

Our Gentle Sin - a novel by Tara Lemana

Chapter 1

Gwangju, January 2005

Winter colours the early January morning in shades of faded blue and pink, touching pale cheeks with delicate blush and dusting dark eyelashes until they glitter. The hush in the air bites as it's breathed in, sheathing lungs in the kind of sharp exhilaration only cold and shock can bring.

The city lies diminished, heavy under the crispness of frost, city sounds and human voices hanging brittle in the air, fragile as ice blooms on a windowpane. The scents of summer and autumn are gone now, their thick potency having thinned out gradually as days grew shorter, fading until everything smells like concrete and exhaust with an aftertaste of dirt curdling on the tongue.

On this, the day Hosu's life changes forever, he ducks his face deeper into the collar of his regulation school jacket, the emblem on the chest proud and stiff while doing very little to protect him from winter's teeth. His cheeks feel rosy and sting from the cold, and he's almost certain his ears are bright red where the wind slices at them. They hurt when he touches them with careful fingertips, and he silently curses at himself for refusing to wear the beanie his mother tried to hand him when he left home, putting vanity over comfort. He busies himself watching his feet as the rubber soles on his school shoes scuff indistinct marks in the frost, shivering in his school shorts and bare, thin legs.

The walk from the metro station to his college isn't far, twenty minutes if he dawdles, but the road is busy and loud. He fumbles with his mp3 player, pulling the headphones out of his bag with stiff, unyielding fingers, popping them on his head in an effort to warm his ears as much as to listen to music. Epik High's album *Map of the Human Soul* is his favourite right now, and he bobs along to the beat as he mouths the still somewhat unfamiliar English phrases sprinkled in among the Korean syllables his tongue wraps around so comfortably.

There's a steady, undulating stream of students from his college flowing around him, a chattering mass of monochromatic bodies making its way through the streets to their destination. Hosu keeps to himself within the chaos, content to listen to his music and think his own thoughts rather than look for company amidst the sea of navy blue.

Hosu doesn't mind college so much. He does okay, has a few friends, though none very close, and he doesn't make waves. He's liked by his teachers but isn't a teachers' pet, gets decent grades - though never as good as his parents would like - and generally just gets by alright.

What he does mind is the way he feels like his skin is a few sizes too small for him, the way his insides itch when his future is discussed around him like it's something entirely separate from him, something he doesn't have any stake in. He minds the way he doesn't quite *fit* anywhere without understanding *why*, the way his thoughts and his feelings don't seem to slot neatly into the pre-packaged identities stacked up around him like discounted wares at a superstore. He minds that he feels a little too alien, a little too strange and crooked to be quite *right*.

He minds that a great deal.

He shrugs his shoulders tight as the throng squeezes around him, jostling him through the school gates and onto the grounds, spreading out to fan across the wide stairs. Hosu trudges up them, eyes

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firmly downward, mind on his music and on minimising the amount of space he takes up in the world.

The shoes that suddenly appear in front of him are not regulation. They're Converse, red, with sharpie writing all over them, seemingly random English words that Hosu can't quite place. He stops and stares at them dumbly, trying to process why they'd be there, in a sea of black leather lace-ups, this one random pair of bright red Converse.

"Hey, kid."

The voice is deep and gentle, husky with smoke, and it crawls into Hosu's lungs to make them itch. He coughs as he looks up.

There's a whole person attached to the Converse, a person with sharp eyes and pale, freckled skin, with messy, bleached blonde hair and all-black clothes above those red Converse that *definitely* aren't regulation. Hosu's brain gets stuck on that, *not regulation*, and he blinks, wide-eyed and hooked. The pale, freckled face smiles, lopsided, smoke curling out from between pink lips, the butt of a cigarette loosely held between two long, knobby fingers as he sits, perched two steps above the one Hosu is standing on.

"I know. Just moved here, no uniform yet."

It takes Hosu a second to realise he must have spoken aloud, and it unnerves him. Words are not his friends, and the thought they might be ganging up on him, slipping out between his teeth without his permission, is nerve wracking. He clears his throat, fingers twitching in the pockets of his - regulation - jacket.

"Oh. Um. Welcome?"

The boy in front of him blinks, slow, and smiles, slower. It's wider this time, delighted, gums peeking out above his small teeth, and there's a little flutter at the back of Hosu's throat at the sight of it.

"Thanks."

He drops the butt of his cigarette, grinding it into the concrete with the heel of his shoe. Hosu doesn't like the smell of cigarettes, never has, but there's a certain appeal about the danger of them, the recklessness imbued to a person who willingly inhales the smoke and paints the inside of their lungs with it. He watches the butt be ground into loose bits that flutter in the breeze when the boy lifts his red Converse, his eyes caught on the addictive ordinariness of the gesture.

"Hey, kid."

Converse Boy ducks his head into Hosu's line of sight, and he feels a blush spread up to his cheeks. New people make him nervous, make him overly aware of all the ways he doesn't fit, but this boy with his clothes that shout rebellion so loudly in their shades of red and black, this boy with his cigarettes and his deep voice, this boy doesn't feel like he fits either, and so maybe he won't mind that Hosu doesn't. He breathes deeply, filling his lungs with bravery, and smiles, and Converse Boy smiles back.

"What's your name?"

"Um, it's, um, Hosu?"

"Is that a question?"

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Pink deepens on Hosu's cheeks.

"N-no, it is, it's Hosu. Kim Hosu, '90."

"Well, Kim Hosu, it's nice to meet you, I'm Im Duri, '89. You can call me hyung, since we're friends now."

"I – we are?"

"Aren't we?"

And well, Hosu isn't going to argue. After all, when you don't fit, finding people who want to call you friend is a rare occurrence, something beautiful and fragile, something you hold onto for as long as you can, with careful hands and a jittery heart.

He nods shakily and smiles again, mouth full of words that don't quite say what he wants to say.

"Well then, Hosu-ah. How about you show me to the school office?" Duri says as he rises and brushes dust off his jeans.

As Hosu walks beside Duri, heart racing in his chest and tongue tripping over syllables, he can't help but feel like in the space of a breath his whole world has changed.

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Duri slots into Hosu's life like he's always been there, like he *wants to* be there.

He's patient and warm, quiet and determined to break down Hosu's tentative, uncertain silence with gentle, probing questions, until Hosu's nerves settle and his words become looser, less brittle. He seems hellbent on teasing answers out of Hosu, on *learning* Hosu like you learn a song or a dance that captures you.

And Hosu is captured. It's new, this sense of being seen, of fitting with another person.

They sit together during lunchtimes, Duri quietly putting parts of his lunch onto Hosu's plate while mumbling something about skinny legs, and they talk about everything and anything.

They walk together after school, Duri waiting for Hosu outside his classroom and falling in beside him to walk out the school gates and down to the metro station. They catch the same subway and get off at the same stop; it's two weeks before Hosu learns that Duri's stop is three stops earlier and he walks all the way back after seeing Hosu home. It's information he doesn't quite know what to do with, something that sits under his heart in the rapidly growing box titled Reasons Im Duri Is My Best Friend.

While they walk, they talk.

Words become easier for Hosu when they're heard by Duri. There's something in the way Duri listens that makes Hosu feel safe, makes him feel like no matter how he phrases his thoughts, Duri will distill the real meaning behind the syllables.

The air between them feels soft and warm, always, no matter the weather, like their friendship cocoons them and protects them from the world around them as they learn each other.

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Hosu learns that Duri is new because he's *always* new. His family move frequently for his dad's work, and so Duri has adapted to never putting roots down anywhere, never tying his threads to anyone else's.

Duri learns that Hosu likes to dance but doesn't think he's very good at it, and that his father won't allow him to take lessons because *dancing is for sissies*.

Hosu learns that Duri is the kind of person to whom dancing is for anyone who likes it, who likes Epik High as much as Hosu does, and to whom gentleness has no gender. He's also the kind of person who's learned to hide all of those things behind a scowl and an almost exclusively black wardrobe, because it stops him from fitting in too easily and *moving all the time is easier when you don't have too many attachments to the places you leave behind*.

Duri learns that behind Hosu's small, shy exterior hides pure sunshine, a brightness he can't unsee once it bursts out through Hosu's smile, all straight teeth and sparkly eyes. He also learns he'll do anything to keep pulling more and more of that brightness out of Hosu, every chance he gets.

Hosu learns that Duri is quiet, but his thoughts are loud, fierce opinions seemingly at odds with his gentle actions.

Duri learns he likes having a person in his orbit to belong to, a person to care for, to protect, someone whose loneliness matches Duri's and dilutes it until it washes away.

Hosu learns that there is a space inside him that fills up when he's with Duri, when he's *seen* and *heard*.

Duri learns that there are some people worth tying his threads to.

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Days tick by into weeks. Duri's red Converse and ripped jeans are replaced by the standard navy-blue uniform, a valiant effort to squash him into the mold, but to Hosu, the ways he doesn't fit are still louder, more beautiful.

His own oddness, the way he's always a little out of step with everyone else, begins to rankle less as he sees the ways he fits with Duri. He learns he no longer has to cull his words, make them less *weird* or space them out to avoid that glassy look in others' eyes; Duri will absorb them all and ask for more.

Duri celebrates the resonance of Hosu's oddities - his enthusiasm for things others find strange, his liking for pink and dance and sparkly things, the gentleness of his hands and the way his loud laughter overwhelms his entire body until he collapses, bones dissolving in a puddle of joy.

Duri lets Hosu see behind the emo punk mask he uses to push away potential connections before they happen, lets him in on the Duri he keeps secret. That Duri is complex, a tapestry that somehow has twice his years woven into it. That Duri does silly dances when he's excited, writes feisty lyrics and raps but won't let anyone hear him, and knows exactly when to dispense advice and when to change the topic to give Hosu a reprieve. That Duri doesn't care about norms and standards, he asks Hosu what's in his heart and insists he follow that.

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Their afternoon walks stretch out, longer and fuller each day. What started out as just a pleasant way to spend the travel time to get home soon turns into an event, something they look forward to and find ways to prolong with eager hearts and starry eyes.

Soon, they are catching later trains, stopping to buy snacks and drinks on the way to the station and sitting on a bench in the nearby park to share them, shy at first, then bolder as each gesture is met in kind. When they get off at Hosu's stop, they meander, slower and slower, shoes scuffing side by side on cracked pavement, symmetry in both their oddness and their sameness. They find themselves sitting under a tree a block from Hosu's house, words spilling, rushing, on and on in a desperate hunger to *learn*, to *share*, to *connect*. It's only when the afternoon light dims into twilight, subtle stains of lilac and navy shading their cheekbones, that they finally part, reluctance slowing their feet, only the thought of Hosu's *eomma* worrying putting any impetus behind their movements.

It becomes their everyday routine, and after initial questions, their families soon adjust around them, relieved both their sons have found friends to spend time with after school, dulling the need for *concern*, the need to fret about their respective boys' inability to *fit*.

Conversation comes easily, now. All the barriers that exist with others fall away with them, shyness and self-doubt melting in the warmth of mutual acceptance.

When Duri finds out it's Hosu's fifteenth birthday on the Friday three weeks after they first meet, he tells Hosu to meet him outside at six am on the Saturday, and to tell his parents he won't be home until after dinner. It's still dark out, the world slumbering passively around them, and Hosu grumbles at the early start and at Duri's adamant refusal to tell him where they're going. But his grumbles mask a quiet exhilaration at his friend planning something just for him, at the knowledge that he matters enough to Duri for him to want to make an effort for his birthday, and Duri ignores them with a soft, knowing smile.

They walk side by side to the station, Duri wearing those same scuffed red Converse and his black ripped jeans. Hosu casts sideways glances as they walk, emboldened by the darkness around them to look freely, enthralled by the way Duri takes up space in the world without being loud and obvious. Duri is a quiet, calming presence beside him that radiates confidence and strength until Hosu feels it singing in his bones, buoying him with its presence.

The train trip is long, over ninety minutes, and they both doze off at different points. Hosu is awake when the sun starts to peek over the horizon, and he reaches over to shake Duri awake too, wanting to share this moment, to see gold gather on Duri's lashes as he watches the world wake up. They sit in silence as the first rays slip through distant trees and watch gilded pinks pooling on the world's edges, sitting close on the vinyl seats, the other's warmth a balm against the early morning chill.

Duri watches Hosu's profile as he stares out the train window, body limp and heavy with fatigue, soft black hair a little too long at the front, wayward bangs tickling his lashes as he leans his forehead on the glass. The rising sun outlines the slope of his nose and lips in the same soft gold that's setting the world outside afire, emphasising the way he pouts when his face is relaxed like this.

It's unbearably cute, and there's a warmth spreading under Duri's breastbone at the sight, soft and buttery.

He has to look away.

When they reach Suseo station, Duri stands and pulls Hosu to his feet.

"Come on, this is our stop."

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His long fingers wrap around Hosu's hand, warm and dry, and he holds on tight as he pulls him through the early morning crowd, weaving through tired, disinterested bodies for a short distance and onto a waiting bus. He doesn't let go until they drop into seats side by side near the back of the bus, and Hosu doesn't know what to make of the way his heart races or the flash of disappointment when Duri's fingers slip away.

His palm is clammy now, and he wipes it surreptitiously on his jeans, fighting the urge to reach out and reclaim Duri's hand again, to wrap possessive fingers around the broad palm and guard it jealously. He breathes through the urge, pushing down the flare of anxiety at the thought that *that would be weird*, the conviction that *boys don't hold hands* whispering in his mind with the voice of his father. It reminds him in clipped syllables that Duri only grabbed his hand to move him along, to not lose him in the crowd, that it meant nothing, because of course it doesn't.

The voice that sounds like Hosu's father ruthlessly insists that Hosu certainly doesn't *want* it to mean anything either, and he swallows around the tight lump suddenly lodged in his throat.

He interlinks his fingers, holding onto his own hand to offset the odd sense of loss creeping in under his skin.

It's a short bus ride, followed by another, even shorter one, and then they're standing in front of Namhansanseong Fortress, imposing and beautiful in the early morning light. Duri looks over at Hosu, his gummy smile bright and joyful.

Hosu gapes.

"Namhansanseong?"

Duri nods, sharp eyes softening in the corners as his smile smudges all his edges.

"Yeah. Surprised?"

"Definitely! What – why?"

Duri shrugs, nonchalance trying and failing to mask his excitement.

"I've always wanted to go visit. I've seen photos. The walks are really beautiful, and we can have a picnic. And I bet you've never been?"

Hosu shakes his head, wide-eyed and breathless.

"I haven't – wait, did you say picnic?"

Duri's smile stretches wider, and he ducks his head a little. Bashful pinks stain Duri's cheeks and a giddy realisation that *Duri is shy* bubbles up at the back of Hosu's skull.

"Yeah. I mean, we'll be here all day, and we need to eat, right?"

Hosu feels warm all over at the thought that Duri planned this all out for him, *for them*, that he chose something he'd always wanted to do and then chose to share it with Hosu, to *gift it* to Hosu for his birthday.

A whole day just for them.

He swallows around the lump in his throat and pushes words out past it.

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“Thanks, hyung.”

Duri shrugs, avoiding eye contact, but Hosu can see the smile still curling the corners of his mouth.

“Come on, Hobah, hyung didn’t bring you here to stand around all day!”

And with that, he leads Hosu into the gates.

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Namhansanseong is breathtaking.

The meandering walks, the ivy crawling over rough stone walls, the ancient, cramped tunnels barely wide enough for one person to walk through, let alone two, the sprawling forest, the endless views. It’s all so much to take in, and Hosu feels a little overwhelmed with it all, a little overawed and hushed. They walk the ancient walls and sit in the shade of trees, talking and listening, the air between them filling up with learning, with connection and history as they share stories and fill up spaces.

When they get hungry, Duri opens his backpack and shyly pulls out containers of food for them to share, an offering that makes Hosu’s throat contract and leaves his eyes a little wet. There are containers of bulgogi, kimchi, plain rice and rice balls, gimbap, as well as cut up fruit and juice bottles, a feast of colours and flavours. There’s even a container with pieces of chocolate cake, because *it’s your birthday, Hobah, you have to have cake!*

Hosu stares openly, mouth watering.

“Where did you get all this?”

