough for Lu Han to hear. He adjusts Lu Han’s bag. It does feel better. Lu Han grumbles out a ‘thanks’. "An assist, you know? It doesn’t make the goal count less toward your total."

"I don’t need help with anything," Lu Han replies. "I never have and I never will."

"Okay, okay." Yixing pats his cheek. Lu Han would bite him if he had the energy, but his leg hurts, and honestly? Nervousness about his surgery is eating him up inside. "Good luck this afternoon. We’ll come see you after the surgery."

"Thanks," Lu Han says. "But don’t visit me."


"Let me go with you," Zitao says. He’s staring into the mirror. "I don’t want you to fall on the subway and get trampled."

"That’s rather grim."
"A young boy, lost under the hustling feet of shoppers—"

"I’m older—"

"But you look younger—"

"Just because I’m smaller than you, doesn’t mean I’m small," Lu Han says. "I am of a completely adequate size. I’m actually kind of tall by normal people standards. No one is going to trample me."

"I don’t think you’re small," Zitao says. "I think you have a torn ligament in your knee, and a compromised center of balance." Zitao, who teaches martial arts to ten-year-olds three times a week, probably knows what he’s talking about. Still. "And you look fifteen. Easy target."

"I wouldn’t want to waste your time," Lu Han says, as Zitao leans further in toward the mirror and combs through his already perfectly sculpted bangs. "I’m sure you have at least thirty more pictures of yourself to take today. You know, for your weibo profile."

"I have already changed my picture twice today," Zitao says. "I’m sure my followers can wait for me to go on a short trip."

"Why are you here?"

"I had this horrible feeling that you would turn down everyone who offered to take you to the clinic, and you can’t turn down my aegyo." He puts two fists up to his cheeks. "Buing buing."

"That is the worst thing Sehun ever taught you," Lu Han says. "It has ruined my life."

"I thought your injury had ruined your life."

"That too." Everything ruins Lu Han’s life. He thinks briefly about Minseok calling him melodramatic and frowns.

"So are we leaving?"

Lu Han hedges. "I’m not sure how long it will take to get to the clinic." Now Zitao is studying himself in profile. Lu Han is used to his friend’s eccentricities. Zitao is a total peacock, but he is infallibly kind, and Lu Han won’t take advantage of him. "I’ll just go alone."

"You do everything alone. You are the only person I’ve ever met that knows everyone and still does everything alone." Zitao sits on the edge of Lu Han’s bed and watches as Lu Han throws the last of his toiletries into his bag. "Stop being so stubborn."

"Stubborn is my middle name," Lu Han says. "Get off my bed."

"And here I thought your middle name was ‘Manchester United’."

Without pausing, Lu Han grabs his pillow with his right hand and throws it in Zitao’s direction. "That’s just a nickname." He zips his bag. "Do you have a romantic walk to go on? Why are you dressed up?"

Zitao frowns at him lightly, hands going up reflexively to fix his hair. "I do have a romantic walk
coming up.” Zitao pulls on a really dumb black fedora. "A romantic walk with my big brother to the clinic."

"I’m swooning," Lu Han says, taking one last longing look at his bed. His leg aches. He wants to go to sleep. Maybe when he wakes up, this will all be a terrible dream and Lu Han will be early for spring practice. He goes to grab his bag, but Zitao has already grabbed it. "You don’t have to."

"I want to. I’m your friend." Zitao puts a hand to Lu Han’s back. "Do you want me to carry you, princess? Bridal style?"

Lu Han gives Zitao a sharp look. "Who are you calling princess, asshole?" Lu Han scowls. He almost trips as he puts more weight on his crutch. "I’ll give you two black eyes and then you’ll be significantly less handsome."

"Aww," Zitao says. "Don’t worry, Xiao Lu, your surgery is going to go well. I’ll even pick you up tomorrow."

"You don’t—"

"I know I don’t have to," Zitao says. "I know."

"Lu Han! You made it."

"Despite how much I don’t want to be, here I am." Lu Han shifts on the bed. "Actually, I’ve changed my mind. I don’t really want to have surgery. I’m thinking I’ll just go home and sleep until—"

This all feels out of his control. A week ago, Lu Han had been getting ready to start his third season with the Goryeo-Dae team. He had vaguely started to wonder who Yifan was going to put on the team with him for the Korea-Yonsei Friendship Games.

He had never imagined getting injured before putting on his red and beige uniform to play his first game. It is scary if Lu Han thinks about it too hard. How easy it is to get hurt. How quickly all his dreams can go up in smoke.

Lu Han doesn’t want to have surgery. Lu Han wants to whine about how much his leg hurts to an unimpressed Minseok, take painkillers, and then have this all go away. That would be the ideal.

"If you don’t get this surgery, you can kiss your football career goodbye," the doctor says. Her nametag says Kim Taeyeon. She’s super hot. Lu Han has been able to distract himself with that for approximately twenty-five minutes, but those twenty-five minutes are up. Now it is back to the familiar aching fear of someone putting him to sleep and cutting his leg open in the hopes of restoring his chances at going pro. "I’m sure I’ve explained this already, but you’ve torn a lateral collateral ligament. You can’t, I’m afraid, sleep this one off."

"I know, I know," Lu Han says. "Wishful thinking." He wriggles again, his bare ass shifting on the low-grade clinic sheets. This whole ~surgery experience~ leaves so much to be desired.
"You don’t need to be afraid," Dr. Kim says. "I’ll take care of you, Lu Han."

"Am I really going to be able to play again?" This is a bigger fear than the surgery. What if they open up his knee and it is all worse than expected? What if Lu Han’s knee will never allow him to play professional football, ever?

He’s not sure how willing he is to go back to Beijing with his tail between his legs.

"Yes," Dr. Kim says. "This is not the first or the last time my team will perform this surgery for an athlete. You’re in good hands."

Lu Han’s hands and feet tingle. It’s the excitement and nerves he feels just before the start of a match.

"Then what are we waiting for?" Lu Han says, collapsing like a rag doll into his pillow. "Lights out or whatever."

"The anesthesiologist will be with you shortly. He will accompany you to the operating room." Dr. Kim makes a quick note on Lu Han’s chart before turning back toward the hall. "Don’t frown like that, Lu Han. You’ll get wrinkles."

Yifan says the same thing. Lu Han is pretty sure it’s a yellow card to make lewd gestures at his surgeon like he does at Yifan, though. "Yeah, yeah," he says to a closing door.

When he is alone again, the creeping discomfort of being in the hospital comes back with enough force to choke him. There are no fond memories to be found as Lu Han waits alone.

When Lu Han wakes up, it is to a familiar face. Yixing smiles at him. He lightly pokes Lu Han’s nose. "Oh good, you’re alive."

"Was there a doubt?" Lu Han feels like he’s talking through an entire ocean’s worth of water. His brain is drowning.

"Now you sound and look like a frog," Zitao says, and Yixing gives him a high-five.

"I’ve just gotten out of surgery and you’re already making fun of me."

"You’re going to be well soon enough," says Yixing. "We can’t get out of practice."

"Look, you got flowers from the girls’ team," Zitao says.

Lu Han tries to swim to shore in his own mind, but whatever they gave him to put him out was the good stuff. He usually only gets this far from lucid the week of exams. That is caused by sleep deprivation and an unholy cocktail of five-hour energy drinks, chocolate bars in the place of food, and the anxiety of knowing that he hasn’t studied the entire semester and it really is too late to be starting the week of exams. "Jinri?"

"It looks like Jinri did, indeed, sign the card," Yixing says. "It seems nice and detached. ‘Get well
soon, Lu Han! 🌹 You even got a tiny flower." Lu Han tries to breathe. "Yifan and Minseok wanted to come, too, but they have this trivial belief that they should ‘respect your wishes not to have visitors’ or something." Yixing tosses his red hair back off his forehead.

"Yifan is a good kid," Lu Han says, glad Yifan isn’t around to hear it. "Minseok, on the other hand, would probably stand next to a rope and not reach for it as I slowly went down in quicksand."

"He likes you." Zitao pats Lu Han’s hand. Lu Han doesn’t feel it. His hands are numb. His face is numb. "You just came on a bit strong with your friendship mojo. It has taken him a few years to get over you getting into the shower with him to wash his back."

"I was just being friendly--You’re a first year, Zitao. How do you even know that story?" There are four Zitaos. All of them are looking at Yixing. "Yixing, you traitorous bastard."

"Close your eyes, Lu Han, they’re crossing." Yixing’s voice is soothing, even with the lacing of sarcasm and amusement through his words. "On the bright side, at least Jinri remembers your name."

"Of course she remembers my name," Lu Han says. He is already starting to fall back asleep. "I’m popular."

"And so very pretty," Yixing says. If Lu Han felt better, he would get his best friend for that. With best friends like Yixing, who needs enemies? Not Lu Han, that’s for sure. "Your surgery went well, Lu Han. Dr. Kim seemed very pleased."

"Yay." Lu Han cannot stay awake. "Now only a year stands between me and actual play." Slurred words. Head full of cotton. He can feel his knee now. It is not a good thing. The numbness was better.

"The year can start tomorrow." Zitao’s cute grin is the last thing Lu Han sees as the anesthesia pulls him back under. "Yixing collected all your assignments, so you can even get a head start on your academics."

"What an incentive to wake up," he mumbles.

"Lu Han, do you want me to call your parents?" he hears Yixing ask. "They must be worried."

"No," Lu Han says, as he drifts off. "Don’t bother."

"Don’t bother?" Yixing smoothes the hair back from Lu Han’s forehead. "They’re your parents."

Lu Han would shrug, but he’s already asleep.

🤣

"You missed my call," Lu Han’s father barks into the phone. "I said I would call at seven, not ‘sometime after seven’."

"I’m sorry," Lu Han says, curling his fingers around the phone. It is raining outside. Perfect. "It took me longer than expected to get back to my boarding house from the clinic."
Crutches, it turns out, are a hundred times more complicated when Lu Han is doped up on pain meds. Zitao had held him around the waist like he was Lu Han’s boyfriend or something when they were climbing in and out of the cab, which had been excruciatingly humiliating. Probably less humiliating than falling would have been, though, so Lu Han is pretty grateful, even if he’s shit at expressing it.

As much as he dreads his first rehab session on Tuesday, at least it will be the beginning step toward walking again. Then playing again. Which is everything that Lu Han wants.

"I don’t appreciate excuses." His father sighs. "When are you coming home?"

"What?" Lu Han mashes his cheek into the phone. "Why would I come home?"

"To see a Chinese doctor about your leg, of course." His father clears his throat. "Now that this football thing is out of the question, you can come back here and see a doctor of my choosing and enter university here."

"Football is not out of the question," Lu Han says. "I just have to take a short break—"

"I spoke to a specialist and these sorts of long term injuries don’t go away, Lu Han. Especially in your case, where it’s a re—"

"I didn’t know you cared. For your information, I had surgery yesterday," Lu Han says. "I’m entering a rehabilitation program. I’m hoping to start for my team again next season." His voice doesn’t waver. It used to, when he spoke to his dad. Nowadays Lu Han is used to disappointing him.

"I don’t approve—"

"I no longer want or need your approval," Lu Han says. "You’re not paying my tuition, and you will never understand—"

"Your duty is to your family," his father says. Lu Han can imagine his mother’s pensive expression as she stands in the kitchen, close to where the phone is mounted on the wall. She probably has one hand pressed to her mouth. She won’t say anything to help Lu Han. She just doesn’t like it when people yell. "And to your family’s business."

*I can’t even pass economics, and you want me to run a business?" I’m going to be a famous football player," Lu Han says. "With or without your support." He takes a breath. "I’m expecting it to be without."

His father does not say goodbye when he hangs up the phone.

There is a knock on Lu Han’s door. "Yes?"

The ajumma of his boarding house peeks in. "Can I get you something to eat? You missed dinner."

"I was on the phone with my father." Lu Han starts to stand up.

"Was he worried about you, dear?" She smiles. Lu Han is glad she does not know his family. That his father had not asked even once if he was feeling okay. Lu Han does not care. He can take care of himself. He moves to stand. "Oh no, Lu Han, I can bring some up to you. We don’t want you to reinjure that leg of yours."
"I can go up and down the stairs," Lu Han says with a smile. It is time for more painkillers.

"Your friend Yixing told me you would say that." She wags her finger. "You have good friends. Lie down before you tear your stitches."

"Yes ma’am."

"Good boy," she says, and Lu Han flushes. The way she grins at him, like she has emerged victorious versus his stubbornness, reminds him of how his mother used to smile at him.

She feeds him stew and tucks him in, and if it chokes Lu Han up, at least Yixing isn’t here to see it. It’s an extremely masculine sort of choked up, anyway.

Lu Han calls into work. Kim Jongin, his teammate and friend, answers the phone. "When are you coming back?" No preamble. "Please say ‘in thirty minutes’.

"Next week," Lu Han says. "I’d be useless for anything but desk duty until I lose the crutches anyway."

"I’ve been working double shifts with Chanyeol and I’m going to strangle him, I swear, hyung. I’m going to wrap my hands around his giraffe neck and squeeze until he turns blue."

"No, you’re not," Lu Han says. "Relax."

"He chortles, hyung. He actually chortles. People are not supposed to do that. It is not a sound humans are actually supposed to make. I can’t live like this."

"I’ll be back next Monday." Lu Han scratches at his head. "It’s a big building. I’m sure you can lose him."

"Are you telling me that no one would find the body?" Jongin sounds… stressed. "I don’t know how you do this four days a week."

Chanyeol can be overzealous. Lu Han can empathize, because he is pretty sure Chanyeol’s approach to Jongin is about the same as his own approach to Minseok. The results are about the same, too, save for the fact that Jongin is much more tightly wound than Minseok is. Lu Han wonders if they sit around after Wednesday practice and commiserate.

"No, I’m telling you to go into another part of the library and do something productive."

"Oh," says Jongin. "Of course." He coughs into the phone. "Are you… how’s your knee?"

Lu Han frowns, then remembers Jongin can’t see it. "It isn’t swollen too badly anymore."

"That is… good?" Tentative. "Yeah?"

"I can’t walk on it," Lu Han says. "There’s that."
"Are you going to come to practice tomorrow?"

"I have physical therapy tomorrow. First session." Jongin makes a tiny whine into the phone. "But I’ll be there the day after."

"Good," says Jongin. Lu Han can imagine him scuffing the toe of his sneakers on the floor. "I need to make sure you’re actually all right."

"I’m fine." Lu Han isn’t really fine. He is not doing well with limited mobility. With needing help to do even simple tasks. He feels trapped in his bedroom after only a couple of days.

"If you say so." There are muffled voices, followed by an impatient sigh. "I have to go, hyung. Chanyeol is buried in the non-fiction section."

"Buried?" If any guy could get himself into trouble that quickly, it’s Chanyeol.

"I don’t know," Jongin says. "I just don’t know." He clicks his nails against the phone. It echoes in Lu Han’s ear. "Feel better, hyung."

"I told you—"

"Yeah, I know, you’re fine." Jongin sighs again, like his life is hard or something. Lu Han wishes he could be at the library, digging Chanyeol out of his own ridiculousness. "See you at practice."

There is a lump in Lu Han’s throat. "See you there," he says.

It is a relatively new facility. Lu Han sits in a cold plastic chair and waits for someone to collect him.

"Excuse me, Lu Han-ssi?" The man in front of him is soft-spoken and small. "Are you ready to start?" He looks like Lu Han could break him in half if he wanted, not like he can put Lu Han back together.

"Are you my physical therapist?"

"Hmmm." The man pulls down on the sleeves of his sweatshirt. It hides his hands from view. "Sort of?" He is smiling too cheerfully for the situation.

"I feel like this should be a yes or no question…"

"I’m a volunteer here," the man says. There are bits of red in his hair. His dye-job is better than Lu Han’s. "I’m Joonmyun."

He holds out a hand for Lu Han to take and pulls him to his feet. Stronger than he looks. "Volunteer?"

"I’m a third year student in university. Sports medicine. I get credit for working here." Still smiling. His eyes disappear into nothing but eyelashes and eyelids and happiness. Distantly, Lu Han wonders
if Yifan would be worried about Joonmyun’s wrinkles. "I haven’t done an athlete rehabilitation before, even though it’s my eventual career path."

"Which university?" Lu Han asks.

"Yours," Joonmyun says, and then he tugs at Lu Han’s hand. This serves to remind Lu Han that he hasn’t let go. He drops Joonmyun’s hand immediately. Lifted eyebrows are his earned response and Lu Han is on the verge of blushing. "Follow me please."

Lu Han fumbles with his crutches. He eventually settles his weight on them and hobbles after a now walking Joonmyun.

"Sorry," Lu Han says. "I pride myself on knowing a lot of people, but…” He pauses. "Ah, you wouldn’t happen to be Jongdae’s Joonmyun, would you?" Jongdae goes on and on about his friend in choir, who is smart and handsome and kind and apparently walks on water or some shit like that. "Kim Joonmyun?"

"Jongdae’s Joonmyun." He seems bemused. "That is one way of putting it, I suppose." He scratches the back of his neck. His movements are jerky. Except for Jongdae, all of Lu Han’s close friends are athletes who move easily in their own skin. Joonmyun seems unsure about what his limbs might do at any moment. "I do have choir with Jongdae."

"He mentions you a lot." Understatement. "I’m surprised we haven’t met before."

"I don’t play football." There is no judgment in his tone, but Lu Han does blush this time. "That’s pretty much your only interest."

"How would you know?" It is not defensive. Well, maybe it is. Perhaps because Minseok had said the same thing last week. And maybe Lu Han has admitted it a time or two, but not to strangers. Lu Han is just focused.

"Here we are," Joonmyun says, opening a set of double doors. Inside the room, there are two other pairs of people doing some kind of workout. "You will be working with me three times a week, and Donghae once a week."

"Donghae?"

"A more senior staff member." He speaks very patiently. Lu Han is often very impatient. "We are both trained to work with athletes, but he has much more experience. I hope it doesn’t bother you—" His brow furrows up, crinkling his forehead and pulling his lower lip out into a pout. Oh man, it isn’t even aegyo, but Lu Han is melting like ice cream in the summer.

This is uncalled for. Lu Han hasn’t wanted to touch someone’s face so badly since he met Minseok as a first year. His fingers itch with it. Joonmyun’s skin looks as soft and clear as Yifan’s.

"I like you," says Lu Han, interrupting Joonmyun. "You seem nice, and to be honest, I was scared, before. The fact that you’re my age and know one of my friends is great."

Joonmyun’s face is suffused in a relieved smile that seems to light up every corner of the gym. Lu Han wants to know how anyone can light up a gym, considering gyms are where happiness goes to die. "That is so good to hear, Lu Han-ssi."
"Just Lu Han." Joonmyun’s mouth curls down. "We are going to be spending a lot of time together, right? Might as well call me Lu Han."

"Then just Joonmyun for me." He reaches out to gently push Lu Han down onto a bench next to a small set of weight cuffs. He takes Lu Han’s crutches and leans them against the far wall. Then he kneels down to examine Lu Han’s brace. He prods the bruised skin that stretches down past the knee brace with the softest touch. It tickles, but it doesn’t hurt. "Are you ready to start?"

"I want to play football again." Lu Han is unsure if he is talking to Joonmyun or himself. Maybe both. Lu Han had a coach once who told him to visualize every goal before he took the shot. Perhaps that is what Lu Han is doing right now.

"We’ll get you there," Joonmyun says, calmly. He sounds very certain. His hands slide down Lu Han’s leg to grip his ankle. It is a comforting touch. Lu Han likes that.

"Then yeah," Lu Han says. "I’m ready to start." He gulps. "I think." This isn’t actually his first time in physical therapy, but it feels like it is.

"Don’t worry," says Joonmyun. His hand rests on Lu Han’s calf. It is warm and sure. Lu Han isn’t nervous, not anymore. There’s something steadying about Joonmyun. "You’ll be back on the pitch next season in your Tiger uniform. Yonsei won’t know what hit ‘em."

Lu Han hadn’t asked for, or needed, any reassurance. Especially not from a stranger. Lu Han had been a child who’d put Band-Aids on his own elbows. Iced his own bruises. Told himself that this time he’d run that three-minute kilometer. He doesn’t require someone to hold his hand. Still, "thank you" bubbles up unbidden, even as Joonmyun unfastens his brace.

"You’re welcome," Joonmyun says. "Now move your toes for me."

Lu Han had gotten into-- no, fallen into football when he was eight, when he saw a match on television and decided he wanted to learn all those tricks.

He had never looked back.

His parents had thought it would be a passing hobby, but it had quickly snowballed into obsession. Into after-school clubs and then neighborhood teams. Then Lu Han started for his high school team in his first year, practically unheard of, and his parents started to realize football was a major part of Lu Han’s life. "Football isn’t going to get you anywhere," his father had said. "Not like mathematics." His mother had just looked disappointed that her flower-faced son kept coming home with bruises and cuts.

When he’d gotten the scholarship from Goryeo, for football, everything paid for by the university, and only Lu Han’s living expenses at a boarding house left for him to earn via part-time job, it had seemed like providence. "You don’t speak Korean, though," his friend Li Yin had said.

"I can learn," Lu Han had replied. "To play football with a really good team? A language is nothing."
And now look at him.

"And now look at you." Yixing sits across from him in the small family-style restaurant. The kimchi and other side dishes are spread out between them as they wait for their food. "You are shaking like Yifan when his ~beauty routine~ gets interrupted." He laughs. "In other words, like a caffeine addict quitting cold turkey."

"I'm so bored," Lu Han confesses. Yixing smirks at him, dimpling, and Lu Han envies the sheen of sweat on his neck and arms from running around on the field. Lu Han had spent practice on the sidelines, hurling insults at Yifan's clumsy dribbling and making inappropriate comments about Minseok's ass. "I might lose the tentative hold I have on my sanity."

"How did your first week of physical therapy go?" Yixing absently stirs his chopsticks in the leftover juice from the pickled radishes, drawing patterns with it on the white ceramic dish. "You don't look worse for wear."

Ah. Therapy. Well.

"My knee is useless." Lu Han looks down at it angrily. "It does almost nothing I tell it to and he just keeps smiling."

"Your knee keeps smiling?" Yixing leans back as the ajusshi sets their plates in front of them. "We might have to change 'might lose' to 'lost a while back' on the sanity front."

"No!" Lu Han blows his hair out of his face. "My physical therapist. He's so cheerful and optimistic." Lu Han's knee brace itches. He'll be able to take it off in a few days, according to Joonmyun.

"Isn't that... a good thing?"

"I guess," Lu Han says. "He's very..." Sweet. Even tempered. Good natured. He doesn't know what to do with Kim Joonmyun. He doesn't react right. Lu Han had spent the entirety of Thursday swearing at him and calling him awful names and Joonmyun had just carefully and steadily flexed his knee again. "Nice. To me, at least." Lu Han takes a big bite of his food. Something to occupy his mouth while he thinks. "I think he's nice to everyone, though."

"He is really nice," says Lu Han again. "But not overbearing." Joonmyun does not baby Lu Han. He does not force Lu Han to accept help to go to the bathroom, or push Lu Han down when he struggles to stand up. He offers his hand but does not make Lu Han take it. For Lu Han, it is like
Joonmyun understands his need to be independent more than the rest of his friends do. It's unbelievable to Lu Han that a stranger can read him so well. It is Joonmyun's job, though. "I like him."

"Do you?" Yixing says. "On a scale of one to football, how does Joonmyun rate?"

"A solid seven," Lu Han replies. Yixing laughs at him. It's mocking, but Lu Han's used to Yixing. "Higher than you, that's for sure."

"Eat," he says. "Or you'll be late to meet Sehun."

Getting anywhere takes longer than it's worth. Lu Han hobbles to his economics tutoring session with a grim determination borne of a complete unwillingness to call Yifan, who had told Lu Han to "call if you need to go across campus. No, really, call."

"I don't know if this qualifies as 'taking it easy.'" Lu Han looks left to see Joonmyun, with a stack of papers clutched to his chest, smiling at Lu Han like they run into each other outside the clinic every day. Jongdae is standing next to him with his own stack of papers. Lu Han catches a glimpse of music bars. Something for choir? "Lu Han-hyung, I know for a fact that Yifan-hyung does not have anything to do today except for homework." Jongdae looks put out. "I know you're not the brightest crayon in the box, but this is just ridiculous."

"No one asked for your opinion," Lu Han says. "Don't talk to your hyung like that."

"Then act like a hyung," Jongdae flippantly replies. Lu Han narrows his eyes at him, and Jongdae sticks out his tongue. "Careful, careful. I'm starting to notice your crow's feet."

"You're just jealous because you already look old--"

"I like his crow's feet," Joonmyun says, and both Lu Han and Jongdae remember he is standing there at the same time.

"Wait a minute," says Jongdae. "How do you two know each other?"

"Joonmyun is my physical therapist," Lu Han answers. "For my knee."

"Donghae-hyung is his physical therapist." Joonmyun's shoulders are tight. Lu Han has no doubt he would be waving his hands in a declamatory manner if his arms were not full of papers. "I'm just the assistant."

"I see him once a week and you three times a week." Lu Han is firm. "As far as I am concerned, he is the assistant."

"He has a lot more experience than I do--"

"Underselling yourself again?" Jongdae is smiling at Joonmyun and Lu Han feels a weird twist in his
stomach. That doesn't make any sense, so he ignores it. Then Jongdae is looking at Lu Han. "I told you he was great."

"You were right, for once."

Jongdae smirks at him. "For once, huh? I'm always right."

Joonmyun is blushing. His eyes have curled up and disappeared again. Lu Han's arms ache standing here, but it's worth it to see Joonmyun in a different setting. The way he always moves has suggested to Lu Han that Joonmyun is more awkward than graceful, but in the gym, Joonmyun is on his own turf. Here, they are on equal footing (even if Lu Han is only standing on one foot).

He's wearing jeans that are supposed to be tight and end up looking loose on his thin legs, and a collared shirt with buttons at the wings that keep the collar flat. Over it is this green cardigan that reminds Lu Han of spinach. And he is still blushing.

Lu Han's stomach is twisting again. And now his phone's ringing. "That's probably Sehunnie."

"Are you meeting him in the student center?" Jongdae asks, and Joonmyun looks alarmed.

"That's very far," Joonmyun says. "Do you need company?" His voice is light but... Lu Han thinks he looks ready to drop his papers and walk Lu Han there.

"I can manage," Lu Han says. He's sweating, and he hopes it isn't noticeable. It's not a hot day, but Lu Han has walked a good distance. His arms ache. "Not too much further."

"Figures," Jongdae says, looking at Joonmyun in exasperation. "I don't know how you work with him. Lu Han-hyung would attempt to juggle with one of his hands cut off and complain loudly that his hair was a mess as all the balls rolled away into the distance."

"I am beginning to see that." Joonmyun smiles at Lu Han again, still patient, still sweet. It is a very nice smile. It is even nicer when Joonmyun is not torturing him, fingers pushing on Lu Han's leg to bend his knee. Significantly nicer. "Jongdae, can you hold these for a second?"

"Sure."

Joonmyun hands the papers to Jongdae and digs into his pockets for his phone. He slides his thumb across the lock screen and looks up at Lu Han. "Give me your number."

After Lu Han reels off the numbers, Joonmyun calls it. It reminds Lu Han that Sehun is probably impatiently waiting for him, tapping his feet as he drinks chocolate-flavored bubble tea. "I have to go."

"Now you have my contact info," Joonmyun says. "I have a car. Call me if you want a ride."

"He won't call you," Jongdae says. "He is too stupid to call you."

Joonmyun reclaims his papers, shaking his hair out of his face. The spring wind blows it about. He looks like a cheerful mushroom. Maybe Lu Han is hungry. That would explain his stomach, surely.

"I am quite capable of getting around on my own." Lu Han is only on crutches for another week, anyway. Then it will be limping without conspicuous aids.
"Don’t undo all of our hard work," Joonmyun says. "Or you’ll be stuck with me even longer."

As they leave, Lu Han beginning the last couple of blocks of his hobbling trek, he realizes that he doesn’t think of that as much of a punishment.

"You’re late," says Sehun, when a sweaty and exhausted Lu Han collapses into the chair across from him in the student center. Sehun’s economics book is open in front of him and he has already completed a good chunk of their problem set. "Why did you not call Yifan-hyung to drive you?"

"I didn’t want to owe him for it." Lu Han’s hand trembles. Great. At least his boarding house is closer to this side of campus. He’d picked that particular hasukjib for its proximity to the student center.

"Yifan-hyung is your friend," Sehun says. "You wouldn’t owe him—"

"He has that politics exam—"

"Seriously, hyung. It is not like you’re weak if you ask for a ride because you blew out your knee."

Lu Han smiles at Sehun, who looks back at him unimpressed. "The moment you need someone else to hold you up," says Lu Han, "is the moment you fall down."

"Are you calling your friends unreliable?"

"I think that people are, by nature, unreliable." Lu Han grins. "Want to prove me wrong by doing my econ?"

"Do your own damn econ," Sehun says, scooting closer to Lu Han. "But let me know if you don’t understand something."

"Sure," Lu Han says. He doesn’t ask any questions.

Physical therapy is hard. "Is this, at some point, not going to be torture?" Sticky bangs and a sticky shirt and a forever smiling Kim Joonmyun. This seems to be Lu Han’s life, now.

It has only been two weeks. Lu Han has a year to look forward to.

Joonmyun makes it better.

He is endlessly optimistic. "You were able to hold this stretch longer than yesterday," he will tell Lu Han with that half moon eye smile. Or "you seemed to have more strength in that flex, Lu Han."

He is also resilient. Lu Han can hurl every awful word in his vocabulary, Chinese and Korean, at Joonmyun as he forces tears back from the sting of a pull. "You’re so lucky my mother wasn’t here to witness that kind of language," Joonmyun says, and Lu Han bites his own lips until they are swollen and red. "She might not know what all of them meant, but she would definitely have put her hands on her hips and informed you that ‘gentlemen don’t swear’." He laughs at the end, a
hiccupping sound that is more like a giggle, and Lu Han wants to throttle him for being so cheerful when Lu Han is starting to wish Coach had amputated his leg after all.

He has these horrible little jokes he tells Lu Han when Lu Han is on the verge of giving up, and Lu Han ends up being so busy staring at him judgmentally that he forgets, just for a moment, that the pain is lingering.

"When you get better, it won’t be torture." Joonmyun pushes slowly on the ball of Lu Han’s foot. Today they’re doing these tense and release exercises that involve Lu Han stretching his leg out and Joonmyun making it terrible in fifty different ways. "Some people will never regain full mobility. Never be able to play. You aren’t one of those people."

"Fuck, that hurts." Joonmyun’s smile gets wider. "Or not hurts, but aches. You know, I Daum-searched this physical therapy thing. It recommended three to five minutes a day."

"That’s for joint replacement, Lu Han." Joonmyun relaxes his hold, and Lu Han gulps air. "Or people looking to regain limited mobility. You are an athlete. This is a whole different ballgame." Joonmyun laughs. "A different ballgame. Get it?"

"That was awful, Joonmyun." Lu Han wants to reach out and flick his forehead. "Is my pain funny? Are you secretly a sadist under that pleasant veneer?"

"Truthfully?" Joonmyun winks at him. "Maybe I am. But that’s not why I’m laughing." He forces his knee to straighten. "It just constantly amuses me to hear the dirty words that come out of your doll-like face."

"Doll-like?" Lu Han scrunches up his face in distaste. "I am not doll-like."

"You? No. But at first glance, your face certainly doesn’t match your personality."

"I get that a lot." Lu Han wipes sweat from his brow, and then looks up at the ceiling. "What do I look like I’m supposed to talk about? Dresses? Make-up?"

"No, no, no," Joonmyun says. "You do look innocent. But your diction leaves a lot to be desired in terms of innocence."

"My… diction." Lu Han lowers his gaze back to the man in front of him. "What does that even mean?"

"I forget, sometimes, that all the words you know are related to football." Joonmyun’s laugh this time is embarrassed. "I don’t know why I’m using literary terms you probably haven’t come across before."

"When you move to a new country with a new language, you learn the words you need to survive, not the weird words, you nerd." Lu Han determinedly points his toe. It burns like hell. But Lu Han just has to think about running again, with the wind in his hair. "What does it mean?"

"It means your word choices, you jock. What I’m trying to say is all the words that come out of your mouth are dirty words. Dirty words and football terminology."

"Everything in life can be explained in terms of football," Lu Han says. "Life is a match and we are the players."
"Is football the only thing on your mind, twenty-four seven?"

Yes, but that’s because Lu Han doesn’t want to dwell on the missed call from his mother or how his physical therapy bills are going to mean picking up another shift at work. He would rather dwell on how Jongin’s goal kicks are all still angled too sharp, or about Yifan’s atrocious footwork when he ventures out from the goal for team drills.

"Is there anything else worth thinking about? Worth doing?" He throws a hand dramatically across his forehead. Joonmyun chuckles to himself and pulls out on Lu Han’s leg.

"Yes, Lu Han. There is a whole world of other things to think about and do."

"My best friend Yixing thinks I should take up pottery. That free class once a week at the student center."

"Maybe he thinks you need something to distract you from your injury."

"I have plenty to do," says Lu Han, brushing his hair out of his eyes with trembling fingers. He needs to remember his hair-tie next time. "There's..." he trails off.

"Watching the football team practice while you angst in their general direction doesn't count."

"I don't--"

"That's not what Jongdae says."

"Jongdae doesn't come to practice because he can't tell the difference between a football and a basketball! He roots for the wrong team at matches sometimes!" Lu Han has tried to teach Jongdae the rules, but they stick about as well as pick-up lines in Mandarin had. Perhaps Lu Han should see if JJ Lin has ever sung the rules of football somewhere, because then Jongdae would memorize them in a heartbeat. "I don't angst. I'm just..."

"Most people have more than one hobby, Lu Han. Broaden your horizons."

"Well, what are your hobbies, then?"

"I have choir, obviously. And I really like poker--"

"Poker?" Joonmyun, in a pair of sunglasses and a cigar hanging out the side of his mouth, leaning back in his chair and smirking in a denim button-up. Lu Han starts to smile at the image.

"Would you ever suspect me of bluffing?" Joonmyun has a positively wicked twinkle in his eye. "I can get away with murder over a card table."

"How many rounds before everyone realizes you are an absolute shark, though?"

"That depends," and Joonmyun’s hand is on Lu Han’s knee, thumb pressing just below the bruise around his stitches. Lu Han shivers. Not from pain, but something else. It makes the hairs on the back of his neck stand up, like when he feels the ball headed toward his head from his blind spot. "On how terribly I’m dressed, I think. I have noticed a correlation between how ugly my friend Baekhyun thinks my shirt is, and how long I can run the table."
Correlation. Right. "What else do you like to do?"

"I also like reading and cooking and watching golf," Joonmyun says. "I have a wide variety of interests."

"I like football." Lu Han winces at a particularly hard pull.

"Everyone who has ever met you knows that. Even the people who haven't met you know that." Joonmyun releases his leg. Lu Han sits up completely. He wriggles his toes.

"I also like girls and dancing at parties."

"Wow, you are a regular Da Vinci, aren't you?" Lu Han is beginning to notice that in the game of conversation with Joonmyun, he never has possession of the ball.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing, nothing," Joonmyun says. "Is that why you're so miserable? Because you live and breathe football?"

"Yeah," Lu Han says, because obviously that is why he's so miserable. What Joonmyun doesn’t understand is that Lu Han has always had football. There were times, in high school, when Lu Han had been a constant disappointment in every way that counted to his parents, when Lu Han had only had football. It is Lu Han’s focus. It is Lu Han’s future hopes as well as his hobby. It is ~the thing Lu Han is good at~, even when the economic theorems and business models slip through his fingers like so much sand. "What else am I supposed to do now?"

Football has been Lu Han's way out. In the end, without it, he is as useless as his parents think he is.

"Find a new hobby? You could always do something artsy. Like--"

"If you say anything about pottery I won't be held responsible for my actions."

"Pottery can be very soothing, I've heard." Now Joonmyun is massaging Lu Han’s leg. This is something he does at the end of every session. Kind of like an apology to Lu Han’s knee. *Sorry for making everything suck,* Joonmyun’s fingers say to Lu Han’s lower thigh. *My bad, bro.* "Art is good for the soul."

"Then you do it," Lu Han says. Lu Han would be shit at pottery. He can see the mess of deformed clay in his head now. What a disaster. He will stick to things that aren’t destined to humiliate him. Like football. His knee gives a mournful pang.

"I would go with you, if you were nervous," Joonmyun says. He is still twinkling. And, *oh no,* Lu Han's stomach is doing that uncomfortable thing. Where it knots itself up because Joonmyun is looking at him.

"I don't need anyone to go with me," Lu Han says. "If I wanted to go, I'd go."

"Darn," Joonmyun says. "I was hoping you would let me use you as an excuse to try it." He is kneading Lu Han's thigh. "Since I've been meaning to for awhile." Lu Han bets Joonmyun would be good at pottery. Since he's so good with his hands.
"Am I?" Joonmyun is amused.

Oops, Lu Han is thinking aloud again. "I mean the massaging... And stuff. The physical therapy stuff." Lu Han looks at the ground. He doesn't have much to do on Tuesdays. He used to spend the extra time running or hitting up his teammates for no-rules matches in the park, but he clearly can't do that. "If you wanted to go, I would." He tries to make it sound grudging. He can already see Joonmyun beaming at him and telling him his hideous lump of clay is *'oh wow such a beautiful bunny rabbit'*. Not that he would make something lame like a bunny rabbit. Not that he’s excited. That would be ridiculous. Because he sees enough of Joonmyun already. "Go, I mean."

"Go where?"

"Pottery!" Lu Han says. "I would go with you to pottery." Joonmyun evaluates him. Lu Han grips his shirt, balling it up in his hands. "If you wanted." Why does he suddenly want to die?

An agonizing silence as Joonmyun stacks the ankle weights. "Sounds great," he says. His smile is so fucking bright. Lu Han should wear sunglasses to these torture sessions. "Give me your address, and I'll pick you up."

"I don’t need to be--"

"Don’t argue," Joonmyun says. "I’m not doing it for you, of course. I just don’t want to be late to my first pottery class." He doesn’t meet Lu Han’s eyes. Lu Han doesn’t believe him.

But for the first time in a long time, Lu Han doesn’t put up a fight about it. "All right," he says, and wipes his sweaty palms on his gym shorts.

"Do you want to go to the movies on Tuesday?" Yixing asks. "Since you’re broken. It’s not like we can guilt Minseok into pick-up games."

"I’m standing right here, guys." Minseok’s hair is going in every direction as he dries it with a towel.

"I have plans on Tuesday." Lu Han sounds really suave and not-suspicious. Maybe.

"What kind of plans?"

"Oh, you know…"

Yixing narrows his eyes. "If I knew, I wouldn’t have invited you to the movies." He lightly shoves at Lu Han. Lu Han clutches at his purple headphones as though they will save him.

"I’m going to a pottery class with Joonmyun." As one word, it’s way less incriminating, right?

Yixing, who forgets what he is doing halfway through the process of tying his shoe on some days, chooses now to pay perfect attention. "Oh pottery is it?" He glimmers with wickedness. "With Joonmyun."
"Lu Han is going to pottery?" Yifan, panting and breathless, collapses onto the bench next to Yixing. "Really?"

"He's going with Joonmyun."

"Oh, I see," says Minseok with a grin, pouring water onto his face as Lu Han looks up at him accusingly. "So he wouldn't go with any of us, but he'll go with ~Joonmyun~."

"Shut up shut up shut up," Lu Han covers his ears with his hands. "He asked, okay?"

"I can't believe he willingly wants to spend more time with you," Minseok says. "What do you guys even talk about?"

"Stuff," Lu Han replies, vaguely.

The truth is, they don't really talk about anything. Or maybe they talk about everything, so it's hard to pinpoint.

Joonmyun tells Lu Han anecdotes about his friends, and about his older brother, who goes to Sogang University and is apparently 'the smart one'. Joonmyun tells Lu Han about his friends in choir: Kyungsoo, who looks innocent and bags a ton of dates because of it, and Baekhyun, who has a speaking voice that grates but sings like an angel.

Lu Han tells Joonmyun about the acoustic songs Yixing still writes about this girl he dated when he was a first year, before he made the team. He also tells him about Zitao's obsession with leopard print, and Yifan's obsession with himself. Lu Han tells Joonmyun about his long-running feud with Jongin, who has appalling taste in football teams and is a Chelsea fan, and about how Chanyeol is determined to win Jongin's friendship one way or another.

"Stuff" is a good answer. Lu Han pats himself on the back.

"Stuff. How thrilling." Minseok looks to Yixing for help in his mission to make even sitting on the sidelines raise Lu Han's blood pressure, but Yixing has his eyes fixed on the pitch, where Choi Minho is showing off for Cho Jinho.

"It's so weird," Lu Han says. "Sometimes he just looks at me and I start talking. About anything."

"You know what?" Yifan takes one last sip of water, and then closes the bottle. "You act like you have a crush on him or something."

Lu Han’s stomach rolls. Usually the result of a bicycle kick, not words. "Don't say weird shit like that." He pours his own water on Yifan's lap. "That's fucking weird."

"Says the man who climbs into my shower," Minseok inserts.

"I didn't say you do have a crush on him," Yifan replies, blotting at the wet spot with his towel. "Just that you're acting like it."

"Fuck off." Lu Han looks at the ground. His knee hurts. "It's not like that."

"Don't be so sensitive," Minseok says. "Why are you all scowl-y now?"
Yixing comes back to the conversation. "Lu Han is always sensitive," he coos. He reaches out like he’s going to grab Lu Han's cheek. Lu Han escapes by leaning back farther than Yixing's arms can reach.

"He can dish it out but he can’t take it,” says Minseok.

"That kind of thing isn't funny when you have a face like this," Lu Han says. He traces the scar on his cheek. "Especially in high school."

Lu Han had never been bullied. Not… not really, anyway. But there had been whispers, and propositions during that summer before college. There had been… other things, too. Lu Han’s throat is dry.

"I see.” Yifan stands, towering. Minseok is looking at Lu Han with that surprised expression again. Yixing isn't looking at Lu Han at all. They have had this conversation before, when Yixing had asked point-blank if Lu Han had other reasons for climbing after Minseok into the shower.

Lu Han had dragged his thumb across his cheek and said no. Yixing hadn’t pushed it.

"We need to get back out there," Yifan says. He seems to be debating whether or not to touch Lu Han's shoulder in apology. Lu Han smiles at him. No harm done.

"First game of the year is next weekend,” Lu Han says. "You losers need all the practice you can get."

"Whatever," Minseok says. "We'll win for you this year and then you can go back to your showboating again next season."

"Right,” says Lu Han. He feels kind of sick.

"In the meantime, you'll have pottery~" Lu Han kicks out at Yixing with his good leg, but Yixing is crafty and coordinated when he wants to be. "Can you keep your eyes out for sloppy passes?"

"Yeah,” Lu Han says, and wishes, more than anything, that he could join them.

Lu Han works in the humanities library. "I would love to work in a library," Jongdae says, as Lu Han absently tightens and loosens his calf. "All that knowledge…”

"Not my thing," says Lu Han. He does not like the quiet. It leaves him too much time with his thoughts.

Jongdae stops. He stares at Lu Han. "It is totally wasted on you, though. Do you even know how to read?" He leans closer to Lu Han. "Lu Han, do you know how books work? You have to open it, first. It’s a process kind of like bending--"

"How many players start on the pitch in a football match?” Lu Han counters. "You don’t even know, even after two years of being friends with the entire football team."
"Oh, you know," Jongdae says. "I had classes to get ‘A’s in."

"Oh, did you get an ‘A’ in Chinese, Jongdae?"

"No," Jongdae says. "You would think that spending all this time with four Chinese guys would have some kind of advantage, but ~no~, I didn’t even get an ‘A’ in Chinese."

"The point is, I’m not into books and you’re not into football, and that doesn’t make either of us wrong—" Considering, Lu Han tilts his head. "Well, actually, you’re wrong—"

"I would hit you if you weren’t already broken," Jongdae threatens, crossing his arms as Lu Han gets back to work.

Lu Han makes enough to pay for his hasukjib and keep enough cash in his wallet to treat Sehun to bubble tea on econ homework Saturdays, and that is all Lu Han really cares about.

He walks in on Monday to a thankful Jongin. "Thank you for coming back," Jongin says. "It felt like I would never see you again."

"I saw you on Friday?" Lu Han moves past Jongin to sign in to his computer. "I need to go and make sure non-fiction got re-shelved correctly."

"Are you doing scheduling? Because I want to work whenever Chanyeol is not working."

"You don’t look any worse for wear, Jonginnie." Lu Han pats his face. Jongin winces at the same time as he leans into the touch.

"That’s because you can’t see my soul." Jongin has a pen in a death grip. "Lu Han, are you sure you should be walking around on that leg?"

"Yeah," Lu Han says. "It’s fine." He leaves his phone and keys on the table. His knee is starting to lock up from the walk, but he minimizes the limp as he heads toward the shelves.

A quarter of the books are in the wrong places, so Lu Han shuffles them around, holding armfuls of them as he slides others across with the tips of his fingers. A copy of the biography of King Sejong slips from the top of the pile. It hits the ground, loud in the quiet library.

"I didn’t know you worked here." A pair of familiar hands pick up the book. Joonmyun’s smile is sweet and even. Lu Han feels exposed standing in front of it.

"My day job," Lu Han informs him. "Until I get my lucrative Manchester United contract."

"Your day job doesn’t suit you at all," Joonmyun says, and laughs. "Give me half of them."

"This is my work, Joonmyun," Lu Han says. "I can do it myself."

"And my work is helping you get back on a football pitch. So I refuse to let your job interfere with mine."

He grabs three more books and holds them as Lu Han puts the other five back where they belong.

Then Lu Han reclaims the ones Joonmyun holds, filing them back into place. "All done." He wipes
his hands on his jeans and then pushes his bangs out of his face. "What brings you here?"

"Homework," Joonmyun says, smile turning wry. "You wouldn’t happen to know where I could find books about the Japanese tea ceremony, would you?"

"I would," Lu Han says. "If you want to take a very slow walk."

"Very slow walks are my favorite," Joonmyun answers. Lu Han can’t explain the way Joonmyun’s awkward shuffling gait is so charming. It just is. Lu Han likes people, generally, but he likes Joonmyun a lot. "As long as there aren’t any stairs involved."

It takes a good thirty minutes to find all the books Joonmyun needs. He pokes and prods Lu Han with partially remembered titles and call numbers he’d looked up at home, and Lu Han returns with snide comments about Joonmyun’s ‘nerd classes’ and who chooses Asian tea ceremonies for an independent study project, anyway?

When he finally makes it back to the desk, Joonmyun carrying seven books and Lu Han two, Jongin frowns.

"You were gone a while."

"Sorry," Lu Han says. "Let me check Joonmyun out, and then I’ll do some of the returns."

"I’m going out to pull a couple of books for reserve," says Jongin. "And by the way, someone called on your cell phone while you were out ~gallivanting~."

"Why do all your friends have a more interesting vocabulary than you?" Joonmyun teases.

"Fuck off," Lu Han says. He picks up his phone. One missed call. It’s from his father. Great. Lu Han will have to return the call. His knee is starting to ache.

"Was it important? I’m sorry for taking up so much of your time."

"It was no one that matters."

It is the careful, measuring look that Lu Han is coming to associate with Joonmyun not knowing what his boundaries are. He can tell Joonmyun wants to press. He… appreciates that he doesn’t. "All right," says Joonmyun.

Lu Han takes Joonmyun’s student ID. It’s a goofy photo. Joonmyun has red-tinted curly hair that makes him look like a show-dog. It is not a good look. It makes Lu Han chuckle.

"I know, I know," Joonmyun says. "It’s an awful photo." He’s pulling at his sleeves as he waits for Lu Han to hand back the ID. "My—a friend of mine convinced me to get a perm, and, well…"

Lu Han slides the books across the scanner one by one. When he’s finished, Joonmyun puts four of them into his backpack and carries the others. "You can leave a few here, if you want? I can put them behind the counter."

"I drove," Joonmyun says. "It’s not a big deal." He pauses. "Thanks for your help today. I’ll see you tomorrow."
"Not tonight?" Lu Han has physical therapy on Mondays.

"Donghae is back. You’ll have him tonight. Meanwhile, I’ll be perusing the history of tea leaves."

"I’m not sure which of us will be more pathetic," Lu Han says. "Then yeah, I’ll see you tomorrow." For pottery. The things Lu Han gets himself into.

Joonmyun waves and exits, and Lu Han watches him leave.

"Who was that?" Jongin asks, when he gets back to the front circulation desk. "You only get all excited like that for football."

"That’s Joonmyun," Lu Han says. "My physical therapist."

"And your friend, right?" Jongin taps something into the computer.

"Right," Lu Han says. And yeah, he has physical therapy with the mysterious Donghae tonight. He has to call his father back tonight. But he’s in a surprisingly good mood. He thinks, crazily, it is because of Joonmyun and his boring homework and his awful ID photo and his unfortunate shirt with sleeves that were slightly too long. "My friend."

"How was your session with hyung?"

Lu Han shrugs. "It was okay." He tilts his head toward Joonmyun’s. "Can I tell you a secret?"

"What?" Joonmyun’s teeth are too big, Lu Han thinks. When he smiles, they gleam.

"I like you better." Lu Han laughs as Joonmyun blushes a soft pink with pleasure even as he shakes his head, denial on the tip of his tongue.

"Let’s begin, guys," their teacher says.

Their teacher is an energetic second year by the name of Taemin, whose hair is so long it looks like it’s going to get caught in the wheel.

"We’re going straight to the confusing spinning device?" Lu Han looks at the contraption in front of him, with a pedal and buttons. There’s a bucket in front of him, too, filled with sponges, wooden knives and a thingy that looks like an oversized version of one of Yixing’s guitar picks. "Is that safe?"

"You aren’t going to hurt yourself on a potter’s wheel, Lu Han," Joonmyun says, seated next to him. He’s close enough that he can tap the side of Lu Han’s sneaker with the toe of his leather shoe. "Relax. Have fun."

Taemin teaches them how to turn the wheels on. It’s sort of like driving a car. Pressing the pedal harder makes the wheel spin fast enough to make Lu Han dizzy. "You will rarely need it to go that fast," Taemin tells the class, with a pointed eye at Lu Han. "These are pottery wheels, not go-carts."
Joonmyun laughs down at his own wheel and taps Lu Han with his ankle. So Lu Han taps him back, happy that his left leg, his good leg, is closest to Joonmyun. "Asshole," Lu Han says, which just makes Joonmyun laugh harder. Joonmyun has a hand over his mouth. It stifles the sound. Taemin continues his lecture.

They are each given a lump of clay, just large enough to fit in both hands comfortably. "Get to know the texture," Taemin says. "Feel the clay."

Joonmyun immediately presses his fingers into it. He is gentle, the same way that he is with Lu Han’s knee. Lu Han looks with trepidation at his own clay. "You look like a scared little kid," Joonmyun says. "The clay isn’t going to squeeze back. You have balls flying at you all day. What’s a ball of clay?"

"I play footie." Lu Han moves the lump from one palm to the other. It’s cool and a little slick. "It’s illegal to use your hands."

"You aren’t going to do it completely wrong," Joonmyun says. "That’s the joy of art. You can just say you meant it to look weird, and everyone will have to believe you."

Lu Han laughs and digs his fingers into the clay. It’s firm, but not too firm. He forms it back into a ball. "Well, football is pretty much the only thing I do right," he says. "I hope you are ready to believe."

They follow Taemin’s instructions, slapping the clay down onto the wheel-head hard enough to make it stick. "Now get your hands wet," Taemin says. "You’ll want them to be wet the whole time, to keep your pot from warping."

Joonmyun listens attentively, and when they start working the clay, Joonmyun is good with his hands. Lu Han, as expected, is less so. His pot is more… shapeless lump than pot. "How goes it?"

"Um." Lu Han dips his hands back in the water and sighs. "It could be worse?"

"It could be," Joonmyun says. He stops his wheel and stands up. He comes to stand behind Lu Han, letting himself lean into him. His chin digs into Lu Han’s shoulder. "When you first started to play football, were you immediately awesome at it?"

"No, of course not." Lu Han had been a mess. It had been him, a football, and a bunch of older kids in the neighborhood who wouldn’t let him play until he could kick at a person instead of at nothing.

"Throwing a pot is just like that." He puts his hands on Lu Han’s, pushing.

"Okay. Sure." Lu Han blows his bangs out of his face.

Joonmyun's hands are soft and wet with clay. They stick to the backs of Lu Han's hands. "Just enough pressure to shape it," he whispers into Lu Han's ear. Lu Han can feel Joonmyun's chest warm against his back.

"When did you become an expert?"

"I'm a fast learner," Joonmyun says, his fingers fitting between Lu Han's to glide along the clay as well. The wheel is spinning slower now. Lu Han had forgotten his foot was on the pedal. He pushes down enough to pick the speed back up. "See? Not so hard."
His lips tickle Lu Han's ear. Lu Han's heart quickens. This isn't soothing. Whoever said pottery is soothing was, is, a liar. Lu Han is going to spontaneously combust. "Easy for you to say." He squeaks. In a not-girly way. He hopes.

A soft chuckle. Joonmyun's fingers drag up Lu Han's arms, leaving gray-brown trails up his skin. "You're doing well," Joonmyun says, retreating to his own wheel and re-wetting his hands. He squeezes some water from the sponge over the top of the clay, like Lu Han had noticed Taemin doing earlier. He looks comfortable hunched over the wheel.

"This isn't really your first time doing pottery, is it?" Joonmyun looks over at Lu Han. There's a stripe of clay on his right cheek, from his knuckle, maybe. Lu Han's traitorous stomach flips and flops.

"No," Joonmyun says. "Are you mad?" Joonmyun suckers his poker buddies out of cash and Lu Han into pottery. He isn't nearly as harmless as he looks.

Lu Han should be angered that Joonmyun lied to him to trick him into coming, but what did Joonmyun really gain from it except more of Lu Han's time? And Lu Han had wanted more of Joonmyun's time, too, only he never would have pushed for it.

So Lu Han isn't upset. He can still feel Joonmyun's hands on his own, and though this hasn't been relaxing, it has been fun. "No," Lu Han says. "But you owe me."

"What do I owe you?" Joonmyun, his secret out of the bag, uses his index fingers to add a dramatic lip to his vase. His clay is smooth. Lu Han's pot is lopsided, but better than before. Maybe there is hope for him after all.

"There's a match, this weekend," Lu Han says. "I've never been a spectator before. Keep me company?" He isn't exactly holding his breath. He tries to sound detached. He is not sure why the answer matters. Perhaps because Joonmyun is among the few people that make Lu Han feel comfortable, and seeing his team play without him is going to be... hard to watch. "I'll explain the rules and—"

"I happen to be free on Saturday afternoon," Joonmyun says. "I think I could manage that."

Zitao curls up like a kitten in the middle of the duvet, long, thick limbs bending in weird directions as Lu Han studies him from the desk. "So I hear you really like Joonmyun."

"Who did you hear that from?" Lu Han draws doodles on Zitao's Korean homework. Zitao uses glitter pens, and Lu Han can never resist.

"Everyone," Zitao says. "Even Minseok mentioned it, and he barely notices your existence unless you're forcing him to." Zitao flops onto his back. His leopard print shirt makes his body blend in with his leopard print sheets like some horrible kind of camouflage. "Stop drawing on my homework."

"All the answers are wrong, anyway," Lu Han says. "I'm making corrections."
"You’re drawing pink sparkly penises, ge. I know you.” Zitao smiles at him. "You didn’t answer my question."

"I like him a lot," Lu Han says. "He is a nice guy. And,” an accusing stare at Zitao, "he is going to the game with me on Saturday, unlike some people I could mention."

"I have to teach my martial arts class," Zitao says. "Sorry!" He rolls up into a sitting position and pulls on Lu Han’s sweats. "Help me with my Korean homework. Yixing-ge is too busy with football practice to help me."

Lu Han used to be too busy, as well. It hurts like eating a handful of razorblades to be reminded of his exclusion, but he smiles anyway. "Come here, little peach, and let Lu Han teach you the mysteries of Korean grammar."

At least this is useful, Lu Han thinks. At least this is another hour he’s not at a loose end.

The worst part about being an athlete, Lu Han tells Joonmyun on Friday, is that you know the extreme things your body is capable of, and even regaining basic mobility gives no satisfaction. "I can walk," Lu Han says, "but I can’t run."

"You will be able to, though," Joonmyun says, doing squats along with Lu Han. His face is flushed pink from exertion. "Eventually."

"Eventually is not now." Lu Han straightens as his knee begins complaining. "I can’t even do twenty squats."

"But maybe next week you’ll be able to do twenty. And the week after that, thirty."

"I’ve never been patient," Lu Han says. He wants to play football now. He wants to climb Everest now. He wants to be free of his father’s angry voice and to throw perfect pots and for Minseok to actively want his friendship now.

"What a good time to learn, then." Joonmyun grabs Lu Han’s arm. "When the reward is getting back on the pitch with your team."

Yixing is waiting for him outside the center when Lu Han walks out. "I thought you were supposed to come out feeling better than when you went in." Yixing throws an arm around Lu Han’s shoulder. He smells like fresh-cut grass and mud.

"If I want to keep my full range of mobility, I have to keep things from tightening up. It hurts, but better pain now, right?" Lu Han elbows Yixing into dropping his arm. "Practice let out early?"

"Duizhang wants us to be rested for the match tomorrow, since we’re going into it without our star player." His eyes flicker down to Lu Han’s knee, and then he switches sides, coming around to Lu
Han’s left and grabbing him in another casual embrace. This time, Lu Han lets his arm remain around his shoulders. "You know, I was doing some research online."

"Were you?" Lu Han leans his head against Yixing’s as they walk. They are not far from Lu Han’s favorite place to get kalguksu.

"Yup," Yixing says, pulling Lu Han tighter against him. "Did you know that the type of injury you have, that torn ligament, occurs most often when a knee is reinjured?"

Lu Han keeps his eyes forward, stopping Yixing from stepping out into traffic when they get to the crosswalk. "Oh?" He licks dry lips.

"And you’ve got that scar on your knee," Yixing says. "So I was wondering if maybe you’d injured it before?" He says it lightly, but his smile, when Lu Han sneaks a glance, is tight.

"Wouldn’t you have known, if I were playing injured?" His bag is getting heavy. He should switch it to his other arm, but he’s too entangled with Yixing.

"I thought so, but sometimes I’m not so sure." Yixing, usually playful, sounds unusually serious. "You’re not the most open person, not even with me. And I’m your best friend."

"You know more about me than anyone else," Lu Han says, moving forward as the crosswalk changes to read ‘40’.

"Which means I know a fraction more than nothing," is Yixing’s reply. Lu Han huffs, nudging Yixing with his elbow again, but softly this time.

"You know my favorite kalguksu restaurant, though." Yixing doesn’t seem amused. "And my favorite color. And my favorite songs." He sighs. "It was in high school."

Turning right, toward the restaurant, Yixing almost misses a step. "In high school?"

"When I injured my knee before," says Lu Han.

"Did you hurt it on the field, or…" Trailing off, he looks at Lu Han, who is purposefully not looking back.

"No," Lu Han answers. Yixing waits for more, but doesn’t get it. Lu Han thinks he’ll ask another question. Ask for more. He doesn’t. Instead, he takes a deep breath.

"You had better not waste my money by getting that spicy soup again."

"Whatever, dick," Lu Han says. "You know you’re the one who can’t handle any spice."

"I don’t know what you’re talking about," Yixing says loftily. "I handle spice just fine." Eyebrows waggle seductively. "And you can ask Kim Hyoyeon about that."

Lu Han pushes Yixing through the door of the kalguksu restaurant, the tension in his back easing at Yixing’s swift subject change. "Gross," Lu Han says. "No one cares about your string of one night stands."

"She’s no one night stand," Yixing says, winking. "She’s my soulmate."
"That’s what you always say!" Lu Han shouts, as the ajumma shoots them both a good-natured glare. Lu Han offers her an apologetic smile. "You should buy me two bowls of kalguksu for making me listen to it again."

The afternoon of the match is warm. Joonmyun shows up in a red Goryeo sweatshirt with long beige sleeves and red cuffs. The tiger emblazoned on the front seems to be roaring its distaste at being worn on such a nice day.

"You know it’s like, twenty degrees outside, right?" Lu Han asks, in lieu of a greeting. "Is your blood thin?"

"I think you mean it’s only twenty degrees, Joonmyun. Where on Earth is your coat, right?"

Joonmyun shrugs, and then steps forward. He trips over his own shoelace. Lu Han reaches out to catch him. "Besides, this is the only ‘school spirit’ gear I own."

"Really?" Lu Han is wearing his jersey. He might not be playing, but he’s still a member of the team. When he’d woken up this morning, it was like his knee had known how much he wants to play. It had ached so bad Lu Han had been tempted to put on the brace. Even now, he’s keeping his weight on his left leg. "I would have loaned you a shirt."

"I might have let you," Joonmyun says, "if you had let me pick you up this morning."

"It would have been out of your way," Lu Han says. "You would have had to drive past here to get to my hasukjib."

"Isn’t that my choice?" Joonmyun taps his chin. "I’m an adult, same as you are."

"I don’t need help," Lu Han says. "I got here, didn’t I?" He’d almost been late. His mother had called, and Lu Han had been sleepy enough to answer the phone without checking the caller first.

"Do you need money?" she’d asked him, and Lu Han had wanted to laugh.

"No," he had said. "I don’t need anything from you."

"Lu Han…"

"It isn’t worth the price I would have to pay in exchange. What would he want? The new year has passed, so it can’t be a trip home."

"Lu Han, your father is——"

"I’m running late," Lu Han had interrupted sharply. "Thank you for calling, and don’t send me anything."

Joonmyun coughs lightly. He always does. Lu Han calls him a ‘frail cougher’ and Joonmyun says it’s because he’s a singer and he doesn’t want to mess up his vocal chords. "Should we find a seat?"
"We have the best seats out here already." Lu Han drags Joonmyun toward the lowest bleachers, stepping up into the third row, right behind the team. "Come on!"

"Is it okay for me to sit here?" Joonmyun asks. He is pulling his sleeves down again. Lu Han should count the seconds until he starts to fuss with his bangs. It is strange, for Lu Han, to see Joonmyun so uncomfortable. It is strange every time, because in the gym, Joonmyun is so confident and sure. "I’m not a member of the team, or anything."

"You’re with me," Lu Han says. Joonmyun’s eyes widen. "Sit down and I’ll explain the rules."

Joonmyun does sit down. The person next to Lu Han scoots to make room for his friend, pushing Lu Han into Joonmyun. Joonmyun loses his balance, but catches himself by grabbing Lu Han’s arm. He doesn’t let go. Lu Han shivers. Maybe it’s colder than he thought. "Who says I don’t know the rules?"

"When we first met…" Lu Han looks over at Joonmyun, who is twinkling at him again.

"I said I didn’t play football. Not that I didn’t have any interest."

"But—" Lu Han frowns. Joonmyun had always acted like he didn’t know anything about football, letting Lu Han explain maneuvers to him and condescend excessively. "You should have said something."

"You look so happy explaining it, though," Joonmyun says. "But since the pottery fib, I think I should be more honest with you."

"You’re very mysterious, Kim Joonmyun," Lu Han says, and Joonmyun laughs, loudly. Enough to garner stares from Minho, who is still lacing up his cleats, foot up on the first tier of the steel bleachers.

"Am I?" He falls into Lu Han when Lu Han shivers again. "All you have to do is ask," he says, the words pitched so only Lu Han can hear them. Lu Han’s stomach feels knotted up like temple ropes, in intricate webs of Joonmyun’s design.

"I’ll keep that in mind," says Lu Han. Then there’s the whistle.

As the game progresses, Lu Han does find joy in watching, even if he wishes he were out there. Joonmyun helps, asking questions about each player's specialties and cheering just as exuberantly as Lu Han when their team gets into position to shoot for a goal. Joonmyun burrows into his side during the stretches when the other team has possession, and Lu Han has no complaints because he is a little cold, sitting here on the sidelines. He’s not used to being cold on a football pitch. Usually he’s out running, the ball pushing against his insole as he takes it up the field, skirting defenders coming from the left and from the right.

Now all Lu Han can do is yell belligerently at Yifan to use those huge hands to stop goals, damnit from the sidelines and listen to Joonmyun laugh in his ear.

"Your team is really good." Eyes still on the players, Joonmyun steals some of Lu Han's attention. "When you’re out there, you guys must be unstoppable."

"We are." Lu Han isn't being arrogant, but their team works well as a unit. Without Lu Han, there are gaps in their offense. A better team than the one they are playing today would take advantage of
those holes, but Yixing and Jongin have always worked so well together that in the end, it is three to nothing in favor of the Tigers.

Lu Han wraps Joonmyun up in a hug. Joonmyun squeaks before he hugs Lu Han back, his sweatshirt warm and soft beneath Lu Han's arms and his hands pressing one atop the other to Lu Han's spine. It is... nice, and Lu Han is reluctant to let go.

The bleachers start to empty, and the team, after shaking hands with the opposition, returns triumphant to the sidelines. Jongin's shirt is plastered to him with sweat as he looks up at Lu Han. "Were we good, hyung?"

"Definitely," Lu Han says, and Jongin’s grin grows larger. Then his eyes turn curiously to Joonmyun. He’s distracted by Yixing coming up behind him, followed by Yifan and Minseok. "Do you want to meet my friends?"

"Sure," Joonmyun says. "It would be nice to put all these names with faces."

When Lu Han introduces Joonmyun, they all look at him curiously. Joonmyun smiles and waves, with some of that bashful confidence that Lu Han doesn't quite get because it is so contradictory, and Yixing leans closer.

"So you're the magical physical therapist."

"There's nothing magical about me," Joonmyun says. "I'm very boring."

"You can't be that boring," Yixing replies. "Lu Han's attention span is almost as short as mine, and he hasn't lost interest yet."

Lu Han reaches out hands as if to strangle Yixing, and Minseok sadly looks at them both before stage whispering 'sibling rivalry' to Joonmyun, making him chuckle.

"Oh look," says Yifan, interrupting the conversation. Jongin sees what Yifan is looking at and waves.

"Look, Lu Han, your true love is headed this way," Jongin says, and Lu Han turns to see Jinri walking toward them. She's wearing her own jersey, the big 'C' for Captain embossed above her heart. She's smiling broadly.

Yifan gets called over by the ref, leaving them to do captain stuff. Lu Han does not envy him the job. He’s still glad he turned it down.

"Lu Han," she says, when she’s almost reached them, heading for Yifan’s vacated spot in their circle. "You're alive!"

"Barely," he says, when she's close enough that he doesn't have to yell. Her hair sticks to her jaw, and her cheeks are pink from the wind. "I might as well just sleep until next season, though."

"Naw," she says. "It's a good chance to observe your team, pretty boy." Jongin stifles a laugh. "From an outside perspective. You'll be a more strategic player when you head back into the fray."

"That's a good way to look at it," Lu Han says, smiling brilliantly at her. She’s so cheerful and bright.
"That's the spirit," she says, and then she's moving away, toward Krystal and Amber, who are waiting by the turnstile exit to head out to the main campus.

Lu Han watches her go.

"Wow, good to see some things never change," Minseok says.

"Yeah," Yixing agrees, "like Jinri being totally out of Lu Han's league."

"You're cruising for a bruising," Lu Han says, shoving Yixing. He turns to look at Joonmyun, who is being uncustomarily quiet. "Everything okay?"

"You like her?" Joonmyun asks. He is smiling, but his voice is off. But then his eyes are crinkling up, and his voice sounds perfectly normal again. "She's totally your type. Football even in your girls, huh?"

"You know me," Lu Han says. "One track mind." He scratches at his head, mussing his hair. He's starting to feel the chill again, because the sun keeps darting behind clouds and hiding its warmth. "Isn't she beautiful?"

"She is." Joonmyun is looking at her now, and Lu Han must have imagined the weirdness he heard earlier in Joonmyun's voice, because now Joonmyun looks amused. "So why isn't she your girlfriend, football star?"

"Because Lu Han doesn't have balls." Yixing dodges before Lu Han can even swing at him. His sweaty face is lit up with pleasure.

Jongin crosses his arms. "He couldn't get past her first rejection--"

"She didn't reject me." He digs his shoe into the soft ground.

"What happened again?" Minseok turns to Yifan, who has just jogged back over to join them again. He has a ball under his arm. The game ball. Lu Han envies him his casual gait, and his own knee twinges. He shifts his weight. He misses running. "Duizhang, do you remember? I don't think Lu Han told us about it enough times, it's slipping my memory."

Yifan pretends to think about it, pursing his already tiny mouth. "Something about... her thinking... he was..." Yifan slowly shakes his head. "I can't remember. I guess five hundred times wasn't enough to embed it permanently in my brain..."

Yixing is grinning like a fox, and Jongin is beaming wide enough to split his face.

"She thinks I'm pretty," Lu Han drops his eyes mournfully. "I asked her what she thought of me and she said 'you're pretty'."

"You're definitely much more than that," Joonmyun says. He slides his fingers along Lu Han's forearm consolingly. "I have to go, Lu Han, but pursue your love!"

"Wait, why do you have to go?" He had gotten used to the way Joonmyun had fit into his side, with his cheerful enthusiasm for Lu Han's sport and just enough knowledge that Lu Han could share the fun of it with him without feeling like he was imposing.
"You won't miss me," Joonmyun says. "Your team is here now."

"Of course I'll miss you," Lu Han says, and Joonmyun's hands disappear completely into his sleeves. It's endearing. Lu Han doesn't know why, but it is one of the things about Joonmyun that make his stomach burble. He almost asks Joonmyun to stay, but maybe Joonmyun has other things to do. Lu Han isn't going to try and keep him. Lu Han doesn't need him to stay, anyway, and he won't ask it of him. "Good luck with your work."


After he leaves, Yixing stares at Lu Han. "That's interesting."

"What is?"

"You're so open with him." Yixing is still staring. "Should I be jealous?" He is teasing. If Lu Han thinks about it, though, it feels true.

"Yeah," Lu Han says. "You should feel super jealous. I'm probably going to replace you, Yixing. Your privileged days as my very best friend are at an end--"

"Why I oughta--"

And then they are wrestling, sort of, Yixing careful not to push Lu Han too hard and Lu Han having no such reservations because he is underhanded like that. And as they play, Lu Han definitely does not think about the way Joonmyun has crawled up under his defenses and found his own place in Lu Han's life.

That night, sleep is hard to come by. Lu Han keeps seeing the day’s game behind his eyelids. His team, winning without him. It feels good and terrible at the same time. Pride and misery all tangled up together in frustration. His knee aches but Lu Han is too lazy to get the brace or get a glass of water or do anything about it. It’s only when he thinks about last year’s championship match that he’s able to fall asleep.

The choir room is not hard to find, even for Lu Han, who is second only to Yixing in the art of getting really fucking lost.

"What are you doing here? No footballs came in through the window from outside…" Jongdae walks over, feigning concern. "Are you injured? Sick?" He presses his palm to Lu Han’s forehead, and Lu Han pushes him back.

"No." Lu Han looks around the choir room. "I'm here to collect Joonmyun."

"I'll be ready in a minute," Joonmyun says. He’s in the back of the room with a wide-eyed guy, shuffling through papers. They’re talking urgently in hushed tones.

"Collect Joonmyun?" Another student Lu Han doesn’t know, in a backwards baseball cap, drapes himself over Jongdae and looks Lu Han up and down. "You must be Lu Han."
"Yeah," Lu Han says. "Baekhyun or Kyungsoo?"

"Baekhyun." He pulls on the lip of his cap. "At your service, football jock."

"Whatever," says Jongdae. "Like you aren’t a jock, too. Both of you have your heads filled more with sports than with any kind of studying."

"So what have you come to collect Joonmyun-hyung for, exactly?" Baekhyun smiles like a puppy. It should be very cute. The sparkle in his eyes is more dangerous than cute. Lu Han would put money on him being as much trouble as Yixing. He’s the kind of player who tricks you with good footwork when you’ve taken the ball up to midfield. "It must be hard, being that popular."

"I know, right?" Jongdae laughs. Lu Han burrows his hands into the deep pockets of his jacket. "Joonmyun-hyung must have no time for himself, between appointments, volunteer work, and his huge number of friends."

"Dinner plans." Lu Han looks over at Joonmyun. His mouth is drawn into a frown, and he has dark circles under his eyes. He looks really tired. When he looks up to see Lu Han watching him, he smiles. "Has he been really busy?"

"He’s always really busy, hyung," Jongdae says.

"I’m shocked he’s making time to eat today." Baekhyun is looking more intently at Lu Han, now. "Considering that he has a chunk of his independent project due tomorrow for his last humanities class."

"The tea ceremony thing?" Lu Han asks, and they both make noises of confirmation.

"All right, Lu Han," Joonmyun says, pulling on a jacket twice as thick as Lu Han’s, "I’m ready."

"Great."

Jongdae and Baekhyun poke and prod and tease at Joonmyun as he packs up his bag. They are all so comfortable with each other. Joonmyun’s bright smile directed at someone else is strange for Lu Han to see. It would be selfish, probably, for Lu Han to want to keep it all for himself.

Outside, the April evening is chilly.

"I could have met you at the bunsik place." Joonmyun is humming something. Maybe one of the songs he had been practicing in choir. "You didn’t have to walk all the way here."

"My knee’s good for it." Lu Han examines Joonmyun’s exhausted shuffle out of the corner of his eye. "If you were tired," Lu Han says roughly, "you could have said no. To dinner."

"What?" Joonmyun reaches out and lightly touches his hand.

"Jongdae says you’ve been really busy. And that your project is due tomorrow."

"Only a part of it," Joonmyun says. "I’m almost finished." He starts humming again for a moment, and then purposefully bumps into Lu Han. "Hey, don’t worry about it. I can afford to get dinner with you."
"I didn’t want you to think it was something—" Lu Han wonders if he had sounded needy on the phone. If Joonmyun had thought he couldn’t say no, or something. "Something you had to do." It makes Lu Han feel gross.

Lu Han’s thigh is cramping up. He needs to stop favoring his left leg, because there is nothing wrong with his right, at least for walking.

"No." Joonmyun is still walking too close to Lu Han. They might trip over each other if they keep walking like this. Joonmyun’s coordination is suspect sometimes, and Lu Han has a longer stride than the smaller man. "I wanted to have dinner with you." For the first time, Lu Han sees Joonmyun stumbling over his words. It echoes in his body, and Lu Han grabs the back of his jacket to keep him from tripping. Joonmyun’s gaze is on the cracks in the sidewalk. "It isn’t some sacrifice I’m making, here, so that you wouldn’t have to face the horrors of eating alone."

If his stomach keeps up with this nonsense, Lu Han will not be able to eat dinner.

"Good." Lu Han lets go of Joonmyun and puts enough space between them to slow his heart rate. "Because eating alone isn’t something I’m afraid of."

It isn’t. Lu Han has the spectacular ability to feel lonely in a crowd of people who all know him. He got used to feeling lonely a long time ago, and just because people like Yixing and Joonmyun make that feeling go away, it doesn’t mean he has forgotten how to deal with it.

"I know," says Joonmyun. "Me either." He laughs. "But that doesn’t mean we can’t eat together tonight."

A tiny bell chimes as he pushes open the door, and light streams out of the tiny restaurant and into the street. It lights Joonmyun from behind. He glows. Lu Han is dizzy. Like he just made a diving header, and all the breath has been knocked out of his body by the ground and the angle on the hit has left a few stars in his eyes.

"If you call ‘picking at your food like a bird’ eating." Lu Han blinks twice and the world straightens on its axis. Joonmyun is looking at him with exasperation.

"Not all of us eat like starving wolves." He nods into the restaurant. "Are you going to just stand in the doorway all day?"

"No," Lu Han says. "I’m coming."

As they eat, Joonmyun talks about a choir performance next month at the hospital for Children’s Day ("That’s in June, in China," Lu Han says. "Not May.") and about his tea ceremony research ("The most complicated one is the Japanese one."), and about exhausting midterms in his sports medicine classes.

"So all in all, I’ll probably keel over by the end of April." Grains of rice stick to Joonmyun’s lips. "There’s nothing I would give up, though."

Lu Han reaches across the table and smoothes the rice from Joonmyun’s mouth. They cling to his thumb, and a few grains fall onto Joonmyun’s navy colored shirt. "You’re lucky."

"How so?"
Lu Han brings his hand back over to his side of the table and picks up his spoon. Joonmyun’s lips are parted, and his eyes bright. "There are so many things that matter to you. You make a difference in so many ways." Lu Han’s mouth is moving without his permission.

"Lu Han…"

"For me, there’s just football. I’m good at football, and that’s it." Lu Han stirs absently at his stew. "And right now, I can’t even do that."

It is every fear Lu Han has had the past few months. It is every practice he watches and every phone call from his parents that he doesn’t answer.

"Well," Joonmyun says, "we’ll have to figure out what else you’re good at in the meantime, won’t we?" He reaches up and combs fingers through his bangs and the hair in front of his ears. Then he pushes his leg between Lu Han’s, tangling their right ankles. It is a comforting touch that Lu Han finds easier to accept because he can’t see it. He thinks Joonmyun knows that, somehow.

"I’m older than you," Lu Han says. "Why do you always feel like my big brother?"

"Am I like a brother to you?" Joonmyun taps his stainless steel chopsticks on the edge of his plastic dish.

Something in Lu Han’s chest whispers no even as he curls his fingers tighter around the spoon. "I don’t have any brothers," he replies. His soup is starting to get cold.

Lu Han’s father calls four times that night. Lu Han will answer next time, because it is not like his parents’ disappointment even matters anymore.

At practice, Minseok collapses next to him on the bench. "You’re looking good this season,” Lu Han says. “You’ve gotten faster."

"I sort of miss you," Minseok says. "On the pitch."

"Only sort of?" Lu Han grabs Minseok’s cheeks and pulls before he can worm back far enough.

"There’s no one on my left," Minseok says. "You were always on my left."

Lu Han leans into Minseok’s space, pressing himself into Minseok’s sweaty side. "Aww, I knew you loved me."

"I said on the pitch," Minseok replies. "Not you as a person. Personal space, Lu Han." His lips quirk at the corners. Lu Han feels a jolt of triumph that combats the longing to feel the burn in his own muscles.
"You keep telling yourself that, Minseokie." Giving Lu Han a look that says you are incorrigible more than I hope you burn alive, Minseok heads back out onto the field, accepting a pass from Jongin and dribbling it jokingly up toward Yifan’s goal. "I won’t tell anyone your secret."

He watches as the team works together. The holes Lu Han had noticed in that first game are starting to close. Lu Han’s place is being filled, slowly, by Jongin and Yixing picking up the slack, Choi Minho falling back into Minseok’s sweet spot in the midfield. Jaehyo, Jinki, Kibeom, Yesung… all capable of stepping in and stepping up. Even Jonghyun, back squabbling with Yifan near the goal, can play offense if they need him to.

There is, Lu Han thinks, a gap on Minseok’s left, where Lu Han always used to take the ball from Minseok to continue up the field.

It is not a very big gap. It is smaller than Lu Han.

"You all right?" Yixing asks, as they pack up to head their separate ways.

"I’m all right," Lu Han says. Yixing frowns at him, and then shakes his head, like he’s disappointed or something.

"If you say so," says Yixing, and Lu Han clenches his hands into fists.

Lu Han’s second attempt at pottery, a taller vase, is slightly better than the first. One side still sags, but it is smoother, and probably won’t crack in the kiln like the last one had. Joonmyun's vase is perfect.

"I don’t think pottery has any chance of being my next expertise,” Lu Han says.

Joonmyun curls his muddy hand around Lu Han's wrist. His thumb sits along the vein. "You don’t strike me as the type that gives up," he says. "One more set of leg presses, Joonmyun, I can take it."

"Being able to endure is very different from being determined."

"I'm not so sure about that." He frees Lu Han's arm and uses both hands to cup Lu Han's vase. "After all, what is endurance but determination to survive?"

In May, Donghae announces that Lu Han can start running again. "In fact," he says, kindly, "I would recommend it."

"Are you saying I look out of shape?" Lu Han grins to show he’s joking.

"I’m only recommending what I think is best for your continued athletic success," Donghae says. "Plus, my neighbor in my apartment complex went to Yonsei and he has to buy drinks every time they lose to Goryeo. So I’ve got a lot riding on your recovery."
"I'll do my best." Lu Han scrubs at his face with a towel. "Was there anything else?"

"I think it would be safe to cut down your sessions, now." He pulls out his phone and scrolls down the schedule. "Wednesdays and Saturdays?"

"Once with Joonmyun and once with you?" It is a good thing. It means he is recovering. It will also lower the financial strain. The lack of effort Lu Han is putting into his studies this year is award-winning, but he should probably try to pass at least half of his classes. Cutting back on hours at the library will take away Lu Han’s excuses not to do any of his homework. Still, he’s inexplicably anxious. "Is twice a week enough?"

"The other two days, you can go running." Donghae says. "Surely you don’t need Joonmyun to hold your hand for that, Mr. Athlete."

"No," Lu Han says. "I don’t."

Yixing sips at his beer carefully. His glass is overfull. So is Lu Han’s, but Lu Han doesn’t give a fuck if it sloshes on him or not. He spills it on the front of his shirt.

"You’re disgusting," Yixing says.

"I’m too pretty to be disgusting," Lu Han says sweetly, and Yixing snorts.

"I don’t think you’re pretty," Yixing says, flicking his forehead. "I think you’re obnoxious and emotionally distant."

"What are you, my girlfriend?" Lu Han takes a giant gulp of beer, letting the foam form a temporary mustache on his upper lip. "I’m not emotionally distant."

"You’ve never had a girlfriend," Yixing says, and Lu Han realizes he is tipsy. "Probably because you say so many words and none of them mean anything."

"I resent that." Lu Han has always been able to hold his alcohol better than Yixing. "Manchester United scores are incredibly important and definitely mean something."

"You talk about those things so no one will ask you any real questions." Yixing pushes his beer toward the center of the table. It is his fourth one. Lu Han should have stopped him two rounds ago, probably, but they’d been having so much fun. It’s been a while since they’ve been out, just the two of them. Yixing is still dating Kim Hyoyeon, somehow.

"Okay," Lu Han says. "Ask me some real questions."

"Did you ever want to do anything besides play football?"

"I’ve always wanted to play football. Since I was really little. It’s the only thing people like about me, anyway, right?" Lu Han tries to remember. "I think I wanted to be a pop star, when I was a teenager." Pop stars are supposed to look like Lu Han. To have long eyelashes that curl and lips that
look painted after a run. "I can’t remember why."

"A pop star, huh?" Yixing hiccups. "I wanted to be a comedian."

"That would have been easy for you, since you’re such a joke." Yixing picks up one of the bar snack pretzels and aims for Lu Han’s face. He gets his shoulder instead. "Yeah, a pop star. I… sort of like to sing." Yixing looks surprised, but then determined. Like Lu Han is one of those Rubik’s Cubes that Lu Han always has in his bag and around his room.

Lu Han is nothing like a Rubik’s Cube.

"How did you injure your knee, the first time?" Yixing rests his head on his hand. Lu Han remembers the school roof. The wind in his hair and a choking fear. Lu Han has never liked heights. And his beer is empty, so he takes Yixing’s. "Hey!"

"I got into a fight," Lu Han says. Lu Han has never been bullied. That doesn’t mean no one has ever tried. "You weren’t going to drink it."

"How do you know?" Yixing’s dimple catches the dim light in the bar. This… is okay. This doesn’t feel lonely.

"One more question." Lu Han drags his finger in the beer spilled on the table. He forms a smiley face.

"Why have you never had a girlfriend?" Yixing leans forward. "I remember being surprised that time you disappeared with Song Qian at the Chinese New Year party last spring. None of us even knew you liked her, and you guys were locked in Zhou Mi’s bedroom for over an hour." Yixing is smirking, now. "Then you didn’t date her, so…"

Oh. That. Song Qian had been moments from breaking a handle over Henry’s head, so he had pulled her into a room to calm down. He had ended up listening to her rant about how Henry was leading Amber on for forty minutes and then apologize profusely for dumping it all on him. When they had emerged, Jongdae had wolf-whistled, and the rumor had started then and there.

"That wasn’t…” Lu Han sighs. "We really were just talking. I know you don’t believe me, but it is the truth."

"Seriously?" Yixing shakes his head. "And then there is this thing with Jinri. You keep making excuses not to ask her out. It doesn’t make sense."

"I’m picky," Lu Han says. He doesn’t want to mess up with Jinri. "Jinri is perfect. Cheerful and interested in football and pretty. She always has something nice to say, and she’s supportive to all her friends. She’s kind to a fault and her hair is really soft and she has capable looking hands."

"Sounds like Joonmyun, too," Yixing says. Lu Han can feel the beer heavy in his belly. "Lu Han, are you sure that—" Yixing stops. He scratches at his hair and grimaces. "Never mind. It’s nothing." He smiles at Lu Han. "Thank you for humoring me in my game of questions."

"No problem," Lu Han says. "I have to go to the—"

"That’s what you get for drinking four beers," Yixing says. "Don’t get lost."
"I'm not you." He stands. "I can at least not get turned around on my way to the bathroom."

"Are you sure?" Yixing rests his head on the table.

Lu Han nods. "I'm sure."

In the bathroom, Lu Han takes a piss and then washes his hands in the sink. He looks up and sees himself in the mirror. The scar on his cheek stands out under the fluorescent lights.

"Sounds like Joonmyun." It kind of does.

Lu Han has excellent taste in friends, that’s all.

He rejoins Yixing at the table, and they both drink water until Yixing is steady enough to walk home. As they walk, Yixing drapes an arm around him. "Lu Han," he says, completely serious. "I would like you even if you sucked at football."

There is a lump of emotion in Lu Han’s throat. An extremely macho lump of emotion. "I don’t know if I would like you," he says, instead of saying ‘thank you’ like he wants to.

Yixing laughs, loud enough to garner the attention of other pedestrians on the street, and Lu Han isn’t embarrassed at all to laugh along with him.

The running is going well. Lu Han gets up and goes to the football pitch early in the morning, before the world wakes up. He plays loud music on his iPhone, and runs until his chest cramps. He doesn’t know if he should be relieved or dismayed that his lungs give out before his knee.

The calmness of the early morning is relaxing. Somehow, though, it just makes Lu Han sad. He couldn’t tell anyone why, but there’s something about being the only person he can see in his line of vision that reminds him of the nightmares he used to have when he was in high school, of looking left and looking right and finding no one to help as the fear suffocated him.

When he can no longer run, his lungs burning, he lies down in the middle of the pitch, eyes closed. One of his headphones falls out of his ear. The grass tickles his neck.

"So you are here," Joonmyun says. Lu Han opens his eyes. He’s standing over Lu Han, blocking the sun. It gives him a golden outline. "Jongdae said this is where you used to run."

"Yeah." Lu Han is still out of breath. "You found me." He reaches up and pulls Joonmyun down, until Joonmyun is lying beside him in the grass.

"Would you mind if I come running with you?" Joonmyun asks. "Running inside is so stifling."

"I agree," Lu Han says. "Especially in the spring and early summer." He lolls his head to the side. "Are you sure you have time for that?"

"You’re one to talk," Joonmyun says. "Don’t you have a million parties to attend after finals?"
He does. Large ones. Filled with people Lu Han kinda sorta knows and would introduce as ‘my friend blah blah’ without actually knowing anything about them beyond their preference for hard liquor or beer. "Do you think it is possible," Lu Han starts, "to feel lonely in a room full of people?"

"Probably just as easy as it is to feel lonely on a big empty football pitch," Joonmyun says, and he smiles at Lu Han, the slight unevenness of his teeth more obvious out here under the sun. "Do you think you could manage another lap?"

"Yeah, I could," Lu Han says. "I'll go slow, just for you."

Joonmyun stands up and offers him a hand. Lu Han considers, for a moment, and then reaches out and takes it. "I don’t need you to," Joonmyun says. "I can keep up with you. I just can’t do too many."

They run three laps around the field, clinging to the touchlines and cutting no corners. At the end, both of them panting and holding onto their thighs, Lu Han thinks it’s the best run he’s ever had out here. "Would you like to get breakfast?"

"I’d love to," Joonmyun says.

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The nightmare, the one where Lu Han is completely and utterly abandoned, had started when Lu Han was sixteen. He had woken up screaming, still wearing a cast, and his father had asked him to keep the noise down. "Real men don't scream like little girls from a bad dream," he had said, and Lu Han had committed that to memory.

Lu Han's nails had torn the skin of his palms in his sleep and closing his eyes again had felt terrifying.

The dreams had stopped when he had come to Korea, everything that mattered to him crammed in two suitcases, with no intention of ever returning to Beijing.

"Why haven’t you been answering my calls?" His father is irate. Brusque. Demanding. Same old, same old. Lu Han has had his reasons for not answering.