Duri shrugs again, busying himself with shaking out a blanket for them on the grass and arranging all the containers on top in a dizzying array. Hosu feels a flutter under his sternum at all this unexpected shyness staining Duri’s cheeks in such pretty hues of pink.

“Eomma helped me. I told her it was my friend’s birthday and I wanted to surprise him. She loves surprises.”

Duri’s eyes are soft as he talks about his eomma, and Hosu finds himself wondering if they’re alike, if Duri got those sharp cat eyes from her, if she bears the same button nose and gummy smile, if she’s both fierce and gentle like him.

They drop down on the blanket and Duri opens each of the food containers, holding one out to Hosu to help himself. He hums his thanks as he picks out a gimbap roll, pausing with it in midair.

“What’s she like? Your eomma?”

“Eomma? She’s....she’s smart. Really smart. She was a teacher, before she had Seongjae-hyung. She’s quiet, but she has this way of making you want to do anything for her, just by being her, you know? I’ve never quite understood how she does it, but she has all three of us just wrapped around her little finger.”

Hosu hums in understanding, his mouth full of gimbap. His own mother is like that, quiet and yet somehow powerful in her own subtle way.

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“Do you look like her?” he asks when his mouth is empty, licking the flavour off his fingertips.

Duri nods.

“Yeah. I have my dad’s eyes though.”

“What’s he like?”

Duri chews his rice ball, considering.

“He’s – he’s a dad. Tells stupid jokes. Always working. Pretty strict. He’s good to us though.”

Duri looks up, catching Hosu’s eye, and nudges Hosu’s knee with his foot, red Converse bright against the sky-blue picnic blanket.

“What about your parents? What are they like?”

A bitter taste seeps in at the back of Hosu’s throat. He deflects, talks about the pretty part of his family, the sweetness mixed in with the sour.

“Eomma is – she’s a lot like your eomma, I think. They sound alike. She’s very pretty. Very smart, very kind. And she’s the boss, even though appa doesn’t know it.”

Duri chuckles at that, nodding his understanding, then tilts his head, watching Hosu.

“What’s he like?”

Hosu studies his hands. Shrugs his shoulders, rolling them up tight.

“He’s...I don’t think he likes me very much.”

Duri stops chewing and stares. Hosu’s body is curled in on itself, the way he does when he’s uncomfortable. The hurt that seeps out into the air between them from Hosu’s hunched form screams loudly with his efforts to quell it, to dampen it into respectful silence, into invisibility. Something to explore later, perhaps. Not now. Not today, on Hosu’s birthday, a day that should be filled with happy memories, filled with just the two of them, with laughter and joy.

He sniffs and hums, breaks eye contact, picking up the container of rice balls and offering it to Hosu, who accepts it gratefully.

“Anyone who doesn’t like you is an idiot. Fact. Now have some rice balls and let me tell you about the time Seongjae-hyung split his pants in front of the entire school.”

Warmth floods Hosu at Duri’s kindness, his crude but wonderful segway into something less raw, the way he sensed Hosu’s discomfort without needing to be told.

It works. Duri neatly diverts the conversation onto Seongjae and from there, it meanders along comfortable topics like friends and happy memories.

It feels good, sitting here with a person who thinks he’s worth their time, who doesn’t mind him rambling on about the things that captivate him, someone who thinks he’s special enough to dedicate a whole day and all this effort to.

It makes Hosu feel like blooming.

He remembers that first day they met, on the steps out in front of school, Duri in his red Converse, so cool and intriguing and *different*. He still doesn’t quite understand how they came to be friends,

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how offbeat loner Duri chose friendless weirdo Hosu out of a sea of bodies stifled with *regulation* navy blue and made him his person, his constant companion. Duri said it himself, he *chooses* never to make friends, chooses not to allow himself to put down roots anywhere because he'll just move again, lose them again, and it hurts to have your roots ripped out.

So why did he choose Hosu? Why make a connection with him, put down roots, allow them to take hold?

Why now?

Why him?

"Hyung?"

"Hmmm?" Duri hums, busily poking in the various containers arranged around him like a banquet.

"You remember that first day? The day we met?"

A quick look up, a nod, a sauce-smudged smile.

"Of course, Hobah. I'll never forget that day."

"Why, hyung? Why did you – choose me? To be your friend, I mean?"

Duri stares.

Why did he? He isn't sure, there was just *something* about Hosu that drew him in. Something about the way he carried himself, the way he seemed like he was trying to be invisible, to fade into the background. Duri recognised that desire, that feeling of wanting to disappear, and it hurt to see it written all over this beautiful, bright creature trudging up the stairs towards him.

And that was it, wasn't it? Hosu was bright, he *shone*. He shone so bright, he eclipsed everything around him, blinded Duri until there was nothing else he could see.

Duri sniffs, cuts his eyes away from Hosu, away, away to the trees and the sky and the birds, anywhere but at Hosu's dark, expectant eyes.

"Because you shine, Hobah."

Hosu isn't sure what he expected Duri to say, but that wasn't it.

"I – I shine?"

"Yeah, you do. Brightest thing I ever saw."

It's said to the air, the trees, the blanket, anything that will hold the secret and pretend with them it wasn't spoken aloud, and Hosu feels like he's intruding, like he wasn't meant to hear.

"Oh."

Duri sniffs again, busies himself choosing the perfect gimbap roll for his next bite. Watching his long fingers pick a piece out of the container makes Hosu realise he hasn't seen those fingers with a cigarette clamped between them since that first day.

"Hyung?"

The word hangs in the air, thin and delicate, too delicate.

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Duri's answering *hmmm* matches it.

"Did you stop smoking?"

A quick look, a sniff, a nod, eyes darting away again, skittish.

"Mm. Yeah."

"Why?"

A shrug, nonchalant seeming, but Hosu can see tension in Duri's shoulders.

"You don't like it."

"I....you quit for me?"

Duri shrugs again.

"Just don't want you to have to smell it if you don't like it. I'm around you a lot."

"Oh."

It's a lot to process. Hosu doesn't like the thought of Duri giving up something he likes just for him, but the fact that he did also makes him feel giddy and twitchy.

"You – you didn't have to do that, hyung."

"I know. Wanted to. It's no big."

Hosu looks away then, looks down, traces the blue threads in the woolen blanket they're sitting on with the tip of his finger.

"It is. You didn't have to, but thank you. I like knowing you won't be doing that anymore. It's bad for you."

The moment is too heavy, too loaded, too much, so Duri huffs out a chuckle.

"Yeah, Hobah, it is. Thanks for forcing me to give it up."

It works, Hosu's eyes growing big and round, eyebrows shooting up.

"Hyung! I did no such thing!"

He swats at Duri's thigh and Duri laughs, warmth prickling his skin, relieved to be back in safer, more lighthearted conversational waters. He swats back, half-hearted and without malice.

"Yah! No hitting your hyung! Respect your elders!"

The tension diffuses with the laughter, ebbing out into the ground below them, sinking into the soil and leaving them light and free.

The day is flying by, lunchtime is over, and soon they start packing away the food and the blanket into Duri's backpack. Hosu hoists the backpack onto his own shoulders under Duri's protests, insisting on taking a shift carrying their things.

The afternoon passes in a blur of laughter and conversation. They walk quiet paths, only seeing a handful of tourists despite it being a Saturday. They stop and breathe in wide vistas, taking pictures

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on the small disposable camera Duri brought along, posing for a few photos when a helpful tourist offers to take some snaps of them together, arms around each other's shoulders, matching wide grins and soft, sparkly eyes.

The day dwindles far too quickly, time siphoning away, measured in footsteps and quiet, gentle syllables. Another picnic, another repose, twilight pushing in around the edges of their bubble until their feet begin the trek back towards the bus stop by silent agreement.

Hosu's face hurts from smiling and his feet ache from walking, but his heart is full, full and fluttery, butterflies lodged in his throat and stomach, filling his insides with ripples of air. He feels buoyed, floaty, filled to the brim with joy and possibility, with the secure knowledge that he is important to someone, someone who is important to him.

They sit together on the back seat, side by side on the ripped vinyl, the stale bus air mixing in with the fresh, cold Namhansanseong air still caught in the corners of their lungs, edging it out little by little. Hosu leans back and closes his eyes, tired and fulfilled from the long day. When he feels Duri's pinky brush up against his hand, it feels grounding, soft, warm, the loss of it cold when it moves away again.

Too soon, the long trip home is over and Duri is walking Hosu home through the dark streets of Gwangju. It's cold under the stars, and their breaths hang in puffy clouds between them, like small pockets of magic made real. Hosu wishes he could reach out and grab one, hold it in his hand and keep it as a memento of the perfect day.

A sudden burst of courage makes him reach out and take Duri's hand instead, holding the palm between his thumb and forefinger and giving it a little shake to get Duri to look him in the eye. Duri's cheeks are stained with gold from the streetlamps and pinkish from the cold, his eyelashes long and dark as he blinks in the evening air, and it's the most beautiful thing Hosu's seen all day.

He takes a deep breath, sucks in courage until it fills his lungs in cold puffs.

"Thank you, hyung, for today. It was amazing, you're the best."

It's not a particularly elegant way of wording how he feels, but Duri's eyes light up as he smiles, and Hosu thinks he hears him the same way he always does, distilling his meaning until it's loud and crystal clear in the spaces between them.

"You're welcome, Hobah. Hyung's happy you liked it."

The rest of the walk home is quiet, both of them wrapped in their own thoughts, soft tendrils of tentative excitement curling around them.

There's a gentle warmth buzzing under Duri's skin, and a matching blush on Hosu's cheeks by the light of the streetlamps.

It takes Hosu a long time to fall asleep that night, head full of moments and a smile that just won't stop painting itself onto his features as he lies in the dark.

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The weeks pass like water eddying over stones, smoothing over life's bumps and edges. Winter slips gently into spring as Hosu's sixteenth year unfurls in front of him.

Duri is meshed into every facet of his life. Their one-year age gap means they don't share classes, but every free moment in between sees them gravitating towards each other, caught in each other's orbit.

For Duri's sixteenth birthday in March, Hosu drags him along to play arcade games after school, letting Duri win until he catches on and threatens to kick Hosu's ass if he doesn't stop making him feel old by humouring him. Hosu laughs and gives in, promptly winning the next four games until Duri drags him along to the basketball game and thrashes him in back-to-back games.

Hosu stares at him in mock outrage.

"How did you do that, hyung? Did you just *hustle me*?"

Duri's grin is wide and gummy, his shrug self-deprecating, and the fluttering under Hosu's breastbone is back again.

"I used to play. Haven't for a while, what with moving all the time."

"Huh. So I guess I should be thankful you haven't kept it up or it really would have been a hiding?"

Duri raises an eyebrow.

"Oh, I think it was."

"Yah! Hyung! It wasn't, I scored some baskets too!"

Duri giggles, and Hosu pushes him, and Duri returns the favour, and they surge out of the arcade in a giddy wave of soft braggadocio and soulful laughter, hands and eyes and hearts caught in each other's tide.

The evening air is mild, slightly chilly but the scent of spring is wound heavily through it, green and lush despite the metallic concrete tang of the city permeating everything.

They wander down to the river, finding an empty bench to sit and look over the water and the different coloured lights winking off its surface. It's pretty, ethereal, and the beauty of the evening drifts onto Hosu's skin like a gentle touch, comforting and familiar.

The banter between them peters out as the lights catch them both, and they settle into an easy quiet.

But the ease fades as Hosu remembers the thing he still has to do, the gift he has for Duri that might be just a little much, a little too personal, and nerves bubble up in his belly, low and unwelcome. His leg begins to bounce nervously, and Duri looks over and presses a hand down on his knee, warm and unsettling.

"Hobah."

Hosu bites his lip and forces his leg to still, the nervous energy, deprived of an outlet, sinking into his stomach instead, making his insides roil. Duri is still watching him, concern etched on his face.

"Hey. You okay?"

Our Gentle Sin - a novel by Tara Lemana

Hosu nods, a quick bounce of the head that betrays his nerves, and a smile tugs at the corner of Duri's mouth.

"Come on, you can tell hyung. What's the matter?"

Hosu stills. He is nervous, on edge, but he really does want to give Duri his gift that he worked so hard on, so he breathes deeply, and lets the spring air fill him up with *brave* and *full* and *green*. His backpack is on the concrete between his feet, and he reaches down, feeling around in the dark recesses between his hoodie and his schoolbooks for the small shape he's been hiding in there all day.

"It's, nothing, it's just, I'm, I've got, um..."

He babbles, words like loose stitches tumbling out between skittish lips, fingers raking among shadows to find an anchor. When his hand closes on the flat, square shape, his heart skips, nervous fluttering in the back of his throat like agitated moths.

Duri is watching him, calm and patient, and Hosu can't look him in the eye, so he watches Duri's hands instead, at rest on the bare skin peeking out through the rips in his jeans.

"I made you something."

He pushes the words out like an offering and holds the square out to Duri with both hands.

Duri stares at it, hesitant, uncertain, before reaching out and grabbing the CD case from Hosu. The insert is plain with only *for hyung* written on it in Hosu's neat, steady hand.

"For me? You made this?"

He turns the case over in his hands, fingers running along the smooth plastic.

"Hobah, is this....what is it?"

"It's – it's a mix tape, hyung. All our favourite songs. I'm sorry it's not, you know, it's not more, or fancy, or like, new, I just, just wanted to..."

A mix tape of all their favourite songs, painstakingly put together by Hosu. It's so lovely, so thoughtful, so very special and so much more than Duri expected, so much more than anyone has ever done for him.

Duri feels completely overwhelmed, rudderless, and his body is moving before he knows it.

Hosu breaks off as Duri suddenly hugs him, wiry body tense and warm, wrapped around him in a gesture that's so unlike the Duri he knows, it takes Hosu precious seconds to respond and lean into the hug, to slip his arms around Duri's back.

"Thank you, Hobah, it's perfect."

The words are soft, cracked, breathed out over Hosu's shoulder to the air behind him, but their warmth filters in through his clothes, sinks into his skin, and heats his bones.

The hug doesn't last long, and it's awkward, but Hosu soaks up the contact. When Duri pulls back, his eyes are shiny and his smile wide, cheeks and neck stained pink.

"Sorry," he mumbles, embarrassment blooming on his skin.

Hosu smiles and shakes his head, ears burning.

Our Gentle Sin - a novel by Tara Lemana

“Don’t be, I’m glad you like it, hyung, I wasn’t sure...”

“I love it, I really do.”

The warmth that’s been blossoming in Hosu’s rib cage for weeks now flares a little brighter at Duri’s reaction.

The train home is mostly empty, the commuter rush having come through several hours ago, a single-minded stampede with its mind set on *home*.

They sit side by side on the narrow vinyl seats, the train’s soothing rhythm jostling them steadily until Hosu nods off to sleep, his head slipping onto Duri’s shoulder, tentative like a confession. Duri resists the urge to lean his head on Hosu’s crown and settles for just leaning back and keeping still, breath eking out in long, slow tides, quietly hoping that Hosu will stay asleep.

The feeling of Hosu’s slight body leaning heavily against his side stirs a heady mix of emotions in Duri, a wild, crimson swirl low in his belly. Hosu makes him feel both protective and protected, both safe and completely out on a thin, fragile limb.

Since he was ten years old and learned how much it hurt to leave friends he actually cared about behind, he’s avoided this. He’s steered clear of real connections, of making friends, avoided entanglements, hellbent on not tying his threads to anyone else’s, to avoid the hurt of having them torn apart. He’s done well at it, perfecting the art of coming and going without creating ripples, being invisible, forgettable.

It’s saved him a lot of pain.

Until Hosu. Hosu, who waltzed right on in as if Duri’s defenses didn’t even exist, who swept Duri along with his *brightness*, all that pent up joy and love just waiting to be let out, to be broken free by someone, anyone able to see it.

And Duri saw it. Oh, he saw it, from that very first second, it smacked him in the head and he couldn’t look away, had no choice but to allow it to burrow under his skin and latch onto his bones, soaking into his flesh, staining every one of his cells with *Hosu*.

So now he’s here, with this boy beside him who reached in and wrote his name on Duri’s marrow, this boy with his blinding smile and his shy heart, and Duri is slipping, all his defenses failing, all his carefully constructed walls crumbling in front of Hosu’s gentle *hyung*. Duri feels powerless, caught in a riptide, no chance of avoiding the hurt coming his way when he inevitably has to leave, and scared of Hosu getting hurt in the process.