"Because nothing I have to say to you will be anything you want to hear. And nothing you say to me is anything I want to hear."

"You need to come home." No diatribes, no lectures. It catches Lu Han off guard.

Lu Han doesn’t want to go home. Lu Han has a new home, here, with a kind ajumma that looks after him when he’s sick and Yixing and Zitao and the team and Jongdae. With Joonmyun, now, too.

"I’m not coming back," Lu Han says. "Not to take over your company or anything else. I’m sorry you had me instead of some other, more filial, son." He speaks as formally as he can, because he wants it to be final.

Yixing sends his mother and grandmother roses on Valentine’s day. Zitao calls home once a week. Minseok’s dad comes to every game, and Yifan’s mother thinks he is perfect. Lu Han will never
have any of that. He is tired of wanting it.

"Lu Han—"

"You can feel relieved of your responsibility to me from now forward. You can pretend I don’t exist. Whatever you would like." He hangs up the phone. He goes to the bathroom and bends over the toilet bowl, but it is nothing but dry heaves.

"Are you okay, dear? Would you like some soup for your stomach?" His hasukjib ajumma looks at him with concern.

"Nothing's wrong," Lu Han says. "Don't worry." Nothing is wrong that hasn't been wrong for a long time already. "I'm going to skip dinner."

"Growing boys need to eat."

"I'm not growing anymore, ma'am," Lu Han says, smiling at her. His lips crack.

"You might not be growing outside," she says, "but everyone is growing inside, all the time. All that maturing takes energy." Startled, Lu Han laughs. "Have some soup."

"No, thank you," Lu Han says, and for a brief second of weakness, he wishes it were his own mother setting the bowl in front of him. Then he swallows that wishing down, a heavy stone, and leaves it sitting in the pit of his stomach as he goes back into his room.

It is not a busy day in the library.

"Stop moping, Jonginnie."

Lu Han pulls Joonmyun's books out of his backpack. He had taken them from Joonmyun yesterday and volunteered to bring them back.

"It’s not like I have to go out of my way, nerd," he’d said, and Joonmyun had handed them over with a stern look.

"So it’s okay for you to do insignificant favors for other people, but not for other people to do them for you?" Lu Han had scowled. "Like me picking you up, for example. That makes you uncomfortable." Joonmyun pushed his fingers into Lu Han's shin to increase the stretch. Lu Han gritted his teeth.

"It’s not the same thing." Lu Han is used to doing things on his own.

"It’s exactly the same thing," Joonmyun had said. "Am I too much work as a friend because I'm busy and letting you take my books back to the library?"

"Of course not."

"Then why would you be too much work if I carried your bag because you're on crutches?" He’d
been hiding his hands in his jacket sleeves again. "Think of being out on the pitch. You have two
defenders on you, but your teammate is open. Do you go for the goal?"

"No," Lu Han says.

"Sometimes it’s okay to rely on your teammates."

Lu Han hadn’t been sure what to say, so Joonmyun had asked him about Messi’s status on the quest
for three-hundred goals, and Lu Han had grasped the subject change like a lifeline.

"I'm not moping," Jongin says, pulling Lu Han back to now. He holds the last of Joonmyun's books,
'An Introduction to the Japanese Tea Ceremony' in his hands. "I am brooding. Like Mr. Darcy."

"And someday Krystal Jung will notice you?" Lu Han sets the book aside after checking it in. The
rest he puts on the cart to be filed back on the shelves. "You should ask her out before Sehun works
up the nerve."

Jongin pouts at him. "You cannot seriously be giving me relationship advice. You have been pining
over Jinri for how long now? Two years?"

"Fuck you, she thinks I'm pretty. As far as I know, Krystal Jung thinks you're hot and would love to
date you."

"And not Sehun? He's taller than me now, that little asshole."

"Sehun doesn't even like her, he's just messing with you."

"What? I will strangle him--"

"Good to see you both so hard at work," Minseok says, putting both hands flat on the counter and
leaning forward. Zitao is behind him, thumbs hooked through his belt loops. "My university tuition
dollars allocated to a great cause."

"What can I help you with, dumpling?" Lu Han bats his eyelashes, and Minseok rolls his eyes.

"Zitao needs a book on King Sejong," says Minseok.

"Oh good, that helps. There are about a thousand of them toward the back. Do you have any more
specific information?"

"Inventions," Zitao says. "It's for my year long research project."

"Are you in Joonmyun's class?" Lu Han looks over to the tea ceremony book he set aside.

"I only realized that the guy I sit next to in class was your physical therapist two days ago." Zitao
shakes his hair out of his eyes. "Small world. He's very sweet. He loans me pens all the time."

"It is not a small world," Jongin says. "It is a university campus. We’re all bound to run into each
other somehow."

Zitao and Minseok disappear deeper into the library with a notecard full of call numbers Lu Han has
looked up, and Lu Han sighs at the three carts of books that need to be reshelved. He’d overdone it
running today, and his legs hurt. He is so out of condition it worries him. On top of that, he can feel tiny tinges of pain in his knee.

"Why don't I take the books this time?" Jongin says, eyes carefully on the computer and not on Lu Han.

Lu Han runs a hand through his hair. "It's my turn."

"I don't mind," Jongin says. He is so earnest.

Lu Han frowns. In his head, life has never been a team sport.

"Okay," he says. Jongin looks up in surprise.

"Really?"

"We'll, if you don't want to--"

"No!" Jongin grins at him. "You never say yes, is all. When someone offers to do something for you." Jongin scratches at his stomach. "Makes everyone feel kind of useless sometimes."

"I'm sorry?" For what, Lu Han is unsure.

Dropping a few more books on the first cart, Jongin is still smiling. "We all like you anyway." He looks past Lu Han. "Can you pass me that book next to you?"

"No, I'm keeping it."

"Reading now, too? You must be getting delirious in your football withdrawal. Like I don't even know you anymore."

"Shut up."

"Change looks good on you, hyung."

Lu Han points behind Jongin. "It's Krystal!"

Jongin spins as quickly as he ever has on the pitch. There is no one in the entranceway to the library.

"You're still an ass, though," he says. "I guess some things never change."

Sehun draws a giant red ‘x’ on Lu Han’s paper. "I would be worried about you if you weren’t good at football, hyung. This is embarrassing."

"I am really good at football, though," says Lu Han. "I don’t need to be good at anything else."

"What are you going to do when you're too old to play?"
"Coach."

Sehun nods. "Speaking of football, do you want to kick the ball around when we’re finished? Nothing strenuous, but I thought it might be fun to not have you run circles around me for once."

Lu Han has not ‘kicked the ball around’ in four months. "I’m busy," he says.

"Too busy to goof off? Who are you?" Sehun squints at Lu Han. "Are you mad at me for using red marker all over your homework?"

"Furious," Lu Han says. "I may never speak to you again." He feels weird. Like he had when Yixing had tried to wheedle him on to a roller coaster at Everland. The beginnings of fear.

Which is stupid, because Lu Han isn’t afraid of football. Lu Han loves football. Maybe he knows that if he plays with Sehun, he will realize just how much he misses it for real and all the progress he has made in not wanting to bury his face in his pillow and sleep until next season will be lost. That must be it. There is no other explanation.

"Do these problems over again," Sehun says. "But correctly, this time. Do you remember how to calculate GDP?"

"No." Lu Han laughs at Sehun’s unimpressed face. "But I wrote it down right here so I will figure it out."

Lu Han focuses on the problems in front of him, and sets the discomfort aside for now.

Why Lu Han thinks it will be a good idea to bring Joonmyun with him to football practice, no one knows. Certainly Lu Han doesn’t know. He is especially baffled with his own logic when Jongdae shows up toward the end of practice, when they’re reviewing notes, like he does sometimes, as Joonmyun is leaning into Lu Han’s side and asking interestedly about all the jargon they use to refer to plays and movement patterns.

Jongdae corners Lu Han, and asks for the five-hundredth time why Minseok doesn’t just take the ball all the way up the field. This is bad, because it means that while Lu Han is explaining to Jongdae the concept of ~strategy~, Yixing is able to corner Joonmyun for a one-on-one chat.

"But you said there is no rule that demands that defensive players stay behind the center line of the pitch." Heaven knows what they’re talking about, over there. Yixing has dragged Joonmyun away, so Lu Han can’t listen.

"There is no rule that demands that I don’t go into the living room at my hasukjib when Jinki has his girlfriend visiting, either." Lu Han wipes his hands on his shorts. "It’s something I do because it makes things easier. It’s like…” he searches for the right phrasing, "a contract, between the players, that they’ll stay on their part of the pitch, for order."

"You know that it isn’t possible for you to overhear Joonmyun-hyung’s conversation, whether I’m talking or not, right?" Jongdae is smirking at him, the little bastard.
"I don’t trust Yixing."

"Yes, you do," says Jongdae. "More than you trust anyone else, anyway. Besides, what’s the worst thing he could say to Joonmyun? Lu Han talks about you all the time, he never shuts up about how great you are."

"You aren’t one to talk," Lu Han says. His stomach is clenching. He’d skipped lunch, he’s probably just hungry.

"Joonmyun-hyung wouldn’t believe it." Jongdae sighs. "He’s so humble."

"Careful," says Lu Han, "I wouldn’t want you to drown in your own admiration-tears." He takes a breath. The air smells like fresh cut grass. Lu Han loves summer. "I don’t know why Yixing has been so eager to talk to Joonmyun."

"You don’t?" Jongdae pats Lu Han’s thigh. "You never open up to people the way you did to Joonmyun. He went from stranger to person you let talk you into pottery classes in less than a month. We’re all a bit shocked, you know?"

"I don’t know why," Lu Han says. "There’s just…"

"Something about him," Jongdae says. "I know. At first, you think he’s just normal and boring and reserved, but then the more time you spend around him, the more you like him, because he’s actually weird and interesting and funny." Jongdae stands up and stretches. "I know that, but Yixing doesn’t know that. All he knows is that his best friend goes running three times a week with this guy he doesn’t know very well, and that you’re secretly reading a book on the Japanese tea ceremony for no reason."

"How do you—"

"You did not seriously think Jongin didn’t tell everyone about that via email the moment he got home, did you?" He rubs his butt. "These bleachers are so uncomfortable. Everything about you football boys’ lives is uncomfortable."

"All your friends are football boys," Lu Han replies. "You’re almost one of us, except the complete lack of coordination and stamina."

"Only about half my friends are football boys. Here comes one that isn’t, though!" Joonmyun slides back down next to Lu Han on the bleacher, as Jongdae laughs at Lu Han’s straightening posture. "I have to go," Jongdae says. "Meeting Zitao for dinner. I’ll see you in choir tomorrow, Joonmyun-hyung."

"Bye, Jongdae," he says.

Yixing comes and sits down on the other side of Lu Han, hooking his arm around Lu Han’s neck.

"What were you guys talking about?"

"My turn to keep some secrets," Yixing says, messing with Lu Han’s hair. Lu Han swats his hands away and fixes it.

"You’re all sweaty and gross," Lu Han says, and Joonmyun chuckles. Lu Han looks at him. He’s
staring down at his shoes, but he’s smiling. "So what are you two doing for dinner?"

"Eating with you, silly," Yixing says, and Joonmyun laughs louder this time. Maybe at their antics. Lu Han doesn’t know, but the sound curls up inside him and makes him feel heavy.

"If that’s all right with you, of course," Joonmyun adds. "If you’d rather it just be you and Yixing—"

"No," Lu Han says quickly. "I would… rather you came, too."

Uneven teeth and crinkly eyes and one skipped heartbeat. Lu Han must be catching a cold. Allergies. Something.

"Then dinner it is," Joonmyun says.

In high school, Lu Han always ate dinner alone. Loneliness was not like a jacket that Lu Han took off when it got hot or like socks that he left pushed into his shoes at the door. It was more like Lu Han’s skin, with him everywhere he went.

Sitting with Yixing and Joonmyun in front of a big pot of shabu shabu, Lu Han is warm and happy and not lonely at all. "You’re awfully quiet," Joonmyun says, while Yixing converses with the waitress, ordering more meat for their pot. "Is everything okay?"

"Everything’s great," Lu Han says, and he impulsively reaches for Joonmyun’s hand and squeezes it once before quickly letting go. Joonmyun flushes. When Lu Han looks back over at Yixing, he is staring at Lu Han speculatively.

"What?" Lu Han snaps, and Yixing shakes his head.

"You didn’t eat any mushrooms, Xiao Lu."

"I’m not even small compared to you—" And then they’re off again, Joonmyun laughing as Lu Han and Yixing playfully snipe at each other. Joonmyun’s weird chuckle sticks to Lu Han’s ribs and slides down them, and Lu Han wishes it didn’t feel like he could get used to being this happy.

Someone calls from a Beijing number twice. Lu Han doesn’t worry about it.

"Your knee looks great. Your x-rays came back clean." Dr. Kim Taeyeon says, smiling at Lu Han. "You’ve been keeping up with your physical therapy, I see. I worried about you."

"Why?" Her lab coat fits as nice as it had back in March. Lu Han taps his fingers impatiently on the arms of his chair.

"You were very hesitant about the whole process. Those are usually the patients we have the most trouble with. I knew giving you to Joonmyun was the right call."

"Wait, what?" Lu Han frowns. "I thought I was his first athlete."

"Definitely," Dr. Kim says. "But not his first patient. He has a lot of patience, so we usually put him
with old ladies. But he really wants to go into sports medicine, and I was pretty sure his temperament would suit you. And with Donghae overseeing, it wasn’t a matter of experience so much as getting you fully invested in your own recovery.

"I love playing football more than anything. Why would I not be invested in my recovery?"

"Patients like you… It’s frustrating, when you can’t get right up off the operating table and get right back out on the field. It can be discouraging, especially when you aren’t willing to accept help."

"How do you even—"

"Your friend," she says. "Zhang Yixing-ssi? Said you were stubborn when I was considering physical therapists for you. He showed up here about an hour after your surgery. I probed him for information."

Lu Han feels dissected. But, well… "Joonmyun was, is, great."

"I know," Kim Taeyeon says. "It’s too bad he won’t believe it. A lot of people with his sort of background have issues with that."

_His sort of background?_

"Anyway," she says. "You are cleared to start training again, but carefully. Slowly amp back into it. No matches until next season, do you hear me?"

"Yes, doctor."

"Good luck, Lu Han-ssi. I hope you get tapped for a tryout."

"Me too," Lu Han says. "I don’t exactly have a fall back plan."

Joonmyun calls on a Thursday afternoon and asks if Lu Han is home. Asks if it’s okay to stop by. "Yeah, sure," says Lu Han, and Joonmyun tells him he’ll be there in twenty minutes.

Lu Han waits for him outside. He wishes he still smoked, sometimes. It occupies you when you’re waiting. He’s hungover from a party last night. He doesn’t remember much of it, except that Jongdae had thrown up into a potted plant and Yifan had spent the whole time looking faintly disapproving.

Jinri had been there. She had looked lovely in her summer dress. Lu Han had talked to her for five minutes about her team’s excellent season so far, before his duty to stop Yixing from drinking another shot of soju had called him back into the kitchen of Minho’s apartment.

Stepping out of the car, Joonmyun walks around to the passenger side to get a handled paper bag.

"What’s up?" Lu Han asks. Joonmyun is dressed inappropriately for the weather. It’s hot enough that Lu Han is wearing a shirt with no sleeves, but Joonmyun is wearing heavy knit.

He reaches into his bag. "I have something for you," he says. "I picked it up from the student center
today." He hands Lu Han a lopsided vase. "I hope you don’t mind that I glazed it for you." It’s blue. Lu Han likes blue.

"Is this…"

"Your vase," Joonmyun says. "From our second pottery class." He slips his hands into his pockets. "Usually the pots just get left on display, but I got permission from Taemin to glaze it, because I thought you might like it?"

"I am so untalented," Lu Han says gravely, and Joonmyun’s laughter is surprised out of him. "This is like Jongdae with a football levels of bad."

"I thought it might be a nice reminder of where you started," Joonmyun says. "In more ways than one." He grins. "Your vases aren’t crooked anymore."

Lu Han does not believe in perfect people, but sometimes he thinks Joonmyun comes pretty close. "You’re…"

"I’m sorry," Joonmyun says. "I know I shouldn’t have glazed it without your permission, but I wanted to surprise you! Then I got busy and—"

"Wonderful," Lu Han finishes, and Joonmyun gapes at him for a moment before his whole face goes red. The tips of his ears are dark with it. "Really wonderful."

"I’m glad you like it," Joonmyun says. "I have to go. I just wanted to drop it off."

"I would hug you," Lu Han says, "but I don’t want to drop my vase."

"Right," Joonmyun says, flush starting to cool. "Right.

Lu Han sets it on his desk. It’s more clearly lopsided like this. Joonmyun has glazed it very nicely. If Lu Han turns it to a certain angle, it looks flawless. In that way, it’s kind of like Lu Han. One pretty side, with a lot of rough edges obscured by the power of a good angle. Football Lu Han, and then the rest of Lu Han.

Lu Han doesn’t understand how Joonmyun gets him so easily. How Joonmyun knows exactly what Lu Han needs and delivers it like it is nothing. He doesn’t understand, but he is thankful.

"Hello?"

"Do you never answer your phone?"

"Li Yin?" Lu Han hasn’t heard from her in over a year. The last time had been when she’d called to tell him she was getting married. Lu Han had sincerely congratulated her, and they’d talked for a few hours, about the Tigers’ prospects for the championship and about a few of their friends from high school. "I’m sorry. I’ve gotten into the habit of ignoring calls from Beijing."

"I know," she says. "But you should probably answer the ones from your mother. She called me
because she couldn’t reach you."

"Is it an emergency?"

Li Yin is quiet. "Well," she says, "do you want to hear it from me, or would you rather talk to your mother?"

"You," Lu Han says. It is not really a question.

"Your father has a brain tumor." Li Yin pauses. "Apparently he tried to tell you last time he called but—"

"He never got around to it," Lu Han says hollowly. "Is that all?"

"Yes, but—"

"I have to go," Lu Han says. "I have physical therapy in a half an hour, and it takes twenty minutes to get there so I should change."

"If you want to talk later…"

"I’ll call you." He doesn’t mean it. They both know that. He and Li Yin have not been close for a long time.

"I’m sorry, Lu Han."

"Okay," he says, and then he hangs up.

He is quiet in session. Joonmyun doesn’t push. Lu Han appreciates that, because at this point, he’s not sure what will spill out if anyone does.

He calls Yixing that afternoon. He doesn't know why, but maybe he does need to talk to someone. Maybe Yixing is a person Lu Han knows won't judge him for the uglier parts of himself.

But when he answers, there is husky feminine laughter. "Lu Han, now isn't a good time. Can I call you back later?"

Later, Lu Han will have thought better of having called anyone at all. Later, Lu Han will wish he hadn't reached out at all. "Ah, don't worry about it," he says. He shouldn't dump his problems on Yixing, anyway.

"Hey, is everything okay?" The laughter stops. "If it is important, Lu Han, I can--"

"No, everything is fine. Sorry to bother you." He ends the call before Yixing can ask him anything more.

He puts on a clean shirt before he leaves the hasukjib. It is only three blocks to the nearest bar. He sits down at the counter and orders his own bottle of soju and a huge plate of potatoes.
When Lu Han was four, his father had shown him how to tie his shoes. When Lu Han was nine, he had taught him how to balance a checkbook. When Lu Han was fourteen, he had taught him how to drive. When Lu Han was sixteen, leg in a cast and a bandage over his cheek, he had told Lu Han he would never amount to anything.

He will need more than one bottle of soju. His phone rings. "Hello?"

"Are you drunk?" It’s Joonmyun.

"Not drunk enough," Lu Han says.

"I was going to ask if you wanted to go see this Italian film, but I guess the better question is are you by yourself?"

"Of course I am," Lu Han says.

"Where are you?"

"I don't need you to come and get me. I don't need to be taken care of." He refills his shot glass. The green bottle is almost empty. The brand is Cheom Cheoreom. ‘Like the first time’. Lu Han had started drinking when he was seventeen. Maybe his father had taught him how to do that, too, in a roundabout way.

"What if I want to come and drink with you?" says Joonmyun and Lu Han considers. That sounds all right.

Lu Han gives him the location, and Joonmyun shows up thirty minutes later in his Tigers sweatshirt with its too-long sleeves. "It’s the middle of summer, Kim Joonmyun."

"It’s the middle of the afternoon, Lu Han." He sits down next to Lu Han at the bar. He smells like summer. It is Lu Han's favorite season.

"Fair enough," Lu Han says. Joonmyun takes Lu Han's second soju bottle and pours himself a shot. He throws it back easier than Lu Han would have expected. "Did you have a bad day?"

"My schedule next week is so packed that I'm pencilling in sleep," Joonmyun says. "One of my professors has lost sight of the fact that we have more than his class, and choir is a mess. I'm picking up an extra shift at the gym to help yet another old man with a hip replacement, and my ongoing project on tea ceremonies is nowhere near completion." Lu Han refills Joonmyun's glass. "How about you?"

Scratching at his cheek, Lu Han can feel a hint of stubble. "I'm not a good person," he says. "That's why, in the end, getting attached to anyone is a bad idea."

"Is that why you feel lonely in a room full of people?"

"I have football," Lu Han says. "People like you if you play football. I'm really good at it too. Better than other people. Irreplaceable at something."

"Lu Han, you're not just football."
"I wish I was." He gestures for another bottle. It doesn't burn anymore. That is how Lu Han knows he is on his way to being well and truly drunk. "Never mind."

"Did something happen?" Joonmyun's hand on his back. He has thick knuckles.

"My father has a brain tumor." His mouth is moving without permission.

"I'm sorry. With surgery and treatment, might he..." Joonmyun's words fail him. "I'm sorry." He drinks directly from the bottle.

Lu Han laughs. "See, that's the thing." He snags the bottle from Joonmyun, ignoring the way Joonmyun's eyes fall on him so heavy. "I'm supposed to be sad, or worried." Lu Han's nose is numb.

Joonmyun's fingers dig into Lu Han's back. His lips are very pink. "And you aren't?"

"I don't know," Lu Han says. "Maybe I hate him too much to worry about him."

Joonmyun's hand falls from Lu Han's back. He takes the bottle, gingerly peeling Lu Han's fingers free of the neck. "You've probably had enough to drink for one afternoon."

"I don't need anyone to take care of me." Great, his words are slurring. He feels hot, and in the air-conditioned bar, he can't blame it on Seoul's heady summer heat. "I'll still be this horrible person when I'm sober."

"You're not a horrible person." Joonmyun's voice is calm and soothing. "And I know you don't need to be taken care of. You can do anything by yourself." His hair is damp with sweat, too. Like he'd walked here in a hurry in the July humidity. "But if you ever want someone, you can call me."

Joonmyun's knee bumps his own. "I love to take care of people."

"I'm used to being alone," Lu Han says. "Life, unfortunately, isn't anything like football."

"I thought everything in life could be explained with a football metaphor?" Joonmyun teases. Lu Han laughs. His eyes burn. He won't cry. His father has always wanted him to be more manly. He can at least do that for a dying man.

"There is no one waiting to take possession of the ball if I trip and fall. There is no one waiting up ahead, and there is no one behind. No one on defense." Lu Han studies his empty glass. "There is no team. Just me. Alone."

"Even in a room full of people?"

"Yeah, even then." Lu Han thinks about the way clay feels between his fingers. How Joonmyun can fill a whole football pitch with his laugh. "But not with you. I don't know why. I don't even know you, not really."

"Do you want to?" Joonmyun leans into Lu Han's space. "I am substantially less interesting than Arsenal stats."

"I do want to. Know you, I mean," says Lu Han, and Joonmyun's smile might be even better than Jinri's. Better than anyone's, because it's just for Lu Han. His vision is swimming. "And who says Arsenal stats are interesting?"
"Can I walk you home?"

"Yeah," Lu Han says. "You can."

When they stop at the door of Lu Han's hasukjib, Lu Han has a clearer head. He should be embarrassed, about the things he said. Things he has never said out loud to anyone. It's like he told Zitao. He sees Joonmyun and the words pour out. But he isn't embarrassed, after all, because Joonmyun is still here, with his soft voice and softer hands and crinkled up eyes and dorky smile.

"You're wrong, you know," says Joonmyun. "You do have a team. A great one. You've got Yixing and Zitao. Jongdae, Yifan, Minseok, and Jongin. You've got me, too." Joonmyun takes a step back. "Teams are more effective if you aren't a ball hog, Lu Han." Lu Han swallows. He can hear the buzz of the mosquitoes and the early evening traffic. "Good night."

"'Night," Lu Han echoes, and his stomach curls in on itself as his heart tries to expand beyond the confines of his ribs.

It's a strange feeling. Lu Han will blame it on the drink. "By the way, do you want to catch that film tomorrow? The Italian one?"

"I don't speak Italian."

"There will be subtitles," Joonmyun says, laughing at him. "Broaden your horizons, Lu Han!"

"All right," Lu Han says, and then he walks inside.

Lu Han finds he enjoys Italian art house films. The one they watch at the foreign film club that next night, with Baekhyun and Kyungsoo, and the three they watch the next weekend at Joonmyun's apartment, after Lu Han finishes his econ problem set.

He checks out a couple on his own from the library, which has Chanyeol giving him questioning looks. "I never took the time to watch movies, before."

"This 'not playing football' thing is like the way rich kids go on Euro-trips before college, for you, isn't it?" Chanyeol laughs, too loud for the library. "Jongin thinks you've been possessed by aliens."

"When did he say that?"

"When we were talking on the phone the other day," Chanyeol says, and Lu Han grins. Some victories, he thinks, are harder won than others.

If Chanyeol can manage it, so can he. He pulls out his phone and texts Minseok. How do you feel about Italian art house films?

I don't know, Minseok writes back. But I am willing to find out.
"We have to be careful," Yixing warns. "Joonmyun told me not to let you show off."

"Since when are you two all buddy-buddy?"

"Since he stole my best friend," Yixing taps the ball with the toe of his cleat. It rolls through the grass toward Lu Han, who catches it easily, trapping it and then getting his foot under it so he can get it into the air. "Pretty sure doing tricks isn't the best way to ease back in."

"Just making sure I'm still a lady-killer with my mad skills."

"That would imply you'd 'killed' a lady before," Yixing says. "How are things going with Jinri, by the way?"

"What?" Honestly, Lu Han hasn't thought about her in a while. In between pottery classes and work and therapy and everything else, Jinri hadn't seemed so...important. "Oh. Maybe next year. When I am back on the team and at a hundred percent swag."

"You will never be at a hundred percent swag, Xiao Lu." Lu Han knees the ball higher, and then hits it right at Yixing with his head. Whatever anxiety had been lingering disappears with how easily the ball obeys him. "With or without football, you're still just a hundred percent lame."

Using his instep, Yixing sends the ball back. Lu Han tries to get more aggressive, but Yixing just slows them down. "You're no fun."

"I refuse to see you reinjured." Yixing's hair is so red in the August sun. "Reinjured again."

Lu Han misses Yixing's next kick. The ball rolls past him. The heat rolls over them both in waves. "It'll be fine." Lu Han licks at dry lips. "I refuse to favor it."

Yixing jogs past him, after the ball. He picks it up. "Lu Han..." Hesitation, and then determination. "Tell me how you injured your knee the first time."

Aiming for a breeziness he has always been able to pull off before, Lu Han shrugs. "It isn't an interesting story. Boys will be boys."

"I'd like to hear it anyway," Yixing says. They are alone out here. "All your stories are boring. I'm used to it." He kicks the ball to Lu Han again.

Lu Han dribbles it down the field, Yixing running behind him. He kicks at the defenderless goal. The ball swooshes into the neck. "At least my stories have a point. You forget the point of your stories halfway through the telling." He isn't out of breath. "Because you get too distracted."

"I'm not distracted now." Yixing grabs a handful of Lu Han's shirt. "So tell me."

"When I was sixteen," Lu Han says, "I was smaller." Lu Han pulls free of Yixing's grasp. "But I already had this face."

"Were you popular with girls?"

"The other boys on the team didn't like me very much, though. Called me 'queer'."
"But you’re not afraid to slap Minseok’s ass. Anybody’s ass."

"It doesn’t matter, here. It’s more… It’s just friendship, here. You know it is. I’m touchy. I like to touch people, because…” He frowns. "It’s not the same thing."

"Is that why you don’t like us to tease you about stuff like that?" Lu Han can’t see Yixing’s face. But he sounds confused. "I think it’s you who’s lost track of the story, this time."

"One day, the captain of the team confessed to me. Told me he had always liked me." Lu Han remembers his face so clearly. "I didn't know what I wanted. What I liked. I told him I didn't return his interest, because the last thing I wanted was for everyone to be right about me. It wasn't about my feelings, not really. I didn't even ever really consider that."

"Lu Han…"

"But the funny thing was, he told all his friends that I had… That I had come onto him. That he had turned me down and I really was a queer." Lu Han's breath is coming too quickly, like he’s halfway through the second half of the match and he has been running for a long time. It feels almost like a panic attack. "They cornered me after practice one day."

Yixing catches him in a hug from behind. His chin digs into Lu Han's shoulder. "Who cornered you?"

"Some of the team. The captain’s friends. Guys I…" Guys Lu Han had admired. Respected. Guys who hadn’t cared that Lu Han was pretty, or that Lu Han was better. The best. Only then, they had cared, because being a queer was a bigger sin than…

Lu Han remembers yelling "no, it's not like that, that's not what happened," but in the end, it hadn’t really mattered.

Lu Han hadn’t been bullied. He’d been reprimanded.

"They cut my face," Lu Han says. He is not going to throw up. He is not going to break down. "It didn't even have the grace to heal ugly." He laughs. Maybe he chokes. "And I couldn't play again for the rest of the season. By the time I could come back, the captain had graduated. He didn't ever have to look at me again." Lu Han had been afraid. Lu Han had pushed all his confusing thoughts down and buried them under that fear, and it had made things easier.

Focusing on football was better. Focusing on football was safer. Still is safer, even if sometimes he thinks about what it might be like to take Jinri on a date and feel her soft hand in his. Jinri might be safe, too. Pretty and smart and feminine and into footie, just like Lu Han.

"I don't know what to say," Yixing says, and Lu Han pulls free from his embrace to fetch the ball from the goal. His hands are shaking.

"You don't have to say anything." Lu Han tosses the ball out of the goal. Yixing receives it, rolling it down his shin easy, like a pro. "You asked and I told you."

"I feel like this one wasn't in the best friend handbook." Yixing is doing something complicated with his feet. He and Jongin have always been the best at tricks. "I'm supposed to say something wise and profound here. Something inspirational."
"I'm not expecting miracles," Lu Han says, hands on his hips. His shoulders feel lighter? Like maybe this ugly, horrible thing had been clawing at his guts and now that it is in the air between them, it's still ugly and horrible but at least Lu Han isn't the only one who can see it.

"Oh," Yixing’s expression goes thoughtful, kind of blank, "I thought of something." He kicks the ball at Lu Han one last time.

"Shoot," Lu Han says.

"But you have the ball?" Lu Han sticks up his middle finger at Yixing who laughs at him. Yixing has serious eyes, but he isn't looking at Lu Han any differently. Like Lu Han is less than he was when they had first walked onto this pitch an hour ago. "No but seriously." Yixing stops running, so Lu Han stops too. They both gasp for air, sticky skin and wide open eyes. "Here it is. Lu Han, I don't care how pretty you are or who you want to fuck. You will just be my best friend Lu Han, no matter what."

Lu Han has a great team, Joonmyun had said. Lu Han shouldn't be surprised that Joonmyun is right. Joonmyun is right more than Lu Han would like, but exactly as much as Lu Han needs. He wonders how Joonmyun’s hand-- "And I'm the lame one?"

He picks up the football, holding it firmly in his hands. "Absolutely," Yixing says. "I'm the cool, understanding friend who likes you despite your obvious flaws."

"Wow," Lu Han says. "Such a charmer. Hyoyeon is so lucky."

Yixing chases him off the field, both of them laughing, and Lu Han is light enough to fly.

"I meant it, you know. I mean it. So if you..."

"If I what?" Lu Han asks. His phone rings. It is Joonmyun. They have plans later. Joonmyun wants Lu Han to watch his favorite Korean drama. Lu Han thinks they are all too melodramatic. Joonmyun thinks that's ironic. "It's Joonmyun," Lu Han says. "I'll call him back in a few. What were you saying?"

"It isn't important," Yixing says. "I think, as usual, I might be ahead of you."

"Whatever," Lu Han says, with a ~gentle~ shove. "If I'm dumb, you're dumb right along with me."

"Dumb together always," Yixing says, and Lu Han, even if he knows better, wants to believe him. Wants to think he can put so much of that loneliness behind him. "Go us."

Lu Han still doesn't like Korean dramas. He has enough ‘makjang’ in his real life that he doesn't need to watch it on television. But he does like how entranced Joonmyun gets in the plot, hands fluttering up to hide his face during fights and clutching at his heart during resolutions.

"You're so mushy," Lu Han says, reaching over and tugging lightly on a piece of Joonmyun's soft bouncy hair.
"Do you mind?"

"No," Lu Han says. He doesn't mind anything about Joonmyun. "It was worth it."

Joonmyun turns completely toward him, catching his eyes. "What was?"

"This injury. All the surgery and therapy." His stomach does that thing, that he associates with Joonmyun's smile. "Because without it, I wouldn't have met you."

"I'm not--"

"You are, though." Lu Han tries to be honest. To let down his guard. It's difficult. "I'm happy to have you on my team."

"I'm happy to be on it." Joonmyun breaks away. His cheeks are faintly dusted pink. "You're missing the good part."

“I never really thought you were sad until lately,” Zitao says. He’s sitting against the outer wall of the econ building, smoking a cigarette. They’re both waiting for Sehun, who had stayed to talk to the professor. "Now that I know what you look like when you’re not sad, I wonder how I could have missed it."

"I wasn’t sad." Lu Han steals Zitao’s cigarette, taking a long drag of it before handing it back. "Not really."

"Sad might be the wrong word." Zitao’s lips curl down. "Maybe just lonely."

Carefully, carefully. "Maybe," Lu Han says.

"You don’t have a nice family, do you?" Zitao’s eyes are wide and anxious. Lu Han rubs his arm soothingly. "You never talk about home."

"I have a great family," says Lu Han. "I have you, and Yixing, and—" Zitao looks five seconds away from trapping him in a bear hug that would have him sitting out next season with crushed bones, so he stops. "Everything’s fine."

"It’s better now," Zitao says, "that you’re letting each of us take a little of the weight."

It’s like how he’s lost his football conditioning. Lu Han’s gotten used to running shorter distances, and the longer ones that he had managed easily before seem far more difficult. He’s not sure he wants that to happen in his life. He’s not sure he would be able to bear all that weight again, if anyone decides to hand it back. "Is it?"

"If we haven’t run from you yet—" Zitao drops his cigarette as Lu Han tackles him. Sehun comes outside and leans against the wall, watching them.

"Children, please, are we going to have lunch or not?"
"Shut up, maknae," Lu Han says, ruffling an indignant Sehun’s hair. "Of course we’re going to have lunch."

"Can’t be sad around food," Sehun says, straightening his bangs and scowling. "Can’t be sad around family," Zitao sappily adds, and Lu Han is torn between mortification and pleasure and decides on laughter.

Sometimes, though, Lu Han still curls up in the living room of his hasukjib and watches professional matches on television, hand rubbing at his knee and Manchester jersey sticking to his skin in the heat. Jinki often comes to join him, deriding Lu Han’s choice of team ("Real footie fans like Real Madrid") and cheering whenever the opposing team scores a goal, and Lu Han dreams about what it would be like to be out there, playing in a televised match in front of hundreds of thousands of spectators worldwide.

"If you ever play for Man U," Jinki tells him, "then, and only then, will I buy a jersey."

"It’s a deal," replies Lu Han, heart in his throat as he longs for the smell of grass and sweat and hard-earned victory.

He longs for it all the time and the only time he thinks about anything else is when he’s sitting across from Joonmyun, talking about something Joonmyun loves, and that… That is a dependence that scares Lu Han far more than anything else.

"But there’s no deal if you end up playing for Chelsea. There are depths to which I won’t sink."

"I won’t tell Jonginnie," Lu Han promises, and turns his eyes back to the screen, thumb caressing the scar on his knee with steady, comforting motions.

Lu Han is checking his book, ‘An Introduction to the Japanese Tea Ceremony’, back in when the girl he just checked out makes an excited noise across the counter. "Is that your book?"

"Yeah," Lu Han says. "It took me awhile to read, but it was interesting."

"Are you into tea ceremonies?"

"I…” Lu Han rubs his neck. "I’m not not into them. A friend of mine is doing a project on them so I…”

"Have you heard about the special event going on in Gimpo?" She looks excited to have found a fellow enthusiast, even if Lu Han isn’t exactly enthusiastic. "The tea etiquette museum, down in Gyeongi-do, is doing a big formal tea Korean tea ceremony next Saturday, along with a comparison of the tea ceremonies from Japan and China." She sighs. "I wish I could go."
Joonmyun would love that. "Do I buy tickets online, or…" He probably has enough in his account to cover it, as long as it isn’t too expensive.

"Tickets sold out a long time ago," the girl informs him. Lu Han frowns. "But the reason I had asked if you had heard about it is because my sister is supposed to have her baby this weekend, so we can’t go. I had bought them months ago…"

"So you want to sell me your tickets?" Lu Han takes all the checked-in books and stacks them on the cart.

"Actually, since you are a fellow enthusiast, and I don’t want them to go to waste, I’ll just give you them."

"Really?" Lu Han asks. She smiles at him, pulling out her wallet and producing two tickets. "Thank you." Kindness from strangers is weird. There’s a cost for everything, but Lu Han can’t find the cost in this, and it makes him nervous. "Are you sure?"

"I would hate for the tickets to go to waste," she says. Lu Han hesitates, then takes the tickets from her with unsteady hands. "Have a great time, yeah?"

"Thank you," Lu Han says again, with more feeling, and she smiles. Lu Han knows Joonmyun will love this, and that makes the tickets easier to accept. Joonmyun’s magic powers, Lu Han decides, are effective even when Joonmyun isn’t even around.

That is how they end up on the bus toward Ganghwa, Joonmyun leaning his head sleepily on Lu Han’s shoulder as they ride out of Seoul and into Gyeonggi-do. "Where are we going, Lu Han?"

"It’s a surprise." Lu Han leans his cheek on Joonmyun’s hair. It’s so soft. "If I told you, it would be way less fun to see your face when you figure it out."

"You tease." Joonmyun plays with the cuff of Lu Han’s jacket, possibly because his own cuffs don’t have enough elastic. Joonmyun has all sorts of nervous habits like that. Lu Han doesn’t think he even notices them. "We left Seoul. The Ganghwa bound bus goes out into Gyeonggi Province. So what’s in Gyeonggi Province?"

"Something for you," Lu Han replies, and Yixing would have hit him by now but Joonmyun just reclines back in his seat, his fingers now tickling Lu Han’s wrist as he plays with the fabric around them.

"Okay," he says. "I give up. I’ll be patient."

"You’re always patient," Lu Han says. "Always."

"Sometimes I’m not," Joonmyun says, looking out the window. "But I try not to let people see that side of me."

When they get off the bus at Gunha-ri, Lu Han hails a taxi. Joonmyun hesitates before he gets in. Lu Han puts it in the back of his mind. "Gimpo Dado Museum," Lu Han tells the driver, and Joonmyun freezes.

"How could you possibly…” Joonmyun is looking at Lu Han like he’s just seen a ghost. "Do you know how impossible it is to get tickets to this event? How did you…” Joonmyun is at a loss for
words. For once, it is Lu Han with possession of the ball, and Joonmyun standing on the pitch looking like he doesn’t know what just happened.

As they are guided through the most traditional versions of the Korean tea ceremony, Joonmyun whispers obscure facts and tidbits into Lu Han’s ear. He’s squirming in his seat like an excited child, and something… bursts in Lu Han’s chest.

"Are you okay?" Joonmyun asks, and Lu Han nods ‘yes’ but he thinks he means ‘no’. Yellow card, yellow card, yellow card. "You look pale."

"You always look pale." Lu Han nudges Joonmyun with his arm. He’s warm.

"Lu Han, this is amazing," Joonmyun says. "Thank you for thinking of me."

I’m always thinking of you is on the tip of his tongue, but instead he says "you’re welcome."

On the way home, Joonmyun squeezes his hand and Lu Han squeezes back and this, he thinks, is the opposite of loneliness.

It shouldn’t mean something, that Lu Han can’t think of another way he would rather have spent his day. It shouldn’t mean something that holding Joonmyun’s hand sends sparks like fire up his arm that well up in his chest, a full torch flame.

It shouldn’t, because Lu Han’s life is football and thinking about the future and putting things like this away, so that he doesn’t feel like he’s at the edge of the roof again, with too much wind in his hair and too much blood on his cheek.

Still, he doesn’t let go until they arrive at their bus stop, and when he does, his palm is cold.

"Do you ever…" Lu Han sighs. "Forget it."

"Do I ever what?" Jongin stacks the books carefully, titles and call numbers out, so they’ll be easier to reshelve.

"Feel things that make you confused?"

Jongin stops and looks over at Lu Han incredulously. "Only every day of my life?" He shrugs. "I thought that’s what it was supposed to be like." He narrows his gaze. "You always tell me I’m more confused than most, though."

"Yeah, that’s true," says Lu Han. "You’re constantly walking into the goal posts of life."

"Naw, that’s more Chanyeol," Jongin says, and the tiniest of fond smiles is sneaking up his lips.

"Careful, careful," Lu Han says. "I might start to think you like him."

"He’s not so bad," Jongin says. "Not once you get used to all the noise." He sets the last book on the cart. "But anyway, hyung, if you’re confused about feelings then you should take your time and
"figure them out?"

"Take… my time?"

"You can’t rush a scoring play," Jongin says, and Lu Han wonders if all his friends really think he can’t handle life advice if it isn’t couched in football terminology. He wonders if they’re right. "But I think you should just ask Jinri out. It’s been ages."

"Jinri?" Right. Lu Han likes Jinri, and it’s Jinri’s smile that should be giving him sleepless nights. Right. Jinri. Right.

"Yeah," Lu Han says. "I’m really going to go for it. Soon."

"Sure thing, hyung," Jongin says, and Lu Han’s metaphorical cleats are catching in the earth as he pulls his stride.

Lu Han’s father calls at seven in the evening during the weekend before Chuseok. He calls then because it’s twenty minutes after he has gotten home. He’s probably still wearing his work suit at this time of night, but has lost his tie. Lu Han’s mother is probably cooking.

"I heard about your tumor from Li Yin." Distant. Polite. "I’m sorry to hear about your health difficulties."

"Now you understand why you must come home. Your time for rebellion and playing around is over." Football is not a game, for Lu Han. He’s finished trying to explain how good he is. How it’s a career choice, not a hobby. He’s done explaining anything at all to his father.

"Do you remember," Lu Han says, "when six boys, six eighteen year old boys, beat the shit out me? When they cracked my ribs and tore two ligaments in my knee? When those six boys dragged me by my hair to the edge of the roof and held me there, one of them with his hand around my throat and another stepping on my belly to hold me down?"

"Lu Han." His father sounds old. He doesn’t sound like someone who can hurt Lu Han anymore. Lu Han knows better than to think that means he cannot.

"Do you remember what you said, when I woke up in the hospital?" Lu Han pretends that Joonmyun is sitting next to him, a hand on his back. "Let me remind you." He can still see his father’s face. "You said ‘this wouldn’t have happened if you were a real man’. Like it was my fault. Like I wasn’t just a sixteen year old boy whose only crimes were being born with my face like this and not being interested in the exact future you wanted for me."

He can hear pots clanging in the background. The iron one his mother still uses to fry fish because it heats evenly on the electric stove she had gotten right before Lu Han had left.

"So I'm going to be just as unfair to you," Lu Han says. "Maybe, if you were a real man, you wouldn't have gotten a brain tumor."

"It is not the same thing, you ungrateful--"
"You're right," Lu Han says. "Here's a better one. Maybe if you were a real father, you would have a son who would come home to see you through your illness." He chokes on his anger. On all the time he had spent alone in the hospital. Alone at school. Alone in his own home. "Maybe you would have a son who cared that you might die."

There’s nothing to say to that but silence, is there? Maybe he won’t call back.

Right now, Lu Han feels strangely fragile. He wants to be taken care of.

_Do you have time? I need a drink._

_Give me half an hour_ Joonmyun replies, and Lu Han lies back on his bed. He stares at the ceiling and touches the scar on his cheek.

They don't go out for drinks. They end up sitting on the floor of Lu Han's bedroom doing the puzzles that Joonmyun had brought over with him. They sip at soju until Joonmyun, with dark circles like plum colored bruises underneath his eyes, falls asleep in Lu Han's lap, and the furious, tangled emotions in Lu Han's chest and throat ease enough for him to lean back against the foot of the bed and fall asleep with him.

"Why is it so easy for you to know exactly what I need?" Lu Han asks when they wake up four hours later, cricks in both their necks.

"I don't know," Joonmyun says. "I pay a lot of attention to you, I guess."

He doesn’t look at Lu Han as he speaks. Lu Han doesn’t think about it beforehand. He just pulls Joonmyun into a hug. Joonmyun is warm in his arms. There is the bursting feeling again. Lu Han is helpless and strong at the same time.

Lu Han's first, automatic response is _good_, which is scarier than he would like to admit. "I pay a lot of attention to you, too." He’d been asked, before, where Joonmyun rated on a scale of one to football. Lu Han wonders if, thanks to Joonmyun, he needs to make a new scale.

Lu Han watches the last match of the year, the championship, still a spectator. Joonmyun had driven him here, across Seoul to see the game. "You survived a season on the bench," Joonmyun says. "Next year I’ll have to sit up here alone, or drag Jongdae out here."

He feels content. It is not that he doesn’t crave the wind in his hair or the thrill of the goal chase anymore. It is more that he knows, in four months, he _will_ be back out there. His knee is good. The fear has receded. "You can watch me get tapped for a famous club," Lu Han says. "F.C. Seoul, hopefully."

"They’re known for developing players and sending them to Europe," Joonmyun says. Lu Han nods. He won’t ask how Joonmyun knows that. Joonmyun seems to know something about everything.

"Right," he says. Minseok comes up through the midfield and passes the ball to Jongin. It is a
mismatch. Jongin’s defender can barely keep up with him, let alone block.

"Do you want to go to Europe?" Joonmyun has his eyes on Yixing, who is now in possession and well within striking distance. "You should start learning English."

"I should," Lu Han says. "Studying, though."

"Yifan can help." Joonmyun’s voice sounds strange. "I would miss you, if you went to Europe."

"That won’t be for a while yet." Yixing scores. The benches erupt into noise and Lu Han is louder than any of them. Joonmyun beside him is cheering goofily, two red inflatable boom sticks in his hands and the chill of autumn in his cheeks. "First things first."

The noise dies down as play resumes. "You’re right," Joonmyun says, leaning into Lu Han. He is probably cold. Lu Han wraps an arm around his shoulders and pulls him in with an oomph. "First things first." His lips brush Lu Han's cheek. It sends a shiver down his spine.

The Goryeo Tigers win the championship, defeating Yonsei 2-0. Afterwards, Lu Han runs out onto the pitch and hugs his teammates, slapping Minseok's ass and telling him he is lucky that his sloppy passes didn't get picked off. Yixing's hand around his waist and Yifan's big grin. Jongin's boyish smile consuming his face and Minho looking smug and self assured. Lu Han's team. He looks up to the bleachers and Joonmyun is standing there, looking small and thin and cold. He is also still beaming, watching Lu Han.

There is suddenly a new type of fear that crawls up Lu Han's spine. "Just think about how much more handily we'll win when you're out here with us." Yifan claps him on the shoulder with a massive hand.

"Obviously," Lu Han says. He is still looking at Joonmyun.

Yixing rides back with them to campus. Joonmyun lets them both off in front of the student center, halfway between their homes, on Lu Han's insistence. Joonmyun pats Lu Han's thigh to wake him up when they get there. Lu Han had not realized he was dozing off.

Joonmyun drives away, leaving a sweaty Yixing and a sleepy Lu Han standing in the student square. Yixing hums, a thoughtful sound. "He really cares about you."

"Joonmyun?"

"He wouldn't even let me draw on your face."

Lu Han shakes his fist threateningly at a laughing Yixing. "You were in the back seat. The angle to do that probably would have been dangerous. He was probably trying to, you know, not get stopped by the police."

"Remember what I said, Lu Han." Yixing narrows his eyes in the direction Joonmyun drove off. "Okay?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Lu Han replies. "Go take a shower and see your girlfriend."

"I thought I was your girlfriend."
"My standards are too high for that," Lu Han says. "Go away."

"Lu Han," Yixing yells, as Lu Han walks away, "Don't be stupider than usual."

What the hell is that supposed to mean?

Joonmyun is wearing a thick winter coat. Jongin is laughing. "Hyung, please. We're going to be running."

"It’s too cold to be outside." Joonmyun's nose is red. He looks like Rudolph. "I don't know how Lu Han talked me into this."

"Hopefully it isn't the way he talks me into things," Minseok says. "With excessive badgering, clinginess and butt-touching."

"Ah, no, he just whined until I agreed," says Joonmyun. Jongin laughs as Lu Han looks at Joonmyun, betrayed.

"Then let's play," says Jongin as he kicks the ball at Lu Han's face. Lu Han catches it with his chest and then send it over to Minseok with a short toe kick.

He expects they will have to go easy on Joonmyun. He is wrong. Joonmyun is more than capable with the ball, crossing over like he’s done it a million times. Maybe he has.

"You're pretty good," Jongin says, surprised. Lu Han is surprised too. "Not a novice player."

"I was on a team in high school." Joonmyun shrugs. "I can't really play anymore, though."

"Oh?" Lu Han passes him the ball, and Joonmyun passes it to Minseok.

"I have physical limitations." Joonmyun's whole face is red from the cold and from exertion. "Can't make it through a whole match." He shrugs, and the furry collar of his coat messes up his hair. Some strands stick up, staticky. "That's why I’m going into sports medicine. So I can make sure other people get to play. Does that make sense?"

"Perfect sense," Minseok says. Lu Han has more questions, but he doesn't ask them. Joonmyun's smile is a little frayed around the edges.

"I think we've played enough for today." Lu Han picks up the football. "Let's go get hot chocolate or something."

"You're buying, right?" Jongin's thin sweatshirt is pushed up to his elbows.

"Sure," Lu Han says. By the time they’re sitting in the Paris Croissant, Lu Han has thought of a million questions for Joonmyun. Things he doesn't know about him that he wants to know. He wants to know everything.
"What's wrong?" Joonmyun whispers to him, as Minseok lectures Jongin for sticking his finger into Minseok's cocoa to steal some whipped cream.

"I have so many things I want to know about you." Lu Han blows his bangs out of his eyes. They're getting annoying. "Not right this second, but later."

"I told you," Joonmyun says. His smile, familiar and comforting, stretches across his face. "All you have to do is ask."

Hundreds of questions distill into one. Why are you so important to me?

"It seems like a dumb idea to have a pre-finals party," Joonmyun says. "Some of us could probably afford to care more about our grades." Lu Han fixes the neck of his sweater and looks over at Joonmyun. "You don't have to come."

"In your famous words, I can take care of myself." Joonmyun's hair is slicked back from his face. He looks wholly different. It's not a bad different. "Even if I find your jock rituals to be foolish at best."

"Yeah, yeah." Lu Han smiles. "You've never done something like this, have you?" He takes Joonmyun's hand and pulls him up the stairs to the Hongdae bar where the men's and women's soccer teams are meeting. "Stayed out all night before finals week."

"Because I'm usually smart," Joonmyun replies. "You must be rubbing off on me."

"Broaden your horizons," Lu Han says, letting go of Joonmyun's hand and pushing open the glass door.

Both teams and friends are there, filling the place, and it is obnoxiously loud. Sehun is sitting in Yifan's lap, obviously wasted already, letting Zitao feed him potatoes one by one as Yifan tries to beat Jongdae at ABCD, wining at every violent penalty as Jongdae tricks him again and again. Jongin has brought Chanyeol along, who trails after him like a hopeless puppy as Jongin does his best to flirt with Krystal Jung. It’s tragic, but Yixing, with Hyoyeon on his lap, seems to be having fun watching.

Joonmyun sticks close to him at first, ordering one drink to Lu Han's every three and laughing as Lu Han tries to shove spicy-flavored ddeok into his mouth. But then Jinri joins their table, and Joonmyun wanders off.

He talks to Jinri for a long time. He loses track of the minutes, lost in a discussion about Joonmyun's favorite drama, of all things. Jinri sparkles when she laughs. Soon, though, Lu Han finds himself scanning the room, looking for Joonmyun's red-tinted hair and missing Joonmyun's thin, warm arm pressing into his own.

He finds him, draped across a table playing cards with Minho, Jongdae next to him. Lu Han turns back to Jinri, and she seems... Less vibrant in comparison. "Excuse me," he says.

When he stands up, he wobbles. Still, he walks toward Joonmyun, slumping into the vacant seat on
Joonmyun's right. "You left," Lu Han says.

"I'm here." Joonmyun smiles. Lu Han is too drunk to lie to himself about the way his heart leaps.

He rests his cheek against Joonmyun's, and looks at his cards. "You're a shark," Lu Han whispers, and Joonmyun puts his finger to his lips.

"Shhh, everyone at this table is going to owe me a drink," he murmurs.

Jongdae looks at Lu Han, then back to Joonmyun. Lu Han can't see Joonmyun's face, but it feels cool to his drink-flushed ones.

Two rounds later, Lu Han has his head in his arms, and Joonmyun pokes him in the side. "I'm going to the restroom."

"Don't leave me," Lu Han says, grabbing Joonmyun's wrist. "Don't."

"I'll be right back," Joonmyun says, but Lu Han won't let go. "We need to get you home."

Lu Han is not sure how they get back to his boarding house. He thinks they take a taxi. Joonmyun hates taxis, though.

He comes to when they are both taking off their shoes at the door, and he trips. Joonmyun catches him, and takes him to his room, guiding him from behind with his hands on Lu Han's shoulders.

"You're a mess," Joonmyun says. "A total mess."

"We finished my physical therapy two months ago." Lu Han sits down on the edge of his bed. "But you're still here."

"We're friends, now, right?" Joonmyun is looking around Lu Han's room. He has never been in here before. Lu Han doesn't know why. Maybe because there's more space at the apartment Joonmyun shares with Kyungsoo, even if there are music sheets all over the place and Lu Han is forced to use coasters for his drinks.

"I had a best friend in high school," Lu Han says. "Her name is Li Yin."

"Are you still in touch with her?" Joonmyun is running his fingers across all the football stat sheets Lu Han has pinned to his walls. His gaze drops to Lu Han's vase, and he laughs. "You need flowers for this."

"It is December," Lu Han says. "What flowers?" He takes a deep breath. The alcohol is threatening to come back up. "She called to tell me my father was ill."

"She's still in touch with your parents?"

"When they need something from me, they ask her. They know I can't write her off as completely as I did them."

Joonmyun makes a sound of acknowledgement, coming over to Lu Han. His knees bump Lu Han's shins. Lu Han looks up at him.
"She visited me in the hospital, you know. Back then."

"What were you in the hospital for?"

"She's married one of those boys. She doesn't know it, but she has."

"What boys?" Joonmyun is combing his hand through Lu Han's hair. "You aren't making sense."

"I thought she would be my best friend forever." Sticky mouth, sticky teeth, and a tongue that is swollen in his mouth. "But now there's Yixing. And you?"

"And me?" His hand slows. Lu Han's brain cannot catch up to his mouth.

"And you. You're the most dangerous." The kind of danger that has Lu Han's stomach aching and his heart trembling and his breath catching in unexpected moments.

"What makes me dangerous?"

The room is spinning. Lu Han pushes his face into the cradle of his shaking hands. "I have never had someone I wanted to stay so much," he says. "I hate that. Because in the end, you won't."

"How do you know that?" Joonmyun asks. Lu Han looks up from his hands. His gut lurches. "You don't. I want to stay. I like you, Lu Han. More than I should." He says it in a rush. "More than I should."

"I should keep away from you anyway," Lu Han says. "I don't want them to have been right about me."

"Who is 'them'?" Joonmyun asks. Lu Han shrugs. His head feels heavy, like it's full of all the liquor he drank. Joonmyun's mouth is pink and his eyes are steady. He is... Oh, great. Lu Han's stomach, his heart, his everything is all mushing and congealing together and if the room would stop spinning that would be...

"What would you do if..." Thoughts, tumbling over each other. Half-formed realizations and things that Lu Han has pushed aside.

"If what?" Joonmyun's voice is too high.

"What would you do if I kissed you?" No, he isn't supposed to say that. He isn't even supposed to think it. Lu Han isn't... There isn't...

Joonmyun backs up, retreats, bumping into Lu Han's desk. Lu Han's vase, glazed blue and only pretty on one side, falls. Falls and shatters. "Who told you?" The sound still rings through the room. Echoes in his head.

"Told me what?" Lu Han doesn't think the words are clear, but Joonmyun takes a shaky breath.

"Go to sleep, Lu Han." He comes closer again, the same hands that pushed Lu Han through physical therapy for six months now pushing his shoulders, making him lie down. His covers are pulled up to his chin. "You're too drunk. You don't know what you're talking about. Go to sleep." His kisses Lu Han's forehead.
"Don't go," he tries to say as sleep pulls him down. Joonmyun's voice is not steady as he whispers "goodnight".

Lu Han wakes up a few hours later, head pounding. "Joonmyun?" No answer. "Joonmyun?" He sits up. His vase, all the pieces of it, are gone. That proves to Lu Han that it wasn't some horrible dream.

It is no surprise, least of all to Lu Han, that he has woken up alone.

Nine days.

That’s how many days it’s been since Lu Han has seen Joonmyun. It takes three days before he wants to see him, and another two before he’s come up with a hundred, a thousand excuses and explanations for what he said. And maybe he owes Joonmyun a whole story. Maybe he doesn’t, but he thinks he wants to tell Joonmyun anyway.

About the high school football captain who had actually been Lu Han’s first crush after all, and about Li Yin, who had been his second. About feeling ostracized in his own home for even the suspicion of being different and how feeling this way about Joonmyun is so terrifying that Lu Han cannot breathe around the fear.

After that, it’s another four days of unreturned calls and nagging anxiety. Of Lu Han thinking he sees Joonmyun out of the corner of his eye and turning his head to disappointment.

"Is everything okay?" Yixing asks. He hesitates. "You haven’t talked about Joonmyun, lately."

"I haven’t seen him, lately."

"Did you have a fight?"

"No," Lu Han says. "Not exactly."

"Did you shut him out?" Yixing taps his own nose thoughtfully. "That can be frustrating, when you do that."

"I let him in," Lu Han says. "Too close. Scared him away."

"Joonmyun is made of sterner stuff than that. There must be information you’re missing." Yixing shoves his kimchi at Lu Han. "Which, let us be honest, would not be a surprise."

"I think I…” He can’t even say it to Yixing. How is he supposed to say it to Joonmyun? Maybe he shouldn’t say it to anyone. Maybe this is something else that Lu Han should keep hidden inside of him. Something dark and ugly like the apathy he feels toward his father’s encroaching sickness. "I think I—"

"I told you, didn’t I?" Yixing looks out the window, at the street, small plastic cup of water raised to his lips. He takes a sip and leans back in his chair. "It’s okay if you’re a pretty boy who wants a boyfriend."
Hearing Yixing say it makes him want to vomit.

It isn’t okay. It’s something Lu Han learned wasn’t okay when he was far younger than sixteen, and hearing other boys get called horrible names in the boys’ restrooms. "Don’t—"

"Wait," Yixing says. "Is that why you guys are fighting?"

"We’re not fighting." Lu Han gulps. "I don’t know."

"Well, don’t sit here and mope about it. Go find out!" Yixing looks at his phone. "It’s half past six. Choir lets out at seven. It only takes twenty-five minutes to get there with two good knees."

"I still think Jinri is super hot," Lu Han says. Is he procrastinating? Nothing seems clear.

"Lu Han, I can’t speak for the world, but speaking for myself, I don’t care."

"It’s not that simple?" The way Li Yin had looked at him. The way those boys had looked at him. The way, maybe, Joonmyun had looked at him. It’s all something horrible that Lu Han had kept hidden behind how much he likes Jinri’s smile. "It’s not. I just want my friend back."

"The clock is ticking, Lu Han."

He gets to the choir room at five minutes to seven. He looks inside, and there is only Jongdae, sitting beside the piano and checking his key as he rehearses.

"Where did everyone else go?"

"It’s finals, Lu Han," Jongdae says. "We always let out a half an hour early during exam periods."

"Fuck," Lu Han says, and Jongdae sets down his papers, carefully stacking them on top of the piano before turning to Lu Han.

"Were you, by any chance, hoping to catch Joonmyun-hyung?" Jongdae continues staring at Lu Han. "He’s been kind of out of it this week. More than he usually is during finals. Tired, worn. He looks like he hasn’t slept."

Lu Han knows the look. The dark circles and the thin smiles. "I was. Hoping to catch him, I mean."

"You could just call him?"

"He isn’t answering my calls."

Jongdae’s eyebrows do a slow creep upward. "We have rehearsal tomorrow at noon. Joonmyun-hyung always comes early."

"Thanks," Lu Han says. He hopes his courage doesn’t fail him by tomorrow. Not that he knows what he’s going to say. But he has to say something, because Joonmyun has to stay. Lu Han will shove everything down and ask Jinri on a date and maybe even visit his dad if Joonmyun will stay.

The thing is, maybe Lu Han is a little bit in love with Joonmyun. He thinks it’s impossible not to be, with the way everything about Joonmyun is a contradiction of awkward and attractive and sweet but not too sweet.
Joonmyun is some kind of magic, and Lu Han might hate that he likes boys sometimes but he
doesn’t hate that he likes Joonmyun. He never really stood a chance, in the end, against that
overeager smile and infinite patience.

But saying that, to anyone, let alone Joonmyun, seems as impossible as going back onto the pitch
had felt his third year of high school. Feeling it is already bad enough.

Lu Han just wants his friend. He doesn’t want to have messed it all up by being exactly what people
assumed he was, back then. He fingers his scar.

He gets ready for bed early. He wants to wake up at three in the morning, and maybe go for a run to
clear his head. If it’s dark, he won’t miss Joonmyun in his three sweatshirts, huffing and puffing
alongside him.

He’s not expecting Joonmyun at his door, standing there in not one coat but two. He’s holding a box
and his face is red from more than the cold. "Jongdae called and said you came by the choir room
looking for me today."

"I wanted to see you," Lu Han says. "It was like you disappeared."

"I already said I wasn’t leaving you." Joonmyun hands Lu Han the box, and then takes off one of his
coats, hanging it on the back of Lu Han’s desk chair. Lu Han swallows. Joonmyun is planning to
stay long enough that he is taking off his coat. "Your ajumma is really kind. She let me in despite the
hour."

"What’s this?" Lu Han lifts the box.

Joonmyun unzips his second coat. He takes it off and throws it over the first one, then faces Lu Han
directly. "I brought it back."

"Brought what back?"

"Your vase." Lu Han opens the box. Joonmyun has put his broken vase back together. The smooth
side now has jagged edges, filled with thick ceramic glue. "It looks more like a mosaic now. But I
felt bad for breaking it."

"I should explain," Lu Han says. "I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable around me, or to—"
There are no shots to take. Defenders on both sides. Lu Han is trapped. "I never meant for you to
know that I—"

"I should answer your question." Joonmyun looks petrified. His eyes are wide and his hands are
tucked up into his sleeves. He looks exhausted, and the corners of his lips pull down. He also looks
resolute.

"My question?"

"You asked me…" Lu Han walks past Joonmyun, to set his vase back on the desk. He still likes it.
It’s even more interesting, now. There is no good side, but that’s all right. "You asked me what I would do if you kissed me."

"I don’t want to lose you," Lu Han says. It is an admission of weakness, and Lu Han avoids those. It’s an admission of fear. "We can forget about it, if you want. I’m sorry. I never should have—"

"If you’d kissed me," continues Joonmyun, "and if you’d meant it…” He stops. Lu Han waits. He waits, and the world waits with him. "If that had happened, I would’ve kissed you back."

One beat. Two. The ball swishes into the net and Lu Han, who can’t, won’t, think about what he’s doing, grabs Joonmyun, one hand cupping his neck and the other touching his soft, soft cheek. He can feel Joonmyun’s racing heart and Lu Han doesn’t know if he has ever been more terrified.

This is proving those boys right, isn’t it? This is the football vice-captain’s hand around his throat and his father’s grim disapproval and Lu Han being all wrong.

And yet, Joonmyun’s the closest thing to perfect that Lu Han has ever known and Lu Han wants to keep him, no matter what.

"Okay," Lu Han says, and then he presses their mouths together.

On a scale of one to football, Lu Han thinks the smooth slip of Joonmyun’s lips beneath his own ranks up there with scoring the winning goal in a championship match, right at the end of overtime, in front of all your friends. He thinks it ranks running again for the first time on his newly repaired knee and seeing his first Italian art house film. He thinks it ranks seeing Joonmyun beam at him from across a low wooden table as he smells the burning of incense and the bitter scent of tea.

He thinks it ranks higher than all that, because all those things are tangled up in the man in front of him, whose mouth opens when Lu Han’s asks.

The room is spinning again, but this time it is a good thing, as Joonmyun’s hands clench in his sweatshirt and he exhales into Lu Han’s mouth. "I’m scared," Lu Han whispers against Joonmyun’s lips, and Joonmyun shivers.

"Me too." Joonmyun tilts his head back, finding Lu Han’s lips again. He kisses him, and kisses him again, and Lu Han feels like he’s on that roof again, only this time, Joonmyun is holding on to his hand. "We can be scared together."

Lu Han does not like to think of himself as fragile. Maybe he’s just like the vase that Joonmyun has put back together, cemented with glue and filled with holes, some too small to see and others gaping wide. But just like that vase, Joonmyun has helped put Lu Han back together, too.

Maybe Joonmyun likes him, holes and all.

And that is the best and the worst and everything in between.

"Okay," Lu Han says. He glides his lips across Joonmyun’s cheeks and chin. "Okay."

"I’m here." Joonmyun yanks on Lu Han’s sweatshirt. "I’m here."

"This is so bad," Lu Han says, even as he clutches Joonmyun closer. "This is really fucking wrong."
"I know," Joonmyun says, catching Lu Han’s lower lip between his own and biting lightly. "But let’s pretend it isn’t, just for now."

"Okay," Lu Han says, and he pushes the terror down deep and wants Joonmyun to stay. So he pulls him down onto the bed and they kiss and touch until three am is long past and Lu Han can do nothing but fall asleep in Joonmyun’s warm embrace.
Joonmyun sits next to him at the barbecue restaurant. Lu Han is keenly aware of every brush of Joonmyun’s arm against his own, and the way their thighs press together beneath the table.

It’s difficult to want to reach out and touch but know it violates the rules. Lu Han’s an athlete, and he knows the importance of the rules. Yellow cards, red cards, out-of-bounds.

They outlined the rules weeks ago, curled up together in Lu Han’s bed, hands twined together and breath mingling between soft, molten kisses. "I like you," Lu Han said, "but boys aren’t supposed to…"

"I know," Joonmyun replied. "We can’t… do this again." As he said it, he licked at the corner of Lu Han’s mouth and stole the piece of his heart Lu Han had accidentally left there for the taking. "Just this once, let me like you back."

And now they have rules, like Lu Han not being allowed to grab Joonmyun’s hand or slide his fingers up Joonmyun’s thighs.

Joonmyun isn’t allowed to smile at Lu Han like he’s the only person in the room and if they can do that, then they can be friends. They can be close and Lu Han will try not to want anything else and Joonmyun will try too.

They try. It mostly… It mostly works.

If most of January was Lu Han’s chest feeling like it might collapse in on itself every time he and Joonmyun found themselves alone in the apartment Joonmyun shares with Kyungsoo, too much space between them on the sofa as they kept their hands to themselves, then February is the slow wearing down of Lu Han’s nerves as the new season approaches and Joonmyun seems to move further and further away.

He’s here tonight, though, sitting next to Lu Han smelling sweet and wearing way too many jackets for someone in front of a grill.

"Hello, Lu Han, hello? Is anyone home?" Yixing snaps his fingers too close to Lu Han’s face so Lu Han bites him. Yixing screams and Baekhyun gives them an exasperated grimace.

"Am I out with university students or with kindergarteners?"

"Kindergarteners," Lu Han replies shamelessly, putting more space between himself and Joonmyun even as Yixing pulls a face.

Joonmyun laughs. "Then maybe you two should be cutting the meat instead of poor Jongin."

"Jongin seems to be doing all right," Yixing says. "With Chanyeol helping him."
Chanyeol holds the meat up in the tongs and Jongin snips away with the scissors. They make an odd team, and Chanyeol hisses each time a drop of fat sizzles up from the grill and hits his arm, and Jongin pretends not to care but cuts more carefully each time. Lu Han finds it cute.

Baekhyun’s face curves into a doting smile as he watches them. "They’re so precious." He says it just loud enough for Jongin to hear.

"Shut up!" Jongin blushes and scowls. "You’re not that much older than I am."

"Jonginnie," Lu Han says, "are you really going to leave Chanyeol holding that meat so you can scowl at Baekhyun?"

The new semester started two months ago. Lu Han had walked into his first day of advanced business theory and had been surprised to see Baekhyun waving at him from the back of the room. Now Lu Han is used to Baekhyun’s nasal laughter. Joonmyun is still laughing, too, and Yixing nurses his finger even as he strikes up a conversation with Chanyeol.

Joonmyun’s hand is close enough that Lu Han could lace their fingers together. He remembers how nice Joonmyun’s hand had felt, during that long bus ride out of town to the tea event.

"All right?" Joonmyun whispers, quietly, and Lu Han realizes he’s spaced out again.

"Yup," Lu Han replies, not looking at Joonmyun, before snagging a hot piece of pork belly off the grill and shoving it into his mouth.

"Jinri will never want to date you with those manners," Jongin informs him, pepper sauce on his lower lip.

Joonmyun stiffens, and Lu Han forces a smile. "I’ll work on it before I ask," he says, and Yixing and Baekhyun both give him strange looks. Chanyeol is too busy looking at Jongin, and Lu Han is afraid to look at Joonmyun.

"Are you ever going to ask her out?" Jongin sets down the scissors and picks up his chopsticks. "It feels like you don’t even really want to ask her out."

"I don’t know," Lu Han says. "Eat your meat."

"But, Lu Han—"

"I said I don’t know!" He bites his lower lip. "I don’t know anything."

Lu Han lets Joonmyun drive him home.

The ride is quiet. "You’ve always liked her," Joonmyun says.

Lu Han reaches for Joonmyun’s wrist but drops his hand before it makes contact. "I have." Joonmyun’s profile is lovely in the dim streetlights as they peek in through the window. Lu Han’s heart collapses in on itself. "A long time."

"She would be." He sounds strange. Lu Han hates it. Joonmyun is bashful confidence and occasional sarcasm and rare nervousness and frequent sunshine. Joonmyun is not breath catching before every word like they hurt to push out. "A good match for you. She smiles at you more, now."
"Does she?" Lu Han fiddles with the radio and doesn’t turn it on. "I haven’t noticed."

Lu Han hasn’t noticed much that is not Joonmyun, and it sucks that it can’t be this simple. It sucks that every time he wants to kiss Joonmyun, he remembers all the reasons he shouldn’t.

"She does," Joonmyun says, pulling to a stop in front of Lu Han’s boarding house. "I noticed." He exhales. "Is it silly, that I notice?"

"I don’t know," Lu Han says. "I don’t know anything." He gets out of the car with a murmured thanks and is careful not to watch as Joonmyun drives away.

What Lu Han does know is that he can’t have a boyfriend and play for F.C. Seoul, no matter how good he is.

He can’t play for any big club and have a boyfriend, no matter how ‘progressive’ things are getting in America.

Justin Fashanu, David Testo, Marcus Urban, Thomas Berling--

He can’t take a boyfriend to a championship party and he can’t take a boyfriend to an award ceremony.

He can’t hang a picture of a boyfriend in his locker and smile at it for luck before a game.

Then there is the fact that whenever Lu Han thinks about having a boyfriend… Even if it is Joonmyun, who fits perfectly into Lu Han’s life like he’s always belonged there… He remembers the way everyone had looked at him, back in high school. The way the other guys on the team had hesitated to take showers at the same time Lu Han did, even after his old captain had graduated and the bruises had long since faded.

Lu Han had had to leave Beijing, because the idea of showing up to university tryouts and seeing an old high school teammate had made him sick with fear.

Even if Yixing has reassured him that it isn’t a big deal, Lu Han knows that it is. Lu Han knows he is not supposed to want to kiss Joonmyun every time he peers up at Lu Han through his poofy hair. Joonmyun knows it too, which is why they have rules, and why they follow them.

Lu Han doesn’t want to be ejected from the game before it begins, and Joonmyun, who wants to work with athletes, has just as much to lose.

It’s easier, in the daytime. Jongdae, Baekhyun and Joonmyun are easy to find at the student center, and Lu Han joins them for lunch twice a week.

‘Just friends’ is easier when they aren’t alone. Joonmyun’s mouth and slide of his teeth under Lu Han’s tongue feel more distant when Jongdae’s teasing him about his 2.0 and Baekhyun is teasing Jongdae about his inability to understand the difference between football and hockey.

‘Just friends’ is harder when Yixing folds his hands around Hyoyeon and Pulls her into his lap, nuzzling his face into her neck and telling her she’s beautiful in front of all of them. It’s harder when Yifan declares he’s asked out Jessica Jung in front of the whole team and everyone slaps his back and congratulates him.
He catches Joonmyun’s eyes, sometimes, and in them, he sees his own longing reflected in them.

“I don’t want to lose you, but we can’t be this.” Lu Han can see Joonmyun’s mouth forming the words when he closes his eyes. He can hear the echo of himself agreeing into the soft skin of Joonmyun’s cheek as he memorizes the way Joonmyun shivers in his arms.

Some kind of jealousy clings to him like spring mud, sticking to his skin and mixing with the sweat and blood of a tough match, and Lu Han doesn’t know how to wash it away.

The first time the older boys let Lu Han play, in the empty lot behind the towering, equally empty apartments at the edge of the city, Lu Han knows this is love.

With sweat clinging to his skin and dirt on his knees and on his cheeks, he passes the ball, stepping into every kick. Adrenaline races through him, and he finally feels like he belongs.

When he goes home that night, his father looks at him appraisingly. "You’re a mess," he says, and Lu Han’s mother takes to his face with a wet cloth, trying to clear away the grime.

"Playing football," Lu Han replies. "With the older boys."

His dad’s expression is speculative, for the first time since he had locked away Lu Han’s dolls and told him they weren’t toys for boys. "Football, huh?"

"Yes," Lu Han says. "I like it a lot." His father's smile, rarely given, makes him feel warm.

"It’s a good hobby for a boy," he says gruffly, and Lu Han swallows around the bubble of happiness in his throat.

Years after that, the mud in Lu Han’s cleats makes his father’s brows furrow with anger. By then, though, Lu Han has already started looking for acceptance in other places, and finding it in championship trophies and Yi Lin’s comforting arm around his shoulder. In the way his high school captain’s eyes linger on him a bit too long, stirring butterflies in his stomach.

Anywhere but in the coldness of his house and the silence at the dinner table.

Every time Lu Han steps out onto the football field, he remembers that happiness of the first time. It had been the opposite of lonely, and he will not give it up for anything.

"You’re moping."

"No I’m not," Lu Han says. Zitao is holding his vase amusedly. "Put that down or it’ll break."

"You’re definitely moping," Zitao repeats. "And it looks like it’s already broken." He smooths his hand along the shattered side of the vase. "It must have taken hours to glue this back together."

"Joonmyun put it back together," Lu Han says. "You’d have to ask him."

"Did he?" Zitao laughs. "He adores you." He leans closer to Lu Han, as though he would like to ruffle his hair, but seems to think better of it at the last moment. "Almost as much as you adore him."

"We’re good friends."
"I’m glad," says Zitao, "that you’ve found a person who sees you.

"So am I," Lu Han says. His palms are dry, but he rubs them across his jeans anyway. "Joonmyun is someone I was lucky to meet."

"So why are you moping, frog?" Zitao pokes Lu Han’s nose. "I miss your stupid dislocated jaw laugh."

"Shut up and take out your Korean homework," Lu Han replies, smiling. It’s impossible to dwell on the negatives when Zitao is smiling at him like a mischievous kitten. "Or else ge isn’t going to help you with it."

"Yes you will," Zitao says. "You’ve become terrible at saying no."

He runs into Jinri at the conbini just outside of campus. Her hair is getting longer again, long enough to brush her shoulders, and her smile is still pretty enough to make Lu Han do a double take. "I’m getting snacks for a movie marathon," she says. "Luna and I are taking a class on Spanish film."

"I didn’t know they offered classes like that?" Lu Han grabs a cup of shin ramyun and leans against the counter as Jinri debates between two types of pretzels, finally settling on ones with a light dusting of cheese. "I really like Italian films."

"Wait, really?" Jinri looks far too surprised.

"What’s that face?"

"It’s not a face," Jinri says, laughing and pushing past Lu Han so she can set her choices on the counter. "You just never seemed the type."

"The type for what?" Lu Han runs his thumb along the edge of the styrofoam bowl.

"To watch Italian films." Jinri tosses her hair. "All football, all the time."

"A friend got me into Italian art house films." The cashier checks out Jinri’s snacks, and Lu Han then sets his ramyun on the counter. "I’ve never seen any Spanish ones, though."

Jinri looks at him, considering. "Are you busy tonight?"

Lu Han looks at his ramyun dinner and thinks about his homework. "Not particularly."

"You should come watch with us." She laughs. "If you want, I mean."

A year ago, Lu Han would have jumped for joy at the opportunity. He licks at the corners of his mouth. He should…

"Sure," Lu Han says. He pats his pocket. He has his keys and his wallet and plenty of time.

He follows Jinri to her home. "Don’t mind my mother," Jinri says, when she stops in front of the door. "She’s…nosy. You know how it is. I bet your mother is constantly calling and asking you about who you’re dating and if you’re eating well."

"Hmm," replies Lu Han noncommittally. "I’m sure I won’t mind." He smiles at Jinri, his shoulders tense. His stomach is unnecessarily angry at him.
Jinri opens the door. "Took you long enough," Luna says, standing in the hallway and Lu Han waves, before shoving his hands into his pockets. "Oh! Lu Han!" Luna looks at him with amusement. "I didn’t know you were bringing home strays."

"Hey!" Lu Han says. "I’m here for the flick."

"Sure you are," Luna says.

Jinri’s mom makes a big deal over him, and comes into the living room frequently over the course of the next few hours, to ‘see if everything’s all right.’

"It’s because you’re a boy," Jinri says, rolling her eyes. "She wants to make sure we’re not up to anything inappropriate."

"I really am just here for the movie," Lu Han says. Jinri is sitting next to him on the sofa, close enough that Lu Han can smell her shampoo. It’s not the same brand as Joonmyun uses—it’s sweeter. Lu Han likes it, but not as much as he likes the simple, clean scent—

"How did you become interested in this stuff, anyway?" Luna asks. She’s sitting in an armchair. She’s leaning slightly forward, her dyed blonde hair swinging in front of her and her eyes taking in the space between Lu Han and Jinri like it’s a mystery.

"My…" Lu Han gulps. "My friend, Joonmyun, dragged me to a showing one night and the rest was history."

"Joonmyun?" Luna’s smile gets wider. "The handsome guy in your year? Sings in the choir?"

"That’s him," Lu Han says. He doesn’t… he doesn’t appreciate the way Luna’s interest changes after she hears his name.

"Is he seeing someone right now?" She leans back. "You should introduce us."

"He’s…" Lu Han wants to say yes, but he can’t. He scrubs his hands on his thighs. "He’s not." His skin itches. "I could introduce you."

"You’re not so bad, stray," Luna says, and they all laugh, and Lu Han wants to go home.

When he excuses himself, at the end of the movie, claiming homework, Jinri walks him to the door.

"We should do this again sometime," she says, and her fingers, nails French manicured in the off-season, linger meaningfully on his forearm. Lu Han expects to feel something. He’s supposed to, right? There’s nothing.

"We should."

She smiles, and he leaves with a sinking feeling in his stomach.

It’s a cold walk home, and when he arrives at his hasukjib, he’s surprised to see Joonmyun leaning against his car, toying with his phone. "Joonmyun?"

"Oh!" Joonmyun looks up. "I thought you’d said you’d probably be home tonight. So I came without calling. Sorry."

"How long—"

"Just a few minutes," Joonmyun says quickly. He looks cold, and Lu Han steps closer to him and
wraps an arm around his shoulders.

"Let's go inside." He opens the door and guides Joonmyun inside. "I was at Jinri’s house."

"Oh?" Joonmyun sounds wistful. "Did you... have fun?"

"She and her friend were watching a Spanish indie film for class so I joined them." Lu Han helps Joonmyun take off his windbreaker, hanging it on the back of his desk chair. He's wearing a heavy sweatshirt underneath. "Jinri’s friend Luna has a bit of a crush on you."

"I don’t think I know her."

"I’m supposed to introduce you." Lu Han sits on the edge of his bed. "What has you looking for me tonight?"

"I haven’t seen you all week," Joonmyun says. "It’s silly, but I missed you."

And there, Lu Han finds it. The quickened pulse, the butterflies. The sweaty palms and the sheer joy that Lu Han had missed all evening but finds now in a simple conversation, both of them on opposite sides of the room, not touching at all. "It's not that silly," Lu Han says. Because I missed you too.

'Just friends’ is easier when Lu Han wants Joonmyun less.

“I heard from Luna that you were over at Jinri’s last night?” Yixing asks quietly over kalguksu, nose crinkled as Lu Han adds kimchi to his broth. "Watching movies?"

"Yup," Lu Han says. "Two foxy babes and a foreign film. Are you jealous?"

"Are you… Is this something you’re serious about? Asking Jinri out?"

"It’s about time, don’t you think?" Lu Han laughs. Hollowly. Harshly. "I think her mom kinda likes me."

"But I thought…” Yixing’s red hair falls into his face, and he frowns. "What about Joonmyun?"

Lu Han is back on the roof. He’s petrified of heights. The vice-captain is staring at him like he’s disgusting. "What about him?"

Yixing curls his mouth around his wide metal spoon. "I just thought..." His frown is disapproving. "I guess I was wrong."

"I guess you were," replies Lu Han, pushing his chopsticks through his noodles. "You know it's..."

"I know you've had it rough," Yixing says, careful. So careful, like he thinks Lu Han will snap if he says the wrong thing. Lu Han might. "But isn't it asking for trouble if..."

"I've had a thing for Jinri since first year." Lu Han likes the noodles here. They're thick, and chewy. Better than the ones at the shop closer to his boarding house. "I'm not rushing into something, here." He smiles cheerfully at Yixing. "Are you jealous because my girlfriend is going to be hotter than yours?"

"In your dreams," says Yixing, reaching across the table and grabbing Lu Han's full glass of water since his is empty. "Hyoyeon is hotter than anyone who would deign to date you." He’s still looking at Lu Han strangely. "There's just this..." Trailing off, Yixing studies the wall instead of Lu Han.
"This what?" Lu Han's broth could be spicier. He drops a few more pieces of kimchi into the liquid, stirring it around and watching the streams of red mix into the pale broth. "Did you forget what you wanted to say in the middle of the sentence again?" If he teases, maybe Yixing will let it drop.

"The way you look at him," says Yixing, quickly. "The way he looks at you." Lu Han's stomach twists all up. Like when Joonmyun smiles at him from across the counter in the library and holds his gaze for a moment too long. It's exactly like that, and Lu Han is just as unsure in the wake of it. "I didn't think you still wanted to ask Jinri out, is all. Sorry."

"You don't understand." Lu Han shouldn't have expected him to. "You've never…"

You've never had someone look at you like you were contagious.

You've never had someone want to make you suffer because of something they think they know about you.

You've never had the thing you love snatched away from you because of something about yourself you can't change.

It must show.

"I won't pretend that I know what it's like," Yixing says. "The high school stuff. The… the stuff with your dad." He scrunches his nose. "But I know that Joonmyun makes you happy, even if he is a friend-thief. Joonmyun makes you smile. Joonmyun, even as he stole you away, made you open up to me for the first time. For real, I mean." He slurps a spoonful of noodles, to give himself time to think, maybe. "Joonmyun makes you happy. And that's… that's not wrong, is it? To be happy?"

"It isn't that simple." Maybe if football wasn’t on the line. Maybe if Lu Han didn’t have so much to lose. "A lot of people think Sol Campbell’s gay," Lu Han says. Now his broth tastes perfect, but his appetite is nowhere to be found. "With Graeme Souness. That they're seeing each other."

"Yeah," Yixing nods. "They do. And that--"

"They think," Lu Han continues. "Think. They don't know. They don't know, but Campbell still gets gay slurs thrown at him sometimes, when they head to more conservative places for games." Lu Han licks his lips. "And he's... you know."

"He's what?"

"Not Asian," Lu Han says. "He's not Asian." Lu Han’s not blinded enough by his dreams to miss the obvious mountains in his path. It should be based on skill, but there's more than that. "And Joonmyun wants to work with footballers, too, remember?"

"I remember," says Yixing. "Does that mean--"

"It doesn't mean anything," Lu Han says. "It just is. I'm just stating facts. I'm just saying--" Nobody wants a queer on their team. "This is the way it is going to be."

Lu Han can't bear the pity in Yixing's eyes. It makes him angry. Frustrated. It makes him feel like nothing, and that is what Lu Han wants least of all.

"If you kept it a secret--"

"Because that would feel so good," Lu Han says. "Because it would be so nice to call him my friend while you get to introduce your girlfriend." Yixing flinches, and looks out the window. Lu Han
follows his gaze. It’s a nice day. A great day to kick the ball around. Practices start next week. Lu Han can’t wait. He... needs football, right now. "You wanna play?"

"I'd love to." Yixing digs a crinkled 10000won bill out of his pocket. "Lunch is on me." Lu Han can see the relief in his gaze. Possibly that Lu Han isn’t mad at him. Lu Han doesn’t know. Doesn’t know anything, least of all how to make the empty, sinking feeling inside of him go away.

The thing about football is that it exhausts Lu Han mentally and physically, and at the end of a match, there’s no time to think about anything else.

As he ignores another call from a Beijing number, Lu Han longs for the smell of freshly cut grass and the weight of a football sliding perfectly into his instep.

Lu Han finds thirteen books out of place in the modern fiction section after Chanyeol’s shift. "He’s hopeless with call numbers," he mumbles to himself.

"Who is?" Lu Han does not have to turn around to know it’s Joonmyun. He smiles, continuing to re-file the books.

"Chanyeol, of course." He looks over his shoulder and Joonmyun’s beaming at him. His hair is getting too long. His shirt is horrible. Lu Han thinks he’s beautiful. "What brings you here?"

"A report for the last literature class I’ll ever take," Joonmyun says. "Fourth year is starting off with a ton of work already."

"I’m swamped too," Lu Han says, sliding the last book into place and turning around completely. "And practice starts on Saturday."

"We should have study time," Joonmyun says. "Time where you’re forced to do homework in the science library."

"Minseok has been trying to institute that for two years now and he has yet to succeed." Lu Han pokes Joonmyun’s shoulder. "What makes you think you can talk me into it, shark?"

This is good. This is like before. Lu Han likes this.

"Well," Joonmyun says, fluttering his lashes, "I really have to get good grades this year, and I really hate studying alone."

Lu Han knows he’s being played, but he grimaces anyway, because it’s working. "Ugh, you’re too good at that."

"Goryeo-Dae’s best poker player." Joonmyun grins at him. Lu Han’s pulse quickens.

"So what books are you looking for?"

"Biographies." Joonmyun hands him an index card with neatly organized call numbers. "I’ve already looked a few up."

"Well, let’s start with these, then."

The section of the library the call numbers lead them to is empty. There’s a fine layer of dust on the
shelves. Lu Han should make Chanyeol come back here and dust tomorrow.

"You’ve picked a weird obscure topic again, haven’t you?"

"You know me." Joonmyun laughs. "I can’t be satisfied with something easy."

He reaches up and hooks his index finger on the edge of a spine, dragging a book free from the shelf. Then he stands on his tiptoes, reaching for one on a higher shelf, and he stumbles. Lu Han comes up behind him, and catches his waist. "Let me get it."

"I’ve already gotten it," Joonmyun says. His voice is choked. The heat of his waist bleeds into Lu Han’s palms. Joonmyun is warm. He smells sweet.

He turns in Lu Han’s arms, looking up at Lu Han, and that’s Lu Han’s cue to step back. He should drop his arms, and step back.

‘Let go, Lu Han,’ his brain says, and his throat is so dry.