Hosu, who let Duri in, who has started to slowly peel back his layers and let Duri see inside to the tender, bruised parts of himself he normally keeps hidden.

Hosu, with his wide, trusting eyes and his heart-shaped smile.

Hosu, gentle, shy Hosu, with his deep wells of heartache Duri can sense but doesn’t know the truth of, yet, and his unfathomably bright spirit.

Duri sighs and leans his cheek on Hosu’s hair, smooth and cool like black silk against his skin, soothing like water on a burn.

Our Gentle Sin - a novel by Tara Lemana

Hosu stirs in his sleep, turning his face into the crook of Duri's neck, and a shiver runs down Duri's spine as the younger boy's breath ghosts across his skin, a gossamer touch under the train's too-bright lighting.

"I'm sorry, Hobah," Duri whispers to the empty air.

"Hyung's so sorry."

When Hosu wakes ten minutes later, Duri is asleep against him, his long fingers wrapped firmly around Hosu's hand, warm and reassuring, steady.

Hosu stares at their interlinked fingers for long minutes, confusion and warmth warring for space in his chest, all his air pushed out of reach. When he feels Duri stir above him he closes his eyes, false slumber on his lashes when he feels Duri lift his head.

As Duri carefully disentangles their fingers, it's all Hosu can do not to grab on and stop him.

*

The days of spring trickle by, each one softer and greener than the one before.

Traces of Duri are all over Hosu's life. Duri's hoodie on the back of his desk chair, borrowed on a cold afternoon and never returned. Duri's number in his Nokia. A photo of the two of them at Namhansanseong, arms around each other's shoulders and twin happy smiles on their faces, pinned to Hosu's cork board over his desk. Songs Duri recommended on his MP3 player. The Pikachu stuffie Duri won at the arcade and shyly presented to Hosu under the guise of not wanting it, nestled among the pillows on his bed.

And of course, Duri himself, woven into the fabric of his days. Their routines, walking home together, going to the arcade together, picnics in the park. Saturday outings become their *thing*, with them taking turns trying to surprise the other with the most unexpected day out. Neither has much money, so other than Duri's extravagant Namhansanseong surprise, they keep it relatively low-key, but it's always fun, the days always ending with cheeks and bellies that ache from laughing too much.

As the end of the school year nears and exams loom and free time becomes a scarce resource, the natural progression is to study together, bent over their books at a small library table, knees knocking together under the tabletop.

After a week of this, the growing expense of snacks and drinks bought to fuel their study sessions prompts the need for a change of venue, and with it, a new step in their friendship, as Duri shyly suggests they move their study sessions to his bedroom at home. Hosu, wide-eyed at the invitation, stammers a hurried *that sounds good, hyung*, feeling overwhelmed and privileged.

Duri's room is small and cosy, an attic space with slanted ceilings and a dormer window above his tiny desk. They crowd onto the single bed, bodies curled over their books in their laps, a tray of snacks courtesy of Duri's mother perched on the desk. It's an uncomfortable and awkward position, and Hosu's back starts to hurt after only half an hour. He arches backwards, trying to hollow his back on the small, soft surface in an effort to unkink his spine. He twists and groans, frustrated with the ache between his shoulder blades.

Our Gentle Sin - a novel by Tara Lemana

Duri clacks his tongue, dropping his pen on his book.

“Yah, Hobah! Stop fidgeting, what’s wrong with you?”

Hosu arches backwards, looking up at the stars on Duri’s sloped ceiling.

“Sorry hyung, ‘s just sore.”

Duri sighs and puts his book aside, turning towards Hosu and holding out his hands.

“Come here, let hyung help.”

Hosu stares.

“Help how? What?”

Duri rolls his eyes, clacking his tongue in frustration and making *come on* motions with his hands.

“Just turn around, Hobah, let hyung rub your back.”

And that’s – new, and strange, but Duri looks all business, so determined, so Hosu figures it must be okay, this is okay, and he turns, swallowing the wave of giddiness that surges up as he shuffles around to put his back in Duri’s reach.

Duri gets to work, quietly digging his thumbs into the dents on either side of Hosu’s spine and massaging along the knobs of muscle he finds, and it feels good, a little painful at times, but relaxing too. The tension eases out of Hosu’s body and he finds himself leaning into Duri’s hands, eyes drifting shut.

As Duri works, Hosu lets his thoughts drift aimlessly. He can’t believe the school year is nearly over, that summer is just around the corner. What will happen over the summer holidays? Will Duri still want to get together? Will they see each other the way they have been? Will they drift apart?

The thought ignites a hot spark of anxiety in the back of his throat, and he swallows it down, afraid to think of the hurt it would cause him if that happened, determined not to let it happen.

He pushes the thought away, consciously shifting gear, thinking of his upcoming junior exams and the week following exams, when students get to relax and celebrate, culminating in the school dance. The thought of the dance has always made him anxious, it’s not really his sort of thing, but he wouldn’t mind going if he had a friend to hang out with. He wonders if Duri is going, then realises that even if he is, he’ll likely bring a date and have no time for Hosu.

The thought sends something barbed and sour in his chest, and he coughs.

“Hobah? You okay?”

Hosu nods.

“Just – just thinking. It’ll be course week soon.”

Duri chuckles.

“Need to get through exams first, Hobah. Time enough to think about fun after those are done.”

Hosu nods shakily, thoughts stuck on the dance, on the thought of Duri at the dance, clinging to a pretty girl in a short dress.

“I – I know, hyung, I just. I was thinking about the dance. It’s at the end of course week.”

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Duri hums behind him, hands still moving across Hosu's back, digging into tender spots, and Hosu winces.

"Yeah, I know. You going?"

"I – I dunno, hyung. It's not usually my sort of thing, you know? But maybe."

Duri hums again, the sound distracted as he focuses on the knots in Hosu's shoulders. Hosu lets his head drop forward, chin to his chest, willing himself to relax.

"What – what about you, hyung? Are you going?"

"Hm. I dunno. I might. Could be fun."

"Y-yeah, it could. You could – you know, maybe take a girl? Like a date?"

Hosu's heart is hammering in his rib cage, and when Duri's hands still on his shoulders, he's sure it's because he can feel it. When they start up again, the movements seem looser, like Duri is distracted.

"I don't think so, Hobah."

A small rush of relief pools in Hosu's stomach. He inhales deeply, willing his heart to settle, and tells himself he's just relieved because it means that if he does go, he might have Duri for company.

He wills his voice to come out steady, trying for nonchalance.

"No? Why not?"

"Just – not really my thing, Hobah."

Hosu frowns at that.

"What, dating?"

There's a pause, a heartbeat, another, and Duri's hands slow on his shoulders. It feels like the whole world is holding its breath, so Hosu does, too, waiting for Duri to speak.

"Dating girls."

The breath Hosu is holding rushes out as his stomach drops. He can feel the blood drain from his face and his fingertips feel tingly.

Duri doesn't date girls.

It's a revelation that sets his blood buzzing under his skin, makes his brain shiver in his skull as he processes what that means.

Hosu isn't stupid, he knows what it means to be *gay*, knows it in the way he knows about *America* and *airplanes* and *champagne*, hypothetical, far-off things he hasn't brushed up against in his own life. He knows there are *people who are gay*, he just never thought he knew any of them, the revelation that *Duri is one of them* is a cymbal crash in the middle of a verse, unexpected and jarring. It's hard to separate his indistinct, externally sourced feelings on *gayness* from his feelings for Duri, and harder still not to hear his father's voice sneering about *faggots* in the back of his mind. The nasty things he says, the mean comments that always stung Hosu in a way he couldn't really understand, that made him feel small, they suddenly hurt more now he knows that his father was talking about *Duri* and people like Duri.

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Duri, who is wonderful, and gentle, and kind, Duri who sees Hosu and accepts him for who he is, Duri who means the world to him.

Hosu feels tears sting at his lash line, thinking of what his father would say about Duri if he knew, a crimson flash of anger at the imagined insults flaring up in his belly.

It's not until Duri speaks that Hosu realises he's been quiet for too long.

"Hobah?"

Duri's voice is tense, and his hands have disappeared off Hosu's shoulders, leaving him feeling cold, bereft.

"Yeah, s-sorry hyung. Just thinking. That's – that's cool, I mean, yeah, cool. No girls. Got it."

He turns to face Duri, suddenly desperate to see Duri's face. But Duri won't meet his eye, and his posture is hunched, and Hosu feels a sudden urge to *fix it*, to bring back Duri's smile, to show him it's okay, they're okay.

"Hyung?"

Duri is staring at his hands, biting his lip. Hosu takes a deep breath and reaches out, lightly taking hold of Duri's pinky and shaking it.

"Hyung!"

Duri looks up, uncertainty flushing his cheeks in those same pretty pink hues Hosu has seen there so many times before now.

"Yeah, Hobah?"

"I was just thinking that maybe, um, like, if you want, if you aren't going to bring a date, maybe we could hang out? Like, at the dance, if you want to go?"

Duri's eyes are wide, a tightness pulling at the corners as he searches Hosu's face.

"You still want to hang out? With me?"

It hurts, to see his hyung like this, all his loud confidence muted, none of his usual swagger bolstering his voice. Hosu hates it, wants to bring back Duri's quiet strength, his gentle loudness, all the ways he fits with no one but Hosu.

"Course, hyung. You're my best friend."

Duri smiles at that, but his eyes don't disappear into his cheeks the way they ought to, and it leaves Hosu feeling a little sad.

"Best friends. Yeah, of course. Okay, Hobah, let's hang out."

The stain of awkwardness colours the air between them, and it chafes, it's not right, and Hosu aches on the inside with the need to make things okay. Duri is fiddling with the hem of his jumper, eyes on his lap, in his own bubble with Hosu on the outside, looking for a way in.

He's acting on instinct when he grabs Duri's hands again and starts to bounce up and down, sitting on the bed.

"Hyung. Hyungie! Hyungiehyungiehyungiehyungie!"

Our Gentle Sin - a novel by Tara Lemana

“What, Hobah?”

Duri’s tone is exasperated, but there’s a familiar little twinkle in his eye when he looks up and sees Hosu’s wide grin.

“Let’s bounce, hyung!”

Duri rolls his eyes.

“Yah, Hobah, no! What are we, five?”

Hosu stands up, legs unsteady on the soft mattress, and tugs Duri up to his feet.

“Come on, hyung, it’s fun, let’s have some fun!”

Duri whines and grumbles something about *dignity* as Hosu pulls on him, but he’s smiling all the same, and when Hosu wraps his arms tightly around Duri’s torso, trapping his arms, and starts to jump up and down on the bed in earnest, Duri has no choice but to go along with the game.

Before long, they’re both laughing, Duri’s gums on full display and his eyes squeezing shut, and Hosu’s heart stops hurting at the sight as he grins back at his best friend. When Duri drops down to the mattress, out of breath and still laughing, Hosu falls with him, and they lie on their backs giggling and looking at the stars on Duri’s ceiling with silly grins on their faces and clear air soft and warm between them.

And this time, when Hosu feels the need to reach out and hold Duri’s hand, he lets himself, secure in the knowledge that this, too, is something Duri would never judge him for.

Duri interlinks their fingers in silence.

*

The handholding becomes commonplace, after that.

Neither ever mention it, they don’t discuss what it means, but their fingers find each other, drawn together like magnets, anytime the other is close. They link pinkies when walking side by side, hidden in the folds of Duri’s jacket, and on the train seat between their thighs, a secret touch in the last row of seats or behind the shield of a backpack.

Their conversations don’t change, their colours still mixing in the same familiar swirls, words flowing easily and freely, but there’s a charge between them that Hosu thinks wasn’t there before.

Or maybe it was, a furtive buzzing underneath the skin that he missed, drowned out by the loudness of his own thoughts.

It flusters him, at first, sending tendrils of anxiety and confusion through his insides as he over analyses what it means, what it says about him that nothing feels better than his best friend’s hand tangled in his own. He agonises over whether the fact they need to hide this means it’s *wrong*, a sin or perversion, as his father would say. But looking at Duri, knowing that Duri is simply the best, most wonderful, most beautiful person alive, ends any thought of anything being wrong, because nothing about Duri could ever be wrong.

Our Gentle Sin - a novel by Tara Lemana

And so, slowly, Hosu relaxes into this new way of being with Duri, the comforting touch, the freedom to interlink their fingers anytime he wants to. He's always been a touchy person, drawing strength through the palms of his hands, through hugs and reassuring caresses, and to have someone as important as Duri is to him allow him this is buoying, lifegiving.

For Duri, Hosu's new touchiness is both exhilarating and terrifying.

The day he came out to Hosu was a revelation for Duri. It wasn't until those heartbreaking moments when he thought Hosu was rejecting him for being gay, that the true nature of his feelings for Hosu came barreling down on him at full speed. The pain and fear he felt in those moments was vicious, ripping the breath right out of his lungs as he sat there on that bed, staring at Hosu's back. It was all he could do to stay upright, to not beg and plead and cry.

Hosu reaching into his bubble of pain and showing him that everything was okay, those endless minutes later, was pure elation, pure relief.

After that, it was as if the flood gates opened. Every moment he spends with Hosu takes on new meaning, is painted in a different light, stained with the awareness of how he feels about this beautiful, bright boy. He can no longer fool himself that he's just being a good hyung to Hosu when his heart races every time Hosu smiles at him, when he leans in close, when he looks up at Duri through those dark lashes, or when he takes Duri's hand and holds it like it's his lifeline.

It's exhilarating, but it's also terrifying to think that maybe to Hosu, this is all just friendship, nothing more, that Duri will always be just his *best friend*. And Duri already knows that even if that's the case, he will take it, he will take whatever Hosu is willing to give him, he will take it and be forever grateful, because there is absolutely no way he could ever deny this boy anything.

The staggering depth of his feelings is scaring Duri, tugging at his insides every time he's near Hosu, every time his breath catches on Hosu's scent, every time soft fingers find his, every time a tired head slips onto his shoulder on the train and dozes off. Duri knows he's on borrowed time, knows that one day, maybe next month, maybe next year, his father will get transferred to another branch, and he'll have to leave, and leave this perfect, bright, shining boy behind.

The thought of losing Hosu is unbearable.

But life, as life is wont to do, carries on. Exams are around the corner, and their study sessions become a daily ritual.

Hosu's touchiness is distracting there, too, encroaching further and further on Duri's personal space, pushing in a little further each time as if to explore boundaries, look for limits, while dark eyes question *is this okay?* And Duri, smitten and helpless, gives his wordless permission with a silent look and the absence of a reprimand.

Gentle, slender fingers holding onto Duri's leg while the other hand makes study notes.

Fingertips drawing patterns on Duri's arm until it tickles and Duri shakes him off with a *yah, Hobah, ticklish*, only for Hosu to grin sheepishly and move his fingers to a different spot – and for Duri to let him.

Our Gentle Sin - a novel by Tara Lemana

And, most devastating of all, the late-night, exhausted, full body back hug that becomes Hosu's way of saying *enough, hyung* when he's too tired to keep studying.

Many a night, Hosu falls asleep on Duri's bed, curled up behind Duri, legs tucked up against Duri's thigh and one hand clinging onto his fingers.

Duri never does find his equilibrium with all of Hosu's touches, always a little breathless, a little warm, a little flustered, a lot giddy at the fact that Hosu even *wants* to touch him, best friends or not. It feels like a gift, a privilege, one that Duri isn't about to turn down, no matter how distracting it is.

Hosu, for his part, is blissfully unaware of the effect his touches have on Duri. Nor is he fully aware of the effect they have on himself. Duri has been his sun and his moon for months now, and this feeling of being so utterly drawn to him is not new in either its intensity or its importance.

Nor is the flutter under his breastbone when he looks at Duri new.

The breathlessness and the giddiness that course through him every time they touch, though, those are new. It takes him by surprise, the way the feelings overwhelm him, the way they sweep through his body and leave him startled and a little out of breath each time.

It's addictive, and the fact that Duri allows it, allows the constant touching, spurs him on to keep doing it, to keep taking more, to keep chasing the giddiness and the new sensations.

There is an undercurrent of guilt, a sense that he's crossing a line, but every time Duri indulges him, it's muted a little more, until it fades into nothingness, and all that's left is warmth and flares of excitement.