Only that’s not what happens.

What happens is light catching in Joonmyun’s eyes, and Joonmyun’s stupid, unwavering smile slipping just enough to break Lu Han’s heart.

Lu Han shoves Joonmyun back into the shelves behind him and kisses him, their mouths fitting together as perfectly as they had before. Lu Han swallows Joonmyun’s gasp, both of his hands fisting in Joonmyun’s fucking stupid fleece plaid shirt. The scent of Joonmyun mingles with the scent of old books, and dust tickles at both of their faces as they taste each other desperately.

Catching the ball right at the sweet spot of his instep. Joonmyun melts into him easy just like that. Lu Han finds himself following instead of leading, Joonmyun pulling him down with a firm grip in his hair and keeping him close. "Stronger than you look," Lu Han laughs into his mouth, and Joonmyun smiles. Lu Han wishes…

"You already knew that," Joonmyun says. "I’ve lugged you around the gym often enough." His knuckles drag down Lu Han’s neck and slide cold just below the collar of his T-shirt. "This is…"

"Breaking the rules," Lu Han finishes. "Red card." Joonmyun’s mouth is pink, lips still so inviting. Lu Han’s hands start to tremble.

"Red card," Joonmyun agrees, smile abandoning his face as his hands fall from Lu Han’s shirt.

"I know that…” Lu Han aligns his palm to the curve of Joonmyun’s jaw, and Joonmyun responds by pulling down at the hem of his own shirt that he’s grasping, "that it’s as hard for you as it is for me."

"I get it," Joonmyun says. "We both know…” His smile is strained. "We both know how it is."

"Even if it’s hard…” Lu Han feels the words stick to the roof of his mouth like peanut butter. "I can’t…” He takes a deep breath, and steps back, away from Joonmyun. Suddenly the library feels cold. Maybe he should start wearing unnecessary jackets and sweaters like Joonmyun.

"I’ll stay," Joonmyun says, shuddering. "Didn’t I promise you I’d stay?"

"It wouldn’t be…” He remembers Li Yin’s voice over the phone. The waver in it as she told him she was planning to get married. "I’m sure you remember him, Lu Han," she’d said. He was the vice-captain of your football team in high school. We reconnected at a business soiree and he swept me
off my feet." Lu Han had gripped the phone tightly and tried to keep from retching.

"Wouldn’t be what?"

Some of those missed calls from Beijing might be from her.

"The first time someone’s intended to stay," Lu Han says. "I can be good at pushing people away."

Joonmyun smiles, lips pink and soft and freshly kissed. "You won’t be able to lose me," he says. "Don’t you remember? I’m a shark."

"Right, right," Lu Han says. It would be wonderful, he thinks, if he could just kiss Joonmyun forever, even back here where the dust sifts across their skin and hundreds of autobiographies loom over them. It would be wonderful if Lu Han were brave enough for all of that.

He settles for picking up the books the two of them have dropped and spinning back out toward the aisle.

"Did you guys get lost back there?" Jongin jokes, when they wander to the front, arms full of books.

"I think we’re still lost," Joonmyun says, hardly loud enough for Lu Han to hear.

"Shut your face, Jonginnie," Lu Han says, avoiding Joonmyun’s gaze.

Lost is a good way to put it.

Practices resume, and they are like water in the desert after days of nothing but sand. Lu Han drinks in the pass-plays like a man dying of thirst, and Minseok laughs when they all clear the pitch and Lu Han is still out running, shooting the ball into the empty net past an imaginary defender.

"We have practice tomorrow, Xiao Lu," Yifan yells. "Don’t burn yourself out two weeks after getting back on the pitch."

"I’ll never burn out," Lu Han yells back. "This is the only thing I love!"

"That and goosing Minseok in the shower," Jinki says, as Lu Han picks up the ball and jogs to the sidelines.

"That was once," Lu Han says, "over three years ago. Are we ever going to let that go?"

"No," Jongin and Kibeom say in unison, before they high five.

Lu Han can feel the ache of a good workout in his thighs and laughter bubbling up. He missed this so much and for the first time in weeks the haunting sadness lifts.

Football’s always been good for that.

"Welcome back," Minseok says warmly as Yixing catches him with an arm, dragging him into a sweaty hug.

"It’s good to be back," Lu Han says.
Four calls. Lu Han convinces himself he’s too busy to answer, even when Joonmyun gives him a narrowed look through his eyelashes. "Aren’t you going to answer that?"

"No," Lu Han says, and the girl at the table next to them in the science library gives them a dirty look. "I’m studying."

"Doodling pictures of Didier Drogba with a spear through his head is not studying, Lu Han." Joonmyun nudges Lu Han’s phone closer to him with the tips of his fingers. Joonmyun’s hand is small. "What if it’s important?"

"I’m studying," Lu Han says again. "And so are you."

"Minseok’s been trying to talk you into this for years and now you’re all dedicated?"

"Minseok’s not a shark," Lu Han replies, and pretends not to see the voice mail envelope blinking ominously on his screen.

They win the first game, a home game, against Gyungbuk National. Lu Han scores their first and their third goal, cheeks flushed and breath coming so heavy it hurts, but it feels amazing. Yifan celebrates their win by pouring his bottle of ice-cold water on Lu Han’s head, the wetness refreshing down his spine even in the brisk spring wind.

Coach Jung starts to cry. Minseok consoles him with firm back pats.

He towels himself off at the bench, choruses of "group dinner!!" heralding the trip toward the locker room. He meets Joonmyun’s eyes when he looks up in the bleachers, and grins.

"Good job, jock," he sees Joonmyun mouth, and Lu Han hums through his shower.

Joonmyun is waiting in the parking lot with his hands in his pockets 15 minutes later, leaning against his car. "You wouldn’t happen to want a ride, would you?"

"Ah, don’t you think—"

"Lu Han!" Jinri yells across the parking lot. "Do you need a ride?" He feels Joonmyun tense, and then force himself to relax. He’s about to do something dumb and self-sacrificing, like telling Lu Han it’s no big deal that he waited outside for fifteen minutes extra in the cold when he can barely tolerate early summer weather without a sweater, and that Lu Han should ride with Jinri because hasn’t he always wanted her attention?

Joonmyun’s face never changes, but Lu Han knows. It’s like Luna asking if Joonmyun is seeing anyone. Lu Han tightens his hold on his friend and waves large with his free arm. "I’m all set, thanks!"

"Don’t you want to go with her? Just football players?"

"If I wanted to go with her I would have."

"I wouldn’t be sad if—"
"If it’s too much trouble to drive me," Lu Han says, "you don’t have to." Maybe Joonmyun is tired of being Lu Han’s chauffeur, or maybe he wants Lu Han to start dating Jinri so the weirdness between them—the unnatural and unforgettable attraction, will fade. Maybe--

"Now who’s the shark?" Joonmyun says softly, separating himself from Lu Han and walking around to the driver’s side. "Get in, jock."

"Are my conditions acceptable?"

"Sure they are." Joonmyun stares straight ahead as Lu Han fumbles with his seatbelt. His muscles are starting to ache, and he can feel the soreness in them as he relaxes into the familiar passenger seat of Joonmyun’s car. The air freshener hanging from the center mirror smells like fruit.

Lu Han’s phone rings, and it’s probably Yixing, asking Lu Han why he isn’t there yet. Joonmyun’s a slow and careful driver who stops for squirrels and does two kilometers per hour under the speed limit ‘just to be sure’. Lu Han has strangely never minded it, though if anyone else had the habit he would tease them mercilessly. It just seems to fit Joonmyun.

Without checking the caller ID, he answers. "Hello?" he says, and from the other end of the line comes a flood of rapid Beijing dialect that leaves Lu Han’s head spinning until he can prod his tired brain into code-switching.

When he does switch, he registers the voice as belonging to Li Yin, and her frantic words mentioning hospitals and surgeries and Lu Han’s dad. "I know you don’t want to, Lu Han, but won’t you come home?"

"I’m already home," Lu Han says.

"Your mom… she needs you, Lu Han."

"I needed her, once." He wonders if his mother is waiting by his father’s bedside. He wonders if she brought flowers to make the drab hospital room cheerier. He wonders if her pale pink lipstick looks gray under the cheap glow of the beige-yellow hospital lights. "I’m in the middle of something."

"Lu Han…"

"I’ll call you later," Lu Han says. "I need to think."

The ominous silence of the car is really filled with all the things Lu Han knows Joonmyun wants to say. Lu Han has always liked that Joonmyun won’t say them unless Lu Han asks him to.

"I’m a horrible person," Lu Han says. "I know I am." He fingers the touchscreen on his phone, pulling up the lunar new year version of Angry Birds and letting the grunts of the tiny cartoon pig-villains echo loudly in the somber vehicle. "I don’t want to go to dinner anymore."

"How about my place, then?" Joonmyun answers, and Lu Han nods.

Kyungsoo isn’t home. His loafers are missing from the entrance way, and Joonmyun murmurs something about vocal lessons as Lu Han slinks off to Joonmyun’s living room and throws himself onto the sofa. Joonmyun sits carefully, cautiously, beside him. Their knees and elbows touch.

"I hate him," Lu Han says. "When I needed his support, he treated me like…” He gulps, and his eyes sting. Inconvenient and unnecessary, because Lu Han doesn’t care. He doesn’t. This doesn’t hurt anymore. "I learned, because of my parents, that I shouldn’t rely on anyone else, because other people always let you down. Even the people who are supposed to love you—" Face bruised,
stinging cut on his face. Knee too swollen to walk, let alone run. "Even those people don’t stick around, and if you want them to, you’ll be disappointed."

"Not all people—"

"I hate him so much and I don’t know if I want to look at him and listen to him just because he has some kind of brain tumor now. Just because he might die without knowing how much I hate him—"

Caught are the words he wants to say, and in the bitter syrup of anger they slip back down his throat to land heavy in his belly.

"Can I ask…" Joonmyun wets his lips. "Can I ask what happened?"

Lu Han tells him. Joonmyun listens quietly, his hand coming up to rest on Lu Han’s back between his shoulders the only reassurance he’s there. Lu Han talks about the roof, about the captain, and about Li Yin. About waking up alone in the hospital and about his father coming to visit and about the emptiness of knowing his dreams didn’t mean anything to his disappointed parents.

"You have a lot of people who support your dreams, now," Joonmyun says. "Coach Jung, Yixing, your team, Zitao, Sehun, Jongdae. Me."

"I know that."

"None of us…" Joonmyun is soft-spoken, but sure. "None of us would let you wake up alone."

The warm, fuzzy feeling accompanying the after-effects of anesthesia had been Yixing and Zitao’s laughter. "I know that, too."

He is hyperaware of Joonmyun beside him, steady and even. Joonmyun’s speaking to Lu Han in the same manner as he’d coaxed him through his hardest physical therapy sessions. Lu Han’s heart is heavy with all that he feels but hasn’t said again since they established their rules.

"You should go, Lu Han. To China."

"Why?" Lu Han studies his hands. He has hands like his dad, strong and capable and nothing like his face. Manly. "I don’t want to care."

"But someday, you might." Joonmyun’s hand is warm at the small of his back. "Someday, you might think ‘I wish I’d taken that opportunity’ and you won’t be able to change the past. You never know the last time you’ll be able to say something. It could be tomorrow or two years from now or ten. But you should never… You never know. So you should go."

Joonmyun’s hand rubs small circles and the vitriol turns to acid on Lu Han’s tongue. He looks down at his friend and thinks he probably already has enough regrets to last and last. "What am I supposed to even say?"

"If nothing else," Joonmyun says, "without your parents you wouldn’t be here, and you wouldn’t be you." He smiles. "And you want to know a secret? I quite like you being here, and being you."

It’s exactly what Lu Han needs to hear. "You’re so good at me."

"Good at you?" Joonmyun’s smile is somewhat strained. "I’m not so sure about that."

"You always…" Lu Han blows his bangs out of his face and his shoulders hunch forward. "Yixing truly gets me, you know? He’s my best friend. But you… you know what to say to make me… think." Joonmyun is too far away. Lu Han will not ask him to come closer. "Meeting you was one of
the best things that ever happened to me." It hurts to be that honest. He chances a look at Joonmyun, who stares back at him evenly with eyes shinier than usual, and hands white-knuckled.

"This is so hard," Joonmyun says. "Why are you so…" He laughs, sadly. "You’re everything I ever…"

"So are you," Lu Han says. "So are you."

It’s quiet, and Lu Han tries to think about his father, and about giving in and going to see him, but all he can think about is Joonmyun’s soft, somber expression and the broken vase so carefully put back together.

"May I be selfish?" Joonmyun asks, and it surprises Lu Han. Joonmyun’s lips curve down, soft and pink, and Lu Han is incapable of saying anything but yes.

"Do you even know how to be?" he teases.

Joonmyun doesn’t smile. He moves closer to Lu Han. His hand falls from Lu Han’s back. "This is half-time," he says. "Intermission. After this, we have to resume the game."

"What?"

Lu Han gasps as Joonmyun turns his body so he’s pressing into him, slipping one leg over both of Lu Han’s so that Lu Han is trapped underneath him. His hips push down into Lu Han, and his hands hold lightly to shivering shoulders.

"There are no rules during intermission," Joonmyun continues, and then he moves forward, down, catching Lu Han’s mouth.

Lu Han grabs Joonmyun’s hips to steady himself, because even though he’s sitting he feels like he might stumble and fall. His fingers are trembling, and so are Joonmyun’s. The mouth above his own, pressing down insistently, is perfect and warm. Lu Han parts his lips enough to sneak his tongue out for a taste, and he finds Joonmyun’s lip balm and wind-chapped skin beneath it. Joonmyun shivers and kisses harder, both of their mouths opening more to allow their tongues to meet, gently and softly and full of pent-up frustration.

Lu Han drags Joonmyun closer, and closer still, until all he can smell is Joonmyun’s shampoo and all he can see, through the narrow line of half-closed eyes, is the soft skin of Joonmyun’s cheek and jaw. "I…"

"Just five minutes," Joonmyun says. "Just five minutes of selfishness. Five minutes of recklessness."

Lu Han answers by sliding his hands up under Joonmyun’s shirt. For someone who always feels cold, Joonmyun has hot skin, and it’s smooth under Lu Han’s rough palms, except a thin scar that he can feel along Joonmyun’s chest. Joonmyun whines, gently, when Lu Han runs his thumbs across Joonmyun’s nipples, feeling them pebble under his touch. Joonmyun sucks and licks his way along Lu Han’s jaw and down to his neck, and Lu Han knows there will be red marks there tomorrow. Reminders. He doesn’t care.

Somehow, Joonmyun’s hips start rocking into his own, his burgeoning erection against Lu Han’s. There is too much friction, and not enough at the same time. Lu Han is both scared and desperate, gliding his fingers down Joonmyun’s firm abs and thin line of hair, fingertips grazing the waistband of his jeans. Unfamiliar territory that has his heart jumping and twisting between his ribs.

"Lu Han…"
"What if Kyungssoo comes home?"

Joonmyun groans and pulls back, standing in front of Lu Han and hauling him up by the front of his shirt. Lu Han’s thighs complain but only until he is standing completely. Being dragged back toward Joonmyun’s bedroom.

"We have a few hours," Joonmyun says. "And I don’t mind people on my bed."

Lu Han laughs, with disbelief and some of Joonmyun’s newfound recklessness, and both his heart and his body are betraying his mind, which is telling him loudly that this is something he won’t be able to take back. That if he lets this continue it will not matter how many rules they make or how strictly they attempt to follow them, there will forever be this between them.

Lu Han has only ever wanted football enough to throw everything out the window like this. Now he finds himself wanting Joonmyun so much it hurts, in every way. "A few hours is a lot longer than five minutes," Lu Han says slowly, and it aches. He wishes it were simple. He wishes it were easy. He wishes he weren’t so fucking afraid.

He wishes every move he made toward happiness didn’t shove him back out onto that roof and leave him stranded there, lost and alone.

Joonmyun kisses him again, crawling up the bed and pushing Lu Han down into the pillows that remember Joonmyun’s scent. With Joonmyun above him, eyes dark and serious and pleading, Lu Han can maybe, just this once, let Joonmyun lick and nip the fear away with his intoxicating and steady mouth.

_I love you_, he thinks, as Joonmyun’s hands work his shirt over his head, and Joonmyun’s lips fall into the dip of his collarbone. _I love you so much._

"Me too," Joonmyun says, as though he can read Lu Han’s thoughts. He probably can. He’s always been able to, even when he’d barely known Lu Han at all.

Lu Han slides his hands down the back of Joonmyun’s jeans, cupping his ass and pulling him down into him, hips flush. It’s wrong, he knows it’s wrong, but at the same time, how can it possibly be wrong to want to be closer to Joonmyun, who’d shone down on Lu Han like the spring sun until he’d bloomed?

_Justin Fashanu, David Testo, Marcus Urban, Thomas Ber…_

The names fade as Joonmyun’s lips reach his navel. "I’m going to…” His fingers rest on the button of Lu Han’s jeans.

Lu Han could, should, say no. He doesn’t.

It might ruin things, but when he wakes up the next morning, sticky and sleepy in Joonmyun’s embrace, Lu Han feels… complete. That, he decides, gazing at the way the light hits Joonmyun’s cheeks and settles into the shadows of his bent arm and tilted head, is the scariest thing of all.

"You didn’t come to dinner last night," Yixing says.

Lu Han flounders. "Sorry, I—"
"Joonmyun called and said there was something going on." Yixing is using his neutral voice, which usually means he’s dying of curiosity but he knows pushing only makes Lu Han clam up. "In Beijing."

"Yeah, there is." Lu Han pulls his sweatshirt over his head and searches in his bag for his practice T-shirt.

Yixing smirks at him and picks it up off the floor, handing it to him. "You’ve been ignoring a lot of calls from Beijing."

Lu Han grabs the shirt and quickly puts it on. Yifan gets bitchy if they’re late. "My father has a brain tumor." He shoves his feet into his cleats and does them up. "I might go see him. Joonmyun thinks I should go see him."

"So do I," Yixing says. "He’s your father, Lu Han."

"My family isn’t much like yours." Lu Han stands up again, bouncing on his toes to get used to his cleats.

"Obviously," Yixing says. His phone beeps. Lu Han sees Hyoyeon’s name. "She’s going to nag me about not eating breakfast."

Joonmyun had done the same thing as Lu Han had rushed out the door this morning. Lu Han had kissed him at the door and Joonmyun had taken a deep breath. "Resumption of play?"

Lu Han had nodded, unable to say ‘yes’ and mean it. "Must be hard, having a minder."

"You and I both know it’s nice," Yixing says. "Jinri missed you at dinner last night."

"Oh," Lu Han says. "Did she?"

Yifan peeks into the locker room. "Move it or lose it," he says.

"Lose what?" Lu Han replies, and Yifan glares at him. "Coming, duizhang, coming."

"By the way," Yixing says, as they fight to be the first out of the door, Lu Han shoving Yixing back as Yixing grabs the back of Lu Han’s shorts to pull him, "you smell like Joonmyun’s shampoo."

Lu Han freezes, and Yixing laughs and slips past him out of the door. It’s just Yixing. Yixing who doesn’t care, he tells himself. But it chills him, deep, and it takes a good half an hour before he can focus on practice instead of the sickening lurch of his stomach.

Three hours later, he spots Jinri, in her own practice uniform, beaming at him from the sidelines. She’s sweating and smiling. One of her knee socks is sliding down. She looks beautiful. Not as beautiful as Joonmyun had, this morning, but Jinri is the right kind of beautiful. Lu Han could put Jinri’s picture in his locker and introduce her to his teammates as his girl. "You want to get lunch, pretty boy?"

"I’d love to," says Lu Han. Strangely, sitting across from Jinri, flirting and sharing ice cream as morning turns to afternoon, feels as wrong as Joonmyun had felt right, and Lu Han wonders if there is something unnatural about him after all.

"Two weeks? With Chanyeol?" Jongin pulls at his hair. "Lu Han, how could you be so cruel?"
"You adore Chanyeol," says Lu Han. "You can’t fool me. I saw you guys playing ping pong in the student center last week and you were laughing at his terrible jokes."

"They weren’t even jokes," Jongin says. "I was laughing at his stupid face." Then he slaps a hand over his mouth. "I mean, I wasn’t hanging out with him."

"Sure," Lu Han says. "Sure you weren’t."

"Still, why are you taking off for two weeks?" He looks down at Lu Han’s knee. "Is there something wrong with your knee?"

"No, no." Lu Han shakes his head for emphasis. "I need to fly back to Beijing. There’s something going on there."

"You never talk about home," Jongin says.

"That’s not my home," is Lu Han’s reply. "My dad is sick."

"I’m sorry to hear that," Jongin says, his face sympathetic and puppy-like in its openness. "I hope everything goes well."

Lu Han shrugs. "Me too, I guess," he says. "Don’t let things fall apart around here without me, Jonginnie."

Jongin scoffs at the idea. "Whatever, hyung." He sighs. "Chanyeol. Two weeks."

Lu Han sees something painfully familiar in Jongin’s smile, and pretends that he doesn’t.

"Have a safe flight," Joonmyun says. His mouth is tiny and pursed, and he won’t look up.

"I will," Lu Han says. "When I get back, I guess… When I get back, we’ll have to…"

"Talk," Joonmyun says. "I know. I agree."

"Yeah."

"I think…” Joonmyun’s hands are tight around his coffee cup. "I think you should introduce me to Luna."

"All right," Lu Han says. His coffee has gone cold.

The air in Beijing is already thick and syrupy with the beginnings of summer humidity. Lu Han walks out of the airport in search of a taxi in sweatpants and regrets not wearing shorts. "Lu Han!" he hears, and he spins in place, his bag sliding off his shoulder and to the ground next to him.

"Li Yin?"

"I told you I would pick you up, stupid. Why are you waiting for a taxi?"

"I told you it wasn't necessary to pick me up," replies Lu Han, smiling at her. "I can get myself there."
"You always say that." Her hair has gotten so long. The ends are permed. It looks nice. She's as lovely as ever. "I've learned to ignore you."

"Thanks, then," Lu Han says.

Her smile grows, and she suddenly launches herself into Lu Han's arms. He reaches out on reflex to catch her. She feels the same in his embrace, and it hits him that he missed her. Despite everything, and the bad things he associates with her now, he missed her. "It's been three years, you idiot. Three years since I've seen your vapid face."

"It has, hasn't it?" He hugs her tighter. "Who are you calling vapid?"

"Oh, no one in particular," she says. "Maybe the asshole who ignores my calls and missed my wedding."

"I couldn't make it," Lu Han says.

She pulls back and looks at him evenly. "I know you don't like to come back here, Lu Han. You don't have to lie to me."

"I'm not--"

She gives him a wry, knowing grin. "I was your best friend for a long time. I know when you're closing someone out. I've seen you do it to a lot of other people. Never me, though."

"Sorry," he says. He picks up his bag as she steps back.

"I'm just not sure why I suddenly started counting as one of the enemy."

"It's not you," Lu Han says, then shakes his head. "Let's not, Li Yin. I'm happy to see you. You look great."

"So do you!" She reaches up and fluffs his hair. "This dye job you have is a disaster, though."

"Hair is not at the top of my priority list," Lu Han says. "I'm playing again, you know?"

"I'd hope so," she says. "You need to be, if you're going to get seen. What teams are you hoping to try out for?"

"Well, you know, I..."

"Do you have a girlfriend?" Li Yin asks, not giving time for Lu Han to answer. "You must not, because she would have told you the hair has got to go."

It's strange. Lu Han feels, standing here in front of Li Yin, that the last year of almost silence has never really happened. But he knows it has, and he knows why. "I don't have a girlfriend." Lu Han follows Li Yin as she starts to walk, away from the taxis and toward the parking lot. "I've got my eye on a terrific girl, though." He blocks all thoughts of Joonmyun from his mind, and thinks about Jinri. "She's captain of the girls' team. A ball of sunshine."

"You are the most predictable." She shakes her head. "Football all the time."

"I have other interests," Lu Han says. "I feel like I'm constantly saying that."

"Maybe you're trying to convince yourself." Lu Han licks his lips as they stop in front of a new car. "This is me," Li Yin says. "My birthday present from the husband."
Just the mention of him sends Lu Han's already brittle mood crashing. He opens the door. "H-how is he doing?"

"Well," Li Yin says, casting Lu Han a searching gaze. "He's doing well. Promoted at work." Lu Han doesn't look back at her, and she frowns. "Can I ask you--" She sighs. "Never mind."

Lu Han closes the car door and grips his knees. He thinks he knows what she wants to ask, but he doesn't want to answer. "How are they doing?"

"Your parents?" She sighs. "Fine, I guess. Your mother looks tired. Your father is as stern as ever, even if he can't yell like he used to."

"Some things never change."

"I didn't tell them you were coming." Li Yin leans forward before she pulls out of the parking space. Driving at the airport here is always crazy, Lu Han remembers. Even if it's been a long time since he was here, he remembers that. "I wasn't even sure you were coming, really coming, until I saw you standing there, to be honest."

"I know what you mean," Lu Han says. He'd second-guessed himself at the airport. He'd almost thrown his ticket in the trash and walked back out to the airport bus. In the end, he'd pulled himself together and sat in his seat and closed his eyes. "It'll be okay."

"I'm glad you came," Li Yin says. "I'm really glad." Lu Han looks at her. She has her eyes on the road, but her eyes are kinda shiny. "I think... your parents will be glad, too."

"Maybe," Lu Han says. "Maybe."

He looks up as the hospital comes into view on the horizon, and swallows. 😒

His father is smaller than he remembers, and he frowns, even in his sleep. Li Yin pushes at Lu Han's back, forcing him to take two steps into the room, and his mother looks up, her gaze falling open in surprise. "Lu Han?" she mouths, and Lu Han nods and does not smile.

He walks further into the room and looks down at the man in the bed. Lu Han hates hospitals, even when he isn't the person in the uncomfortable gown with all the machines hooked up to him. He'd been on a different floor, back when... "Is he going to live?"

"The surgery was a success," his mother says. Her voice is quiet, so as not to wake his father. "He'll be so relieved you've come home, Lu Han--"

"I haven't come home." Lu Han slides his hands into his pockets. "I just came to see... I wanted to make sure he lived. That's all. I'll help out with getting him home and taking care of him, but I'm leaving in two weeks."

"Two weeks?"

"Yes," Lu Han says. He's numb. For some reason, he'd never expected to see his parents again. When he'd walked away three years ago, he'd figured that would be it. "I booked a hotel room close to the house. I don't want to owe you anything."

"You still have a room at the house," his mother says. "We both hoped you would..."
"Come back with my tail between my legs and run the business? Marry a nice Chinese girl and give up on all those silly dreams and ambitions?"

"It's not--"

"I'm going back to Korea." Li Yin puts her hand on his forearm, and it calms him. "Two weeks, and then I'm leaving again."

"Then why did you even come back?" His mother's looking at him seriously. He can't fathom her expression. It's somewhere between disappointment, consternation, and hope.

"Someone important to me told me I might regret it if I didn't. That if something happened to dad and I wasn't here, that years from now I might regret not seeing him one last time." Lu Han runs a hand through his hair. It's getting long, and the ends are dry. "That person's usually right, when it comes to me. Always right. So here I am."

"He might not show it," Lu Han's mother says, "but your father loves you." Li Yin squeezes his arm tighter, a reminder that she's there. It keeps Lu Han from yelling in the room that is already too small and too hot. "He does, Lu Han. So do I."

"No," Lu Han says. "Because if you did, it wouldn't matter if I wanted to play football for a living. It wouldn't matter even if I did like to--" Lu Han chokes on it. "You never would have sat back and did nothing, back then, when..." He takes a deep breath. "But I have people who do love me, now. And it's enough to know I can go home to them."

Lu Han's mother is looking at him, still, and now he can read something like remorse in her expression, but it's buried beneath hundreds of other things, as complex as any of the economics theories that had evaded Lu Han's understanding no matter how much Sehun tried to help.

"I don't know where we went wrong with you," she says.

Li Yin makes a noise of protest, and Lu Han smiles bitterly. "You tried to make me into something I'm not." Lu Han looks back at his father, gauze wrapped around his head. So very small. "It's stupid of me, but I keep hoping..." That one day he'll be enough that they will regret not accepting him the way he is. He doesn't need their approval anymore, but there's a small part of him that still craves it, even if he knows he'll probably never have it. "I need coffee. I'll come back later."

He shrugs free of Li Yin's arm and steps out into the hall. He can hear the two women talking to each other in hushed tones. Li Yin is probably apologizing for him. Making excuses about long flights and maybe stress. Anything but acknowledging that whatever is between Lu Han and his parents is irrevocably broken.

Funny thing is, even after three years and countless friends, some close enough that he counts them as family, he still feels like nothing in front of his mother.

He longs for Joonmyun's steadying presence so much that it claws up in him, an angry animal.

Lu Han should be strong enough to deal with this on his own, anyway. Lu Han should be able to stand on his own two feet, because leaning on other people, even people like Joonmyun, will only make it harder for him later, when he's alone again.

He leans against the wall and breathes.

"This doesn't look like coffee," Li Yin says gently, and Lu Han looks at her.
"I'd just throw it up," Lu Han admits. "I'm so angry. I thought it would be okay, but I'm still so angry."

"She cares, you know. In her own way. She had a future planned out for you. They both did."

"My best friend, Yixing," Lu Han starts, catching his lip in his teeth, "his mother sends him care packages in the mail. Snacks he likes or magazines about his favorite indie musicians. Letters about how she hopes the team is doing well and that his grades are good." Lu Han shakes his head. "His grades aren't good. In fact, they're even worse than mine. He never lies to her, but in the next package she always sends more food. 'To feed your brain' is what she writes, on pale pink paper with flowers around the border. He pins the notes to his bulletin board above his desk."

Li Yin makes a soft noise in the back of her throat. Lu Han snorts.

"She loves him, you see. She wants him to be happy, first and foremost. She wants him to smile, and she doesn't care that he's in love with a girlfriend who doesn't speak the same language as she does or that he fails half of his classes or that he wants to be a songwriter when he graduates, because she knows that's what makes him happy." Lu Han looks at his sneakers. They're too dirty to wear for anything but running now. He should have worn a different pair here, for this. "And I'm... Even though I've never had that, not since I was little, I'm still jealous."

"That's normal," Li Yin says. "To be jealous."

"But I'm also angry," says Lu Han. "That I have to be jealous. That I can't just have someone who loves me in a way that comes without conditions."

It makes him think of Joonmyun, and that just makes him feel even more sick, and more angry, because even though he has Joonmyun, he can't keep him, either.

Li Yin doesn't say anything. She just hugs him. He hugs her back, and he remembers how much he's always cared about her, even if time has passed and things have changed.

"What am I supposed to say to him?" He imagines his father waking up and looking at him with disdain.

"I don't know," Li Yin says. "Maybe there's nothing left to say."

"What if there is?"

"Well," she tilts her head and looks back to the room, through the tiny window of the closed hospital door, to the man and woman shut inside, "isn't that why you're here?"

Lu Han doesn't know why he's here. "I think so," he says. "Just in case."

"The friend of yours who made you come," Li Yin says, after a moment of silence. "Is it your football captain girl?"

"No," Lu Han says. "Another friend."

Li Yin looks up at him carefully. "Are you sure you're chasing the right girl, then?"

"Joonmyun isn't a girl." Lu Han crosses his arms. "It's..." He thinks about Li Yin sitting across from her husband at the dinner table. He thinks about Li Yin's now-husband staring down at him with angry eyes, fists bruised and covered with too much of Lu Han's blood. It halts the words. "It isn't important."
And extended silence that still seems so loud.

"Why did you shut me out, Lu Han?"

He looks at her. Really looks at her. There's a sadness there, that he knows is his own fault. He’d been too ashamed when it had happened to say anything. He’d been too hurt by his father's actions and by his own guilt, and by a lot of other things. And when he’d found out that the vice-captain was going to marry Li Yin, it had seemed too late. He hadn't wanted to snatch that happiness from her. He still doesn't.

"You don't want to know the answer to that question," he says. "You don't."

"A part of me thinks I already know," she replies, taking his hand and lacing their fingers together like she used to when they were small. "But I want to be wrong enough that I don't think about it."

"I know how that feels," Lu Han says. "I do."

He fingers his phone and wonders if it would be against the rules to call Joonmyun right now. He would really like to hear his voice.

His mother opens the door. "Your father has woken up." She looks down at Lu Han’s empty hands. He has no coffee.

"I’m coming," Lu Han says, and he gathers himself, straightening his back and shoulders, before he walks back into the hospital room, Li Yin at his heels.

Beijing has changed a lot in three years. It makes sense, considering sometimes, during high school, Lu Han would go to sleep and wake up the next morning to a new building cluttering the rapidly upward-reaching skyline.

He loves this city, even if it’s full of negative associations for him.

Standing in his mother’s kitchen mixing porridge for his father, while his mother carefully changes his father’s bandages, Lu Han relishes the quiet. He’s never really enjoyed quiet, but in this house, quiet means that no one is yelling at him. His father has done nothing but shout at him since he has felt well enough to shout, and Lu Han has borne it all with a sense of resignation.

"Lu Han," his mother says, walking into the kitchen with a sealed plastic bag of clean gauze, "can you run to the pharmacy and pick up your father’s pain medication?"

The pharmacist’s is empty, save for two people. It’s early afternoon on a weekday, so that isn’t so surprising. He passes his mother’s order slip, the one procured from his dad’s surgeon.

"Lu Han?" Lu Han turns. The man standing behind him is familiar, but the name escapes him.

"Yeah?"

The pharmacist disappears to procure the medication, leaving Lu Han alone with the man. "We went to high school together. I was a first year when you were a third year. On the junior team."

The junior team had been the players who weren’t quite ready for the main team yet. Lu Han had never really gotten to know them, when he was third year. No one had really talked to him, then, afraid that liking boys was contagious. "Oh."
"Yeah," the man says. "I always really admired your play. You were good enough to go professional."

"Still hoping to, actually," Lu Han says vaguely, not trying to encourage this conversation. It makes him nervous. He hopes the pharmacist hurries up.

"I figure you don’t actually want to talk to me, but…"

The pharmacist re-emerges, with Lu Han’s order. Lu Han hands over his credit card quickly. "I need to get home," he says. He doesn’t like being cornered, and he doesn’t know what this guy wants. "And obviously, high school wasn’t the greatest time in my life…"

Understatement. The man gulps and then quickly rushes to get out his words before Lu Han can walk away.

"What I wanted to say is that I’m sorry."

"What?"

"It probably doesn’t mean much to you now, but I am. Sorry, I mean. Sorry I never thought about what I was doing. With the… you know." The ostracizing. The weird looks in the locker room. The cold shoulder everywhere but where they needed him, on the pitch in the middle of a game.

He doesn’t want this right now.

"You were just a kid," Lu Han says gruffly. "And what were you supposed to think, a boy who looks like me on the team that none of the older kids would touch."

"My brother…" He flushes. "My brother is… he likes…” Lu Han gets it. "It’s hard for him. People are very cruel. I’m sorry that I was a part of doing that to someone else. That’s all."

"I forgive you, then," Lu Han says, tucking the pharmacist’s package into his satchel.

"I think…” and Lu Han still can’t remember his name, but he remembers the way he always hesitated on passes outfield, "I think that even if you… That it shouldn’t matter."

"But it does," Lu Han says. "It matters a lot." He shrugs, and walks past the guy. "It was good to see you, but I’ve got to get these home."

"Right, of course," he says, and then Lu Han is walking fast enough that it becomes a jog, the beating of his heart so loud it drowns out Beijing morning traffic.

He’s been expecting it, but it still manages to surprise him. "Stay," his father says. It’s the first thing he’s said to Lu Han in three days, since they’d fought over something stupid and trivial, like Lu Han’s clothes or haircut.

"My team has an important match next week," Lu Han says. "I’m leaving in two days."

"You have a responsibility to this family—"

"I don’t," Lu Han says. It’s a false calm. "You know what I plan on doing with my life. I don’t want to help companies sell car radios."

"I only have one son, Lu Han. You."
"And I have no intention of running your business," Lu Han sighs. "Don’t you understand that I’m good? I’m really good, dad. I’m good enough to play for a professional team. I hope that after a few years in the minor league, I’ll be good enough to play in the Premier league or La Liga. That’s a big deal."

"It’s a game, Lu Han! It’s a game, and you already have a bad knee." His father sighs. "Plus, if you’re around all of those boys all the time, you might be..." He pauses, his lip curling in disgust, "tempted—"

"Shut up," Lu Han says. "Just shut up." He knows he’s crossed a line when his father’s face purples. "Thank you for proving to me that I was right. That there is nothing to salvage here."

Lu Han pushes his chair back and storms out of the house. His phone and his wallet are in his pocket, and the jacket he’d left draped across the chair in the living room can be replaced.

He waves down a taxi and climbs in the back, shaking with anger and with something else he doesn’t understand. His cell phone, which has been silent for ten days, rings with a call from Seoul.

"Hello?" Lu Han says. His throat strains, and he realizes he’s practically shivering with rage.

"This might be breaking the rules," Joonmyun says clearly, "but I wanted to hear your voice." His gentle cadence calms Lu Han.

"I wanted to hear yours, too," Lu Han says. "And you can get two yellow cards before you get ejected from the match."

"That’s good," Joonmyun says, and then he laughs. It’s the best sound Lu Han knows.

"I’m coming home early."

Joonmyun hums. "Did you learn anything?"

"That I’m still not strong enough to see them and feel nothing."

"Feeling nothing isn’t really a strength, though, is it?" Joonmyun sounds thoughtful.

"Feeling everything hurts too much." Lu Han’s hotel comes into view. "Wouldn’t it be simpler if we could turn it off?"

"Simpler? Sure." Joonmyun makes a tiny noise that explodes like fireworks in Lu Han’s belly. "But maybe not better. For every low, there is a high, somewhere along the line."

Lu Han contemplates how well Joonmyun fits against him. He doesn’t know if that’s a high or a low, because it’s all so hopeless. Lu Han wants, so much, but everything has a cost and this is beyond his ability to afford. "I don’t know anything," he says.

Maybe he came to Beijing for nothing. Maybe he came to Beijing to close this chapter of his life once and for all. He might not have no regrets, but he has fewer of them, and more certainty in his decision not to look back.

His hotel phone rings and rings and rings, and he falls asleep to it like it’s a lullaby.

"I’m glad I could see you again," he says to Li Yin as they hug goodbye at the airport. "That was the best thing to come out of this trip. I hope you’re happy."
"I want you to be happy too." She punches his stomach. "I want you to call more, Lu Han. Don’t be a stranger. We were best friends once, remember?"

"Of course I do," he says. "You can always come visit me, you know. Just you."

"I know." She gives him that shadowed look. He thinks… He thinks she knows. He wonders if she asked her husband, in bed late at night, whether he’d broken Lu Han’s ribs or cut his face. He wonders what her husband had said in reply. "Have a safe flight… home." She gives him a small, lopsided grin. "Good luck on your tryouts. And good luck with your football girl." Hesitation. The pressing together of glossy lips. "Or, you know, whomever you choose to pursue."

Lu Han nods. "Thank you," he says. He squeezes her in a quick hug. "And… I’m sorry."

"I’m sorry, too," she says, and she waves as Lu Han queues to go through security. Lu Han says a silent goodbye to Beijing, and doesn’t look back.

Joonmyun picks him up from the airport. When Lu Han sees him, walking and breathing, which had felt painful and difficult for the past two weeks, suddenly become easier as he slides into a one-armed hug. It reminds Lu Han of being on crutches. Of standing up and favoring his good knee and reaching out for those metal sticks to hold up his weight. Joonmyun is like that. Joonmyun is like crutches, and Lu Han finds the dependence as frightening as it had been last spring.

"Are you all right?" is the only thing Joonmyun asks on the trip to Lu Han’s boarding house.

Lu Han rubs at his knee and answers "yes."

"Lu Han…"

"Can we not talk tonight?" Lu Han studies Joonmyun’s profile. He’s cut his hair shorter, and now Lu Han is even more aware of his high cheekbones and the angle of his jaw. Lu Han’s heart hurts. "I think, for today, I feel defeated enough."

Joonmyun’s eyelids flutter open and shut quickly, but he doesn’t look away from the road. The drive from Incheon has them driving across kilometers of water and mud, on roads that are open enough on a Thursday afternoon. "It can wait," Joonmyun says. "I can wait."

"We lost last weekend’s practice match." Minseok’s hair hangs into his eyes. It makes him look younger. "Don’t leave anymore." He’s stripping without hesitation, leaving his clothes in a heap and moving to turn on one of the shower heads.

Lu Han turns on the one across from it, and marvels at the fact that Minseok doesn’t give him a dirty look for daring to shower at the same time. He never has, but Lu Han is still raw from his trip back to Beijing, and the memories are too close to the surface. That first year guy… He had apologized to Lu Han. Apologized.

Yixing is noisy outside the door. He’ll join them soon.

"You survived the whole season without me last year," Lu Han says.

"Yeah, but we were prepared for it, then. There were huge holes without you, dude. Our offense is all readjusted to make room for you. We need you."
"You shouldn’t need people," Lu Han says. "You should be able to get by without them."

"That’s so gloomy," Minseok gives him a sour look as Lu Han pushes his face under the spray of the shower. "Football is a team sport, Lu Han. The whole point is depending on other people." Unexpectedly, he smacks Lu Han’s ass, and Lu Han yelps and turns around. "Now we’re even."

Lu Han gapes at him, and he laughs again as Yixing walks in, taking one look at Lu Han’s face and bursting into laughter himself. "Your face," Yixing wheezes. "You have no idea how dumb you look when you’re surprised."

"Why are you so mean to me, Zhang Yixing?" Lu Han pouts, letting his somber mood lift as he starts laughing with his friends.

"That’s what teammates do," Yixing says.

"Exactly," Minseok says. "It’s the fine print, right under looking out for you on the pitch and making sure to pass you the ball when you’re open."

"Gosh," Yixing cups his hands under the water spray and then splashes the water in Lu Han’s eyes. "Two weeks in China and you’ve forgotten what a team is?"

Lu Han grins. "Glad I have you guys to remind me."

He and Joonmyun go running at dawn. Lu Han doesn’t know why he still comes running even though Lu Han is well. Lu Han likes it though, because he’d never thought of his morning runs as lonely, but they were. They aren’t now, even the mornings that they don’t share any conversation at all.

Joonmyun, today, looks like he hasn’t ever slept in his life.

"You didn’t have to come."

"I wanted to." Joonmyun’s sweatshirt is too big for him, and he drowns in it as he runs at Lu Han’s side. Lu Han slows his pace enough that Joonmyun doesn’t need to take two strides to his every one. "I’m just busy. I have some practicals soon. Anatomy and physiology."

"Sounds hard." Lu Han huffs. "Nerd."

"You’re a nerd too," Joonmyun says. "You’re just a football nerd. I could never memorize all the stats and things you know by heart. Compared to that, the human body is a piece of cake."

"You know a lot about footie, though."

"I used to play, after all." Joonmyun laughs. "They called me Suho. I was my team’s captain, in high school."

"You must have been good," Lu Han says. "Captain is an important position."

"I was a pretty good all-rounder. Not the best at anything." His words come out strained. He’ll have to stop at the end of this lap around the football pitch. He can only go a few before his cheeks get too pink, like all of his blood is in his face, and his hands start to shake.

"Why don’t you play anymore?" Joonmyun frowns, and Lu Han backtracks. "You don’t have to answer, if you don’t want to."
"I don’t mind, if it’s you," Joonmyun says. "I don’t have the stamina."

"You said that before."

"When I was a third year, there was a car accident." They slow even more, so Joonmyun can speak without struggling. "There was a partial rupture in my aorta." Lu Han lifts both his eyebrows. "The aorta is the largest artery in the body, and mine tore. Not a lot. I was lucky. But enough that I still have lingering heart problems, because some of the tissue died."

"So you couldn’t play football."

"Still can’t," Joonmyun says. "That sort of extended time period of cardio is something I can’t do." He moves his hand up to push his bangs out of his face before he seems to remember he’s cut them off. "I know what it’s like to have something you love to do taken away from you. That’s why I wanted to become a physical therapist for athletes. Because I want the people who can get back on the field to do it."

"I like your hair like that," Lu Han says, stupidly off topic. He always says stupid things in the hopes of making Joonmyun happy. Joonmyun flushes, with more than exertion. "It’s easier to see your halo without all that puff in the way."

"Shut up, Lu Han," Joonmyun says, shoving him, and there’s the smile Lu Han loves again.

"I’m going to run one more lap, and then we can go get breakfast." Joonmyun nods and jogs toward the bleachers as Lu Han speeds up, running his last lap at full steam.