It doesn't occur to him to name all he feels, all the ways his insides swirl when Duri is with him, too consumed in feeling it all to stop and analyse it.

And so the weeks rush by, a whirlwind of study and *Duri* and luscious, confusing, overwhelming *feelings*.

Until exam week arrives and everything changes.

*

Chapter 2

Exam week is pure, bitter hell.

Despite all his study breaks with Duri – many of which, admittedly, didn't amount to much study – Hosu struggles with every exam, a heavy certainty of failure sinking into his bones every time he leaves an exam room, empty and defeated.

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Heavier still is the way his and Duri's orbits haven't intersected all week, the way every spare minute hasn't been spent together the way it has been for months now. Exams and stress are crushing weights on both of them, leaving them breathless with the sheer volume of pressure they are under. Minutes trickle into hours, hours seep into days, and inevitably, the days bleed into a full week without Duri. Hosu feels his absence like a missing limb, a phantom pain that aches no matter how much he tries to soothe it.

Their exam schedules don't line up, gaps falling in all the wrong places, contrary, and both are confined to their homes by insistent parents with high expectations for acceptable exam results.

It's lonely, a stark and unwanted reminder of the days before he met Duri, before they tied their strings together, and Hosu hates it. Missing Duri is an ache in his chest that keeps him awake at night and pools in the corners of his eyes at all the wrong times.

Hosu breaks on Thursday, worn thin, dipping into a place of hopelessness and lonely despair. His exam for the day is over and the stress of the week has sucked the life out of him and left him shadowed, feeling sad and incompetent, incapable of more study. Listlessness drags on his frame as he hangs around the house, missing Duri with a fierceness that makes his lungs ache. His mother's eyes on him are soft, understanding, and her hands are gentle when she hands him money for snacks and sends him to the shops, a private hope in her belly for a lightening of his mood through the magic of air and sunlight.

As his feet drag him heedlessly along the pavement, Hosu digs his Nokia out of his pocket. It's a risk, calling Duri, knowing his dad's eyes will roam the family phone bill when it comes and Hosu will get yelled at, but his desperation to hear Duri's voice trumps everything else.

Duri answers on the first ring.

"Hello?"

"Hyung?"

"Hobah? What's the matter?"

"I – I don't know, hyung, I just..."

His cheeks are wet, then, and he wipes at them, surprised and embarrassed.

"I'm sorry, hyung, I shouldn't have called, I'm sorry, I'll hang up..."

"Hobah, no. Where are you?"

"I'm just – just going to the shops for eomma, I'm nearly there."

"Wait for hyung, Hobah, I'm coming, I'll meet you there."

"Oh – okay, hyung."

Duri is already gone.

When Hosu comes out of the shop bearing bags of snack food, Duri skids to a halt beside him, brows drawn, out of breath and sweaty.

"Hyung! Did you – did you run?"

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Duri ignores the question and steps in close, closer than is prudent in public, thumbs brushing across Hosu's cheeks with a tenderness that cuts off Hosu's air.

"Hobah, were you crying? Why were you crying?"

Hosu can taste more tears on the back of his tongue, bitter and selfish, and swallows desperately. He can't cry again, not here, not now, not in public, and Duri's eyes are far too much, too sweet, too concerned, too tender, so he stares down at their feet, those same red Converse staring up at him, the Sharpied words now familiar and comforting.

Duri reads him so easily, sees Hosu struggling to stay in control, how it's written all over his body, all over the way he avoids eye contact. He grabs Hosu, then, takes him by the arm and tugs him along, ignoring the boy's surprised stumbling, the intake of breath at being jostled. He follows Duri blindly, down the street, around the corner and into a quiet side street, where Duri pulls him into a stairwell, away from prying eyes. He takes Hosu's bags from him, gently, and puts them to the side.

"Sit, Hobah."

Wordlessly, Hosu does as he's told, sitting on the second stair, hunched over and feeling small. He didn't mean to make a fuss, doesn't understand why he's so sad or why all he can think about is Duri.

Duri, who's watching him with worry etching unfamiliar grooves in his face, as he sits beside Hosu.

Duri, who probably had to abandon his study to come to Hosu's rescue.

Hosu blanches at the thought and buries his face in his hands.

"Oh god, hyung, I'm so sorry I called you, you didn't need to come see me, you probably need to study."

"Shhhh Hobah, it's fine, hyung's fine. Tell me what happened."

The warmth of Duri's body alongside his on the stair is grounding, and his hand rubbing between Hosu's shoulder blades feels nice, soothing.

"It's stupid, hyung, I'm stupid."

Hosu's tone is whiny, petulant to his own ears, and he feels embarrassment flush through his body, staining his neck and cheeks a deep red under his early summer tan.

Duri sighs.

"You're not stupid, Hobah. Come on. Tell hyung what happened."

Hosu takes a shaky breath, hands still firmly glued to his face, a flimsy attempt at making himself invisible, at shielding himself from his own embarrassment. He's never cried in front of Duri before, hates crying in front of anyone, hates showing *weakness*, and there's a small part of him that's screaming in the back of his mind at all this show of vulnerability, all this *risk*.

"I just...I think I failed all of my exams, hyung, it's been so stressful and I hate it, I can't do this, I'm too stupid, I'll fail and my dad will be so mad and he'll disown me and I'm just going to be an embarrassment to my family and..."

"Hobah! Stop it, hey! Stop!!"

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Duri's hands are on his shoulders now, fingers pressing in, tight, tighter, shaking him, and Hosu falls silent, shocked out of his beginning spiral.

"Hobah, come on, look at hyung."

When Hosu doesn't drop his hands, stubbornness still sticking to his fingers, Duri tugs them down gently. Hosu's tear-stained face tugs at his heartstrings, an ache blooming under his ribs.

"Hobah, you are *not* stupid. What did I tell you about when we met? What did I say about you?"
When Hosu doesn't respond, Duri goes on.

"You shine, Hobah! You are bright, and smart, and amazing. You are going to pass your exams, and you're going to go on and do great things and make everyone around you proud. You already make me proud, Hobah, every day. You make hyung so proud to know you."

The tears well up afresh, and Hosu can't stop them, and can't hide behind his hands, trapped as they are in Duri's, heavy on his lap, an anchor. And so the tears fall, and he lets them paint silvery trails down his cheeks. It's all too much, all this emotion, this bright rainbow swirl, darks and lights and brights all mixed together, dizzying, overwhelming him.

"Hyung..."

"Shhhh Hobah, hyung's here, it's okay sweet boy, everything's okay."

Duri reaches up thoughtlessly, brushing tears off Hosu's cheeks with his thumbs, and he's so close, so full of warmth and acceptance for Hosu and all his odd ways, and Hosu feels *full* in a way he never does when he's not around Duri. He feels *full* and *loved* and *special* and it's all because of Duri.

Something bursts inside of Hosu, and a current sweeps through him, washing everything away, all the sadness, all the fear, all the doubt, all the self-hatred, and all that's left is *Duri, Duri, Duri*.

Hosu surges forward and kisses Duri, presses his closed mouth firmly onto Duri's, warm and soft.

It's lips, just lips, just Hosu trying to press everything he's feeling into Duri through a touch, not all that different from every other day, but at the same time, a whole new beginning.

Duri's mind is reeling. He falls into the kiss for long seconds, elation running through his veins, his body thrumming. Hosu kissing him is beyond his wildest expectations, more than he ever thought he could have, more than he ever thought he had a right to want.

He lets himself have this, just for a little while, seconds, not minutes, until the voice in his head that shouts at him he is the hyung, and Hosu is upset, and this might not mean what he'd like it to mean, finally wins, and he gently cradles Hosu's face and pulls back to look him in the eye.

"Hobah..."

Hosu's face is serene, beautiful, until he looks at Duri and something sweeps across it – fear, doubt, shock.

"Oh my god hyung, you didn't....you didn't want me to, I'm so sorry...I'll, I'll go, I'm sorry, I'm sorry hyung..."

He tries to pull away, to close himself off and put distance between them, but Duri won't let him, holding on, insistent.

"Hobah, no, wait, wait a second. Stop!"

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The clear command does stop Hosu, who looks at Duri with tears in his eyes, embarrassment crackling loudly in the air around him.

“Hobah. Why did you kiss me?”

It’s too big a question, with too many vulnerabilities, and Hosu squeezes his eyes shut, tears leaking out again.

“I’m sorry, hyung, I’m sorry, please don’t, please can we just not talk about it?”

“No, Hobah, we can’t do that. I need to know why, you need to tell hyung why. Was it just because you’re sad?”

Hosu desperately wants to hide, wants to put up all his walls, aches for invisibility. The words pile up on his tongue, desperate to spill out, but it’s scary, so scary, too much to lose, too many consequences.

But Duri is still holding his face, the contact warm and comforting, seeping into his skin, a balm on all his uncertainties, and he remembers that this is *Duri*, the one person he never has to hide from, the one person who never judges him.

He sucks in a shaky breath and, drawing strength from Duri’s hands, shakes his head.

He opens his eyes, needing to see Duri.

“Why then, Hobah?”

Duri’s voice is gentle, familiar, warm, and it draws Hosu in, calms him, soothes his shivery insides until he feels his jaw unlock and the words eke out between his teeth on an errant breath.

“Because I really wanted to, hyung. I missed you so much, I like you so much...”

Duri *blooms*.

There’s no other word for it. He feels it inside, the warmth spreading out from his core, the giddiness, the tears welling up.

Hosu watches as Duri’s face transforms, as his smile, his favourite one, the one that’s shy and wide and beautiful, breaks out and lights the space between them, as his eyes begin to water and the tears threaten to fall.

“You do?”

All Hosu can do is nod, fingers digging into his thighs nervously, feeling exposed and raw like never before, every nerve naked and unprotected, laid bare to the outside world, to Duri.

It’s Duri who leans in this time, who puts himself out there on a limb, heart on display, and presses their lips together. He does so slowly, eyes on Hosu, giving him time to back out, to say no, to stop this from happening. But Hosu doesn’t.

The kiss is slow and sweet, an exploration of something brand new, something fragile and precious. Hosu’s hands drift up of their own accord, fingers wrapping around Duri’s wrists in both a need for touch and silent permission. Duri’s thumbs continue their gentle caressing along Hosu’s cheeks, sending small sparks along his skin.

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When the tip of Hosu's tongue finds Duri's bottom lip it's accidental, almost, a hesitant reconnaissance into new territory, exploring boundaries. Duri meets him there, allows the deepening, welcomes it, as he does with everything involving Hosu.

Hosu loses himself in it, in *tasting* and *feeling* and *being*, in *lips* and *tongues* and *wet* and *dizzy*, loses himself in *Duri*. He feels like he's floating, held down only by Duri's hands on his face, his fingertips curled around the nape of his neck. He wants to stay in this forever, never leave this place where nothing else matters, where it's just him and Duri.

Duri feels unmoored, exhilarated, his whole being singing with *Hosu*, with all the fervent, overwhelming feelings that have been buzzing under his skin for months now. Hosu's skin against the palms of his hands, warm and soft and golden. Hosu's scent all around him, in his lungs, on his tongue, like summer, citrusy and clean and slightly salty.

The sound of a door opening and slamming shut near the top of the stairwell, followed by quick footsteps on a higher staircase, sees them suddenly scrambling to separate, cheeks flushed and breathing rapid. They stare at each other as the footsteps come closer, eyes wide. Duri suddenly jumps up, grabs Hosu's bags and his hand and hurries out the stairwell door and further down the road, ducking into another side street.

They're exposed now, the relative privacy of the stairwell lost. There are few people around, but still, the real world crowds in, stubborn in its insistence it needs to be reckoned with. Where just seconds ago, Duri's lips were on his, Duri's air in his lungs, now Hosu's only connection to Duri is his fingertips and the soft, sideways looks and small smiles they keep throwing each other as they walk. It's not enough, he needs more, greedy for all the new sensations he just got the briefest taste of before they were torn away again.

"Hyung..."

Hosu's tone is whiny, petulant, and it's embarrassing to his own ears, heat rising up his neck. Duri smiles and squeezes his hand.

"I know, Hobah, I know. Later."

Hosu pouts, and Duri laughs.

"Don't pout, Hobah. You need to get home before your eomma wonders where you are. Hyung'll walk you home."

The walk home is far too quick for Hosu's liking. He drags his feet, slowing down more and more, pulling on Duri's hand and making him stumble. Duri just smiles, indulgent.

Under the trees near Hosu's home, the last bit of cover before they officially breach the imaginary *hands-off* zone surrounding the house, they linger, pinkies linked, eyes locked, yearning for *more* splashed liberally all over their faces. Duri puts Hosu's bags down and looks around, furtive, before leaning in to press a short, soft kiss to Hosu's lips, a promise.

"Tomorrow, Hobah. One more exam, then we're done. I'll be finished at one, meet me after?"

Hosu nods, eyes wide, lips tingly from Duri's touch.

"Okay, hyung, yeah. I'll see you tomorrow."

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And then, with one last squeeze of fingers, Duri is gone, walking briskly back in the direction of his parents' home, hands in his pockets and shoulders a little hunched.

Hosu's eomma doesn't question the length of time it took him to go and get snacks, but she seems to notice his changed mood, smiling softly as he greets her with a grin and puts the bags on the counter before grabbing a bag of chips and running up the stairs to his room.

In his room, Hosu throws himself on his bed and screams into his pillow, body vibrating, too much adrenaline and too many emotions flooding his system to contain it all. He kicks his legs against the mattress, body thrashing as he screams, expelling all the excitement, the giddiness and shock at what just happened, pushing it outwards.

Eventually he rolls over, energy expended, chest heaving, staring at the ceiling with wide eyes and a wider grin. As his heart rate calms, he pulls his blankets over himself and rolls onto his side, wrapping himself burrito-like before finally stilling.

He kissed Duri. Duri kissed him.

They kissed. Lips, tongue, more lips, more tongue.

It was amazing, delicious, *hot*.

The thought stops him short.

It was *hot*.

Hosu kissed a boy, and it was hot.

He kissed *a boy*.

He kissed *Duri*.

Duri is a *boy*.

Hosu likes *Duri*.

Hosu likes a *boy*.

There's a tendril of anxiety low in his gut as the realisation sinks in once more. Hosu *knows*, now, *knows* why he doesn't fit, one of the reasons, at least, and it's a thing that would be terrifying if it weren't for Duri, if it weren't for the way *they do*. With Duri, the terror mutes, softens into something bearable, something he might even grow to own, to love, one day.

Hosu's thoughts involuntarily stray to his father mumbling something dismissive about things *boys don't do*.

His father has a lot of opinions on the things *boys don't do*, and Hosu is pretty sure *kissing other boys* would be high on that list, sit judgmentally near the top. But the memory of the taste of Duri against his lips and on his tongue drowns out the worry, softening it into a subdued kernel lurking in the corner of his mind, *there* but not prevalent.

What he has with Duri couldn't possibly be wrong. There's nothing but love and acceptance between them, nothing but mutual support and joy and kindness. How could that ever be wrong? A gentle kind of conviction blossoms under his sternum, an almost-certainty that his parents would recognise the *rightness* of what he has with Duri, were they ever to spend time with Duri.

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He lets the thought sit, suppresses his worries, and closes his eyes to watch the replay of his afternoon with Duri on the backs of his eyelids, the kiss, *the kiss*.

Kissing Duri. *Kissing Duri!*

Hosu falls asleep with the taste of Duri on his lips and the thought of him in his mind.

*

Friday is full of nerves, buzzing along Hosu's skin and tingling in his fingertips. His final exam barely registers in his awareness, no more than an annoying obstacle between him and Duri.

Time slows to a crawl, inconsiderate of Hosu's need for it to hurry, for one o'clock to arrive and deliver on its promises. Hosu is hyper aware of everything, the breath in his lungs, the brush of his clothes on his skin, the ticking of the clock on the classroom wall, the scuffing of rubber school shoe soles on the floor, the small noises made by his classmates as they squirm in their seats, willing the exam to be over.

His stomach flips at the thought of seeing Duri again, of holding Duri's hand again, of maybe even *kissing* Duri again. Part of him is nervous that Duri might have changed his mind, that he regrets kissing Hosu, and those nerves, too, dance along his skin.