"You didn’t have to slow down for me," Joonmyun says, when Lu Han gets back to the start.

"I wanted to," Lu Han replies. It would be nice, maybe, if he could take Joonmyun’s hand. Nice, but not allowed. "Is that okay with you?"

"Yes," Joonmyun says, and for a moment, the sadness in his eyes makes Lu Han want to take a step back. Then it’s gone, and he’s smiling, and Lu Han can breathe again.

Maybe, Lu Han thinks, for a brief, desperate second, it would be okay—Then that’s gone too, and there’s the shadow of happiness between them as they walk.

"Dinner?" Jinri asks, when Lu Han answers the phone.

"Half an hour?" Lu Han asks, and Jinri makes a noise of agreement.

"Yixing told me you like kalguksu. I know just the place."

"Sounds great," Lu Han says. When he hangs up, he searches for excitement or nervousness or anything, and he comes up empty.

A scout for F.C. Seoul shows up at the fifth game of the season.

Lu Han barely registers his presence in the stands, more focused on giving his all in what is turning out to be a challenging match. The Busan teams always put up a good fight. He bets it’s because their legs never get tired. Lu Han has heard they train in the sand.
At the end of the game, after Jongin puts an amazing kick past their opposing goalie, Lu Han cheers and screams before automatically running toward the bleachers to pick Joonmyun up in a hug. Joonmyun laughs and swats at Lu Han to put him down. His cheeks are pink with pleasure, though. "Stop," he hisses, and Lu Han checks to make sure no one is watching them. No one is, not when Jongin has a shouting Chanyeol in a headlock, Chanyeol screaming about sweaty dongsaengs and the danger his glasses are in.

"They don’t even have lenses," Jongin shouts back, hyped up from his awesome goal. Chanyeol is grinning like a big dumb puppy, anyway, so it probably doesn’t matter. Lu Han could probably sneak a kiss on Joonmyun’s cheek, if he wanted. It’s not worth the risk, no matter how smooth the skin would feel beneath his lips.

He bounds back out to the middle of the field, accepting slaps on the back from Jinki and Yifan. Yifan’s broad hand almost sends him reeling.

Lu Han loves football. The adrenaline is hot and fierce in his veins, mingling with joy and pride and victory.

"Lu Han!" He turns. The scout is approaching him, with a big grin on his face. "That was some game."

"Thank you, sir," Lu Han says. "We’re very proud of our team."

"Your team, it seems, is also very proud of you."

"It was Jongin who scored the winning goal," Lu Han says, licking at his lips and letting his breathing even out.

"We’ll be looking at him next year, certainly," the scout says. "But this year, we’re looking at you."

Lu Han swallows, rubbing his hands on his shorts and bowing carefully. "I’m honored, sir."

"We want to bring you in for tryouts," the scout continues. "At the end of August."

"I…” Lu Han’s head is spinning. "Yes, please, of course." The scout laughs at him. "I mean, yes, I would like that very much. Sir."

"Good, Lu Han. I can’t wait to show you how well you could do in F.C. Seoul."

"It’s… definitely the team I was hoping to play for next year, sir," Lu Han says, honestly, and the scout laughs.

"Well, I think we want you to play for us next year, too." Lu Han looks back to the bleachers, where Joonmyun is waiting, eyes riveted on the scout, and smiles a tiny grin at him. When he looks back, though, the scout is narrowing his eyes. "As long as you don’t have any…” his gaze darts toward Joonmyun, Lu Han’s Joonmyun, in the stands, still smiling stupidly and proudly in Lu Han’s direction, "problematic proclivities."

"Proclivities?" It sounds dirty in the scout’s mouth. It sounds even dirtier in Lu Han’s.

"You know," the coach said. "Drugs, alcohol. Among other things." Joonmyun again. Lu Han gets the unspoken message. Other things.

"The girl I’m seeing is the captain of the women’s team," Lu Han says. "Nothing official yet, of course. I’m playing hard to get." The words hurt to push out, but the scout smiles at him, relieved.
"Well, you know girls, you can’t make it too easy for them."

"Right," Lu Han says, hoping he won’t throw up on the scout’s shoes. The triumph and the joy are gone, replaced by leaden fear and misery. "Of course."

"I knew you’d understand," the scout says. Lu Han smiles back, empty.

"To our Lu Han, who is trying out for F.C. Seoul!" Yifan yells, lifting his beer. Everyone else lifts theirs, too, and Lu Han’s beer sloshes over his fingers as he raises his own glass with shaking hands.

"Congratulations," Joonmyun whispers warmly. All Lu Han can see is the scout’s judging stare. He can’t stop shaking. "What’s wrong?"

"We need to have that talk now," Lu Han says. The smile falls from Joonmyun’s face, and Lu Han’s beer goes down badly, thick as molasses down his esophagus and into his tummy.

"Tonight then," Joonmyun says. He clinks their glasses together. "Until then, enjoy this victory."

The victory is as bitter as the beer with the looming conversation hanging over him.

Joonmyun follows him up into his room, both of them tiptoeing so as not to wake anyone up.

Lu Han sits on the edge of his bed, stretching his legs out. Joonmyun sits on the chair at Lu Han's desk. Their feet touch.

They sit in silence for a few minutes, until Joonmyun breaks it.

"We both know this doesn’t work," Joonmyun says. "The rules and the boundaries and all the things we can and can’t do. It doesn't work."

"I know," Lu Han says.

"I look at you across the table and I want to kiss you. You tell me you're going out with Jinri for lunch and I can't eat my own lunch because I'm so..." He sighs. "I'm jealous, Lu Han. I'm jealous, and it feels horrible. I've never... I've never been jealous before." He laughs. "I guess I've never been in love before, either." Lu Han waits. "It doesn't work."

"What... what are we supposed to do?" Lu Han's whole body is tight. The muscle tenses of nervousness, similar to the ones he gets the night before an important match where the teams are too even and he isn't sure if their team will come out the victor.

"Something has to give," Joonmyun says. "Something, somewhere, has to give." Lu Han looks up and stares into Joonmyun's eyes. Joonmyun is staring back, earnest, and Lu Han can see a hundred things in his expression.

There had been a time, in Lu Han's life, when he knew exactly what he wanted most. When that Manchester United jersey was the only thing he would think about in the shower and at night before he closed his eyes. That time had lasted until last year, when Joonmyun, poker shark and maybe the other half of Lu Han's heart, had come into Lu Han's life and molded it in his image like it was a piece of wet clay on the wheel. Now Lu Han closes his eyes and sees Joonmyun, and wakes up and hopes, in that moment between sleep and wakefulness, that Joonmyun will be next to him when he
opens them.

The thing about football, though, is that Lu Han has wanted it for so long, and he knows he will never truly be able to let that dream slip from his hands, no matter how much he loves, really loves Joonmyun. And he knows, without a doubt, that he can't have Joonmyun and not shout it from the rooftops. Lu Han has been loved half-heartedly enough throughout his life that he would never be able to do it to someone else. Especially not Joonmyun, who is so perfect and wonderful that he deserves the moon and the stars and songs dedicated to him and to have his picture on someone's desk or hung in someone's locker.

Lu Han... Lu Han can barely accept that he wants another man, let alone give up everything he has worked for because of that want.

"The scout said..." Lu Han shivers. "He looked at you and said..."

"Said what?" Joonmyun kicks Lu Han's ankle. "Lu Han, what did he say?"

"I asked you," Lu Han says, "to stay."

"I would," Joonmyun says. "I will."

"Now..." Lu Han's hands are shaking. Everything is scary to him, these days. His father would be so disappointed. Is so disappointed. Is. "Now, I'm asking you not to."

"Lu Han?" It cracks. Lu Han usually loves the way Joonmyun says his name, but tonight it shatters him, because he knows that Joonmyun is hurting. He knows it is his fault. There is nothing he can do about it though, because he doesn't... Lu Han wants... He squeezes his eyes shut and remembers the names. Justin Fashanu, David Testo, Marcus Urban, Thomas Berling-- "Are you saying—"

"It'll hurt less later if we end things here," Lu Han says. "Really end them. I won't..." He breathes. "I won't depend on you anymore."

"I want you to depend on me," Joonmyun says. "As much as you hate needing people, I have always liked being needed."

"Ever since I was a little kid, becoming a professional footballer is all I've ever wanted." Joonmyun’s eyes cut into him. "It’s... all I’ve ever wanted, Joonmyun. And as much as I want—" You. Us. This. Always. "I will always want that the most."

Joonmyun’s eyes are wet, but he doesn’t cry. Lu Han has never seen Joonmyun cry. He probably never will, because Joonmyun is the strongest person he knows. "Then you need to go for it," Joonmyun says. "You don’t want to look back and regret..." Me. Us. This.

"How are you so wonderful?" Lu Han asks, and Joonmyun laughs, dry but sincere.

"I'm not," Joonmyun says. "If I were..." He shakes his head, smile growing a little larger. He stands. "You are," Lu Han says. "Joonmyun, you are." He wants to kiss him, to whisper all the things about him that are perfect into his lips, but Joonmyun is gone, down the steps and out the door to his car, and Lu Han’s eyes can only trace the outline of his glued together vase in front of this year’s Premier League calendar, and think about the choices he has made.

Almost."

Lu Han looks up from his partially eaten sandwich. "Joonmyun?"

"Your head popped up like a meerkat’s when I said his name, oh my goodness." Jongdae takes a bite of an apple. "Did you guys have a fight?"

"Yeah," Lu Han says. "You could say that."

"So apologize for being stupid," Jongdae says. "I know it’s your doing, since Joonmyun-hyung is perfect in all ways."

"It is my fault," Lu Han says. "It isn’t the sort of thing an apology can fix."

"But you guys were like…” Jongdae tilts his head. "Like two halves of a socially unacceptable melon. Or like egg and ramyun." He sets his apple down. "Are you really… Is the difference really irreconcilable?"

Lu Han can still feel the weight of the scout’s eyes on him. Yesterday, F.C. Seoul had sent him a sweatshirt in the mail. Next year, Lu Han will probably be playing league soccer. It’s what he’s waited for.

He hopes Joonmyun has passed his practicals. He hopes Joonmyun’s nights for the past week have been better than his. Not sleepless. Not endless.

"I think it is," Lu Han says.

"That’s too bad," Jongdae says. "You and Joonmyun-hyung… had a lot in common. He was as closed off as you were, you know? Maybe because both of you really had only yourselves to rely on, or something." Lu Han rips the crust off his bread. "You kind of… opened each other up. You don’t find a friend like that every day, you know." Jongdae’s eyes are narrow and knowing, and Lu Han feels naked under his gaze.

"I’m not hungry anymore." He throws his sandwich in the trash, ignoring Jongdae’s protests, and walks out into the sun. It’s a bright day but the light hurts his eyes.

Lu Han gives Luna Joonmyun’s number. "Ask him on a date," Lu Han says. "He’s single."

Jinri rewards him with a smile as Luna beams.

Lu Han feels like so much nothing he can’t believe he’s still breathing.

Lu Han is early for his shift. They don’t open for another hour, but he’s been meaning to check out a couple of books for a project and he won’t have time once students start coming in. It’s midterms, and Lu Han’s procrastinated enough.

The library doors are already unlocked. Lu Han knows he locked them last night. Perhaps Jongin has come in early, too. Their morning practice had been cancelled by Yifan, who apparently has three midterms in three days and has transformed into an actual anime character in his mood swings.

He walks into the front lobby and freezes.
Jongin has Chanyeol pressed against the counter, Chanyeol holding onto the edge of it as Jongin kisses down his neck. There’s no mistaking what they're doing. Lu Han clears his throat even as he grips at the door for balance.

He’s dizzy and angry and all kinds of other things, too. He doesn’t know what to do with all the different feelings that engulf him.

Jongin jumps back like everywhere he and Chanyeol had touched burns. His eyes are wide and nervous, but he relaxes somewhat when he realizes that it’s only Lu Han standing there. Then he tenses again. "Lu-Han-hyung, you’re… early. I…"

Chanyeol’s eyes are wide and scared. He’s chewing on his lower lip, watching Lu Han’s reaction carefully.

"What are you…?" Lu Han’s voice is all wobbly. He tries again. "What are you doing?" It comes out sharp and accusing this time, and Chanyeol cringes, reaching forward to clutch at Jongin’s shirt.

Joonmyun had done that, once, when Lu Han had pressed him into the shelves and kissed him until his lips were swollen and as pink as cherry blossoms.

Jongin blinks. "Kissing?"

"Chanyeol is a man," Lu Han says. Too loud. He knows it’s too loud. "Chanyeol’s a man. You can’t." He’s shaking now, because it isn’t fair that Jongin’s fear has receded and been replaced with determination. That Chanyeol doesn’t look confident but that he doesn’t let go.

"I’m right here," Chanyeol says, but Lu Han is bearing down on Jongin.

"I know you don’t like…” Jongin breathes deep and barrels on. "I love Chanyeol, and it’s okay if you don’t accept it. I can’t change it. I don’t want to change it."

Lu Han knows how that feels. He knows the inevitable push of emotions against his ribs and he knows the undeniable quickening of his heartbeat. He knows exactly how it feels, but Jongin can put it into terrifying words that make Lu Han feel inadequate and empty. "Jonginnie."

"Hyung, I love Chanyeol." Honest. Serious. No slip no pause. No hesitation. "If it’s going to be a problem for you, I’ll leave the team—"

"No!" Lu Han’s throat is dry. "You’re misunderstanding—"

"What am I misunderstanding, hyung? You’re looking at me like I’m a criminal. Like there’s something wrong with me. There isn’t."

"The F.C. Scouts are looking at you for next year," Lu Han says. "You can’t…” Throw that away. Jongin can’t put Chanyeol’s picture in his locker, just like Lu Han can’t put Joonmyun’s, and that’s the way things are, no matter how squarely Jongin sets his shoulders.

"I love football," Jongin says. "But I’m not like you, hyung. I can do something else. I can get a job at my dad’s company and I’ll be fine. It won’t be the end, for me."

"You’d be an awesome businessman," Chanyeol says, smiling lopsidedly at Jongin. "And you look great in suits."

"You would choose—" Chanyeol slips his hand into Jongin’s. It looks so easy. Jongin’s hand fits so nicely with Chanyeol’s. "You’ve always wanted to play football."
"When I was a kid," Jongin says, "I knew I liked ballet. When I turned fifteen, I knew I liked boys just as much as I liked girls." He grins. "Now, I just like Chanyeol, even though he’s clumsy and kinda stupid and can’t figure out library call numbers."

"Hey," Chanyeol says, dropping Jongin’s hand to shove him. "Library call numbers are hard."

Jongin laughs and sloppily kisses his cheek. "How do you have better grades than I do?" Lu Han remembers wanting to do the same to Joonmyun at the game, but being too afraid. Jongin turns back to Lu Han. "I can’t change the way I feel. Not for anything."

"Not for anything, huh?" Lu Han nods. He’s still dizzy. There’s nausea now, too, and maybe something too close to guilt for comfort. "I’m not going to tell anyone about this."

"Thank you," Jongin says. "I know it’s hard for you to deal with, because you’ve always been…"

"I’m not homophobic," Lu Han snaps. "I just don’t like jokes about it. I don’t like assumptions."

Assumptions that he proves true with every impulse to run his hands down Joonmyun’s back and kiss him until both of them run clean out of air. The way Jongin had kissed Chanyeol. The way Lu Han will never kiss Joonmyun again.

An hour later, Lu Han is still reeling. "This makes sense to me," Jongin tells him, gesturing between himself and where Chanyeol has disappeared into the art history section. "It’s the only thing that does, strangely enough."

Lu Han remembers a morning two months ago, when he’d woken up with Joonmyun in his arms, soft and naked and still sleeping. He remembers and thinks that had made sense too.

But Lu Han is not sure like Jongin is. Lu Han does not know if he could give up everything like Jongin could. Lu Han has clung to football for sanity for so long that without it he would be an anchorless ship in the sea of life.

And that, he thinks, is that.

It is amazing how you can go from seeing someone every day to not seeing them at all.

Lu Han passes his F.C. Seoul tryouts in August, three weeks before the championship game against Yonsei.

His jersey, which he doesn’t take off even when he gets to campus after the tryout, feels good against his skin. Like he was always meant to wear it. He’s full of exhilaration and flush with triumph.

Normal people probably call their parents. Lu Han only has one person he wants to call, but he doesn’t know if he can.

It probably breaks the new rules. The excruciating ones that are all Lu Han’s fault.

He scrolls through his phone until he finds a number he hasn’t called in four months.

I passed tryouts he types.

Congratulations Joonmyun texts back.

Lu Han considers replies. Thank you or I miss you or I think I’m still in love with you because I can’t
His phone beeps again. *Fight for your dreams, Lu Han.*

For a second, there, Lu Han stands on the precipice of crying, but he falls back from it as Yixing slaps him on the back. "Barbecue on me, Xiao Lu."

"You’re not bigger than I am," Lu Han says, gulping back the emotion and swallowing it down.

"Taozi is," Yixing says, as Zitao grabs Lu Han’s wrist and pulls. His spiked bracelets look dangerous enough that Lu Han goes with the pull to avoid getting gouged.

"Barbecue it is," Lu Han says.

He’s happy enough.

But he wishes Joonmyun were here. He wishes he were brave enough to ask him to be.

Lu Han will stand on his own. Lu Han will achieve his dream all by himself. He will have what he’s always wanted.

He will. He can.

He’s made his choice. He’s close enough to be sure it’s the right one. He smoothes his new jersey and steels himself.

"I think it’s about time we made it official, Lu Han." Jinri is sipping on bubble tea. Sehun, on the other side of her, raises both of his eyebrows and excuses himself to the restroom.

"Are you sure you want to date a boy you called pretty, Jinri?" Lu Han teases, when they’re alone, even as his stomach folds over itself in nervousness. He never imagined actually dating Jinri, not even when it was his number two life goal.

"That was just to discourage you last year. It was obvious you were crushing on me."

"If you like me, why were you trying to discourage me?" Lu Han gapes at her.

"It’s because I thought you were boring," Jinri says. "Football, all the time. Now you’re interested in all sorts of stuff."

"I like tea ceremonies and Italian films and pottery and running in the morning before the world wakes up," Lu Han says. Joonmyun’s hands on him, helping him smooth the clay. Joonmyun smiling at him in the dark theater. Joonmyun, out of breath, with his perfectly broken heart. "I like bad Korean dramas with mediocre acting and I absolutely hate poker." Joonmyun, Joonmyun, Joonmyun. "I like working in the library and I hate economics."

*Broaden your horizons, Lu Han.*

"That’s the kind of thing that makes you more than a pretty face," Jinri says, taking Lu Han’s hand. Her hand is smaller than Joonmyun’s, but not by much. Lu Han feels an ache in his chest that presses down on his lungs and suffocates him.

"I’m not pretty," Lu Han says. There’s no fight in him.
"All right," Jinri says. "You aren’t, then. Do you want to come to dinner at my parents’ house next week, as my boyfriend?"

Her smile is bright and indulgent. Lu Han remembers when it used to enchant him. Maybe, if he gives it time, it will enchant him again. "Yeah," Lu Han says. "I’d like that a lot."

end of intermission
"So if one is only in Manchester for a week, what are the must-dos?"

"You should go to a football game," Lu Han says. "I hear the team is pretty good there."

"Do you?" Yixing flicks a piece of tomato at Lu Han’s face. Lu Han looks around quickly to make sure no one’s noticed that Yixing is five. "It’s good to see your ego is still intact even if you can barely talk to your teammates."

"My English is not that bad," Lu Han counters, lips curving into a smile anyway. Yixing is infectious.

"Well, after three years of practice it better not be."

"I speak three languages." Lu Han stabs the sausage on his plate. Yixing still looks baffled at the absence of rice. Lu Han remembers how that feels. "I’m one up on you."

"Duizhang speaks four," Yixing says. "I hear his little third grade English students all say yeah to him all the time instead of yes." Lu Han can imagine Yifan down on his knees with twenty irrepressible third graders piled on top of him, calmly delivering orders that may or may not be followed. "Figures he could command a football team but can’t quite corral third graders."

"No one can corral third graders." Lu Han pushes his fried hashbrowns around on his plate before choosing a more burnt section to take a bite of. "Not even duizhang with his four languages and goalie hands."

"I was insufferable as a third grader." He sounds nostalgic.

"You're insufferable now."

"Who pleaded with whom to come visit?" Yixing’s eyes are twinkling. He’s dimpling at Lu Han the way he does when he’s about to lord something over him. "You practically begged me to take a week off from work and fly to England to see you."

"I did not plead, pleading is not something I do," Lu Han says grudgingly. "But now I’ve seen you and I remember why I was so eager to escape the country."

"You’re so full of shit." Yixing squirts ketchup all over his food liberally. "You were all ‘I wouldn’t mind if you wanted to visit, Xing. That’s the Xiao Lu version of begging."

"I hope all that ketchup suffocates you and you die," Lu Han says. "I’ll read your eulogy. He was a dick, is what I’ll say. Hyoyeon would cry softly and agree—"

"Speaking of Hyoyeon," Yixing says, now happily eating his breakfast, "she loves that picture of the three of us—you, me, and Zitao, I mean, that we took at the wedding. She got a larger copy of it framed recently for the hallway wall."
"It’s a great photo," Lu Han says. He keeps a copy of it in his bedroom, in his apartment. Yixing looks so happy in it, and Zitao looks so pleased about being in between them in the hug. Hyoyeon, in her Western style wedding dress, had hoisted up her skirts and squatted down to take the picture, scandalizing her mother and making Yixing wolf-whistle at her legs.

That had been a great day. It had also been the last time Lu Han had been in Korea. Has it really been two years? Time seems both slower and faster when Lu Han is so far away from everything that’s happening.

"You’ll have to come visit again when the baby’s born," Yixing says. "Jongdae is already boasting about all the lullabies he’s going to sing when he babysits. The other day, he and Joonmyun stopped by the house to drop off paperwork for the alumni job fair and—" Yixing stops. "Sorry, I forgot we don’t talk about Joonmyun."

"It’s not like that." Lu Han’s appetite is gone. He sets down his fork. "It’s…"

"Complicated. I remember. Seat us at separate tables at the wedding complicated."

Lu Han sighs and throws his napkin in Yixing’s face. "Why do I even like you?"

"Because I’m your best friend, and the only person who understands your deep love of MCM products."

"True," Lu Han admits. "I might, might, have missed you some."

"I know," Yixing says. "I don’t even take the fact that you call once a month as a sign—"

"It’s hard to make the times line up, and I—"

"But you called and begged me to visit you in England," Yixing interrupts. "Which means I rate at least an eight on a scale of one to football, so I forgive you, Xiao Lu."

"I’m not—"

"So, like I said," and Yixing sets down his fork, plate clean in front of him, eggs and potatoes devoured, "if one is only in Manchester for a week, what are the must-dos?"

Lu Han pays for their breakfast as Yixing yawns and then pretends he isn’t, hiding his jetlag behind teasing barbs and tripping Lu Han up as they walk. Lu Han feels nineteen again as they walk, like he’s a second year in university and Yixing is his dumb best friend and both of them aren’t adults with bills and separate lives from each other across the world.

They end up walking around the mall downtown, leaving the indoor section in favor of the outdoor promenade, Yixing marveling at the sheer number of fliers that have made their way from lampposts to the street and how the mannequins in H&M are taller than the ones in Myeongdong.

Yixing prattles on about Minseok and Zitao and Yifan and Minho, and about Jongdae and Baekhyun and even Kyungsoo, who works at the same company as Yixing does, promoting musicians. There are friends he doesn’t mention, and as they get down to the bus terminal, Lu Han has to ask.

"How’s Jongin?"

Yixing tilts his head. "Well," he says, after a measured and careful silence. "He's doing all right."

"You don’t sound so sure."
"He's been passed up by F.C. Seoul for next season." Yixing is studying the ground beneath them, toeing at cigarette butts, instead of looking at Lu Han.

"He was a starter last season," Lu Han says. "Passed up? Surely one of the other teams took him. Busan has been in dire need of a new forward player. Or he could go abroad. Shanghai Shenhua FC…"

"No," Yixing says. He's spinning his wedding ring around and around on thin fingers. "No one wants him."

There had been an incident. A teammate had caught Jongin and Chanyeol holding hands in the park and Jongin hadn’t denied anything. Jongin has never been a good liar.

"Oh," Lu Han says. "How is he... taking that?"

"Well as can be expected," Yixing replies. "Chanyeol helps. When we went out to dinner with Yifan and Minseok last week, he seemed resigned. He says he's been expecting it since the coach found out."

"Yeah," Lu Han says. "I can see that. At least he..."

"Has Chanyeol and a job in his father's company waiting for him," Yixing agrees. "At least there's that."

Lu Han is suddenly finding the ground more interesting than before, too. "At least there's that," he echoes. "That's good for him. He'll be okay."

Yixing suddenly stops. It's not a good place to stop, even if the walkway is more than wide enough. There are too many people brushing past them, even in mid-morning, down the busy downtown street. Yixing stands out with his bright red hair and contrite expression. "Lu Han, I wanted to say..."

"Do you have to say it now?" Lu Han knows most people won't understand them. They're not speaking in English, and Lu Han is famous but not that famous. "Can it wait until we get back to my place?"

"No," Yixing says. "I might forget exactly what it is I want to say. You know how forgetful I am."

"I'm pretty sure you play that up for laughs," Lu Han says. "You remembered every play we ever learned in practice and you remember how to strum that noisy out-of-tune guitar of yours, and you remember all the words you made up in that dumb love song to your ex-girlfriend from first year."

"Even so," Yixing hooks an arm around Lu Han's neck and pulls him closer, "I don't want to miss the chance."

"The chance for what?"

He licks at his lips, his tongue darting out to wet them in the cool September wind. "It must have been really hard for you," Yixing says. "Back then."

Lu Han knows, all of a sudden, what Yixing means, and he doesn't want to talk about it. "No." Lu Han starts to walk again, slipping free of Yixing's arm, forcing him to keep moving unless he wants to get lost in a country where the only words of the language he knows are 'hello' and 'I very love you'. "It wasn't hard, because professional football was my dream. Is my dream. And I'm living it."

"Still," Yixing says. "I must have made it harder. Telling you how simple it would be. Telling you to
go for it like there weren't any consequences."

"You were just trying to help." Lu Han thinks it must be the weather. It got hot early this year. That's why he's so dizzy. It has nothing to do with the loss that always seems to find its way into Lu Han's chest when someone mentions Joonmyun. And the fact that it never gets hot in Manchester is something he won't dwell on. "Can we not?"

"I'm sorry, Lu Han," Yixing says. "I just wanted to say that. I really didn't realize."

"How were you supposed to? You're normal. You want normal things." Lu Han closes his mouth and swallows the rest of the words. "And I wanted... I just want football. That's enough for me. I'm happy."

"Are you?" Yixing's arm slides back around his shoulders, a familiar and reassuring weight. "Are you happy, Lu Han, living your dream?"

"I am." Lu Han fingers his touristy Man U shirt and thinks about all the times he'd worn one just like it as a fan. Now he's a player for the team he's always idolized. It's his name on the back of the jersey he's got at home, not Wayne Rooney’s, not Zaha’s.

His dad was wrong, his mom was wrong. Everyone who belittled him or treated him as less or treated him like nothing... all those people don't matter anymore, because Lu Han is vindicated. High school feels like a distant memory, and if Lu Han's knee aches when it rains, it’s a small price to pay for the way it doesn't hurt at all when it shines.

And if Lu Han's bed is cold and his heart feels even colder, he reminds himself that nothing in life comes without a price, and that he’s always done all right on his own. "I am."

He looks at Yixing, and Yixing is looking straight ahead. His mouth, though, is drawn down. "Would you even tell me if you weren't?" He laughs, and Lu Han resists the urge to jab his finger into his best friend’s dimple. "Three steps forward and two steps back."

"That's still one step forward, right?" He laughs too, strained. "I thought you wanted to visit the stadium."

"You would think that would be something you could see," Yixing says. "But the horizon looks pretty clear of that world famous football stadium for that world famous team."

"Can I tell you a secret?" Lu Han pokes Yixing in the side and enjoys the strange love-child of a giggle and a yelp it produces. "The stadium isn't even really in Manchester. Neither is my apartment, for that matter. England’s not like Seoul. The city is just the city, and then everyone lives in the boroughs and villages and stuff, around them."

"It sounds complicated."

"It takes a while to get used to. No kilometer high skyscraper apartments five meters from the mall. And the stadium is outside the city."

"That means I have to get back into the car with you, doesn't it?"

"It does," Lu Han nods. "But better than getting into the car with you."

"Everything is more interesting than driving," Yixing says wistfully. "Concentrating is forever my arch-nemesis."
The unease that had settled over them both lifts, and Lu Han's smile comes readily when he summons it. "Come on then," he says, pointing back toward where he'd parked this morning before breakfast. "If you only have one week in Manchester, we don't have time for you to stand here and space out."

Lu Han began his second season with F.C. Seoul a successful starting player. He ended it with a perfect record, major accolades, and an offer to go and play in the Netherlands.

It was only one season spent in the red and white home game jersey of PSV Eindhoven before he’d been picked up for his record high scoring and fast footwork. Before everything started moving so fast that Lu Han could barely catch his breath as he packed up his life into the same two suitcases as always and switched countries again, this time hoping to stay a while.

Sometimes, most of the time, it feels like a fairytale. Like it had all come too easily after everything had always been so hard.

The first time he’d pulled that Man U jersey over his head, two years after his move to Europe, Lu Han had thought he might cry. Now he wears it most months of the year, in between practices and games and the inexplicable other duties that come with being a professional Premier League football player.

He likes… no, he loves his job. He thinks that if high school Lu Han could see how twenty-six year old Lu Han spends his days, he would walk with his head a little higher in a way that had nothing to do with false bravado.

After all, Lu Han has what he has always, always wanted. And he’s happy.

He gets an email from Jinki two weeks after Yixing has come and gone back again.

Finally had to suck it up and buy one of these the email says, and attached is a picture of a Manchester United jersey. He’s had someone take it from the back, because Lu Han can see it’s his own name across Jinki’s shoulder blades.

did it hurt? did your heart shrivel up and die? Lu Han replies.

He doesn’t get an answer until the following morning, the time difference coming into play. It isn’t words, it’s just another picture. Jinki has used duct tape to write "SUCKS" under the logo on the breast, and he’s flipping off the camera. Lu Han laughs loud enough to wake the neighbors and thinks he might go home when Hyoyeon and Yixing’s baby is born, after all, because there are some things he misses that he’s definitely allowed to miss.

"I would miss you, if you went to Europe."

Lu Han closes his email, and goes out for a run. The streets aren’t empty, but… Lu Han has the uncanny ability to feel alone in a room crowded full of people.

Lu Han’s English has come a long way since he’d started playing with the Dutch. Still, he thinks he’s heard wrong when, after the match, a player from the other team says something strange after congratulating him on the win.
"You're pretty," he says. He looks different out of his blue uniform. It takes Lu Han a minute to recognize him.

"Excuse me?" replies Lu Han, clearly and succinctly, thinking he must have heard wrong.

"You're very pretty," the man repeats. His lips curl in a smirk, and he looks Lu Han up and down suggestively. Lu Han has already showered quickly and changed out of his uniform. He’s wearing his sweats. He’d escaped, with a baseball cap pulled down (over hair that’s reached frightening levels of platinum thanks to a stylist with no idea how to deal with Asian hair) through the back players’ exit long after the bigger name players had drawn the reporters after them like puppies.

He’d not expected this guy to be waiting for him. Lu Han’s gut lurches. It’s been ten long healing years but he still goes back to the roof when he’s afraid.

"I’m a man," Lu Han says. "Men aren’t pretty, they’re handsome." Lu Han has a teacher tone that he only has occasion to use with Zitao, but it does well to mask the wobble in his voice.

"Not you," the other guy says. Lu Han is so flustered that he can’t remember his name. Only that he’d worn a jersey with Samsung emblazoned across the chest during the entire second half, and that Lu Han had watched him with careful eyes three years ago on television as he tried to memorize player styles and maybe even before that. One of his socks, during the match, had been lower on his calf than the sock on the other leg. "You’re pretty." His voice is appreciative. Lu Han clutches more tightly at his bag. "Do your teammates tell you how pretty you are?"

"No," Lu Han says. "Because it’s inappropriate. Like you’re being right now."

"I’d like to be more inappropriate," he says, taking a step closer, and Lu Han takes a larger step back, in the direction of his car.

"No, thank you," he says. "I’m not interested." The man is attractive. He has the build of a football player, and nice thighs and hips. He has a famous face, too. But Lu Han is not lying when he says he isn’t interested.

He reassures himself that he’s not thinking about… About other people when he smiles nervously at the man and takes another step back.

The other player seems to realize he’s made Lu Han uncomfortable enough to no longer pass as teasing, and relents. "That’s too bad," he says, before nodding at Lu Han and stalking off in the opposite direction, perhaps toward his own car and his own life.

Lu Han does not realize his hands are shaking until he’s sliding his key into the ignition. He misses, thrice, before the key finally slides home and his car comes buzzing to life around him.

He contemplates the encounter with a clear mind even as his body continues to shake. Is it that obvious, Lu Han thinks, to other people? That at night, he still remembers the cool slide of skin and the soft brush of hair? Is it tattooed on Lu Han’s face, in ink invisible to him, that he’s different? That he is, no matter how much he pretends, never going to be able to completely lock away the part of him that still leaps whenever anyone mentions Joonmyun’s name?

Studying himself in the mirror, Lu Han can’t figure out what other people see that gives him away. He can’t figure out if it’s hiding in the crow’s feet at the corner of his eyes or maybe in the dark of his eyelashes. Somehow, though, Lu Han, no matter how much he tries, can never be safe.

He doesn’t mention it to anyone. Considering, three weeks later, he still has a job, Lu Han assumes the other player never mentions it to anyone either. They both, he knows, have quite a bit to lose.
That night he picks up a girl at a bar while he’s out with his teammates to celebrate their win. She’s Korean, and her name is Yoona. She’s beautiful and funny and silly—impressed with Lu Han’s Korean. She recognizes him by his hair from the team. They make out sloppily on his couch for three hours and then she leaves him her number.

His teammates congratulate him the next morning at practice, thumping him hard on the back in turns and asking if she’s a keeper while Lu Han laces up his cleats.

He must have drunk too much, because when he thinks about what his teammates would be doing right now, if he’d picked up that other player, instead, he finds himself needing to throw up into the sink, all the color drained out of his face when he looks up into the mirror again.

When he’d shown up at his first practice for PSV, his teammates had studied him carefully. Lu Han’s palms had been damp and clammy.

"Are you any good, twink?" one of the players had asked, and Lu Han had summoned up the mask that had gotten him through the hardest years. After fourteen months of stares and hurried showers alone in the locker room and fear any time he found himself up high.

"Yeah," Lu Han had said. Almost no accent, now, after hours of practice. "I’m good." He was as good as any of them. Two years with F.C. Seoul had sharpened him up and stamped out his weaknesses. "Really good."

"He looks like a girl," another player had said.

"In Asia, they all look like girls," the first player had responded. "A whole country of queers."

Lu Han had swallowed down the horrible things he’d wanted to say, and his anger, and smiled. "I’m really fucking good at football," he’d said clearly. "And so is my girlfriend."

Jinri had seen him off at the airport. She’d cried and promised to visit soon. Lu Han had known she wouldn’t be able to get very much time off from work.

She would break up with Lu Han a year later, when it became clearer he wasn’t going to be coming back. Lu Han had let her drift out of his life with something like relief mixed into his sadness.

"Then let’s see you on the pitch, twink," the second player had said. Lu Han had squared his shoulders, and thought, not for the first time, of Joonmyun’s calm voice, telling him to push even harder.

"You got it," he’d said, bouncing to loosen his muscles. "Let me show you how it’s done."

He would make them shut up.

He did.

It’s like déjá-vu.

Lu Han can feel the pain lance up as he crumples, and he can see the horror on his opponent’s face before the throb makes everything blurry.

"It’s his knee!" he hears one of his teammates yell, and Lu Han thinks that’s obvious the way he’s
Five years and Lu Han still finds it all hauntingly familiar. The medic comes running and Lu Han grits his teeth. Yixing needs to be telling jokes. He can hear the Chinese national anthem in his head.

"You’ve re-torn your lateral collateral ligament," the medic says grimly, and there’s a rush in Lu Han’s head that’s louder than the medic’s voice and louder than the memory of a softly sung national anthem.

’Is this it?’ Lu Han thinks, as the game stops, adding minutes to injury time as he’s lifted onto the gurney and wheeled off the pitch. ’Have I finally ruined my knee?’

Back in the locker room, he’s immediately wrapped and iced. "You’ll need to go to the hospital after the match," the medic says.

"Right," Lu Han says, through gritted teeth. "I guessed that." He can feel himself blacking out, consciousness slipping from his grip.

All he can do is pray that this isn’t the end.

Will I be able to play again?" is the first thing he asks, and the doctor, a middle-aged man in his late fifties, smiles.

"Yes, Mr. Lu. You’ll be able to play again. But your knee is never going to be the same again."

"Will I be able to play again professionally?"

"Yes," the doctor says. "After surgery and rehab, you will. But one more severe injury to that knee and you’ll be lucky if you can walk normally again."

"I see." Lu Han stares down at his swollen knee. "It’s always this knee."

"We’re human beings, not machines." The doctor is looking over x-rays. "The body is amazing, and can push itself to amazing limits, but it’s not without weaknesses."

Lu Han’s ribs never strain, even if he’s got scars along them that will never fade. It’s only his knee that gives up, time and time again.

"But I’ll be able to play?"

"You’ll be able to play." The doctor clears his throat. "Is there anyone you’d like to be here when you have your surgery? I know you’re from abroad, so if you’d like me to schedule it next week to give you time for your family to get here—"

"There’s no one," Lu Han says. He knows Yixing would come, but he also knows how expensive that is. He knows how pregnant Hyoyeon is.

And maybe Zitao would come, Sehun trailing behind him like a lost puppy, but Lu Han would never ask. He knows Zitao is busy.

He could call…

"No one?"
"No," Lu Han says. "But don’t worry, I’ll be fine."

The doctor’s brow furrows. "If you insist." He looks down at his chart. "I’m sure your club will be speaking to you about a physical therapist. It seems you’ve worked with a physical therapist before?"

"I have," Lu Han says. "When I was in college."

"Then you know how this process works."

"I do," Lu Han says. "I guess the club will talk to me about that, after the surgery."

"Right." The doctor shuffles his notes. "I’m going to schedule you for next week anyway," he eventually says. "Just in case you change your mind about calling someone from home. That gives you five days."

"Thank you," Lu Han says, knowing it’s unnecessary. He can, he’s sure of it, take care of himself. This, he decides, is full circle. He’s right back where he started, and staring out at doing it all again, alone.

"I’m flying out there, then."

"Don’t," Lu Han says. "It’ll be horrible for you. Don’t come."

"Are we back to this? I took you to your last surgery. I should take you to this one." Zitao is using his most stubborn tones.

"You are not driving my car, Zitao. You’ll smoke out the window and I’ll come out of surgery to leopard print carseat covers."

"Please," Zitao says. "I would get the carseat covers before you even went into surgery, frog-ge. God knows what horrible team-themed decorations you have in there now. Yixing told me about the red and gold air fresheners."

"Yixing is a traitor."

"Only when it means making fun of you." Zitao is chuckling.

Lu Han wants to laugh along, but he’s anxious. "I don’t know if I can do this again. I don’t know how I did it before."

"I told you, I can fly out for the surgery."

"Not the surgery," Lu Han says. "The nothingness. The mornings where I can’t go running and the afternoons where I can’t do anything but watch other people kick the ball around. The nights where I think about matches I’ll never get to play and try to figure out what to do with all the extra energy. The feeling…" Worthless. "Just, everything."

Zitao makes an incredulous noise. He’s probably fixing his hair as he speaks to Lu Han. Maybe Lu Han is annoying him. "You’re so melodramatic. I’m going to tell Minseok about this, ge." Lu Han scowls and settles his leg on his ottoman, propping it up to alleviate the pain. "You’ve proven, to both yourself and to everyone else, that you’re more than just football. Go to museums. Study English and go to every place on the continent where a James Bond movie has been shot and send hundreds of pictures to Yifan-ge, all in separate emails, until he swears."
"He never swears."

"Exactly," Zitao says. "So that should keep you busy during your recovery."

"I’m serious, Zitao. The only reason I managed not to lose it last time was because…” Joonmyun. Joonmyun and Italian films and pottery classes and evenings in his apartment talking about nothing and everything.

"Of Joonmyun-hyung, right?" Zitao’s thoughtful ‘hmmm’ has Lu Han closing his eyes to keep himself from counting the dapples in his ceiling paint. "If that’s the only way you got through before maybe you should just have him help you again?"

"Zitao, you know…"

"Think of this as an opportunity for you guys to get over whatever it is you fought about."

"We didn’t fight." Lu Han closes his eyes. "I don’t even know if his number is the same."

"Do you have a pen?" Zitao asks. "I’ll give you his number. Then you won’t have any excuses."

"I’m not—" Sighing, Lu Han adjusts his leg on the ottoman. "Who is the ge here?"

"Clearly it’s me," Zitao says. "Since you’re sitting here asking me how to call the guy who was one of your best friends because of some weird falling out you had that was probably over his choice of favorite teams or something. Whenever I say your name he still smiles, so…"

"He does?" Lu Han runs fingers through his hair. "Do you think he would answer, if I called?"

"Of course he would, ge. It’s Joonmyun-hyung."

"We have several therapists we’ve worked with a lot," the assistant coach says. "Any of them would be good. I’ll get you a list and we can decide—"

"Could I possibly get someone from home?" Lu Han blurts it out without thinking. Once he’s said it, he can’t take it back. "The language barrier, and—"

"You talk well enough with us."

"It’s different, with doctors and medical stuff," Lu Han explains. "And I’ve… got history with someone who knows my condition. Knows my injury personally."

The assistant coach seems to think on it for a moment, before he nods. "If you get him out here, and he has the right accreditations, you can have your own therapist."

"Great," Lu Han says. Now the only thing standing in his way is to actually get him out here. He can hear Zitao’s laughter in his head already as he thinks about the number he’s memorized with how often he’s typed it on his keypad in the past three days. "Great."

Drinking alone at a pub reminds Lu Han of his first year of university. Everything reminds him of something, these days. He must be getting old.

Lu Han might look young, but he’s felt kind of old on the inside for a while now. He’d hobbled to
the pub like an old man, that’s for sure. He’s lucky to live so close. He can no longer drive, so he’s been taking taxis to his doctor’s appointments. He’ll take a taxi to and from his surgery, too.

The pub’s empty, and mostly dark. The music’s loud, but not loud enough to stop Lu Han from hearing pieces of conversations and his own thoughts.

"Do you mind if I join you?" Lu Han looks up. It’s the player from before. There had been a game today, he suddenly remembers. Chelsea versus Manchester City. Lu Han had watched part of it as he’d emailed Jongdae. "I’m sorry about… last time."

Lu Han remembers his name now. Remembers the slurs hurled at him from the terraces sometimes that don’t have anything to do with being from a rival team. "I’m not holding a grudge."

"I wasn’t sure," he says, "if you would or not. I don’t know why I was so careless."

"Because it gets tiring, being careful all the time." Lu Han orders another drink. Pretty soon he’ll be drunk enough to pull an Yixing and forget his way to the bathroom. He’s glad he forewent his painkillers tonight. The beer numbs the pain well enough. "Pretending all the time."

"Do you pretend a lot?" It’s empathy in his eyes, not sympathy. They may or may not be pretending about the same things, but they both know what it is to smile and not mean it. Then Lu Han’s tension leaves him.

"More than I ever imagined I’d have to, to make my dreams come true."

"Same." They’re both quiet for a while, before the man speaks. "I really appreciate you not mentioning—"

"I was only eight when Justin Fashanu killed himself." Lu Han drinks deeply from his mug. The man’s wearing a sweatshirt in Chelsea blue, with the hood up obscuring his face. Lu Han would do the same but there’s no point. He’s too recognizable for that. "But I was sixteen when I got a little too close to being too much like Justin Fashanu myself." He shifts in his seat, and winces as it jars his knee.

"I know how that feels." He probably does. "It’s a real shame that the biggest crime I could commit wouldn’t be murder or assault. Hell, that would be just another Tuesday. But if I wanted to have a boyfriend, well, then I’d be out of their favor faster than anything. I’d be watching next season’s starting game from my sofa. Or the hospital, if I was dumb enough to get caught out alone."

"That’s the way it is," Lu Han says. "In Asian football too. In all football."

"Four-thousand footballers in England and Wales." A sip of beer. Eyes staring into the cherry wood counter of the bar like it holds answers. "Not a single one is ‘gay’."

"I’m not gay," Lu Han says.

"I never said you were."

Lu Han’s lips are dry. When he licks them, his tongue comes away with the bitter aftertaste of Guinness. "There was… someone. Once."

"And you chose football."

"I chose football. I will always choose football."
"Me too," the man says, pulling on the white drawstrings of his hood. "Guess that’s why we’re Premier League players."

"Guess it is," replies Lu Han. He’s thinking about the phone call he has to make later, to the man whose voice he hasn’t heard in two years. He still remembers the way it sounds, though, as clear as the referee’s whistle.

The man next to him looks down at his braced leg with sympathy. "You gonna be able to get back on the pitch soon?"

"Maybe," Lu Han says. "It isn’t the first time this knee has been through trouble. It’s not even the second time."

"Oh," he says. "When will you know?"

"I have to work with a…" He searches for the word. "A therapist. To see how much of the damage is temporary and how much is permanent."

"I know a guy…"

"Me too," Lu Han says. He slides his hand into his pocket and fingers his phone again. One more hour, and at least one more beer. "Back in Korea."

"A famous guy?"

"An old friend," Lu Han says, and the word friend aches more than he’d thought it might.


"Hello?"

Lu Han’s heart stops. Quivers in almost stillness. Starts again. "Joonmyun?"

"Is this…" Hesitation. "Lu Han?"

"Yeah," Lu Han says. "It’s me."

"How did you get this number?" It’s not accusing, but it makes Lu Han want to hang up, anyway.

"Zitao gave it to me." Lu Han’s sitting with his back ramrod straight in his plush armchair. "I’m sorry if you didn’t want me to have it."

"I don’t mind." Soft and gentle. Joonmyun uses so much polite Korean that he has a way of letting his voice trail off on his endings when he’s not sure if he should use it or not. Hearing that again makes Lu Han long to bury his hands in Joonmyun’s soft hair. To feel Joonmyun’s tiny hand on the small of his back. "Why did you call, Lu Han?"

When Lu Han scored a goal in a professional match, for the very first time, he could feel the rising tide of emotion washing over him hotter than the rays of the summer sun. Burning him with its radiance.

This is more than that, bigger than that, stronger than that, and Lu Han wants to hide in the shade. Joonmyun has always been so very bright. "I shouldn’t have. I shouldn’t have called, I’m sorry—"
"Lu Han, slow down and enunciate."

"What does enunciate mean?" It comes out squeaky, and Lu Han takes a breath, filling his lungs with air like he hasn’t since Joonmyun answered the phone.

Joonmyun laughs. "Jock," he says fondly, and if Lu Han closes his eyes, blocking out his fancy English-style apartment, it could be five years ago, Joonmyun’s fingers skating over the bruised, post-surgery skin of Lu Han’s knee.

"I…" Old Lu Han would walk the entire way to the student center, never once caving to ask for a ride. Old Lu Han would sit alone in the hospital to wait because he’s afraid to ask his friends to come with him. Old Lu Han stood on his own two feet and never needed anyone because he’d never had anyone he was allowed to need. But new Lu Han, the Lu Han whose walls Joonmyun had chipped away to expose his softer, rawer parts, just wants someone to hold his hand and tell him it will be okay. "I…"

"What is it?" Joonmyun is so patient. "Lu Han, this is me."

"It’s you," Lu Han says. "No one can ever be you."

"No one can ever be you, either. Or Zitao. Or Yixing, for that matter. Or anyone. There is only one of each of us." Joonmyun is teasing him. It works. It lets Lu Han laugh, and takes the panic out of him.

"I need you." Lu Han’s dry throat clutches to the words but he forces them up and out.

"What?" Joonmyun’s voice is barely a whisper, now. "Why?"

"There are three famous, respected, highly recommended physical therapists on call with my team."

"You do play for one of the best teams in one of the most popular leagues," Joonmyun says. "What does this have to do with me?"

"I told my assistant coach that I would only have you."

Joonmyun makes a squeaking noise, before he takes a shivering gasp of air. "And what if I won’t come?"

"Then I don’t know what I’ll do," answers Lu Han. "I hadn’t thought that far. I’ve never directly asked someone for a favor before." He chuckles. "I’m new to this whole ‘asking for help when you need it’ thing."

"Why does that not surprise me?" It’s simple to picture Joonmyun’s face, tender and indulgent.

"So if you don’t come, then I’ll figure out what to do about my knee—"

"It’s your knee?"

"Didn’t you know? It was all over Naver and Daum, apparently."

"I try not to look," Joonmyun admits. "Thinking about you is… it’s still hard." He goes quiet. Like he regrets admitting that.

"Me too," Lu Han says. "But only some days."

"Only some days," Joonmyun agrees.
"On the other days, I wonder what you’re eating for breakfast. If you’re helping sucker some other poor patient into pottery—"

"You were never just a patient to me." Joonmyun cuts him off with that, and Lu Han hears sharpness, more fine than a knife’s edge. "I’ll come."

"Really?" If Lu Han hadn’t thought of what he’d do if Joonmyun said no, he’d thought even less of what he would do if Joonmyun said yes. "I have a guest bedroom, and I know you have other patients and—"

"Did you really think I’d say no to your first ever favor?" Joonmyun laughs again. It’s more natural this time. More sincere. "If I did you might never ask anyone for another one again."

"You don’t have to… say yes because you think…"

"Let me rephrase," says Joonmyun. "Do you ever think I’d say no to you?"

And maybe it’s because when Lu Han was small, so small he had yet to disappoint anyone at all, his mother had made sure to keep him under a parasol to protect his skin. But for some reason, Joonmyun’s brightness, even from this far away, is peeling away his skin and leaving him burned.

"You’re amazing," Lu Han says. "I hope someone tells you that every day."

"No one has ever told me that but you," Joonmyun says, and Lu Han thinks that’s the most unfair thing he has ever heard Joonmyun say.

i asked joonmyun to come, so stop worrying.

and????!!! is he coming???? Yixing uses oversized text and html to make it blink.

Lu Han laughs. yeah he emails back, and his hands only shake after he hits send.

Lu Han takes a taxi to Manchester International. It isn’t too long a ride. Through the window, he watches the people out for strolls and then, as they get out of his neighborhood, the roads. Anything to distract him from the nerves that threaten to power-kick their way out his stomach.

When Joonmyun walks out, wheeling his suitcase behind him, in oversized knit that drowns him, Lu Han’s nerves finally succeed, leaving a massive hole in his gut that he’s sure his feelings are falling out of.

Joonmyun grins at him, waving awkwardly and shuffling as always, and Lu Han grins back as he approaches.

"Is it safe for you to be out and about pre-surgery?" is the first thing out of Joonmyun’s mouth. Of course it is.

"Sorry I couldn’t pick you up in my car," Lu Han says, gesturing to his crutches and his knee. "And I would’ve made a sign but I couldn’t hold it, between my bag and the walking aids, and I figured…"

"That the platinum blond would be sign enough?" He’s teasing again, doing that weird little laugh Lu Han hasn’t heard in so long he’d almost forgotten it. "You’re like a human neon right now. You
look like Hongdae at midnight." He tilts his head. "It looks good though. Misleadingly angelic."

"You were the only person in a winter sweater getting off the plane," Lu Han says. "You weren’t so hard to spot, either."

"Airplanes are cold." Joonmyun’s hair has gotten longer again. Fluffier. His sideburns are long enough to fuss with, now. "And so far, Manchester is even colder. It’s been a long time since I’ve flown."

"Still," says Lu Han. "It’s July." Granted, July in Manchester is significantly cooler than July in Seoul, but there’s still a sheen of sweat on Lu Han’s skin if he walks too fast.

"I know, I know," Joonmyun says. "Think of me as a reptile, if you must. I don’t create my own body heat."

"But you’re so warm," Lu Han says, then winces. Touchline. Yellow card. "Do you have everything?" His suitcase looks heavy. "Sorry I can’t grab that for you. You must be tired."

"You must be in a lot of pain." Joonmyun smiles. Sunshine. Fuck, Lu Han hadn’t been ready. "Thank you for letting me stay with you."

"Thank you for flying to another continent for me?" Lu Han looks at Joonmyun incredulously. "Where else would you stay, nerd? Do you even speak any English?"

"I speak some," Joonmyun says. "Part of working in the medical profession is being fairly proficient in English."

"Ah, that makes sense." Conversation is so easy. Lu Han relaxes as he hobbles, Joonmyun slowing his pace beside him. "Welcome to England. Is it your first time here?"

"It is," Joonmyun says. "Are you going to show me around?"

"Only if you’ll concede to wait a few weeks."

"I’ve got three months," Joonmyun says, and Lu Han’s heart clenches. "Plenty of time."

Joonmyun, for the next three days, fits into Lu Han’s apartment like he’s always been a part of it, an extra mug finding its way onto the bathroom sink and Lu Han’s dishes suddenly finding themselves organized by size and shape in his cupboards.

"It’s good to see some things haven’t changed," Joonmyun says, as Lu Han prepares ramen for them both, cracking eggs into the hot broth and laughing as Joonmyun watches him add the spice with an expression of intense concentration. "So stubborn. I could have made the ramen. You’re hurt, and you shouldn’t be up on that leg. You have surgery tomorrow."

"You’re my guest," Lu Han says.

"I’d feel more comfortable staying if you’d let me help you," Joonmyun replies, and Lu Han wavers. "I won’t fall for your tricks anymore, shark." Lu Han looks up at him from the stove and frowns. "This isn’t going to be like intro to pottery."

"You liked that class," Joonmyun says. "And so did I." He stands up from the small table Lu Han keeps in his kitchen, barely big enough for two people, since Lu Han is used to eating alone, and
walks up to the stove to stand beside him. He reaches for the chopsticks and Lu Han lets him take them from his fingers. His knee aches awfully, from trying to do too much. "Have a seat."

Lu Han watches as Joonmyun lowers the heat on the stove. His sleeves are pushed up, revealing strong forearms. "Are you happy, Joonmyun?"

"Right now, or in general?" Joonmyun takes a potholder and sets it on the table. Then he returns to the stove and removes the pot from the eye, bringing it over to the table and setting it on top of the potholder.

"In general," Lu Han says.

"I can’t complain," Joonmyun replies. "I have the job I wanted. I work enough to be busy but not enough that I’m swamped. My brother and his wife just had twins, so I can play with them as much as I want and still go home to a quiet house." He laughs. "I have friends, and things to do. I’m happy enough."

"Is all we get in life being ‘happy enough’?" Lu Han asks, and Joonmyun squints at him curiously.

"Aren’t you happy, Lu Han?" Joonmyun makes a sweeping gesture with his arm. "You play for the team you’ve always admired. You live abroad and you have hundreds of girls back home with your picture on their wall. Isn’t this… what you wanted?"

"It is," Lu Han says. He should say more. With more enthusiasm, too, maybe, but his knee hurts and he’s tired. "I thought you didn’t look me up online."

"I make sure you’re alive every once in a while," he counters, and Lu Han laughs.

"I ask Jongdae about you," Lu Han admits, and Joonmyun looks surprised. "Just to make sure you’re doing okay."

"I’m no famous football star," says Joonmyun, "but I’m doing well for myself."

"I’m glad," Lu Han says, before dipping his spoon into the broth. "I’m really glad."

"Are you sure you don’t mind driving?" He’d noticed Joonmyun’s discomfort when they were in the taxi, before. He remembers that Joonmyun doesn’t like taxis.

"I would rather drive than let anyone else drive me," Joonmyun says. "I don’t like to be in vehicles that I’m not controlling."

"Why not?" Lu Han asks, without thinking. Then, when Joonmyun’s hand comes up to press against his chest, he knows. "Because of your accident?"

"Yeah," Joonmyun says. "Because of my accident." His fingers dig into his sweatshirt, and Lu Han resists the urge to reach over and straighten his fingers one by one. "I almost died that day." He sighs. "My dad… his reflexes saved my brother and I. It didn’t save him and my mom, though." Lu Han had suspected that, maybe, Joonmyun was speaking from experience, when he’d mentioned the regret of never saying goodbye, but to hear it is hard.

"I didn’t know," Lu Han says. "About your parents."

"I don’t really like to talk about it." Joonmyun smiles. "And you’re not one to talk about parents."
"So when you aren’t driving, you’re afraid?"

"Is that silly?" Joonmyun laughs, as he starts the engine.

"No," Lu Han says. "I’m afraid of heights."

"Sometimes I forget how much you understand me," Joonmyun says, as he backs the car out of the driveway. He turns his head the wrong way at first, because the steering wheel is on the wrong side. Lu Han had gotten confused at first, too.

"I never forget." Lu Han leans forward and pushes the radio on. "Thank you… thank you for coming."

"You already said that." Joonmyun’s cheeks are pink. "It’s okay, you know. You haven’t asked for too much."

Yes, he has, but Joonmyun is here, anyway. "I’ll probably say it a few more times."

"I don’t mind."

"You brought someone after all," the doctor says, after Joonmyun pats his hand and leaves the room so they can talk. "Family?"

"He…" Lu Han considers. "Yeah, of a sort."

"I’m glad you’ll have someone here when you wake up," the doctor says. "It’s lonely, to wake up from anesthesia with no one there waiting."

"It’s not so bad," Lu Han says. "I’ve done it before."

Waking up with Joonmyun peering down at him, though, eyes wide and tired, settles the panic that ricochets between Lu Han’s ears.

"You feeling okay?" Joonmyun asks, keeping his volume low. One of his hands is on Lu Han’s, and the other presses to Lu Han’s forehead, holding his hair out of his eyes.

"Mmm," Lu Han says, and Joonmyun’s relieved smile, more than the drugs still coursing through his veins, make Lu Han feel like he’s flying. "I missed you."

Joonmyun blinks, owlishly, and then his smile grows wider. His teeth are still uneven along the bottom edges, and still white enough to blind. "I missed you too," he says. "Dramas aren’t the same without you judgmentally commenting on every irrational action the hero and heroine take."

"Is that all I’m good for?" Lu Han whispers, and Joonmyun shakes his head yes, even as his eyes get suspiciously shinier.

"That and drinking," Joonmyun replies. "And maybe you’re good at persistence, too."

"Only sometimes," Lu Han says.

Joonmyun’s hand withdraws. "More than you’d think."
The first week after his surgery, Lu Han is a useless mess. Joonmyun, who is always braver and more adventurous than anyone would guess, pulls up maps to grocers and theaters and museums on his laptop and ventures out into the city on his own with Lu Han’s car keys and solemn promises to be back for dinner.

"Today I went to the Imperial War Museum North," Joonmyun says, when Lu Han forces himself to get out of bed and out into the living room. From there, he can see Joonmyun sitting on the bed in Lu Han’s guest room, because the door is ajar. He’s organizing the booklets he’d picked up into neat piles on a bed he’d probably made as soon as he woke up. Lu Han hasn’t made his bed in a year. He changes the sheets every two weeks but he only bothers to put on the fitted bottom one. "I saw a Russian tank. I wore those headphones that give you a tour in Korean."

"I went there once, when I first got over here." Lu Han leans against the doorway. Joonmyun’s clothes are still in his suitcase, mostly. A few are stacked on his chair, folded. "Did you enjoy yourself?"

"I do like museums," Joonmyun says. "I’ve been dragging Kyungsoo with me to all these art exhibitions lately, in Seoul. I never get to see him anymore, unless I do."

"You guys don’t live together anymore?" Lu Han shakes his hair out of his face. "I didn’t know that."

"No," Joonmyun says. "He works on the other side of the city now. He decided to get a place closer to his job."

"Do you live in that big apartment by yourself?"

"I’m trying to talk Jongdae into moving in," Joonmyun says. "I think he wants to, but his mother wants him to stay at home."

"I guess other people’s mothers actually like their children," Lu Han says, and Joonmyun snorts.

"I also brought home some DVDs, if you’re interested. I took note of which ones you already had, and I’m adding a few to the collection."

"What did you get?" Lu Han asks, and Joonmyun’s smile gains a little mischief at the corners.

"I’ll tell you if you bend your leg for me fifteen times." Lu Han had barely gotten to ten yesterday.

"Fuck, you’re evil," he says, and then, behind that, comes a laugh that neither of them had been expecting.

"I haven’t seen you make that face in quite a long time," Joonmyun says. "You go from beauty to the beast in just a few seconds."

"Fifteen is a lot more than ten."

"It’s a good face," Joonmyun says. "Ugly-cute." He stands, and then walks toward Lu Han. Lu Han watches him, unsure, but he only slips past Lu Han, out into the living room. "You coming?"

"Yeah, I’m coming."

Joonmyun drives them out to the clubhouse the next afternoon, so he can meet with Lu Han’s
assistant coach and the team manager.

"So you’re the physical therapist," his assistant coach says. "Lu Han speaks very highly of you."

"That’s because Lu Han likes me," Joonmyun says.

"Lu Han likes everyone," the manager says. "It’s one of his best traits as a player. He gets along with everyone."

Joonmyun cuts eyes at him, and Lu Han carefully doesn’t look back. "Lu Han has always had a lot of friends."

"When he got injured, though, he only wanted you." The manager leans forward. "Why is that?"

Lu Han keeps his face carefully blank. He should have expected this line of questioning. He had thought he’d put a stop to it with the girls in clubs, but…

"I was the physical therapist who worked with Lu Han the last time he was injured." Joonmyun’s words are heavily accented but clear. "I was the assistant."

"But you did all the work." Lu Han quiets when his manager gives him a glare. Lu Han winces and leans back in his seat. It pulls at his thigh. His whole leg aches from the exercises Joonmyun had put him through this morning. "I—" Joonmyun glances at him this time, and Lu Han immediately quiets. The assistant coach smiles.

"I’m familiar with his injury, and he can be…” He casts around for a word. "Stubborn."

"But not with you." Lu Han’s assistant coach seems amused.

"Usually not," Joonmyun says. Lu Han crosses his arms and pouts.

"I like you," the manager says. "You will stay and help get Lu Han back on the field."

"Yes sir," Joonmyun says.

Grabbing Joonmyun’s arm, Lu Han uses him for balance as he guides him to the locker room. "Want to meet a few football heroes, while you’re here?" Lu Han grins. "I mean, you already know the best one, so…”

"You’re so full of yourself." He shoves Lu Han lightly. "Just because you’re popular now…”

"Think of it this way. You knew me first."

"I did," Joonmyun says, slipping an arm around Lu Han’s waist as he starts to limp more obviously. "You should be on your crutches."

"It’s been a few weeks." Lu Han sighs. "It’s definitely time for me to start walking without them."

Practice is in a half an hour, so the locker room is full. His team welcomes him back with too-hard back slaps and whistles. "Have you gotten even blonder?" one player asks, while another snaps back, "You’re one to talk!"

"You’ve been gone almost a month," says a teammate. "I’d started to like your funny techno music."

Joonmyun stands in the midst of it all, flustered and pink and amazed.
"Guys, this is Joonmyun, a friend of mine from Korea," Lu Han says.

Lu Han’s teammates love Joonmyun. Everyone loves Joonmyun, really, but he hadn’t expected the blatant adoration to come so soon. Lu Han likes to think he’d been made of sterner stuff, but the truth is, he’d fallen for Joonmyun’s charms just as quickly.

When they head out, with a promise extracted from them both to bring Lu Han to practice next week by the assistant coach, Joonmyun is still smiley.

"You’ve been making your teammates listen to KPop?" Joonmyun pulls down on the sleeves of his sweatshirt. It’s true August now, getting colder but not that cold, and even looking at Joonmyun in his seasonally inappropriate outfit makes Lu Han want to melt.

"A tiger can’t change its stripes." Lu Han still has his Goryeo University Tigers sweatshirt on the top of his laundry pile. He wears it when he goes running. He can do that along the roads now. It’s strange to be out running in the early morning and see other people running too. Something else that’s different here.

"I suppose not." Joonmyun taps his fingers on the steering wheel. "One of your teammates asked me what I thought of your girlfriend."

"Oh," Lu Han says. Maybe they mean Li Yin, who sends him letters that smell faintly of her perfume because it rubs off as she writes. Or maybe they mean Yoona, who is beautiful and who Lu Han has called twice and likes just fine but doesn’t have the time or energy to date.

"You have a girlfriend?"

"I think, after four weeks, you would know if I did." Joonmyun is still tapping his hands, in no particular beat, on the steering wheel. "There hasn’t been anyone serious since Jinri."

"Really?" Joonmyun tries to hide his surprise behind one of those genial, meaningless smiles he’d perfected long before he met Lu Han, but Lu Han sees through it as easily as Joonmyun sees through his subterfuges. "That’s… that was three years ago."

"Yeah," Lu Han says. "I’m not really looking."

"Why not?"

"You make a lot of sacrifices, to play football." Lu Han fastens his seatbelt as Joonmyun starts the car. "What about you?"

"Luna and I broke up in February," Joonmyun says. "I don’t want to talk about it."

"We don’t have to," Lu Han says thickly, and then he stares out the window and watches the familiar scenery go by.

That night they go out to the Cornerhouse on Oxford Street in central Manchester to watch a new Korean movie that had come out in the flurry of festival season. "I haven’t watched one of these in ages," Joonmyun says. Then, joking: "I hope I still remember Korean."

"We’re speaking Korean right now," Lu Han says. "Eat your popcorn."

"Bossy," Joonmyun says, grabbing a handful anyway. He’s warm against Lu Han’s side. "I’m
supposed to be the bossy one."

"I’m older," Lu Han says, as the theater darkens. He can taste the sweetness of the popcorn on his
tongue.

"But you’re Xiao Lu," Joonmyun says, elbowing Lu Han just enough to move him closer into Lu
Han’s side. He’s trying not to smile. Confused feelings burble up inside Lu Han’s belly and make it
harder to eat.

"Who are you calling ‘xiao’?" Joonmyun laughs, and is about to respond when the film starts, with a
sequence that reminds Lu Han of *3 Iron*, which he and Joonmyun had also watched together one
night in third year, two days after Joonmyun had turned in his midterm papers.

The theater is chilly. Lu Han wishes he’d brought a jacket. He glances down at Joonmyun. Sure
enough, he has his arms wrapped around himself, frowning even as he stares at the screen, caught up
in the movie.

Debating with himself, Lu Han looks around the theater. It’s very dark, and there aren’t a lot of
people to see anything he might do. And Joonmyun is cold.

Lu Han only hesitates a few more moments, pondering consequences and what people might think
before he throws his arm around Joonmyun’s shoulders and draws him into his side. Joonmyun
startles and holds himself stiff. "You look freezing." Lu Han murmurs into his ear, and Joonmyun
sighs and relaxes into Lu Han’s embrace.

It’s as torturous as Lu Han had known it would be. Joonmyun still smells like the same shampoo,
and he’s soft, and he fits as perfectly as he always has underneath Lu Han’s arm. Tentatively,
Joonmyun wraps one of his arms around Lu Han’s waist to pull himself closer. "Warm," he says,
into Lu Han’s chest. Lu Han can feel the movement of Joonmyun’s lips through his thin shirt. "How
do you stay so warm?"

Lu Han’s heart is beating fast enough that he should be on fire. "I dunno," he says. "Magic, I guess."

"A good kind of magic."

Lu Han doesn’t really see the rest of the movie. There are too many other things to notice, like the
patterns that Joonmyun’s fingers unconsciously draw along his side, or the way Joonmyun gives
these tiny gasps of fear when the movie is scary and these tiny coos of joy when something romantic
happens.

He eventually closes his eyes and recites this month’s Arsenal stats in his head, going player by
player, and when he’s done, he moves on to Chelsea. Football is the smell of cut grass and the
softness of dirt under his cleats. It’s not Joonmyun fitting against him like he’s supposed to be there.

When the movie’s over, and they pull away from each other, long before the lights go up, Lu Han
feels the loss. "Thanks for that," Joonmyun says, awkwardly avoiding Lu Han’s eyes.

"Anytime," Lu Han replies honestly.

Joonmyun smiles the way that hurts. "Really?"

"Really," Lu Han says. "When I said I missed you, I meant it." He stands up, crumpling the empty
popcorn bag between his hands.

"I thought that was the anesthesia speaking, not you."
"It was a combination of us both." Lu Han wets his lips. "I… Sometimes I just wanted to hear your voice. If I could just hear your voice, it would be enough."

"I thought you didn’t want anything to do with me, for awhile." Joonmyun stands too, and follows Lu Han out of the theater, out of the building. Out on the street, the evening has dropped the temperature even further down. It still feels warm to air conditioning cooled skin.

Finally, Lu Han speaks again. "When I told you not to stay… It was a different kind of selfishness. It was me wanting more than I could ever have. It was… me being scared that as long as you were around, I would never be able to fulfill my dreams. You made me hazy and confused. You made everything so much less simple."

"And now?"

"Without you, even though everything was more… clear cut, there was a Joonmyun-shaped hole in my life. I tried to fill it with lots of different things, but I never really managed." Lu Han digs in his pockets for his car keys, before he remembers that Joonmyun is carrying them. He shakes his head at himself. "I think I could handle it now, if you could. It’s been years. I’m older, and maybe even wiser."

"I could probably handle it," Joonmyun says, producing the keys and jingling them in Lu Han’s face. "But if you tell me to leave again, Lu Han, I won’t… I won’t ever come back."

"Okay," Lu Han says. Friendship. Touchlines, yellow cards, follow the rules. It will work this time. Lu Han is sure of it. "That’s… yeah. Okay."

Joonmyun’s grin this time is sincere, and rich with joy. It fills in all the cracks in Lu Han’s nerves like glue between bits of ceramic. Sticking Lu Han back together in places he hadn’t even known he was broken.

"Do you think you can get to the car before that knee gives out?"

"I could get to the car five times and back before this knee gives out."

"Stubborn," Joonmyun says. "Stubbornness is good if you want to get back out onto the pitch by the beginning of next season."

"I do," Lu Han says, and he sets his jaw and starts to walk, lighter with Joonmyun present by his side.

They go running on the first of September, in the light rain, at a slow pace down a jogging path alongside Nicolas Road all the way to Longford Park. Tackling the route slowly, with Joonmyun at his side, tiny huffs and puffs as his shorter legs take two steps to Lu Han’s every one.

"I run this way every morning, when I’m playing," Lu Han says. "There’s a park at the end of this road."

"A park?"

"There’s even a goat," Lu Han says. "If you’re nice to me, I might let you meet him."

"I’m nice to everyone." He thumps his chest twice, and Lu Han slows down without asking if he needs to. His knee aches, anyway, so he might as well.
"You would probably be nice to some rando robbing you blind. 'Sir, be careful not to trip! Your shoelace is untied, did you know?'' Lu Han makes his voice purposely higher. It doesn’t sound much like Joonmyun. Joonmyun punches him in the arm.

"Why is there a goat?"

"Why not?" Lu Han replies, and Joonmyun chuckles breathlessly and picks up the pace.

Once they get there, Joonmyun has him do stretching exercises by the athletics track, and then do short sprints back and forth while the midday crowd of elderly joggers watch in amusement at Joonmyun barking orders and Lu Han scurrying to follow them. When Lu Han is sure he’s going to die, he convinces Joonmyun that there really is a goat, and drags him to visit.

As Joonmyun plays with the bunnies, Lu Han tells him about bringing Yixing here, and how one of the animals had started to chew on his shirt. "He screamed and screamed," Lu Han says, digging in his pocket for his phone. "Being an awesome best friend, I took a video instead of trying to help."

"Never change," Joonmyun says, as he stands up and leans into Lu Han so they can both study the phone screen. They’re both sticky with sweat, but Lu Han leans his head on top of Joonmyun’s anyway, letting Joonymyun’s hair tickle his cheek and nose.

If Lu Han were referee, he’d give the move a yellow card, but no one is watching so he lets it slide as Joonmyun slips in just a tad closer. "I can’t see," Joonmyun explains. "The glare from the sun."

They run back even slower than they’d run there, and Lu Han’s leg aches. He’s also more winded than anticipated, especially when he turns to look at Joonmyun and the afternoon light catches in the reddish strands of his hair, giving it an angelic glow.

"You did well today," Joonmyun says. "This is really nostalgic, isn’t it?" He looks around Lu Han’s neighborhood. "Well, same story different setting."

"Not quite the same," says Lu Han. "It’ll never be quite the same."

"Hmm." Joonmyun rests his hands on his hips and looks up at the sky. "You’re right."

The weeks pass, and they fall into a routine that makes Lu Han feel, for the first time, like this apartment in Manchester might be home. Lu Han and Joonmyun take turns cooking dinner and Joonmyun accompanies him to practices and helps him work out with the ball as carefully as possible. He woos Lu Han’s teammates and somehow woos Lu Han all over again too.

Sometimes he goes out on long walks with his cell phone and comes back when the battery dies, and Lu Han thinks he’s talking to his brother, and maybe to Jongdae, too. He wonders what they talk about. Maybe they talk about Lu Han, sometimes.

"What’s it like, living with Joonmyun?" Yixing asks one Saturday morning, when he calls Lu Han for their monthly powwow. "Is everything still going well?"

"Yeah," he says. But I’m scared again. "Great, even. It’s like he belongs here."

"You don’t sound happy." Yixing is on his third bowl of cereal since the beginning of the call, but he stops eating now, possibly to listen to Lu Han more carefully.

"Well," Lu Han says, wriggling his toes and feeling the stretch in both his good knee and his bad.
"In a month, he’s going to leave. And then he won’t belong here anymore. And I’ll be…” *Alone again.*

"Oh, Lu Han," Yixing says. "You can come visit us in January for New Years’ right?"

"Yeah," Lu Han says. "That’s true!" He tries to keep his voice optimistic. He doesn’t think Yixing buys it, but the best thing about Yixing is that Lu Han never has to tell him to drop something when it gets too close to dangerous territory. "I’ll just enjoy it while it lasts."

It is, maybe, too perfect to wake up in the morning and hear Joonmyun humming the Goryeo-Dae fight song as he rinses two mugs for coffee, his skinny jeans slipping down to ride low on his waist as he reaches up high where Lu Han keeps the coffee beans.

To have Joonmyun teaching him how to play poker in the afternoons and go out with his friends at night. It all falls together into some horrible pattern that feels too nice and presents too many temptations.

A part of Lu Han that has lain sleeping for five long years is waking up.

Halfway through the third month, Joonmyun makes a few phone calls and comes back out of Lu Han’s guest room, which now might as well be Joonmyun’s room, smiling.

"I’m staying for another month," he tells Lu Han, who has just turned on the television to a drama that has been gaining popularity lately. "I had to clear some things at work, but you’re obviously not fully healed."

"It’s taking longer this time." Lu Han sets the remote down beside him. "To heal."

"It’s been injured a lot," Joonmyun says. He sits next to Lu Han. "You’re going to feel it a lot more, this time."

"Do you think…" He shakes his head. "It isn’t important." There are some questions that he doesn’t want to know the answer to, yet. He closes his eyes.

"What are they saying?" Joonmyun asks, and he opens them again. "They’re talking faster than I can understand." His hand is on Lu Han’s thigh. It isn’t the first time, but usually they’re in the midst of therapy, Joonmyun digging his fingers into Lu Han’s good leg to egg him on, or gently massaging the bad one in apology.

This… This isn’t therapy. This is Joonmyun and Lu Han, two friends with vaguely set boundaries and a history of touches that have gone too far. Lu Han knows what the sweat along the curve of Joonmyun’s jaw tastes like and Joonmyun knows what Lu Han looks like when he comes. And Joonmyun’s hand is warm through Lu Han’s jeans.

"The girl, with the blonde hair, she’s… she’s a maid, right? But she’s in love with that guy in the suit. He used to be…” Lu Han’s brow furrows, concentrating on the translation. The words are all jumbled up in his head. "He used to be a driver. But now he’s a member of the family, because he married one of the daughters."

"And?" Joonmyun leans his head on Lu Han’s shoulder, and Lu Han fixes his eyes determinedly on the screen. Sometimes, in football, you come up against a defender that it’s hard not to foul but that doesn’t give you any excuses as far as the officials are concerned. This is like that, and Lu Han has to watch his footwork, and even more importantly, watch his hands.

"And she’s asking him to meet her for lunch outside. Like a date. But it’s inappropriate, because of
their social statuses, and he can’t figure out how to tell her that."

"So are they star-crossed lovers?" Joonmyun looks a lot more interested in the story now. Probably because it’s so much like the dramas he adores.

"No," Lu Han says, warming up to it. He usually watches this after Joonmyun goes to bed, indulging in a cup of tea and catching up on match scores and team standings on his laptop. "No, that guy, his first wife was a real lady. Like an aristocrat. And he was nothing, socially, and they ran off and eloped. That’s real star-crossed lover stuff, in my opinion. This is just infatuation."

"So they loved each other, but the society they were in told them that they couldn’t be together?"

"Right," Lu Han says. "Exactly that." He looks down at Joonmyun, and realizes how close he is. His skin is clear, and kind of golden in the dim light from the two lamps Lu Han had turned on at dusk.

"What’s he saying now?" Joonmyun whispers, and his breath tickles Lu Han’s lips. Lu Han, this close, can see each and every one of Joonmyun’s eyelashes.

"I don’t know," Lu Han says. "I’m not listening."

Joonmyun chuckles, strained, and Lu Han could just lean forward a couple of centimeters and their mouths would meet. "I thought you were going to be my human subtitling machine."

"Humans aren’t machines." Lu Han lifts his hand up to cradle Joonmyun’s jaw. The skin is as smooth as ever. Joonmyun leans into the touch, and it’s both a lifetime ago and yesterday that Lu Han had Joonmyun trapped between himself and the shelves in the library, lips parted and eyes giving permission. "They have weaknesses."

"What’s your weakness, Lu Han?" Joonmyun’s hand comes up to sit atop his. It trembles.

"Don’t you know?" Lu Han says. He thinks that it’s obvious. But maybe it isn’t, to Joonmyun. He should keep it that way. He leans backward, dropping his hand down between them. It lands on Joonmyun’s lap, and Joonmyun’s hand falls too.

Joonmyun lets go of his breath, like he’s been holding it. Lu Han had certainly been holding his. "I should go to bed, anyway."

"Yeah, we both should," Lu Han says. He stands, and his legs wobble. It has nothing to do with his knee and everything to do with the unsteady beating of his heart. "I’ll see you in the morning."

"In the morning, then."

Lu Han has trouble falling asleep. Maybe he’s only imagining Joonmyun tossing and turning in the room next to his, but he doesn’t think he is.

"I choose football," Lu Han says to his own reflection the next morning. "I will always choose football."

Joonmyun laughs at something on TV. Lu Han can hear him through the door. His laughter is clear, like bells, and Lu Han can think of a thousand times he’s heard it, but it has never shaken his resolve quite like this. His stomach heaves, and he wipes the toothpaste from the corners of his mouth.

"I will always choose football. That’s why I’m a Premier League player."
September twenty-eighth, Lu Han winds up at Manchester International again, Joonmyun by his side as they wait for an arriving flight from Beijing.

His first glimpse of Li Yin has him waving wildly in her direction, and she smiles. "Lu Han!" She runs up and hugs him, before pulling back and greeting Joonmyun like he’s an old friend. "And you must be Joonmyun."

"Not much Chinese," Lu Han says, and Li Yin smiles. He looks at Joonmyun. "And she doesn’t speak much Korean."

"Just a little," she says, pinching her thumb and first finger and leaving only a small space between them to show her proficiency.

Despite the language barrier, they get along perfectly. Lu Han plays translator for them both, his brain twisting and turning as he tries to figure it all out, even as people around them all speak in English.

"I’m glad you came," Lu Han says, when they get back to his place and Joonmyun excuses himself to go to the restroom.

"I’m glad you actually wanted me to," she replies, kissing his cheek. Joonmyun comes back out as she pulls away. He gives them a strange look before he smiles pleasantly and asks Li Yin, in halting Chinese, where she would like to go for lunch.

Over the next four days, they visit museums and go shopping and eat any number of foods Li Yin calls fattening even as she happily chomps them down. They wander through Chinatown, where Li Yin and Lu Han tell stories of their childhood, Li Yin narrating and Lu Han struggling to turn her winding tales into understandable Korean as Joonmyun patiently laughs at them both.

Li Yin sleeps on the pull-out bed in the living room, refusing both Lu Han and Joonmyun’s offer of their own beds. "No way," she tells Lu Han. "I can’t tell my husband I slept in another man’s bed, even if the other man wasn’t in it."

In the mornings, Lu Han wakes every day to find Li Yin and Joonmyun communicating without words to make breakfast, and he watches them from the hall with a fondness that catches him by surprise.

As far as family goes, he thinks this must be what it feels like to have a real one.

Lu Han shows her the stadium, and she participates in one of Lu Han’s rehab sessions, still pretty good with the football herself, even after all these years. "Lu Han taught me," she says, when Joonmyun gives her a questioning look. Joonmyun nods, studying the football instead of Li Yin, and she smiles at him like she knows what he’s thinking. Lu Han doesn’t.

On the last day of her visit, they go out to a fancy dinner, ordering meat dishes that cost more than all their other meals combined and a bottle of red wine to go with it.

Joonmyun shivers on the way out to the car, so Lu Han has him pop the trunk and produces a sweatshirt to drape over Joonmyun’s navy diner jacket. "I put it in there just in case," Lu Han says. He means it to sound like he put it in there for himself, but really, he put it in there for Joonmyun just last week as it turned quickly to the chilling coolness of fall.

When they get home, Lu Han showers first and then retreats into the kitchen to make tea.
Joonmyun’s door is closed. He’d been quiet at dinner, looking back and forth between Li Yin and Lu Han, and smiling strangely at them both.

Lu Han doesn’t understand, so he pushes it aside.

He turns the stove on and fills the kettle before setting it on the eye.

Li Yin clears her throat, and he turns to see her standing in the doorway in a huge fluffy pink bathrobe, looking comfy and warm.

"So I’ve finally met your Joonmyun."

"He’s not my Joonmyun," Lu Han says, looking at the water he put on for tea and frowning at nothing.

"Yes, he is," Li Yin says. "Can’t you tell?"

"It isn’t like that," Lu Han says. "I’m not…"

"I know," Li Yin replies. She moves further into the kitchen as Lu Han’s kettle starts to shriek, shrilly. "But you smile brightest when he laughs. Former best friends notice things like that." He pours the water, and pours a cup for Li Yin, too, plucking two tea bags from the jar he keeps on his counter and opening them both quickly, dropping the bags into the mugs. "I noticed when you mentioned him years ago, when we were visiting your father in the hospital."

Even though it’s only Li Yin, Lu Han still has to sit down. Water sloshes from the mugs onto his hands.

Fear makes him light-headed, and though she’ll never say anything to the press or his coach, every person who knows how Lu Han feels is another person he’s failed to hide it from. "Is it that obvious?"

"I can see why you love him," Li Yin says, sitting down across from him at the tiny kitchen table. It seems all the smaller as she leans across it, catching his eyes and pinning him in place with her stare. "He’s a wonderful person."

"He’s a man," Lu Han says sharply, in reprimand. It’s acid on his tongue. "And I’m afraid... afraid of... heights."

"I can see why you love him," Li Yin says, after an extended silence. "Afraid of heights, I mean. We used to do all sorts of reckless things on the roofs of those under-construction buildings, back in middle school. Do you remember climbing in through the windows, and getting our uniforms dirty with cement dust as we crawled along the unfinished brick shelves? That must have been at least twenty-five meters."

"I didn’t learn to fear heights until later." The tea is hot. It scalds his tongue and palate.

"You never were as a child," Li Yin says, after an extended silence. "Afraid of heights, I mean. We used to do all sorts of reckless things on the roofs of those under-construction buildings, back in middle school. Do you remember climbing in through the windows, and getting our uniforms dirty with cement dust as we crawled along the unfinished brick shelves? That must have been at least twenty-five meters."

"A lot happened on that roof. I learned real fear. Real failure."
"After that, you never really… your smiles were hollow. Even when you were back on the pitch, the next season, you were hollow." She finally picks up her tea and takes a sip. "But when you talk about Joonmyun, talk to Joonmyun, you’re so…” Pause. Shift. Sigh. "Whole."

"Joonmyun is…” Lu Han considers. "The best thing that ever happened to me."

"Then why are you letting him pack his bags? Why is he leaving in three weeks?" Li Yin reaches across the table and grabs Lu Han’s hand. "I know you’re afraid. Whatever happened on that roof, whatever you hear in locker rooms, whatever your father used to yell at you when you’d come home…” Her thumb rubs circles on the top of his knuckles. "Put all of that aside, and tell me honestly why you’re letting him leave."

"Because I have dreams," Lu Han says. As long as you don’t have any abnormal proclivities. "Because I’m making my dreams come true, and I had to, have to, make a choice."

"What is your dream, Lu Han?"

Lu Han opens his mouth to answer, but it sticks in his chest, and for a moment, he doesn’t know.

"I—"

"Am I interrupting something?" Joonmyun’s in the doorway now, looking at their hands. He’s wearing one of Lu Han’s sweatshirts, the zippered one that Lu Han had draped over his shoulders earlier when they were coming home from dinner, and his own pajama pants.

"Not at all," Li Yin says, guessing Joonmyun’s question. Lu Han quickly translates for her into Korean. “I was just about to go to bed.” She smiles enigmatically at Lu Han, who still feels winded from their conversation. Then she stands from the seat, offering it to Joonmyun wordlessly. "Goodnight," she says in crisp Korean.

Joonmyun does take her seat. "You don’t look so good."

"She gave me a lot to think about," Lu Han says. "As always."

"You can tell me it’s none of my business anymore, if you want," Joonmyun says, "but are you in love with her?"

"I was once," Lu Han says. Now his tea has gone from hot to tepid, skipping the comfortably warm stage. "When I was seventeen."

"Not now, though?"

Lu Han pulls himself together enough to meet Joonmyun’s eyes. "No," he says. "I love her, but that’s not the same thing."

In love, Lu Han thinks, is five years of almost silence that in the end mean nothing because his heart still leaps at the sound of Joonmyun’s voice.

"You say some pretty smart things, for a jock." Joonmyun picks up Lu Han’s mug and Li Yin’s, too, walking them both over to the sink and rinsing them clean. "But we should both go to bed soon, if we’re going to take Li Yin to the airport at six, tomorrow morning."

"I’m not sleepy." Lu Han could use a walk. A walk alone, to clear his head. But Joonmyun is insistent. "You don’t have to—"
"I'll tuck you in," Joonmyun says. He grabs Lu Han’s wrist, pulling him up and dragging him to his room with that surprising strength. Lu Han flips the light when Joonmyun can’t find it. "I’ve never been in here. Is your room the new version of your bed? No visitors allowed?"

"No," says Lu Han. "Not really."

Joonmyun looks around the room, and drops Lu Han’s wrist when he spots something on Lu Han’s desk. "You still have that?" High and disbelieving. He walks over to the desk and gingerly picks up Lu Han’s blue vase.

Lu Han steps over to his bed, pushing the bunched up covers out of the way, and then lying down and pulling them up over his shoulders. "It reminds me of you."

"I never thought…” Joonmyun’s eyes shimmer in the almost darkness. He’s still so beautiful. Lu Han thinks about dreams.

"That vase is me," Lu Han says. "The glue… that’s you."

Joonmyun approaches the edge of the bed slowly. He peels Lu Han’s covers back and straightens them, making sure to cover Lu Han’s feet and folding the top of Lu Han’s thin comforter back neatly. "Your comforter is thinner than mine."

"You get cold," Lu Han says helplessly. "Even in the summer." Joonmyun’s hand is in the range of Lu Han’s hand. He could reach out and take it. But Lu Han is afraid of heights. He’s even more afraid of falling from them.

"You’re pretty amazing too," Joonmyun says, kissing Lu Han’s forehead, lips drier than Lu Han remembers from long ago. "I hope someone tells you that every day."

Then he’s gone, and Lu Han closes his eyes. "I chose football," he whispers to no one, and his heart hammers in his chest.

It’s all over the news. Chelsea player caught with another man. Pictures in The Sun, and boycotts already beginning for the exhibition match in Argentina next month.

"Do you know him?" Joonmyun asks, standing quietly behind him as he switches from morning talk show to morning talk show, looking for a reprieve. "That player?"

Two shared beers in a bar and a mutual understanding. "Yeah," Lu Han says. "I know him."

"Did you know he was…” Joonmyun sighs, and Lu Han can’t see him but he knows what his face looks like. That soft, unsure look that only seems to come out when he doesn’t know exactly what to say. It’s rare he makes it, but Lu Han has memorized it anyway. "Well."