His exam finishes at twelve. The hour's wait time before Duri finishes is the worst, nothing but Duri to keep his mind occupied, nothing but thoughts of what will happen, what Duri is feeling, what all of this means now, what it changes between them, if anything. He sits on a bench near Duri's classroom, nervously tugging at a thread on the edge of his school shirt, feet hot in his black cotton socks and heavy leather shoes, the early summer sun rubbing heat into his skin until the bridge of his nose stings.

When Duri shuffles out of the classroom, his eyes cast about, searching for Hosu. His smile when he spots him sitting in the sun dispels all of Hosu's worries, warmth blooming in his chest and butterflies fluttering in his belly. Duri looks at him like he hung the moon and the stars, like all the world's best things are wrapped up into a package called Hosu. Hosu has no idea what he did to deserve that kind of adoration, but having Duri look at him that way across the space of the school yard, navy-clad bodies milling around and in between them, makes him squirm and blush.

Duri looks like everybody else, in his uniform, on the surface, and yet not, not to Hosu. He still stands out, an island amidst the ebb and flow of students, and it's reassuring, the reminder that they both *don't fit*, yet they fit with each other, each other's perfect counterparts.

Hosu stands, feet shuffling shyly on the pavers, eyes locked on Duri as he makes his way across the yard, backpack slung over one shoulder and that smile, so wide and uncensored, far too open for a public space like this, pulling his features into lines that tug on Hosu's heart.

And then he's there, *right there*, in reach, and all Hosu has to do is reach out, connect hands, lips, bodies.

But this is the school yard, and *boys don't*, so Hosu doesn't. His fingers twitch with the effort to *not touch*, and he almost does, hand scooting across the space between them to divert at the last second and tug on Duri's bag strap instead, cover up for all the things he cannot do.

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Duri watches the movement and smiles, knowing.

“Hi Hobah.”

“Hyungie.”

The word is soft, telling, slipping out through smiling lips, formed by a tender tongue, and Duri’s smile deepens, creasing at the corners. There’s silence for a beat, two, three, silence filled with just looks and smiles, filled with secrets, before Duri pulls them both out of the intimacy that threatens to envelop them right there in the middle of the school yard.

“Shall we go?”

Hosu’s nod is eager, hungry, and they fall into step side by side, joining the throng flowing towards the school gates.

They talk quietly as they walk, inane banter that neither will remember later, the kind of chatter that’s suitable for public spaces, suitable to be overheard by the press of bodies around them, bodies in *regulation* navy with *regulation* personalities and *regulation* ideas about the things that *boys don’t do*.

The press around them jostles Hosu into Duri repeatedly, arms brushing together, fingers touching, and even that little bit of contact is exhilarating. Stray smiles catch the corners of their mouths, twitch at their eyelids, shrouded truths hiding in plain sight, unknowable.

The train ride to Duri’s is long and arduous, alien in its discomfort, dual meanings assigned now to every touch, every word, all carelessness abandoned in favour of excessive awareness, paranoia. The sudden guilt at being a boy who *doesn’t fit*, a boy with a secret, staining everything with a strange kind of thrill, a giddy anxiousness.

Stepping into Duri’s home is surreal. The house is its own silent bubble, both parents out at work and Seongjae out with friends to celebrate the end of exams. Shyness descends heavily on Hosu’s bones as he toes off his shoes at the front door beside Duri, as he lets his fingers be clasped and lets himself be led up the same path he’s been down so many times before, down the hallway and up the stairs to Duri’s attic bedroom. The house’s silence wraps itself around them as they move through it, banter extinguished in favour for an unfamiliar tension.

When Duri’s door clicks shut behind them, Hosu still feels the tension, heavy in the air and in his lungs. He stands by the door, looking around the familiar space, feeling none of the comfort that familiarity should bring, uncertain of how to navigate this new thing, this new dynamic.

And then Duri turns and smiles, that big gummy smile that makes Hosu’s heart stutter, and threads the fingers of both their hands together.

“Hey Hobah.”

The greeting is soft, gentle, an acknowledgement of all the things they haven’t said, all the things between them that are complicated and secret and new, and it reminds Hosu once more that he’s not alone in this, he’s with Duri, and that makes it okay.

“Hey hyung.”

He thinks Duri might kiss him then, and his nerves spike, the pressure of the moment prickling the back of his neck. But Duri steps in, slips his arms loosely around Hosu’s waist, and rests his forehead

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on Hosu's shoulder, a warm, gentle hug that pulls all the tension out of the air. Hosu wraps his arms around Duri and leans into it, gratitude flooding him like it always does when Duri just *knows* what he needs, when he reads Hosu so easily and gives him exactly what he needs to be okay.

The tightness slips out of Hosu's form, sliding down his limbs and sinking into the floor where he stands, and he sags against Duri, feeling boneless. Duri groans under the sudden shift in weight, then giggles, which makes Hosu giggle, and before he knows it, they are both laughing, leaning against each other just inside the doorway. It's healing laughter that dissolves all the uncertainty, all the nervous tension, and reminds them that whatever else they are, they are also each other's *person*, best friends.

Eventually, the giggles wear off, leaving them loose-limbed, soft, and happy. Duri's smile when he lifts his head is wide and joyful, and Hosu matches it, giddiness swirling in his belly. Duri reaches out and trails tentative fingers down Hosu's cheek, and Hosu leans into the touch, eyes slipping closed.

"You okay, Hobah?"

The words are gentle, light, not the heavy, loaded question of the day before, not prompted by tears and sadness but by a calm awareness that there is more to be said. Hosu hums, nods.

"Yeah. Better now."

Duri allows him a few more moments of nuzzling into the wide, warm palm of his hand before he pats Hosu's cheek twice and Hosu hears him intone *come on Hobah*.

He opens his eyes and Duri tugs him forward towards the bed.

"Sit, Hobah."

And this is familiar, he knows how to do this, how to sit on Duri's bed with him, safe in their own warm bubble. He drops his boneless frame on the bed, then crumples, lying down, shy and daring all at once, patting the mattress beside him.

"Come on, hyung, lie down with me!"

It comes out on a whine, pink-cheeked, and Duri laughs, but does as he's told, a giddy flutter in his belly as he drops onto the narrow bed and lies down facing Hosu.

They just lie there, at first, watching each other, taking it all in, trying to map out in their heads what's changed, what's the same. Too many minutes pass in silence, and Hosu needs contact, reassurance, so he buries his face in the pillow and reaches out, blind fingers searching and finding Duri's hand and bringing it up between their chests, fingers entwined, taking the soothing touch he needs. Duri smiles, brings their hands to his face and presses a kiss to Hosu's knuckle, then the next, and then next, one after another, eyes never leaving Hosu's, and it's a lot all at once. Knuckles give way to fingertips, then to random points on the back of Hosu's hand. Hosu watches, spellbound, a little embarrassed at the tenderness.

When Duri stops, it feels like now it's *Hosu's turn* to say something or do something, so he takes a deep breath, butterflies fluttering under his breastbone, and leans in, pressing a gentle kiss to Duri's lips, a soft, unspoken *I'm still here, I don't regret this* that feels necessary to convey.

When he pulls back, Duri is watching him, a soft smile curving his cheeks, and he leans in and presses the same kind of tender kiss on Hosu.

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It feels like a promise, a confirmation, a wordless vow of *me too*.

Duri goes to pull back, but Hosu's hands fly up, cupping his face to keep him close, before reaching deep inside himself to the part that's brave and reckless, the part that doesn't care what *boys don't do*, and just like yesterday, brushing the tip of his tongue along Duri's bottom lip.

That's all it takes. The kiss deepens from there, still soft, an exploration of something new, something warm and sweet and magical. They kiss, lying on Duri's bed, until they're breathless, faces rosy and rumpled, hands roaming over cheeks and chests and gripping onto waists, hesitant and not yet brave enough or needy enough to explore further.

It's a lot, these new sensations, first kisses with a first love, a depth of feeling that neither yet fully understands, the reckless abandon of youth allowing them the bravery to jump in the deep end without too many questions, without obsessing over *what ifs*.

The spaces they take for breaths are filled with smiles and giggles, with breathless *oh my god's* and soft fingertips on electric skin. It's gentle and sweet, innocent, this first foray into being together as something more than friends, it's overwhelming even without pushing too hard, going too fast.

Eventually the stress of the previous weeks and the emotion of the day catches up with them, and the kisses slow, eyes droop, fingers tangle between them and they drift off to sleep on top of the covers.

*

The following week passes in a blur. It's course week, a euphemism for *slack off and party* week. The courses students choose are for fun only, and no one cares who attends what, teachers turning a blind eye to missed classes more often than not.

Duri and Hosu spend most of the week finding places to be together.

Watching straight couples skirt non-PDA regulations and hold hands around school while not being able to do the same is hard enough, but the stakes have been raised now. The knowledge of each other's taste is written onto their lips, etched into their tongues, addictive, sparking yearning that bleeds into everything, every touch, every smile, every word.

Hosu is certain that it's written all over them, the knowledge they have, the secret they share.

They take risks, exchanging furtive kisses in empty restrooms or locker rooms. Apartment building stairwells all over town become favourite places to sneak away to for the dark, recessed spaces underneath each staircase, perfect for breathless make out sessions.

And when school is not in session, Duri's room is still a favourite hangout spot. There, too, risk exists, with no lock on the door, but the hours between four and six are usually all theirs, no one else home to catch them doing things that *boys don't do*.

They spend hours learning this part of each other, exploring gentle touch and taste, learning this new form of physicality that is so taboo but so delicious all the same, and it's exhilarating. Neither can get enough of this, this new way of being together.

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Only once do they go to Hosu's home. Duri meets Hosu's mother, a soft-spoken woman with her son's kind eyes and pretty face. The nerves buzz under Duri's skin the entire time he's in the same room as her, fear that the secrets he holds close to his heart will spill over making him jittery and stilted in his conversation. Answering her questions about himself, entertaining the friendly chatter about his friendship with her son, in a way that diminishes Hosu's importance to him, hiding the fact that her son is his *first love*, chafes at him. It's not in his nature to hide who he is, and the fact that society dictates he must do so is a needle under his skin that stirs a constant low-burning anger in his gut, even at sixteen.

They sit in Hosu's room after that, but from the way Hosu jumps at every noise, nerves making his eyes dart to the door every few minutes, shoulders tight and body taut, it's clear that there is no haven here for them, and Duri resolves to make sure to steer them clear of here going forward.

They skip the school dance. The thought of standing at the edge of the school hall, hands cold and empty, staring at each other across inches that might as well be miles, is painful. The idea of watching their friends slow dance with girls, listening to them brag about *copping a feel* or stealing a kiss, all while having to endure the frustration of not being able to touch, let alone kiss, is depressing. It's a bitter feeling, something that burrows under Hosu's skin when he lets it take up space in his thoughts for too long, the way things that are okay for others are somehow not okay for them, the things that *boys and girls* can do that are somehow steeped in sin for them.

Instead, they hole up in Duri's room with snacks, and under cover of watching a movie, make out in the dark, breathless and full of ardour.

They don't lose the parts that made up their friendship *before*. They still laugh until they cry, still spend long days talking, still go to the arcade, still have their dedicated Saturdays together. But woven through all those moments there are the loaded touches and the furtive kisses, now, the long make out sessions and the heavy glances.

In the midst of it all, the earth turns, and suddenly it's summer. Hosu breathes out, and school ends.

Long days of heat and sweat stretch out in front of them, empty and open, ready to be filled in whichever way they choose.

It's a luxury Hosu can hardly fathom.

With both sets of parents still working, and Seongjae off with his friends most days, the afternoons at Duri's stretch into long, leisurely days. Anytime Seongjae is home, they throw their swimming gear into bags and go hang out at the pools, foregoing privacy for a decent cooldown from the oppressive heat.

And oh, the heat. It has an impact neither foresaw, compressing a development in their relationship that might have taken months into mere weeks. As the heat presses down on them and the last bell heralds the start of the summer break, shorts and t-shirts replace school uniforms, exposing vast expanses of smooth skin that brings with it its own heat. Bare thighs brush past each other in the water, on seats, on Duri's bed, gold contrasting with cream, sending shock waves through them.

Hands wander more frequently now, unheeded, trailing soft, heated tracks up from knee to groin and back. Silent kisses turn headier, breathier, more vocal, groans slipping in, cheeks colouring in embarrassment until that, too, is kissed away. Eager hips rock forward now, shame pushed aside with the realization that the desire burning hot and low is reciprocated.

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The day it boils over is hotter than hell, the heat slicking skin with a sheen of sweat, the air in Duri's room devoid of oxygen even with the window open.

They are locked together on Duri's bed, legs tangled, slippery, hips pressed together, hands roaming, lips and tongues tireless, searching and finding *more, more, more*. It's so hot, so wet and it's already been *so long* since they started fooling around, Hosu feels like there's a pressure valve in his chest that's about to explode.

"Hyungie."

It comes out breathy, desperate, and Duri pulls back, eyes searching.

"What, Hobah?"

"Lemme touch you," Hosu whines, hand trailing along the waistband of Duri's shorts, fingertips brushing the bare, pale skin of Duri's belly.

"You *are* touching me, Hobah."

Hosu leans his forehead on Duri's, looking, *looking*.

"You know what I mean, hyung. Lemme *touch you*."

Duri hesitates, eyes searching, wide.

"You sure, baby?"

Hosu nods.

"Yeah, hyung. I want to touch you."

He grinds his hips down on Duri's, bone to bone, flesh to flesh, cheeks colouring with the hitch in Duri's breath and the kick in his hips. He smiles, at once shy and delighted.

"Seems like you're pretty keen on that idea too."

Duri's cheeks flush, and he's pretty, so pretty, Hosu could watch him blush all day.

"Shut up."

Hosu leans in and kisses Duri until he forgets he was shy, until he forgets anything that isn't this, right here. When he leans back again, Hosu's fingertips rest on the top of Duri's thigh, so close, and it sends a shiver down Duri's spine.

"Can I, hyung?"

Duri's *yeah, Hobah* comes with another kiss, deeper and greedier than before. When Hosu reaches in and touches, Duri steals all the breath from his lungs.

It's clumsy and messy, that first time, a little awkward, and it's over quickly, but it's *so good*. The heat and the sweat make everything slick, the long build up makes it so very easy, even the smallest touch electrifying.

When it's over, when hands and stomachs are messy with more than just sweat, when chests are heaving and everything is hotter and stickier than before, when Duri won't stop laying small kisses all over Hosu's face until Hosu giggles and hides in Duri's neck, it feels like a turning point.

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Somehow, this wasn't really *real* in Hosu's mind until just now, all the kissing and wanting was a dream, something that could still be played off as a glitch, something small and accidental, but this, touching and being touched, this feels like something different, irrevocable, unexplainable, and somehow, there is relief in that, ownership.

Duri cleans them up with baby wipes before they curl up on the bed together and drift off to sleep.

*

The summer drifts by in swathes of heat, windless, airless days stacking up until breath becomes a commodity, a scarcity. The city smells like decay and desperation, the scent of melting rubber mingling with the smell of rancid rubbish and hints of sewage.

It doesn't make for the most tempting time to venture out, though the hottest days still pull them towards the pools, feet on auto pilot with the heat pressing down on their backs as they walk.

Their days continue as they have done for months, each caught in the other's orbit, exploring the city and each other. The learning continues unabated, expanded now to not just learning personalities and histories, hopes and dreams, but bodies, tastes, sensations.

The shyness doesn't leave, it stays, intrinsic to the awkwardness that lives in the fabric of being a teenager, of trying to learn someone else's skin while still an alien in your own.

Days trickle into weeks. They find their feet slowly, within this new territory of being *more than friends*, this strange new landscape for which they have no reference point. The secrecy is easier to take now that school is not a factor, now that they aren't constantly being reminded that they are *different*. It's still there every time they step outside of Duri's bedroom, but the summer haze mutes it to a dull ache rather than the choking, nauseating feeling that hung around them during course week.

The days spent lying on Duri's bed in their own bubble are bliss. They still spend hours talking, fingers tangled between them while they stare up at the ceiling. Many an afternoon will start with Duri demanding *Hobah, tell me a story*, then listening with a smile, eyes closed, while Hosu talks.