The partial smile he had given Lu Han as he’d tugged on the draw strings of his uniform.

A reminder of the consequences that leaves Lu Han feeling cold. "Yeah," he says. "I did."

"What about his teammates?"

"You can’t be gay and play professional football," Lu Han says. He can imagine the slurs. He looks at the man’s face above his Chelsea jersey, and knows he won’t start for his team next week. "That’s the way it is."
Joonmyun puts his hands on Lu Han’s shoulders, and Lu Han shrugs him off. "I feel sorry for him."

"He chose," Lu Han says, as he gets up and walks toward the bathroom. He wants to take a shower, to maybe wash away all the panic that scales his back like spider vines.

"Is it that easy to choose?"

Lu Han stops, one hand on the doorknob, and turns to look back at Joonmyun. He looks lost, too small in his sweats and barefoot on the carpeted floor of Lu Han’s apartment. Lu Han can imagine him, thirty years from now, with a few more lines on his face and peeks of gray in his hair instead of red, looking at Lu Han just like this. The image flickers, and then disappears.

"No," Lu Han says. "But dreams come with sacrifices."

"Did high school teach you that, Lu Han?" Joonmyun asks, and Lu Han locks himself in the bathroom, and turns the water on as hot as it will go.

"You have to stop wearing the brace," Joonmyun tells him on the way to the clubhouse from the hospital. It was Lu Han’s last visit, and he’d been told the injury had healed nicely.

"My knee doesn’t feel normal," Lu Han says. "So I must not be ready to take it off." He sounds whiny. Minseok would give him that look, if he were here. Joonmyun just frowns.

"That is the new normal," Joonmyun says. "You can’t tear the same muscle so many times and come out unscathed." Joonmyun has his eyes on the road in front of them. He’s driving slowly, as usual. "You’re going to feel it more than you used to."

"I’m too young to be working around the places where my body is giving out."

"You’ll still play as well as you did," Joonmyun says, glancing away briefly to smile at him. "These are the perils of professional athletics." Joonmyun’s smile slips some. "Among other things."

Lu Han slumps in his seat and crosses his arms. "Yeah," he says. "And the next time my knee gets hurt on the pitch, I won’t be getting up from it, right?"

"You will," Joonmyun says. "You will, but I don’t know if you’ll be able to play anymore."

Not able to play anymore. It cuts him to his bones. "What would I even do, if I couldn’t play anymore?" Lu Han tries to picture a life without the thrill of the match. Without the challenge of getting past other skilled players. Without the goal of being striker some day. "I’ve worked my whole life for this."

"Stop being so reckless out there with your defenders and you won’t have to find out." Joonmyun pulls into a parking space. "You’ve given up too much for this to let carelessness take it away from you."

The assistant coach looks over his medical forms and nods.

"We’ll have you back into practice in February." he says. "Double up on your runs and keep up with your exercises." He looks to Joonmyun. "Will that compromise his recovery?"

Joonmyun looks to Lu Han, who quickly translates. Joonmyun smiles, and replies in English.

"No," Joonmyun says. "My suggestion is the same."
"Good," the assistant coach says, pleased. "I had my doubts about your friend here, but he did well by you."

"He always does," Lu Han says, and then they rise to go, having decided beforehand in the locker rooms in favor of an early lunch.

"Lu Han, can I speak to you alone?" Joonmyun nods, not needing translation for that, and steps outside the door, leaving Lu Han and the assistant coach alone in his office. "It’s time to send your friend home."

"You don’t have to pay him anymore," Lu Han says. "And he told his boss he would be here until the end of October."

"This isn’t about paying him," the assistant coach says. "This is about the Chelsea scandal. We don’t need one in our club."

Lu Han feels like a football has just flown into his stomach, knocking all the air out of him in one go. "Sir?" Lu Han grasps for meaning. "It’s not—"

"I don’t care what it is or isn’t." The assistant coach shuffles papers on his desk, and doesn’t look at Lu Han. "But send him home before things get out of hand."

There’s nothing to say to that. Not really. "I—"

"You’re pretty enough that even if you’re just friends, the papers are on a hunt for gossip now. It’s like the lid has been blown off of some huge undercover gay faction of the Premier League, and a pretty boy living, with another pretty boy who flew here from South Korea when he got injured isn’t going to look so good for the team. It doesn’t look so good for you." He coughs. "We like having you on the team, Lu Han. You’re a good player. But we will let you go if we have to. Am I clear?"

"Yes, sir," Lu Han says. Clear as window glass.

"What’s wrong?" Joonmyun asks, when Lu Han walks out of the office. "Are you in trouble for something?"

"I don’t want to talk about it," Lu Han says, and Joonmyun doesn’t push. Joonmyun lets Lu Han have the dreadful quiet he wants all the way back to the apartment, not even bothering to stop at the restaurant they’d eyed on the way to his doctor’s appointment.

"We’ll order take-out," Joonmyun says. "Or I’ll make sandwiches. You don’t look like you’re in the mood for lunch."

"I’m not," Lu Han says. "Not at all."

Lu Han ends up going for a drive and then a walk by himself, ending up at Longford park and finding a quiet place in the gardens to sit alone. He’s spent several afternoons with Joonmyun here, in this park, laughing about nothing or debating the merits of the movie they’d just watched, Joonmyun teasing Lu Han about his opinions with "should I explain the hero’s intentions with football metaphors?" and Lu Han snorting and declaring he knows about all sorts of things now, and maybe he should explain it to Joonmyun in Japanese tea ceremony format.

And Manchester had never really felt like home until Joonmyun had come to live here too, and Lu Han thinks that when Joonmyun gets on that plane again, the belonging will leave with him.

He gets home after dusk, and Joonmyun looks up from the sofa, his reading glasses sliding down his
nose, his hair wet from the shower, and his mouth parting into a smile of relief. "I was starting to get worried about you."

"You don’t have to."

"We’ve been over this before." He scoots over, leaving enough space for Lu Han on the couch. Lu Han sits next to him, making sure to leave space between them. Still, Joonmyun’s shampoo wafts over him, and Lu Han wonders if this is how Joonmyun’s heart aches when he runs too fast. "I want to worry about you. You can’t tell me not to."

"I can hope you’ll listen to me one day," Lu Han says. "I’m not… I don’t need anyone take care of me."

"You needed me," Joonmyun says confidently. "A few months ago, you needed me."

"I shouldn’t have," Lu Han says. "It would have been better, for both of us, if I hadn’t."

"What’s wrong, Lu Han?" Joonmyun’s hand goes, like a magnet, to the small of Lu Han’s back. "You have to leave. He says it in a rush.

"What?"

"You… I’m better now. You should leave. You have your own life. You shouldn’t be trapped here in mine."

"I’m not trapped in yours. I chose to—"

"You don’t understand," Lu Han says. "I thought I could… I thought we could… but we can’t." Lu Han shakes his hair angrily out of his eyes. "I can’t."

Joonmyun is quiet. He waits, maybe to see if Lu Han will keep speaking,

"So you’re asking me not to stay again?" His voice cracks, and Lu Han cracks along with it. Joonmyun grabs a handful of Lu Han’s shirt in his hand. Lu Han could pull away if he wanted. "Are you, Lu Han?"

Lu Han’s every breath feels like fire, the burn at the end of a match when there’s nothing left but pure adrenaline.

Yes, Lu Han thinks, because that is what he’s asking. He’s asking Joonmyun to stop being everything to him, and to stop smiling at him like that in the mornings and to stop wanting Lu Han as much as Lu Han wants him.

Instead of saying that, he leans forward and kisses him. And it’s funny how five years can pass but Joonmyun’s lips still feel the same beneath his own. His mouth still unfolds beneath Lu Han’s like the lotus blossoms between the tea cups during the tea ceremony, or like the intricate plot of a film noir, every new swipe of Lu Han’s tongue earning a different kind of gasp. It’s funny, Lu Han thinks, that he has never felt more alive than he feels when Joonmyun melts into him, opening his mouth wider and demanding Lu Han does the same.

Lu Han slips his hands into Joonmyun’s hair and tilts his head sideways to crush them more firmly together, and Joonmyun moans, shifting so he’s sitting in Lu Han’s lap. His knees are pressing into Lu Han’s hips and everything is suddenly too hot, too much.
They both feel it, and Lu Han knows, as Joonmyun’s kiss gentles, lessens, that there have been too many chances and too many failures. There is still Lu Han’s choice looming in the space Joonmyun creates as he starts to draw back.

Trembling, Joonmyun pulls away. He presses both of his hands to Lu Han’s cheeks, and kisses his nose. "Red card," Joonmyun says sadly. "Ejected from the match."

"I—" Lu Han knows that he doesn’t want Joonmyun to leave, not really. It would be easier, but it isn’t what he wants. The problem is that Lu Han doesn’t know what he does want. He clings to the fact that football is what he knows. That football is what got him through everything and it will get him through this, too.

"I’ll change my flight," Joonmyun says. "You’re well now, so there is no reason for me to be here." He moves further away from Lu Han, rising from the sofa and retreating back to his room. "Live your dream, Lu Han. And I’ll..."

"What’s your dream, Joonmyun?"

"Unattainable," Joonmyun replies. "So you’d better play hard enough for the both of us." He starts to close the door, putting wood and plaster between them, and soon, distance. "You’ve given up too much for this to let carelessness take it away from you."

Lu Han’s heart gets on a plane to Incheon. Lu Han’s soul gets back on the field, kicking the ball around as winter settles in colder than it has in years before.

"I haven’t heard from you in a while," Jongin says. "I thought you might be afraid to call me, hyung."

"Why would I be afraid to call you, Jonginnie?" Lu Han keeps it light, letting his voice curl teasingly over Jongin’s name.

"Because I know how you are about all the gay stuff, and I know you heard from Yixing that my gay stuff got me kicked off the team."

"You didn’t get kicked off," Lu Han says. "That would have meant you did something wrong. You didn’t."

"Passed over, then," Jongin says. There’s a burst of Chanyeol’s laughter in the background. "Sorry about that. Baekhyun is over and they’re playing video games. They get along too well. It’s noisy."

"I’ve just been busy." Lu Han wrinkles his nose. "That’s why I haven’t called."

"With Joonmyun-hyung, I hear. Did he make you go to a bunch of obscure museums? Did you pretend to be mad about it?"

"He went to the museums by himself, mostly," Lu Han says. "It was fun, but he went home on Friday."

"I thought he was staying until October? That’s what Jongdae said, when I talked to him last weekend."
"Things change." Lu Han isn’t sure why he called Jongin. "He had to leave earlier than expected."

"Why?" Jongin, as much as he cares about people, has never been the best at subtle hedging around unwanted questions. Lu Han supposes that for some people, that is part of his charm.

"We’re not so different, you and I," Lu Han says, after a long pause. "The difference is in what we chose to do about it."

Jongin’s breath hitches. "Oh," he says. Lu Han finds himself shaking, because he had never meant to admit something like that today or any day. Saying it aloud is terrible and real, but much like when he’d told Yixing about… the incident, he feels freer afterwards. Lighter. "Oh."

"Yeah," Lu Han says. "But you were… willing to give it all up. I wasn’t. I’m not."

"Can I… Hyung, can I say something?"

"Sure," Lu Han says. "The worst thing I can do from England is hang up on you."

"What do you mean, hyung? You’re not going to have me re-organize everything Chanyeol’s put in the wrong place in the historical fiction section?"

"The worst that will happen to you is my eternal ire," Lu Han jokes, even though he doesn’t feel like joking. He’s on his back at the edge of the school building roof with the wind in his hair and crushing pain in his ribs. He has someone’s hand over his mouth so he can’t scream for help. "So just say it."

"I think for you, Lu Han-hyung, all you’ve wanted to care about was football for so long that you stopped realizing you could like something else that much. Football was like, I dunno, a safe place for you."

"Yeah," Lu Han says. "A safe place when there weren’t any other safe places."

"But you do have other safe places now. You have us, right? You have other things you love, too, like movies and even tea ceremony exhibitions and who knows what else." Jongin would be shrugging, Lu Han thinks, if Lu Han could see him. "You have more than just football. So now you can choose whether or not you really want that the most out of everything you have. And you can decide what you want to give up for it?"

"Playing football was your dream too," Lu Han says. "We were going for it together."

"You got there!" Jongin says. "I just found another dream along the way. Or, well, the thing I wanted most… It changed. That can happen. It happened to me. I don’t regret not sticking with football. I don’t regret turning down the ultimatum of Chanyeol or F.C. Seoul for another season."

"This is the most I’ve ever heard you talk." Lu Han tries to sound nonchalant but he thinks it comes out choked.

"Because I would have regretted losing Chanyeol more than I regretted losing my spot on the team. Even if he is," and Jongin raises his voice, "loud and really obnoxious right now."

"I think you mean always," Lu Han says, and Jongin laughs. He doesn’t sound like a man who lives every day filled with some kind of regret.

"Maybe I do," says Jongin. "I love him anyway." He chuckles, low and embarrassed. "Do you love Joonmyun-hyung?"
"I…"

"Try this," Jongin says. "It’s actually the advice that Joonmyun-hyung gave me, back when I was trying to figure all of this out for myself."

"Joonmyun?"

"Yeah." Jongin sniffs. "Close your eyes. What’s the first thing you see when you think about the word happiness?"

Lu Han clutches at his phone like it’s a buoy in the ocean. "Oh," he says. "Oh."

The coach looks at him in disbelief. "What?"

"I’m not renewing my contract." Lu Han repeats steadily. He can hear the Manchester wind in his ears.

"Did you get a better offer elsewhere?" The assistant coach looks shell-shocked. Lu Han guesses they don’t hear that from the other end very often from players who love their own franchise.

"No, of course not," Lu Han says. "But I’m retiring."

"You’re twenty-six," the coach says. His steel-gray hair is pushed back from his face, and his eyebrows are gathered in seriousness. "If you retire now, then…"

"I know." Lu Han swallows down his anxiousness and meets both sets of inquisitive eyes. "But I have a lot of things to consider. My knee is not really…" He debates his words. "It won’t ever be as strong as it used to be. One more injury and I’m out for good."

"Then why not play until that injury? You told me once, when you first got here, that it had been your life-long dream to play for Manchester United."

"And now I’ve done it," Lu Han says. "And it was amazing. Everything I had dreamed of."

"But?"

"It’s strange," Lu Han says, "but I think I have to… Do something else." When Lu Han closes his eyes, and thinks the word happiness, it’s not this that comes to mind first. It’s home, the one he made for himself in Seoul, and the people he made it with. It’s…

As he shakes their hands and walks out of the clubhouse, he isn’t sure whether he wants to smile or cry.

If Lu Han had been asked, way back in his first year of university, what kind of place Yixing would live in when he was in his mid-twenties, Lu Han would never have guessed it would be this floral.

"What are you going to do with yourself?" Yixing asks, as Lu Han bounces the baby on his lap.

"I’m not sure yet," Lu Han says. "I’ve got enough time and money to figure it out."
"That’s true," Yixing says. "I bought a poster with your face on it from the stationery store last week. I figured it might become limited edition."

"If anyone cares about a player that retired at twenty six." The baby, tiny and wide eyed, gurgles up at Lu Han. She has dimples like Yixing.

Hyoyeon is whistling in the kitchen as she pours pretzels into a bowl. Lu Han can see her, her hair long and blonde still, swaying happily. "I’m still kind of shocked you did that. Was it not what you expected?"

"It was everything I expected," says Lu Han. "And more."

"But…"

"I never imagined that after I got that… that after I’d experienced it, and lived it… that I would want more. That it wouldn’t be enough." Lu Han looks down at the baby and tickles her stomach. She can’t quite laugh yet, but she gurgles again. A happy gurgle. "Jonginnie told me that dreams can change. That his did." Lu Han chuckles. "There was a time when he came to me for advice instead of the other way around."

"That was his biggest mistake." Lu Han glares, because he can’t sock Yixing with a lapful of baby. "I think he’s right."

"You do?"

"When I was twenty, I wanted to be a songwriter. I still do. But when I was twenty, I would have given anything to be a songwriter. Now, though, there are things I wouldn’t give." He reclaims his daughter. "It’s not that I want being a songwriter less. It’s that I want other things just as much. Maybe more."

"When did everyone grow up without me?"

"Probably while you were wrestling tall football players in the Netherlands," Yixing replies. "Welcome home."

"Thanks," Lu Han says.

Meeting up for drinks with the old gang in Apgujeong is strange. Back when they were in college, they never could have afforded Monkey Beach, but now they’re all grown-ups with grown-up jobs. "Except you," Baekhyun says cheerfully. "You’re unemployed."

"You’re the last person I expected we’d ever get out here," Jongdae says. "I thought you were too cool to hang out with your college buddies."

"Naw," Lu Han says. "I was just too far."

"What brings you back here?" Jongdae asks. "I almost passed out when I saw you had," he air quotes, "retired."

"The old knee," Lu Han says. "It’s had about enough."

"Yixing said it was good enough for you to get back on the pitch, though," Minseok interrupts. "So you could have kept playing?"
"I could have," Lu Han says. "But one more injury to it and I might not be able to run anymore." He smiles, small but genuine. "I didn’t want to take the chance that I’d never play at all again just to play for Man U."

"Who are you, and what have you done with Lu Han?" Minseok asks suspiciously. To Lu Han’s surprise, he throws an arm over his shoulder. "Next thing I know, you’ll be letting people help you bag your groceries at Lotte Mart and watching economics news in the middle of the night with Sehun while the matches are on SBS."

"Now let’s not go overboard," Jongdae says. "Then we would have to start checking for identity theft." He reaches up and flicks a piece of Lu Han’s hair. "Or extensive bleach poisoning."

"I’ve been thinking about letting it go natural," Lu Han says.

"Really." Minseok looks skeptical.

"No," Lu Han says. "But Jongdae believed me, for a second there."

"I did not," Jongdae says. "I never would believe such a—" He stops and smiles large. "Joonmyun-hyung!"

Lu Han turns around slowly. Of course Joonmyun would be here. Lu Han had mentally prepared for it. But nothing could have prepared him for the way Joonmyun refuses to meet Lu Han’s eyes, even as he smiles at him in a way that means nothing at all.

"Lu Han," he says. "Settling back into Korean life all right?"

"I am," Lu Han says.

"How long are you here?"

"I don’t know yet," Lu Han says, and Joonmyun nods. "Hopefully forever." Joonmyun startles, but still doesn’t look at Lu Han.

"Why?" Joonmyun says, and Lu Han doesn’t think he can tell him the answer.

Zitao, who comes in after Joonmyun, immediately comes up and picks Lu Han up in a crushing hug. "Xiao Lu!"

It breaks the tension, and things ease. Joonmyun ends up on the opposite end of the table, and Lu Han, staring at the end of his professional football career, pours himself another drink and lights a cigarette.

Yifan sits down beside him. "I thought you mentioned a job interview tomorrow."

"I’m not Yixing," Lu Han says. "I can handle my liquor."

"Poor Yixing," Yifan says. "It’s like his tolerance has gotten worse since the baby."

"Drinking is fifty percent genetics, fifty percent practice."

Yifan laughs, but Lu Han isn’t really paying attention to him. He’s paying attention to Joonmyun, who leans forward to take Zitao’s cigarette from his mouth and wipe his hair from his forehead like he used to do for Lu Han.

He’s laughing and smiling and he’s bright without even acknowledging that Lu Han is in the room.
He isn’t looking at Lu Han, and Lu Han remembers Joonmyun’s words so clearly. “I won’t come back,” he’d said.

Lu Han is here but Joonmyun isn’t looking at him. At all. And it hurts worse than handing in his resignation. It hurts worse than his injury and worse than the recovery.

That’s the clearest indication Lu Han has that his dreams have changed. That what he wants most has changed.

Lu Han could play football again tomorrow, and injure his knee past redemption. But Lu Han is already going through life without his right knee, or his right hand, or the right ventricle of his heart, because Joonmyun is all of those things. Joonmyun is a part of Lu Han, no matter how hard Lu Han tries to push him away. No matter how hard they try to keep distance between them.

And maybe that realization is enough to help Lu Han let go of him. Because Joonmyun seems happy now, without the heavy weight of Lu Han’s problems pushing down on him.

Lu Han would give up running, give up anything, for Joonmyun’s happiness.

He thinks back to red cards, and Joonmyun pulling himself out of the match. Maybe, Lu Han thinks, they both should have been carded, because there’s no way to win the game now, not when it took Lu Han too long to realize he couldn’t play this match one man short, especially if that man is Kim Joonmyun, who took the broken parts of Lu Han and put them back together.

But Joonmyun has his own team. Joonmyun has Jongdae and Baekhyun and Kyungsoo and that brother who graduated top of his class from Sogang. Joonmyun had lost a lot and put himself back together, and maybe for him, Lu Han isn’t a match-losing loss.

And if he isn’t, if he’s not a starter for Joonmyun, Lu Han can be okay with that.

His greatest dream might once have been to play for Manchester United, and to prove that he was more than anyone thought he could be.

But like Jongin had said, dreams can change. People can grow and expand and everything in the world does too. And Lu Han’s greatest dream, now, is to see Joonmyun smile. Even if he’s smiling at someone else.

"Are you okay?” Yifan is sitting next to him stoically. He’s surveying them all with a sort of wistfulness, like he’s on the outside of a bubble of happiness, and Lu Han can empathize with that. He’d heard Yifan and Jessica had broken up recently, after six years together. "You seem... sad."

"I’m thinking about dreams,” Lu Han says. "And wishing I still knew how to reach for them."

Lu Han remembers being a child, with his football posters curling at the edges and peeling off the walls, the mantra of *that’s what I want most* echoing in his head like a steady drum.

And Lu Han remembers the feel of Joonmyun’s hands, slick with clay, sliding across the backs of his own. Joonmyun’s voice in his ear. About the look in Joonmyun’s eyes, when they’d said their last goodbye. He looks at Joonmyun now, sitting next to Jongdae with his hands full of cards, swindling Minseok out of all of his Hi-Chew pieces and laughing into Baekhyun’s shoulder, and his heart breaks.

"It’s never too late?” Yifan’s hands look more fragile now than they used to. Like his fingers might break if he tried to stop a goal instead of help a child hold a crayon.
"My knee will never be as good as it was when I was sixteen ever again," Lu Han says. "Maybe my ability to reach for my dreams is just like that."

Yifan is quiet. Lu Han vaguely wonders why Yifan looks so sad. He grabs the soju from in front of them and pours them both another small glass. They clink their glasses together and drink. The world swims. Lu Han has no match tomorrow. Just an interview he hopes he’s good enough to ace, and an empty bed. He might meet up with Yixing and his family for dinner at a samgyeopsal restaurant, and Jinri for a movie afterwards.

At the end of the day, though, Lu Han will be almost as alone as he started.

Lu Han is back on the roof, and inside, he feels empty.

end of second half
"This is criminal," Minseok says. "Absolutely criminal."

"Don’t make me smack your ass in front of all these impressionable young kids," Lu Han replies, straightening the collar of his Yonsei windbreaker.

"Yonsei, Lu Han?" Minseok shakes his head. "They’re only Goryeo-Dae’s biggest rivals in the college league. You’re a turncoat."

"It’s a good team, and they wanted me," he says, before he looks out at the pitch. His players are running short sprints, back and forth. Two on the end look like they’re about to drop. As a coach trying to round out the starters this season, Lu Han wants to know if they will. "I wasn’t about to put Coach Jung out of a job. And I’m serious about the butt-smacking, don’t think I’m not."

"I thought they might be able to smell that I was a Goryeo Tiger as I was walking over here," Minseok says. "How do you live in eternal danger like this?"

"Minseokie," Lu Han says. "It took me seven years to earn your friendship and now I want you to take it back."

"Yixing will be here in a couple of minutes. He got caught in traffic." Minseok stuffs his hands into his pockets. "I’m still kind of in shock that you went from starting player to university coach in less than six months."

"So am I," Lu Han says. Neither of the two first years on the end have dropped, yet, and Lu Han finally blows his whistle out of mercy. "But actually? I love it."

Lu Han loves being young enough that he can still teach his players things. He loves that he can connect with them in a way older coaches can’t, because the memory of a match on Saturday and an econ exam on Monday is still fresh enough in his head. He loves that they respect him but they aren’t afraid of him. He loves that they ask for his autograph and then play pranks on him sometimes when the team wins.

He likes that no one is watching him now, and that maybe he can finally start working toward a new type of happiness, without worrying about his knee or a terrace full of angry, slur spitting fans, or about whether something about how pretty his face is will keep him from getting picked up next season.

When Yixing arrives, Lu Han releases his players to the showers, and the three of them go out for drinks. Yixing ends up too drunk to go home, so Lu Han laughingly calls Hyoyeon, who clicks her tongue against her teeth and says "well, send him home repentant tomorrow," before she starts laughing too. Lu Han knows she isn’t angry, because Yixing rarely goes out without her, and because she’s still got quite a bit of party animal left inside her, too.
The next morning, Yixing wakes up with a hangover and a dim haze over the usual twinkle in his eye. "I hate you so much," Yixing says. "You know I can’t drink that much. You’re a horrible excuse for a friend."

"You were having so much fun," Lu Han says gleefully, hangover-free himself.

"So were you," Yixing replies, moaning as he rolls over. "Did you call my wife?"

"She laughed at you," Lu Han says. "She’s a keeper."

"I know." Yixing peels himself off the couch. "Lunch?"

Grabbing lunch at Lu Han’s favorite kalguksu place used to be a weekly endeavor, but now it has been a long time since Lu Han has sat at one of the creaky wooden tables and fished a silver spoon out of the box at the edge.

"Do you remember what you told me last night?" Yixing asks, out of the blue, and Lu Han, with a mouthful of noodles, peers up at him through blond bangs.

"No." Lu Han does, actually, but in the light of day, it’s more difficult to approach.

"You told me you were in love with Joonmyun." Yixing casually stirs his broth. "Not that I hadn’t known, but you’ve never said it to me before. We had a moment."

"I was drunk."

"You were," Yixing says. "But you meant it."

Lu Han could deny it, but what’s the point? "I meant it."

"So why haven’t you talked to him? Why do you avoid gatherings you know he’ll be at?"

"It’s for the best," Lu Han says. "I… It’s like when you’re down four goals and there isn’t much time on the clock. You want to end the match with dignity. Not like Deportivo versus Milan."

"Remember Man U’s game against Tottenham, in September 2001?" Yixing stirs his kalguksu. "It was three to nothing."

"I remember," Lu Han says. He’d watched that game more than once, as a kid. Had watched Andy Cole strike that first goal and David Beckham make the last one. "Man U won. Five to three."

"They wouldn’t have won if they’d just thrown in the towel," Yixing says. "Oh, we’re down by three, we’ll never come back from this. Let’s just go home."

"It’s not the same thing."

"Sure it is," Yixing replies. "You came back to Korea at least partially for Kim Joonmyun. You don’t drive all the way to the net and then give away possession of the ball."

"You do when you aren’t…" Lu Han snorts. "He took himself out of the match. Red card."

"All I’m saying is, no matter how much the both of you avoid each other—" Lu Han gives Yixing a shocked look. Joonmyun is avoiding him? "No matter how much you both do that, it’s obvious the match isn’t over." Yixing clinks his spoon against the edge of his bowl. "It’s just gone into overtime."
Lu Han’s father passes away at the dawning of April. Li Yin calls and tells him in a hushed voice, and Lu Han, sweaty from work and exhausted, sits down on the edge of his bed and rubs at his face with tired hands.

"I’ll come," he says.

"Your mother is…” Li Yin sighs. "I’m glad you’ll come. I was pretty sure you wouldn’t."

"I don’t know why I’m saying yes," Lu Han says. "Maybe I’m coming to spite him, since I know he probably wouldn’t want me there."

It is the job of the child, to prepare for the funeral. Lu Han’s mother, Li Yin says, couldn’t manage it through her grief, and Lu Han doesn’t have uncles or aunts to smooth things out.

There’s a lot less trepidation, this time, when Lu Han flies to Beijing. Zitao volunteers to come with him, and this time Lu Han accepts. Zitao is surprised but pleased, and Lu Han is glad of his broad shoulder to lean on in the car they take to the hotel.

Zitao helps Lu Han look through the almanac for an auspicious date. Lu Han insists on creating the white invitations on his own, stamping each one of them personally after he gets the list of contacts from his mother.

"I’m relieved you’re here," she tells him, when he drops by the house to pick up his father’s address books and the list his mother made up of important people to call. The always immaculately kept flowers in front of her house have grown wild, and more weeds fill the beds than tulips. She looks old, Lu Han decides. Old and sad. "I don’t think I could have…"

"I’ll get this one thing right," says Lu Han tightly, wondering why he wants to give her a hug. He hasn’t touched her in many years. He hasn’t even wanted to speak to her in years. But she looks like she needs a hug. Lu Han pushes down his anger and his bitterness and wraps his arms around her for a brief moment. "I’ll take care of everything. Take your time to grieve."

Lu Han orders flowers and calls all the invited guests, employees and family friends and business associates, to precede the arrival of the invitations, methodically and without much thought.

"You’re so calm," Zitao says. "If it were my mother, I…"

"You love your mother," Lu Han says. "This is a completely different situation."

"I know," replies Zitao. "It just makes me sad." Lu Han gathers him into a much easier hug than the one he had given his mother, and Zitao nuzzles his nose into Lu Han’s neck. "You deserve more than this."

"I have more than this," Lu Han says. "It’s just back in Korea, not here." He pulls back. "I’m not sad. I think I’m angry."

"Angry?"

"That I never managed to prove myself."

"You already have," Zitao says. "Now just let it go."

"I’m not the best at that," says Lu Han. "But I’ll try."
Lu Han doesn’t sleep. Instead, he stays awake remembering every argument he and his father have ever had. He sits up in his hotel bed and grabs for the brief eulogy he’d included on the funeral invitations, and wonders if he should have been more honest.

The night before the vigil, Lu Han and Li Yin go to the funeral home to finish the final arrangements. "It’s strange," Lu Han says. "I never thought he would actually die. It seemed like some imaginary thing that would never happen. That I would have forever to hope he would accept me the way I am."

Li Yin nods. "I understand."

"Joonmyun told me my time was limited, but I…"

"How is Joonmyun?" Li Yin asks.

Lu Han focuses on stamping the paperwork in front of him. "I think he’s doing well," he says. "We haven’t talked since September. I mean, I’ve seen him, briefly, but…"

"I see," Li Yin says. Lu Han doesn’t think he’s ever heard her sound so disapproving before.

"I know now," Lu Han says. "That I’m in love with Joonmyun. But it’s too late."

"Is it?" Li Yin asks. "Are you going to let it go just like that?"

"Don’t I have to?"

"When did you become a person that gives up?" Li Yin sounds angry. "I thought you were the guy that went for what he wanted, no matter what anyone said. It doesn’t matter if it’s a spot on a team or a spot in someone else’s life, you never were the type that conceded defeat."

"I don’t know," Lu Han says, and Li Yin takes the paperwork from him firmly, walking over to the home director to hand it to him, leaving Lu Han floundering and empty-handed.

At the vigil, Lu Han’s lack of sleep starts to catch up to him. "I’m going to get some air," he tells Zitao, who looks five minutes from a coma. "I’ll be right back."

He had suspected, ever since Li Yin had come in with her husband by her side, that he’d be forced to talk to him. His suspicions are confirmed when he follows Lu Han out, his fancy designer shoes clicking hesitantly on the steps. "Lu Han?"

"What can I do for you?" Lu Han doesn’t mean to sound that aggressive. Maybe he does. Minseok has always told him he’s melodramatic, and even if his rage is justified, this isn’t the time or the place.

"Can I talk to you?"

"I can’t stop you," Lu Han says, wishing he could. The vice captain looks nice in a suit. Not like the sort of guy who would break your ribs because he’d heard a rumor. Maybe he isn’t that sort of guy anymore. Lu Han doesn’t know. Doesn’t want to know.
"I wanted to say…" The vice-captain sighs. "I don’t know what I wanted to say. There’s nothing I can say that would make up for…"

"Do you know how long…" Lu Han’s dry lips pull as he speaks. Chapstick. He needs chapstick. He fumbles for it in the pocket of his black slacks and applies it with a shaking hand. "Do you know how long I’ve been afraid?"

"It’s—"

"I can’t go on roller coasters. I can’t even look out the window of high buildings without hearing the wind in my ears and remembering the pain and… how much I wanted to scream but couldn’t."

He looks up to meet the vice-captain’s eyes, and he’s looking at Lu Han in horror. Lu Han wants a cigarette, but he really doesn’t want it to become habit again, even if Zitao’s chain-smoking the entire trip has been testing him.

"I was jealous of you."

"What?"

"You were talented and you played as a starter as a first year. You were fast and everyone knew you were exceptional. That you were going places. I was the vice captain and the captain liked you best. And your best friend was the girl I…" He laughs. It is brittle. "So when the captain said you were… that you had…" He stops, and the wind in Lu Han’s ears is louder than ever. "It was easy, right? To get angry. To let that be your flaw. And I convinced myself that it was about that, instead of all the other stuff."

"I didn’t hit on him, you know." Lu Han gives in and pulls out a cigarette. He lights it with shaky hands. "He… made a move on me. I rejected him." He takes a drag.

The vice-captain’s face falls, then. Crumples into nothingness. Lu Han wants to feel some kind of satisfaction but he can’t, because they’re at his father’s funeral, and his fear has already cost him so much that this windfall doesn’t even put him close to breaking even in life. "I’m so…"

"I don’t forgive you," says Lu Han.

"I had figured, but I had to…"

"But maybe in a few years, I might." Lu Han takes a drag of the cigarette, and hands it over to the man. "In a few years, the memory will have faded more. In a few years, I might be less afraid of you."

"All right," the vice-captain says, and Lu Han walks away, back inside the funeral home, leaving the cigarette and the vice-captain outside in the mild spring air.

"Sleepy yet?" Zitao asks, and Lu Han smiles and shakes his head no.

"Not yet," he says, and redirects his eyes to his father, lying arms crossed in his white robe, frowning sternly even in death. "I think I’m going to make it."

"Good," Zitao says, and Lu Han looks over to where Li Yin is sitting beside his mother.

"Thank you," she mouths, and Lu Han smiles genuinely. At least he will get another type of closure.
The funeral passes much faster than the days preceding it, and soon enough Lu Han is driving his mother home in her car, Zitao in the backseat, walking her, and some flowers she’d chosen to keep, into the house where he grew up.

She takes a glass cistern out from the cabinet and sets it on the kitchen table, dropping the freshly cut blossoms into it, then taking a small cup of water and filling the base of it. "Will you be okay here?" Lu Han asks, and she doesn’t answer for an excruciatingly long minute.

"I’m going to sell it," his mother says. She pushes the flowers around in the vase. "The house. I can’t live here alone." They don’t look any different when she pulls her hands away. "So take anything of your father’s you still want, okay?"

Lu Han nods, and Zitao pushes him, with a firm hand between his shoulders, deeper into the house. Lu Han’s first instinct is to go into the safety of his room, which still looks like something fit for a seventeen-year-old boy. But his father’s office door is cracked, and Lu Han hasn’t been inside it in over ten years.

"Did your dad do a lot of work at home?"

"He did," Lu Han says, pushing the door open. He walks over to his father’s desk, where half finished business correspondence covers the surface. His father had always had firm, strong handwriting, but his characters look shaky on the yellow notepad. Lu Han feels a distant sort of sad.

He picks up his father’s favorite pen. It is a fountain pen he’d had for as long as Lu Han could remember, and there’s ink dried on the tip. He sets it down when he realizes his tight grip might break it.

Zitao rummages through the stacked boxes at the back of the office, lifting them with ease that would probably make his mother dismayed. She’d always complained about how heavy they all were.

"What’s this?" Zitao has his hands on the edges of a big black box that Lu Han has never seen before. His thumb brushes a label card. "It says ‘Han’."

Lu Han walks over from the desk to Zitao. Zitao moves out of the way, so Lu Han can kneel down in front of it. The box isn’t dusty like the other ones in the back of the office.

He lifts the lid.

"Wow," Zitao says, and Lu Han reaches into the box with quavering hands to pull out the Man U jersey on top. It’s the expensive one, Lu Han thinks vaguely, and when he flips it in his hands, he can see LU HAN in big blocky letters across the back. Underneath the jersey are magazines, newspaper clippings, print-outs. Pictures of Lu Han playing for PSV and for F.C. Seoul. All tucked away in a box at the back of his father’s office. "Looks like he couldn’t give up on you after all."

It’s probably the dust, but Lu Han is suffocating. "Why…"

"You can cry, if you want, frog-ge." Zitao fluffs his hair. "I cry all the time. Plus, I’ve already seen you at your most unattractive."

"Shut up, Zitao." Lu Han fingers the jersey, eyes still combing over the magazines in the box. His chest is tight. His eyes burn. "I’m not going to cry," he says, and he puts the cover back on the box. His father was… "I’m too manly to cry."

Zitao laughs at him, but not loudly, like he’s afraid he’ll disturb the somber atmosphere in the room, or like if he laughs at a high enough volume Lu Han will shatter like so much glass.
He sets the jersey down. He puts the lid back on the box, and then he finds it easier to breathe.

And in the aftermath of standing up and dusting off his knees, he thinks about Joonmyun, and missed opportunities. About vases and about the triumph of winning goals and the misery of staring down at a long match ahead and being one player short.

His father had been second string on his team, after all. Perhaps he had gotten some closure today.

In the taxi back to the hotel, Zitao is quiet. Lu Han is remembering a taxi ride back when he was in university. He looks down at his phone and thinks about making a call.

In the end, though, he slides his phone back in his pocket, and tries to forget a box full of evidence that his dad might have accepted him, even if he had never told him so.

"Thank you so much for coming," Lu Han tells Zitao, and Zitao offers him a crooked, kitty cat smile.

"We’re your family, too," Zitao says. "Don’t you forget it, ge."

 ربما الطريق النزيف هو أن لو هان، الذي كان دائمًا يحاول أن يكون شجاعًا، والذين هو دائماً أخذ القرار الصعب، في الواقع هو صارم.

"When did you become a person that gives up?"

Lu Han doesn’t know. But that isn’t who he wants to be. That isn’t what he wants.

Lu Han disembarks from the airplane with a new sense of purpose.

He’s torn his knee three times and he’s still running. He’s only broken his and Joonmyun’s hearts twice, and those are both still running, too. Lu Han hopes… Lu Han can recall slowing his pace as they jogged around the perimeter of the football field, Joonmyun puffing beside him with pink cheeks and soft smiles. They had run so well together.

He unpacks slowly, giving himself a chance to change his mind, but whatever amorphous, ludicrous idea had developed on the way home has only hardened into diamond now.

He calls Yixing.

"You need what?"

"Joonmyun’s address," Lu Han says. "I need to go visit him. Right now."

Yixing whistles. "Didn’t you just get back from China, like, four hours ago? Don’t you have work tomorrow?"

"Yes, and yes," Lu Han says. "But I still need Joonmyun’s address."

Yixing laughs. "About time," he says, and gives it to Lu Han without any more fuss.

Joonmyun’s apartment complex looks exactly how Lu Han would expect. It’s proper and prim and actually an officetel. There are men in suits walking in and out of the apartments, some with
cigarettes catching a last smoke before riding the subway to work, and others on their way out of the building for good, briefcases swinging and ties slightly crooked.

Joonmyun lives on the third floor, and Lu Han finds it easy enough. He has a placard on the front with his name in his own neat handwriting. He knocks.

He knocks again.

No one answers. "Maybe he has work," Lu Han says. "Maybe he can see out of the peephole that it’s you," his brain says back.

He walks back to the subway. His phone blinks. It’s Yixing. "He wasn’t there," Lu Han says. "Or maybe he was. He didn’t answer the door, either way."

"Are you giving up?" Yixing teases. "Already?"

"No," Lu Han says. "Never again."

It’s the first match since he’s been back from China. Yonsei versus Goryeo, of course. It’s early May, and the grass smells sweeter now in the warmer air.

He gives his players a pep talk, trying to channel his inner Coach Jung, and finally one of them pats him on the arm. "I think you’re more nervous than we are, Coach."

"I am," Lu Han says. "I am man enough to admit that."

They all laugh, and the tension in the air evaporates, leaving behind only excitement.

His friends are here for the game today. Jongin and Chanyeol, Jongdae, Baekhyun, Kyungsoo, Zitao, Minseok, Jinki, Yifan… Even Sehun had slithered out of his consulting firm office this morning at ass o’clock and changed out of his suit and tie for the game. Yixing and his baby are here too, decked to the nines in Goryeo gear. "I hope you don’t mind," Yixing says. "But the fact that you work for Yonsei is an abomination and I won’t teach my daughter to like such horrible team colors."

"Understood," Lu Han says gravely, and then giggles as the baby plucks a Yonsei flag out of Jongdae’s hands and starts chewing on it.

"Bad baby!" Yixing says, and Zitao giggles and steals her from his arms.

"Are you excited for the match?" The voice is familiar. Lu Han had eaten breakfast this morning, so he shouldn’t be hallucinating. He turns around slowly, and Joonmyun is standing there, in his gargantuan Goryeo Tigers sweatshirt, looking cold and scared and still so pretty in the early afternoon light.

"Very excited," Lu Han answers. His eyes peruse every millimeter of Joonmyun’s face, noting all the things that are different, and even more, the things that have stayed the same.

"I thought you didn’t know what you would do, if you weren’t playing professional football."
"I was wrong," says Lu Han. "It wouldn’t be the first time."

"You jocks," Joonmyun says. "Never thinking things all the way through."

"I thought this through." Lu Han adjusts his windbreaker as Joonmyun shivers. He would like to offer it to him, but he’s unsure if he should. "The whole coaching thing."

"Really?"

"None of my players," Lu Han says firmly, "will ever be afraid."

Joonmyun’s eyes go wide, in surprise and something else Lu Han can’t make out. "Is that your dream now?"

"One of them." Lu Han surveys his starting players warming up on the pitch. Out of the corner of his eye, he watches Joonmyun fidget.

"I was at my brother’s house," Joonmyun says.

"What?"

"When you came to visit. Yixing told me you came to visit."

"I did." Lu Han’s throat is oh-so-dry. "I wasn’t sure if you—"

"I go there sometimes and stay, for a few days. When I’m between patients. I have a very irregular schedule."

"All right," Lu Han says. "I should have called first. I wasn’t sure you would answer, though."

"I would have," Joonmyun says. He pauses. "Maybe this is stupid, but…"

"It probably isn’t," says Lu Han. "I’m the one who says all the stupid things."

"Right." Joonmyun looks up at Lu Han, and now Lu Han knows what that look is. It’s hope. "I’ve been… thinking."

"About what?"

"There are some new alumni classes down at Goryeo." The words come out in hurry, like he thinks he won’t get to say them all before Lu Han interrupts. Lu Han isn’t planning on interrupting. "They’ve got three levels of pottery." He pushes his hair out of his face, and his fingers linger at his sideburns, playing with them nervously. "I was planning on taking the beginner class, but I don’t…"

His tongue flicks out and moistens the corner of his mouth. It’s painfully cute. "I don’t want to go by myself, you see."

Lu Han doesn’t dare to let himself breathe. The thing about red cards, Lu Han knows, is that they don’t mean a player is out for the whole season. The thing about red cards is that, after you get one, getting back on the pitch is a whole new rush.

"So I was wondering if you would do me the favor of going with me? Only if you had the time, of course, and—"

"No," Lu Han says, and Joonmyun’s face falls, the lines of rejection on his face as easy to read as the direction of his first year players’ sloppy pass plays. Lu Han smiles and unzips his windbreaker, sliding it down his arms. He throws it over Joonmyun’s shoulders, and allows his hands to linger,
briefly, on the narrow slope of Joonmyun’s shoulders. He feels solid and real under Lu Han’s touch, even as Lu Han regretfully lets his arms fall. "I’m an expert in the making with this pottery stuff. I think we might need to sign up for intermediate, Joonmyun."

And the sadness clears from Joonmyun’s eyes and he shines and shines and Lu Han has never been more in love with Joonmyun than he is in this moment.

"Are you sure?" Joonmyun is not asking about the pottery class. Joonmyun is asking about forever, maybe, and Lu Han reaches out for his dream, seizing that final goal as overtime runs out.

"I’m ready," Lu Han says, and if it is possible, Joonmyun’s smile grows even wider.

"Good luck in the match," Joonmyun says, and Lu Han jogs out on the field to shake hands with the other coach before the start of play. Victory or defeat out here today, between these two teams, Lu Han has already won.

End of match

Chapter End Notes

oh my gosh thank you for reading ;~~;

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