"Okay, hyung. I'll tell you the one about the famous rapper D-Day. His real name is Duri, only no one knows that, he keeps it a secret. He's super famous, got awards and stuff. He started writing songs when he was just a kid, so he's gotten really great at it. All his songs are fire, raw, all his lyrics are clever and slick, and no one raps faster than him. He's really cool, and really hot, too, and all the girls and boys want him, but they can't have him."

"They can't?"

"Hmmm. Nope. He's taken. His hot dancer boyfriend has wicked muscles and he'll beat up anyone who tries to steal him away."

Duri snorts at that.

"That right?"

"Hm-hm."

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"Is he rich?"

"Filthy. Big house, big car, big rings."

"Hm. He sounds amazing. Might not mind having a go at him myself!"

"Hyung!!"

Duri laughs, and Hosu slaps his thigh.

"Alright, alright. What about this hot dancer boyfriend?"

"Hm. Well, he's rich and famous, too. Good legs, strong thighs. Really nice abs."

"Okay, but can I tap that?"

Hosu giggles at that.

"You might be in with a chance, if you play your cards right."

Other times, Hosu will weave a dreamier story, one that settles on Duri's skin like a blanket, warm and comforting, always set in a world where being themselves isn't a sin, where being together is not something they have to hide.

In Hosu's stories, they're together, years into the future, building a life together. Sometimes they're a famous dancer and rapper, but most often they have average lives, happy and colourful, lives with jobs and kids and animals.

It's one of the ways Hosu has always spent his time, dreaming up a fantasy world in which he *fit*, in which the parts of his life that hurt no longer exist. Being added to Hosu's fantasy world feels like an immeasurable privilege to Duri, and he likes nothing better than to listen to Hosu spin his pretty tales, building castles in the air of Duri's bedroom.

Hosu, for his part, feels quietly awed that Duri *likes* his stories, that he wants to be part of them and wants to hear them.

And so summer cements their connection into something deep and solid, something that drives its roots right down to their cores, wrapping them around their hearts until they are inextricably linked, in the way of first loves.

And as it goes with first loves, it feels enormous, bigger than everything, all-encompassing.

There is a day in early August when Hosu is quiet, subdued, all his sparkle a little muted, duller than usual. It tugs at Duri as they sit at the edge of the pool, feet dangling in the water, bare thighs pressed together.

Duri waits Hosu out, sitting quietly beside him, waiting for him to be ready to talk, for the words to pull themselves together and spill between them. He watches a group of small children play in the water while their mothers look on and waits.

When Hosu finally speaks, it's soft, words hesitant.

"Hyung?"

Duri hums, eyes on the water, giving Hosu space to say what he needs to.

"What if you have to leave again?"

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Duri's bare skin pebbles, suddenly cold. Hosu's voice wrapping around the words he's tried so hard not to think, not to even admit as a possibility, is frightening, as if by speaking the fear out loud he'll call it into being.

"That's not going to happen, Hobah."

"How do you know, hyung?"

And Duri, for all his maturity, is just sixteen at the end of the day, a boy on the cusp of adulthood with nothing but childhood behind him. Stubborn, sixteen-year-old pride bursts out, a teenage boy's inflated sense of his own power claiming him in the exact wrong moment, and Duri sets his jaw.

"I know, Hobah. I won't let it."

Hosu frowns, his desire to believe Duri warring with his sense that things might not be that simple. It's confusing, conflicting, different parts of him forming different opinions and not knowing which to trust.

In the end, Hosu, walking that same tightrope to adulthood together with Duri, falls back on a child's instinct to believe the world is all good and any wish can be secured with a little magic.

"Promise me, hyung. Promise me you won't leave."

And Duri, smitten and protective, and desperately wanting to believe in the power of faith, says the words they both need to hear.

"I promise, Hobah. I'm not going anywhere, we'll always be together. You and me."

And because it's Duri, it's enough.

Hosu smiles, relief blooming in his chest.

*

As August draws to a close, summer bleeds into autumn, greens disappearing in a cacophony of reds and oranges and yellows, a loud tribute to the new season. The heat softens into something just shy of boiling, something that simmers *on* the skin instead of deep below it.

The new school year arrives, and with it, renewed secrecy. Gone is the freedom of spending all their time in Duri's attic, it's back to hours in separate classes, making do with time together on the train ride to and from school, with afternoons and evenings, with Saturdays.

It never seems like quite enough. They orbit each other with the single mindedness of youth, completely absorbed to the exclusion of everything else.

They settle into a routine, travelling to school together, spending class times apart, meeting up at lunchtime, usually at the end of the sports field, far enough away from everything to be able to talk freely and hold hands without being seen. After school they play spades, sit by the river and talk, or make their way to Duri's room, their haven from prying eyes and judgment.

It's a honeymoon, full of joy and heat and wide-eyed firsts, full of innocent faith that all is as it should be and this is how it will always be, despite the secrecy, despite the fear of being caught.

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August flows, as August does, into September. Normality reclaims them, and they settle into a rhythm together, a way of being *them* that suits. Time passes in the blink of an eye, and suddenly, it's November.

The days are shortening, autumn giving way to winter a little more day by day. The gentle cold that has settled into their days now is welcome, a not yet bone-numbing chill that makes physical closeness a more acceptable oddity, one they take advantage of greedily, pressing sides close together while sitting, while walking.

It's been ten months since Duri came to Gwangju and crash landed in Hosu's life. Five months since their first kiss.

Months of friendship, of being seen, of learning, of loving, of being loved.

Months of laughter and joy, of firsts, of figuring out who they are and how they work.

Months of tentative exploration, of learning through touch, of coming to terms with doing things *boys don't do* and all that comes with that.

They are good together, solid. There is a mutual understanding that is intuitive and runs deep, a feeling like each has placed their brand on the other's bones, irrevocable. It was there from the first moment and nothing has changed it, nothing has frayed the bond they have.

Hosu's nerves about Duri deciding he isn't *worthy* have eased, slowly but surely, kissed away by soft lips, brushed away by gentle touches and reassuring words, until they are just a wisp of a memory, something vague and inconsequential buried at the back of his mind while Duri's fingers draw patterns on the skin of his forearm.

And Duri's fears of being taken away from Hosu have settled, too. There has been no mention of leaving Gwangju, of his father being transferred, and eagerness to stay with Hosu has dulled his sense of caution, the paranoia that made him protect his heart in the past, wrapping it in distance and coldness to avoid attachments.

Duri is *attached*, hopelessly and irrevocably so, deeply smitten and utterly devoted.

His roots have burrowed deep in a boy named Hosu.

*

The end comes suddenly, a lightning bolt out of a clear blue sky, a fatal crash on an empty stretch of highway.

It's a Saturday morning. Duri is still half asleep, deep under his duvet when his mother knocks on the door of his bedroom and comes in, sitting on the edge of his bed, bare toes buried in the fluffy rug under her feet. She reaches across to brush his hair from his face, her fingers soft and soothing.

"Duri-yah? Darling? Are you awake?"

Duri groans.

"Eomma? What time is it?"

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"It's ten am, baby."

Another groan.

"I need you to wake up, honey, we need to talk."

At that, a cold flash of alarm flares up in Duri, tightening his throat and sending a chill down his spine. He turns to face his mother, rolling onto his side, sleepy eyes blinking open.

"What, eomma? What'd I do?"

She smiles, but it's sad, and Duri's stomach clenches.

"Nothing, baby. It's just...well. I know you love it here, and you've made a really good friend in Hosu, but..."

"No."

Duri is wide awake now, cold fear sending a spike of adrenaline through his body, panic welling up.

"Duri-yah."

"No, eomma, you can't, not again! It's not *fair!*"

His mother's eyes look sad, she looks small and tired, and there's a little voice at the back of Duri's mind that says *she doesn't want this either*. He pulls himself upright, needing to sit up and look his mother in the eyes.

"I know, sweetheart, and I'm sorry, but you know we have to go when your father is transferred."

Duri's voice comes out harsher than he intends it to, spitting the words.

"Why, eomma? Why can't he just go alone and come visit us on weekends?"

"Duri-yah, no! We are a family, we need to stay together!"

Duri is shaking with anger and fear, tears stinging at his lash line, the thought of losing Hosu too much.

"I can't *do this again*, eomma, not again! I'm finally happy here, I have a – I have friends, I have a life, school is going well, please, don't make me do this again!"

She shakes her head, reaching out a soft, warm hand to brush his shoulder, but he pulls back, shakes it off, too angry for comfort.

"It's not up to me, sweetheart, this is what's happening. We all just have to make the best of it."

The tears spill now, heedless, anger burning hot and heavy in Duri's chest, recklessness flowing from it and into his voice, into his words.

"I'm not going, eomma! I'm not!"

He throws the duvet off and jumps off the bed, needing to get out, to get away from this situation, hands blind as he gropes for his jeans, carelessly tossed on the chair in the corner of his room.

"Im Duri, you will not talk to me that way."

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His mother's voice is calm, but the use of his full name stops him in his tracks, and he turns to her, misery tugging on his frame, oppressive and overwhelming. She's standing beside his bed, drawn up to her full height, two inches smaller than him and yet towering over him in all her exquisite power.

"Please, eomma..."

It comes out in a whisper, all the air gone from his lungs, and it breaks on a sob.

She looks at him, something soft and sympathetic in her eyes, but she doesn't waver, her jaw set and posture erect, stern.

"It's done, Duri-yah. We leave in two weeks. All of us."

With that, she turns and leaves his room, and Duri crumples to the floor in a heap, crying until he runs out of tears, until his eyes hurt and his voice is cracked and hoarse.

He dresses quietly, then, and leaves without eating breakfast or saying goodbye, walking over to Hosu's place and waiting for him under the trees outside. They had plans to meet later on, and Duri is early, so he sits in the shade and watches Hosu's house.

When Hosu comes out and spots him, the happy look on his face breaks Duri's heart all over again.

He watches with a pain in his chest as the younger boy waves and crosses the street to him, looking excited and happy until he gets close enough to see Duri's face clearly. The way the happy look fades into one of shock and concern makes Duri want to cry all over again, but he swallows the tears that sting at the back of his throat.

"Hyung? What happened?"

Duri shakes his head, unable to voice what he needs to without breaking into pieces.

"Don't, Hobah, just, can we just, let's go somewhere, somewhere we can be alone, please."

Hosu nods, worry pulling dark lines into his features, staining them in ways that amplify the ache in Duri.

"Where, hyung? I take it we can't go to yours?"

"No, not mine. Can we – maybe the park? That spot we found?"

Hosu nods, slow, thoughtful.

"Okay, yeah, okay hyung. Come on, let's go."

He holds out his hand to pull Duri up off the ground, and the warmth of his hand is so familiar, so sweet and beloved, it makes Duri want to crawl inside him and disappear. The sob at the back of his teeth is traitorous, pushing its way out, and he swallows it down, rough hands wiping his eyes in short, angry strokes.

They walk in silence, side by side, Hosu touching gently, cautiously, every chance he gets. A supposed accidental brush of fingers, a gentle press of a palm in the small of his back, a shoulder brushing by, Hosu's way of imparting comfort, careful glances at Duri exposing his poorly hidden worry and fear.

The train ride is silent, too, aching so, Duri locked in a battle with himself to gain control over his emotions, over the situation, to be *strong*, to be a good hyung. Hosu's dark, worried eyes weigh

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heavily on him, sparking a deep need to protect and nurture. With every minute that passes, the need to make sure Hosu is okay, to find a way out of this situation that will mean Hosu doesn't get hurt, becomes greater and greater.

As the minutes pass, the answer starts to feel obvious, simple, the solution entirely achievable. Duri needs to convince his parents to not go, or convince them to let him stay behind. There is no other choice. Leaving is not an option.

By the time they reach their stop, Duri has convinced himself that he can *fix this*, that he can make his parents see reason, make them see that Duri is where he belongs.

Calm settles on him, reassurance that he'll be able to stay feeling like a certainty by the time it settles in his belly. He'll keep the secret, for now, and not tell Hosu until he has better news, until he can look the boy in the eye, smile and say, truthfully, *hey my parents wanted to leave but I fixed it, everything is okay.*

He feels lighter, having clarity, and looks over at Hosu with a genuine smile, a little sad around the edges, still, but it's real, and the worried lines on Hosu's face relax just a little.

"Hyung?" he whispers, "Are you okay?"

Duri looks down, tangling their fingers together on his lap under the welcome secrecy of his jacket. He nods and smiles up at Hosu again, face soft.

"Yeah, Hobah, hyung's okay. Everything will be okay. I'm sorry I scared you."

"What happened, hyung? Can you – can you tell me?"

Duri nods.

"I will, Hobah, just – not today, okay? Let's just go and have a nice afternoon, and I'll tell you later."

Uncertainty still hovers around Hosu, but trust weighs heavier, and he nods along.

"Okay, hyung."

The afternoon passes like many before it. Hosu is subdued at first, colours still muted, as worry sits heavy on his frame, but Duri's conviction that he will fix the situation shakes loose his sad mood until he's able to joke with Hosu and make them both laugh.

They sit at the park until Duri's tummy rumbling reminds him he left home without breakfast, and they make their way over to the shops, where Duri treats them both to large portions of hotteok. They eat, sitting by the river, fingers and faces sticky and sweet. Duri feels reckless, wrapped in a bubble, the emotions of the day giving him a rush of adrenaline that makes him feel invincible.

When Hosu looks at him with a smile and sticky sweetness on his lips, Duri reaches over, thoughtless, thumb skimming along Hosu's skin to gather the stickiness, then sucks it into his own mouth, lips and tongue curling around the digit.

Hosu stares, open mouthed, shock mixing with arousal in his belly, and he swallows hard.

"Um...hyung?"

"Hmmm, Hobah?"

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“Can we – um, can we go now?”

Duri hums.

“Where to, Hobah?”

“Um. Anywhere? Maybe, um, somewhere private?”

Hosu’s cheeks are pink, and Duri grins and can’t help but feel giddy at that. And as they run to the nearest apartment block with their hands linked, feeling brave and invisible, Duri’s certainty that everything will be alright grows, pushing out the fear.

And as they sneak into the stairwell and press together in the shadowy space under the stairwell, hands and mouths eager and greedy in a rush of heady excitement, he almost forgets about the deadline hanging over his head, the fearful prospect of losing this boy.

And as he takes Hosu’s air, as Hosu steals his, as they keep each other quiet and breathless under the stairs, the feeling that *everything will be okay* gets passed between them, lip to lip, tongue to tongue, until it settles in their chests, far down where it feels safe.

*

Duri tries.

He tries everything he can, over the next week. He begs, he pleads, he screams and cries, he bargains and cajoles, he even threatens.

Nothing works.

His parents are unrelenting, unsympathetic to his plight, firm in their conviction that the family must stay together and unmovable in their insistence that the transfer must happen, that it is an irrevocable fact, a mere inconvenience Duri will have to learn to live with.

As the days wear on and his attempts to convince them fail time and time again, Duri withdraws. The fear that things *will not be alright* first scratches at his skin, persistent and irritating, then tunnels deeper, digging its way into his flesh, making its home there.

Hosu notices, of course. By the end of the first week, Duri is undeniably quiet and morose, and it’s impossible to hide from Hosu, screaming into the space between them in loud, obnoxious waves.

Anxiety about the cause of Duri’s mood is starting to eat away at Hosu. The old insecurity that Duri might finally be working out that Hosu isn’t *worthy*, that he’s not good enough for him, not interesting enough, that they *don’t fit* after all, comes back with a vengeance, a cold flare in Hosu’s belly.

Duri finally has no choice but to break Hosu’s heart on the Saturday, halfway through his last two weeks in Gwangju.

They’re in Duri’s room, lying on his bed, and Hosu is in the middle of a story when he suddenly stops, words tapering off on a sudden exhale.

Duri is slow to notice, distracted as he is.

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“Hyung?”

Hosu’s voice is shaky, unmoored, full of broken fears and bitten-off syllables, and tears sit fat and shiny in the corners of his eyes.

“What’s wrong, hyung? Are you...do you....”

Hosu falls silent, and a tear breaks loose, traitorous, cutting an unwelcome track down his cheek and onto the sheets. Duri’s heart clenches.

“Hobah? Hey, what’s wrong?”

He reaches out, aching, fingertips brushing Hosu’s cheek, trying to push comfort into the boy’s skin, but Hosu’s eyes squeeze shut and an errant sob breaks loose.

“Hobah! What’s wrong, what’s going on?”

Hosu’s voice bursts out of him, pinched and high and anxious and *all wrong*.

“You – you need to tell me, hyung! If you don’t – if you don’t want me anymore, you need to just – just tell me! I can’t take this!”

It’s painful, how far off the truth it is, it’s full of badness and and wrongness and it hurts to hear. The taste of panic is sharp and acidic on Duri’s tongue.

“What? Hobah, no! That’s not it, I promise! Oh no, come here!”

Hosu feels himself be pulled into Duri’s chest then, strong arms wrapping him up as he cries, and it settles something inside him for a moment or two, offers a gentle relief amidst the pain and desperation. It’s when he feels Duri’s chest shake that he realises Duri is crying too, and the feeling of panic is back in full force, overwhelming him as he stares at Duri, eyes wide and desperate.

“Hyung! Just tell me! Whatever it is, you have to tell me!”

Duri sobs, then, shoulders shaking, face buried into Hosu’s shoulder, hiding, trying to stay invisible for just a little longer, to avoid hurting Hosu for just a little longer.

It’s Hosu’s small, broken *please, hyung*, that finally does it, finally gives him the push he needs to crack open the bad thing he’s hiding.

His smile is watery and wrong as he pulls back, both hands wiping at his face, and Hosu doesn’t smile back, can’t, eyes full of fear.

“I’m sorry, Hobah, hyung’s sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you. It’s just, I....shit. Oh shit, baby, hyung’s so sorry....they’re...my parents, they’re.....we’re moving again, Hobah. I have to leave.”

The room goes utterly silent, and the walls seem closer, suddenly, looming like spectres in Hosu’s periphery. He can’t feel his feet, or his hands, or his face, and his lungs won’t work, they’re not moving, he’s not breathing, and then suddenly, he is, but he’s breathing too fast, too much, too soon.

“No. What? No! Hyung, no!”

Panic wells up inside him and he’s heaving, scrambling, pushing Duri away and rolling off the bed.

“Hobah, wait!”

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"No, hyung, you can't! You promised! You promised me!"

His voice breaks on the words, and Duri wants to break with it. He reaches for Hosu, but Hosu pulls away, distraught.

"No! Don't touch me! You *promised*, hyung, you said we'd always be together, that we'd always be here, you can't *leave!*"

He's screaming now, and Duri does break, all his pieces tumbling to the ground, hapless.

"I tried, Hobah, I did, they won't let me stay! I don't want to leave, I want to stay so much, please, Hobah, don't be angry!"

But Hosu hurts, everything hurts, his heart hurts and his lungs hurt and the air hurts and Duri is *leaving*, he was right, Duri doesn't want him, Duri said he'd stay but he *lied*.

"You're *lying!* You're just saying it because you don't want me anymore, you'd find a way to stay if you wanted to!"

He's backing away from the bed, tripping over his feet as he goes, panic bursting out of his chest and making him want to run, anywhere, away, away from here.

Duri scrambles off the bed after him.

"Hobah, no, wait! Please, baby, don't, it's the truth, I want to stay so much but they *won't let me*, please, you have to believe me!"

"You're *lying!* Leave me alone!"

The words come out on a scream as Hosu slams open the door and runs out of the room, feet stumbling blindly down the stairs, running, running, out the front door and up the road, half blind with tears running down his face.

Duri collapses on the floor in his room and cries until he can't feel his body anymore.

*

Hosu runs until his lungs give out, then he walks until his feet are sore, willing his existence to numbness.

When he finally walks in the door at home it's dark out and dinner is served, cooling on the table between the unforgiving figures of his family.

"Where have you been?"

His father's voice is hard, marble, and Hosu swallows, thankful that at least the tears have stopped, even through the knowledge his eyes must be red and swollen.

"I'm – I'm sorry, appa, I didn't mean to be late for dinner, I – I was out with Duri-hyung and lost track of time."

His father grunts, dissatisfaction loud in his voice and his body.

"What sort of a hyung can't get his dongsaeng home in time for dinner?"

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Hosu bites his tongue on the sharp retort that jumps up behind his teeth. Defending Duri in front of his father will only get him into more trouble, and Duri won't be here soon anyway, there is no point.

"Yes, sir."

He mumbles it, eyes down, aiming for contrite. His mother and sister sit silently, eyes down, listening to the exchange taking place.

There is a beat, two, then his father huffs.

"Well, don't just stand there, go wash up for dinner!"

Hosu nods, aching, turning and moving off to the bathroom, feet heavier than they have a right to be, every step a chore.

His face in the bathroom mirror looks miserable, torn, red-eyed and puffy, and he swallows the tears that burn at the back of his throat at the visual reminder of everything that's happened this afternoon.

He makes his way back to the dinner table and sits quietly, unable to bring himself to eat, pushing the few morsels he's put on his plate around with his chopsticks, listlessness in his movements. His mother clacks her tongue at him softly, annoyed at his lack of manners, and fusses, putting a few more pieces on his sparsely populated plate.

Her voice is gentle as she chides him, something just a little shy of soft, but it still stings.

"Hosu-ah! What is the matter with you, don't play with your food!"

"Sorry, eomma."

It comes out robotic, mechanical, and all it does is aggravate his father, who reaches over from his other side and flicks his ear sharply.

"What's the matter with you, you look like you sucked a lemon?!"

Tears fill Hosu's eyes as he cups his ear reflexively. His chest tightens and he feels desperate for gentle touch, for a hug, for his mother to show her gentle, comforting side. He looks at her, eyes watery and pleading.

"Duri-hyung is leaving."

"Oh."

His mother seems to soften a little, then, going quiet, her eyes gentling. She pats his hand once, twice, but doesn't reach out for him, doesn't open her arms and invite him to cuddle like she used to when he was little.

Hosu shrivels.

On his other side, his father huffs, and Hosu can feel the annoyance radiating off him in toxic waves.

"Good. Too attached to that boy anyway, it's unseemly. Boys shouldn't be so clingy."

Hosu's face crumples, and it's all he can do to choke out *may I be excused?* before running up the stairs with his father's dismissive wave still fading from the air.

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Hosu cries himself to sleep.

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Duri's last week in Gwangju is the loneliest, most desperate time of his young life.

Hosu won't answer his calls, doesn't respond to texts, and the rejection stings, unforgiving, sharp, more painful than anything Duri has ever experienced.

On Monday morning, Duri waits outside Hosu's house for him to leave for school, hope and nerves warring for attention in the pit in his stomach.

Hosu doesn't show.

With dread in his chest and his heart in his mouth, Duri eventually gives up and catches the train alone, showing up to school an hour late, miserable and on the verge of tears.

The morning drags on, unrelenting, unnoticed, passing Duri by in a daze. Hosu doesn't wait for him at the end of morning classes, either, and it's all Duri can do not to cry. He wanders the school grounds with his lunch, lead in his shoes, eyes roaming his surroundings, looking for Hosu.

His heart clenches when he sees him, sitting alone under a tree, a small, sad figure, unwelcoming and yet still pulling at Duri, still tugging him forward, helpless and with a lump in his throat.

Hosu doesn't look up when Duri stops beside him, and it feels like a punch to the gut, cruel and vicious.

"Hobah..."

"Don't, hyung."

Hosu looks broken, and Duri's insides twist and cry out.

"Hobah, please, can we talk?"

Hosu's head shake is furious, and he wipes his eyes angrily, hands shaking, body taut.

"I said don't, Duri. Just go. This is hard enough as it is, just leave me alone, please."

Duri breaks, tears streaming down his face as he looks down on Hosu, uncaring of how it looks, desperate to break through Hosu's walls, to reach the soft, hurting boy inside them.

"Please, Hobah, don't do this!"

"I said *leave me alone!*"

It comes out on a scream, and heads across the school yard swivel in their direction, lecherous for gossip.

Hosu pushes himself up, movements jerky and irate, wiping his face with the back of his hands. He grabs his backpack and turns, walking away, shoulders tense and posture slouched, angry and hurting.

Duri feels every one of Hosu's steps as he treads on the pieces of his heart.

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Hosu cries all the way home.

The pain is like nothing he's ever experienced or wants to experience again. He feels broken, his insides ripped out, eviscerated.

He never, ever imagined it could feel like this, never thought anyone could ever hurt him like this. The fact that it's *Duri* who's doing this to him makes it that much worse.

Duri, who he thought was his person.

Duri, who he thought *saw him*.

Duri, who told him he shone, that he was special, that he was loved.

Duri, who said he loved him and would always be with him.

Duri, who lied.

When he gets home, he rips his uniform off and crawls into bed in his boxers, hiding under the covers against the November cold, shivering with the chill and shaking with his sobs.

He never should have let Duri get so close that he could hurt him.

This never would have happened if he'd *steered clear*, if he'd stayed away and not given into his *feelings*, if he'd just *listened* to his father about the things *boys don't do*.

He was wrong, they were wrong, and his father was right, justified in all his callousness, in his judgments.

This is the reason why boys don't.

Because when they do, people get hurt.

People like Hosu, people with weak hearts and tender insides who make bad choices.

As Hosu cries and follows his circular logic into a space where he'll learn to harden his heart, he begins the slow process of digging up the roots he allowed Duri to put down in his chest, boxing up all the feelings marked *Duri* and *first love* and *boys*.

He never realises that by boxing them up, he also protects them and keeps them safe.

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Duri doesn't return to school.

He spends the last of his days in Gwangju moving through his house like a zombie, crying frequently and, like Hosu, beginning the slow process of divorcing himself from everything that made Gwangju home.

Our Gentle Sin - a novel by Tara Lemana

From Hosu.

It's a slow untying of threads, a careful uprooting that hurts in a vicious, cruel, biting way. It's a pain that digs deep, settling into an ache in the marrow of his bones, permanent and irreparable.

His mother watches him, eyes soft and knowing, wrapping him up in warm hugs whenever he allows it, which isn't often.

The guilt over having made promises to Hosu he should have known better than to make is crippling, the sting of it permanently stabbing his insides. Every time something reminds him of Hosu, a fresh wave of tears overwhelms him, and anguish clogs his airways.

He packs up all the little mementos of Hosu, the mix tape, the photos, the random notes and Hosu's t-shirt, left on his bed one day after one of their afternoons together. All of it goes in a box for safe keeping, along with everything he feels, everything he dreamed of, to be unpacked at a later date.

As he leaves Gwangju behind for Seoul, Duri reluctantly closes the door on Hosu and everything they had together, breathes deeply until he thinks he feels his old resilience settle back on him the way it used to do before he met Hosu.

He's never hated being resilient more than he does right now.

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Chapter 3

Gwangju, 2006

Stitching himself back together is a long, arduous process for Hosu.

He withdraws into himself for months, inhabiting his skin like armour, a shell that separates him from the outside world, while he repairs his wounded insides stitch by aching stitch.

He keeps to himself, reticent, and it's easy to do, the drifting away of his few other friends long since complete, edged out by Duri, his attention and adoration eclipsing their half-hearted friendship without even trying.

Hosu is ignorant to the way his shine dulls, scuffed up and matted by his anguish, by the pieces of his broken heart that rub against it until it's raw and scratched, until the polish wears off all the things that made him so bright in Duri's eyes. The things that made him *Hosu*, that made him different and special, made him *soft*, the things that made him *fit* with Duri.

Little by little, piecemeal, he takes all those fragile, precious things and tucks them into the box marked *Boys Don't*, the box that holds Duri and all the things he meant to Hosu, all the things they did, all the things he made him feel. The box sits, shut up tight, carried under his breastbone, heavy, aching when the world smells like rain.

Our Gentle Sin - a novel by Tara Lemana

He moves through life like a shadow for a long time, months, years even, going through the motions of what's expected of him, doing his best to do all the things *boys do*.

He doesn't hear from Duri, stills his fingers on the urge to dial Duri's number time and time again, until the day he erases that last vestige of Duri, deleting the digits from his phone. A clean, painful break, severed strings carefully tucked away in a precious, fragile tangle deep between his lungs.

Gwangju, 2009

Hosu is nineteen and in his last year of school when he meets Harin. She's a firework, full of spark and bite, the same age as Hosu but in some ways, years older, wizened. Like Duri, Harin barges into his life without stopping to ask whether he wants her there, deciding they will be friends whether he has room for her in his life and his heart or not.

It's a familiar dynamic, comforting. Harin is funny and warm, outspoken and different, bright in a blue kind of way, underestimated and powerful. Like Hosu, she doesn't quite *fit*, refusing to engage with the gossip culture that thrives on the innate insecurities and competitiveness of teenaged girls. Her lack of filter and refusal to play up her looks like most of the girls in school put her on the outs with boys and girls alike, making her a target for derision and jealousy, whispers in hallways that sting the skin with their sharpness when they filter through.

These things that put Harin on the outs with others are precisely the things that make Hosu breathe easy around her, the things that make him feel like they are in parallel, like she is *safe*.

His friendship with Harin is steeped in honesty, cast in simple lines, clear and unassuming. What he sees is what he gets, and it's refreshing, reassuring, a warm and gentle thing that cradles him. Harin never makes him feel judged or like he's *lacking*, she just seems to like Hosu as he is, gives him space to talk or stay quiet, knowing when to tease to lighten Hosu's mood and when to ask questions to reach in and pull out the answers he's too afraid to give without her gentle encouragement.

Slowly but surely, Harin breaks down some of Hosu's barriers. She makes him laugh a lot, pulling giggles out of him in a way he hasn't experienced since Duri left, and it's healing, recharging. She drags him to the arcade he used to go with Duri, unaware of the painful memories it holds, and her raucous laughter and lighthearted jokes help him recalibrate to allow the space back into his sphere, to wall off the pain and find joy and laughter in a place that had come to symbolise *hurt*.

She becomes a fixture in his life, a best friend, erasing the all-pervasive loneliness he's lived with since Duri left.

The whispers around school have it that they are a couple, names always linked, and they let the rumours stand unaddressed, but the truth is that they are pieces of the same puzzle, two misfits drawn to each other for comfort and friendship.

There is a moment, brief and fleeting, when they try to be something else to each other, try to tie some of the loose threads they haven't attempted to join before. Between one breath and the next, Harin leans close and presses a warm kiss to Hosu's lips, entirely unexpected but not unpleasant. Her lips are soft and supple, a little wet, the air around him is sweet with the scent of her and Hosu is at peace, feeling safe, safe enough to allow the moment, to allow the kiss, as puzzling as it is.

Our Gentle Sin - a novel by Tara Lemana

His mind jumps back to the memories tucked away in the box of secrets he carries, his only frame of reference, his box of shame and desire, of confusion and love and hurt.

Kissing Duri was fire, heat, dizziness, sweetness, it was breathless and amazing and arousing.

Kissing Harin is nothing like that.

Kissing Harin is sweet, gentle, friendly, calm, pleasant, a little weird.

A part of him thinks kissing her should feel different than it does, that it should make him feel all the things he felt with Duri, because she is who he is *supposed to* want to kiss, but it doesn't.

He doesn't.

And then she's pulling back, expression bemused, as if considering some complicated puzzle with a picture that doesn't make sense, all the right elements in all the wrong colours.

Harin shakes her head, sighing light and airy, lips still pink and shiny from their kiss.

"Just checking."

Hosu laughs, unaffected, light.

"Just checking?"

"Yeah. You're so lovely, Su-ah, it'd be nice if we could, you know, be more, but nope. Just friends."

Relief flutters in Hosu's chest, and it's unexpected, a feeling he isn't quite prepared for. A part of him thinks that he should probably feel sad that she doesn't like him like that, doesn't want the other parts of him, but he doesn't, he feels giddy, laughter spilling over, tumbling out between them, because he doesn't feel that way either.

"Definitely just friends," he agrees, with cheeks that ache from smiling.

With Harin by his side, the world feels a little less overwhelming, a little more like something he's capable of navigating, feels *finite*. He lets her see more of himself than anyone else, more of his colours, though even with her, he never opens the box marked *Boys Don't*, doesn't tell her about Duri or the things he made him feel, too afraid of showing anyone his most shameful, darkest shades of grey.

Being friends with Harin is healing. Her friendship is a balm that seeps into Hosu, filling many of his fissures with love and starlight, bright and shining. She reminds him he is worth something, that he has value to someone besides his mother, that his colours are beautiful. She lets him recharge his batteries with hugs and laughter, and after one day confessing his need for touch while sadness and need licked at his insides, she even allows him to hold her hand from time to time, fingers slotting together in an approximation of fulfillment.

She swats him on the back of the head when she thinks he's being dumb, while simultaneously reminding him he is her single most favourite person on the planet, and between the two extremes, the blue and the yellow, manages to restore enough of his self-esteem to help Hosu pick up the threads of his life and carefully restart his tapestry.

Hosu begins to bloom again, little by little, not like before, and not as brightly, never as brightly, but still, he finds some of himself again.

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She pushes him to put his softer parts out there, and with his heart in his mouth, he does, auditioning for the school dance team. She screams when he tells her he got in and buys him hotteok and Sprite to celebrate, grinning widely while his knees bounce in jittery excitement.

He keeps it from his family, this public softness, afraid of his father's drawn brows, his dark derision, but having Harin's support is something, it's enough, it's not the gold he'd like but it's the silver he needs.

Dance is good for him, healing parts of him he didn't know were broken, filling in breaks and brightening colours.

He grows. In more ways than one, Hosu grows. The more he practices, the stronger and fitter he gets in both mind and body. At nineteen he is going through his growth spurt, eating everything in sight and shooting up. Dance helps shape his wiry body into a long, lean and muscular frame that moves with grace and certainty. As his baby fat disappears and his cheeks thin, his jaw becomes sharper, his features more pronounced. His gait changes, a dancer's grace and confidence leaking into his movements, bleeding through into everything he does.

More and more, he feels eyes on him as he moves around the school, catches his name in whispered conversations as he walks past. It's a strange sensation, to be noticed, looked at, talked about, thrust into the limelight in a sudden rush of interest, for someone so used to being invisible.

Harin's regular presence at his side offers some protection, a ward against all but the most brazen girls, those for whom the possibility of Hosu being attached is no deterrent as they approach him, hips swinging and lashes flirting, flimsy excuses at the ready. Harin scoffs at them, wary and protective, scathing in her comebacks.

Hosu feels uncomfortable with it all, harried by the attention, by the giggly chatter from girls who suddenly, desperately, need to borrow a pencil or to ask him some inane question.

But there are some that make him more uncomfortable than others.

The corner table in the cafeteria where he's sitting with Harin one Thursday is rickety, one leg a little shorter, like an old injury. Hosu folds a napkin and tucks it under the offending leg, smiling softly at the story Harin is telling him, a fluidly disparaging narrative about some project she's meant to be doing with three girls who refuse to do anything but talk about nail polish colours.

The deep, vaguely familiar voice that interrupts her story is warm and pleasant.

"Um, excuse me, Hosu, right?"

The warmth from that voice seeps into Hosu and somehow locks his tongue, glues it to his teeth, unmovable. All Hosu can do is stare, wide-eyed and scared, and nod, mute. The boy smiles, all teeth and cheeks and sparkly eyes, and Hosu's stomach shivers and tries to climb up into his chest cavity.

"I'm Hyungwon, I'm in your math class?"

He phrases it like a question, hesitant, as if he needs Hosu to confirm, so Hosu does, still mute, useless mouth full of useless tongue.

"Yeah, um, so, I missed class yesterday, and um, just wondering if you might have notes I could copy?"

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He stands just a little too close, a little too eager, fingertips drumming softly on the tabletop between Hosu and Harin, and she watches closely, invested, chin resting on her hand, lips curling at the edges.

There's a rushing in Hosu's chest, and his breath feels heavy, and it takes him a little too long to realise Hyungwon is waiting for an answer, eyes wide, nerves tugging his eyelashes into endearing blinks. When Harin kicks him under the table, he swallows hard and coughs, discomfort and something else, something warm and familiar fluttering low in his belly.

"Um, ehh, yeah, sure, no problem."

His smile feels like an awkward, uncomfortable stretch on his face, false and pained, but Hyungwon doesn't seem to notice, barreling ahead.

"Oh awesome, thanks man! When can I – um, maybe I can meet you somewhere to grab them off you?"

His fingers brush Hosu's forearm with the request, gentle, sweet, and Harin doesn't miss it, eyebrows climbing up behind her black bangs, mouth opening on a small *oh*. She looks at Hosu, stares, face open and challenging, the curl on her lips still lingering, and Hosu panics.

He sits up, pulls away, withdraws his arm, heart stuttering in his chest and dark pinks flushing his neck and cheeks, loud and traitorous.

"Um, eh, I mean, um..."

He feels hot, his scalp burning, palms sweating, tongue thick and awkward, all his words stuck in his throat. But Harin sees, as she sees everything, and comes to his rescue, body leaning forward across the table, hand gently touching Hyungwon's arm, smile warm and comforting.

"You can grab them off him in the next class."

Hyungwon's face falls, disappointment emphatic in the soft lines on his features, but he nods.

"Okay, yeah, sure, sure. Thanks, Hosu!"

He waves, and his smile is shy as he turns and walks back to the table of his grinning friends, hands in his pockets and shoulders hunched.

The kick to his shin hurts more, this time, bruise staining the already tender leg, and Hosu hisses.

"Rinie! Stop kicking me!"

She widens her eyes at him, somehow pouring endless meaning into the simple gesture.

"What the hell was *that*?"

And it's too much, too much to think about, too much to talk about, these things that stray too close to what *boys don't*, so he shrugs.

"Don't know what you're talking about."

Harin kicks him again.

"Ow, Rin, stop!!"

"Then stop lying to me! What the hell was that??"

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He doesn't mean to whine, doesn't mean to give anything away, but it slips out, unheeded, shameful.

"I don't know! He wants notes, what do you want me to do about it?"

"*He wants notes!*" Harin's mimicry is perfect, embarrassing, eyes rolling so hard Hosu thinks it must hurt.

"He doesn't want your notes, you moron, he wants to jump your bones!"

Hosu chokes on his strawberry milk, snorting it out of his nose.

"Oh my god, shut up!"

Hosu feels hot everywhere, fire licking at his ears, his neck and all over his chest.

Harin leans back, grin wide and satisfied, smug.

"Well, he does."

It's mortifying, and Hosu's skin is crawling with unwanted thoughts, unwanted feelings, and the churning in his stomach is nauseating. He hides behind his hands.

"Shut up, Rinie, you're being gross!"

There's a pause, a breath, then Harin's pulling at his hands, rough, annoyance in her fingertips.

"Hey!"

Hosu looks at her, the way she's leaning forward on the table, mouth and eyes tight, looking straight at him, straight *through* him.

"Don't be a dick. It's not gross. Even if *you're* not into guys, it's not gross for him to be."

There's a lump in his throat, and his tongue feels heavy with unsaid words, words that want to leap out across the table and spill all his darkest secrets to Harin, show her *what's in the box* and have her accept him just as easily as she just accepted Hyungwon, but he bites down on them, afraid.

"Yeah, okay, sorry. Just, not for me, you know."

His eyes won't stay on hers, straying everywhere else but there. When they flit back to her for a moment, she's staring straight at him, and a small voice at the back of his head screeches *she knows, she knows, she knows*.

After a pause that's far too long, she sighs, nodding, resignation or something like it softening the pull in her brows.

"Sure, Su-ah. Not for you."

Lunch hour stretches out long and thin, and every time Hosu looks up, he catches Hyungwon's wide eyes on him, sees the boy flushing and quickly looking away when he realises he's been caught.

It takes a long time for the prickly heat under Hosu's skin to settle down.

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Hyungwon remains a fixture in Hosu's periphery for weeks.

The smiles he throws at Hosu across hallways or classrooms dust shy shades of pink high on his cheekbones and in behind Hosu's ribs.

He seeks Hosu out some lunchtimes, words soft-spoken and fingertips eager, to ask a question or initiate a conversation about something random.

Hosu is terrified.

The looks Hyungwon offers him are far too beguiling, pulling at something inside him that he knows belongs in the box under his sternum, something he can't allow out. The gentle touches to Hosu's hand or his arm stir up too much buzzing under his skin and make it hard to think.

Sometimes Hyungwon will spill reckless words between them, words that pull heady laughter out of Hosu, full and unreserved, until it catches on something in Hosu's throat, a sharp awareness of the things that *boys don't*, and his teeth clamp down on the things welling up inside him, shutting everything down. Hosu will panic, then, pull his walls up, tear his eyes away from Hyungwon, cut his words down to the bare minimum, until Hyungwon stills, face falling, and pulls away.

Eventually, Hyungwon stops trying to talk to him, pulling back, only offering him small smiles across rooms, and eventually, not even that.

It hurts, it does, it stings, but not as much as it would if he let Hyungwon get close, not as much as it would if he opened that box.

Nothing good could come from that.

And so Hosu swallows hard, lifts his chin, and steers clear of Hyungwon and all the shades of possible hurt hidden inside his fingertips.

*

Hayoon isn't like the other girls.

She reminds Hosu, in sidelong, loud ways, of himself. Harin sees it, too, and she lets it be known in her typical, unfettered manner when she first meets the girl.

"Oh my god, Su-ah, she's like, your twin! You have the same freaking laugh!"

"We do not!" Hosu protests.

But they do. Hayoon's laugh is boisterous and infectious, a little obnoxious, just like Hosu's, bright slashes of joy cutting through the air on every exhale. Her grin is wide, welcoming, and her teeth are a little crooked, and the way her eyes scrunch up and her dimples pop when she laughs makes Hosu want to coo at her.

She's a year below Hosu and Harin, and a new recruit to the dance team, and from the first time they meet, comfort swells between them. Being with Hayoon feels unburdened by the fawning that so exhausts Hosu about other girls. Hayoon is funny and relaxed around him, full of the kind of

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boundless energy Hosu has stored up in his own bones, and their mutual love of dance provides them with instant common ground on which to bond.

When she invites Hosu out to see a movie, he doesn't think it's a date, feels secure in the breezy friendship they've built. But Harin says it is, eyes rolling and head shaking at his naivete, and that makes a nervous flutter start up below his breastbone that he pushes down with both hands.

They sit together, knees touching, a bucket of popcorn wedged between them, and Hayoon's fingers brush his, softly, and it's nice.

The movie is funny, and she laughs her loud *hahaha* laugh, and like dominoes it kicks Hosu's laugh off too, and he feels happy and warm, and that's nice too.

When she leans her head on his shoulder, she smells good, and it's lovely, soothing.

When he walks her home and they stand uncertainly outside her front door, the air feels heavy, loaded with expectation, and that's different, new, and Hosu isn't sure what to do with that. He shuffles his feet and stammers his way through small talk about the movie, until Hayoon smiles, dimples deepening, tangles her fingers with his, and leans in to kiss his cheek. It spooks him, and his breath catches, and he turns, her lips brushing the corner of his mouth instead, and Hosu feels his cheeks heat up, flustered.

She stays there, close, watching him with wide eyes, and it feels like he's supposed to do something, like it's *his turn*, like she'll be embarrassed if he doesn't *kiss her back*. Hayoon is his friend, and she's lovely, and she's the kind of girl he's *supposed to* like. And he does, he does like her, in the way he likes Harin, in a way that's sweet and gentle and decidedly devoid of any sexual feelings.

But she's his friend, and he doesn't want to hurt her feelings or make her feel embarrassed, so he lets the weight of expectation filter from the air into his skin, into his bones, lets it make his decisions for him as he turns in to face her and leans down a little to kiss her, soft lips on soft lips. She sighs, and he feels the feathery breath of air pass into his mouth, and it's familiar and yet so different.

Kissing Hayoon is lovely, it's gentle and sweet and safe. There's no heat in it for Hosu, no breathlessness or needy pulling, but it's nice in all its softness. It makes him curious what it would take for him to feel that heat, for it to feel like he knows it can, for urgency to creep into the spaces between his ribs and the hollow in his pelvis, and so he tests the waters, licking along her smooth, pink lips. The way she lets out a soft little moan and opens up for him is interesting, intriguing, and a certain pride flutters soft wings inside his ribcage, so he experiments a little further, slips his tongue past her teeth to lick into her mouth.

Hayoon drinks him in, hands tangled in his t-shirt and body pressed up against him, soft and eager, and Hosu thinks that *this is it, this is what it's meant to be like*. Only it's nothing like what he knows it can be, there's no lava under his skin, no aching in his lungs, no heat in his groin, no urgency in his hands. But this is what *boys do*.

And so he kisses her again and again, and tells himself that this is how it's meant to feel, *this* is right, and anything else is *sin*.

He kisses her to drown out the ghost of Duri's lips on his.

He kisses her to banish the sound of Duri's moans against his teeth.

He kisses her to forget the feeling of Duri's hands on his body.

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He kisses her to exile the memory of Duri falling apart underneath him.

He kisses her to drive away the knowledge that he fell apart for Duri.

He kisses her to try and nail the box shut.

He kisses her to remember that *boys don't*.

*

They date for two months before they drift apart. It's not dramatic, or painful, it's just a gentle shift back to something *less*.

For Hosu, it's a relief, a soft *ahhh* unfolding in his chest. As much as he doesn't mind kissing Hayoon, anything else makes an uncomfortable churning start up in his belly, and as the weeks go on, her gentle hints at *more* start to make him feel pressured, anxious.

The day she reaches out and strokes him over his pants while they're kissing on her bed, he panics, jolting upright and away, *away*, heart racing and skin crawling, mumbles about needing to *go home* spilling urgently between them.

They don't last long after that, just days, Hayoon letting him down gently, eyes full of *something* he doesn't care to look at too closely, mouth shaping careful words that say *we're better off as friends*.

Hosu agrees, heart and lungs and spine bursting with what he thinks is an unreasonable lightness.

When he tells Harin, she just hums and nods, eyes gentle and expression serious as they sink into his, heart and mouth full of genuine caring.

"Su-ah. You know you can tell me anything, right?"

And Hosu knows, feels it in his skin and the way his stomach settles around her, in the way her eyes are never full of anything but warmth and acceptance, in the way his words flow freely when they talk, but things that feel too hard to admit to yourself have no hope of being admitted to others, and so he just nods.

"Yeah, I know. Nothing to tell though. We just weren't suited."

Harin lets it go.

*

Gwangju, 2010

Hosu and Harin graduate high school.

It's an odd feeling, leaving the place he's spent the last six years behind, the hallways crowded with memories both good and bad, the classrooms full of ghosts. He spent so much of his time here

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lonely or desperately unhappy, the air feels loaded with those emotions, thick with them. The thought of leaving all of that behind, of stepping into a new place, free of history, free of eyes that think they know him, makes him feel buoyant.

Chonnam National University feels like a fresh start, a chance to reinvent himself, slip into a new skin, be whomever he wants to be, a person who *fits*, a person who isn't invisible or noticed too much.

He tries on different personalities like suits, those first few months. Harin watches him with baffled amusement as he struts around, erasing all traces of the shy, invisible boy he spent his years at High School being, determined not to be discarded again, not to let anyone too close, determined to decide for himself who he is. He works hard to hide his shy-but-bubbly nature and forces a purposely donned *rebel with a cause* persona, struggling to find his feet between who he is and who he thinks he'd like to be, who he thinks he needs to be to *fit* and to be safe from hurt.

His wardrobe reflects his inner struggle to figure out who he is. He starts out dressed in all black, like some special forces want to be in combat boots and army fatigues, determined to intimidate and keep people at bay.

It doesn't work, of course. His bubblyness sneaks out through the cracks in his persona, leaking out in bright, shiny rays at the merest provocation. Harin seems to make it her mission to thwart his attempts at becoming someone else by purposely making him laugh in public, carefully destroying his badass persona one giggle at a time. She buys him things she knows he'll love, brightly coloured, sparkly things no self-respecting *badass* should carry, and complains if he doesn't carry them with him in his backpack or on his person. Hosu somehow finds his black backpack slowly overtaken with bright patches and glittery keychains, his pens decorated with bouncy or fluffy pen toppers, and he builds up a collection of brightly coloured snapbacks, all thanks to Harin.

It annoys him at first, but there's a quiet thrill at seeing these defiant little touches that scream *Hosu*, at knowing Harin, this person who is so important to him, *sees* and values this softer part of him and wants to share it with the world. Slowly but surely, he stops trying quite so hard to be someone he's not, allows a little softness to leak into who he presents to the world at CNU, a little pink or purple into his black wardrobe, a little joy into his manufactured starkness.

He majors in business, unreservedly hating every minute of it, but his dance minor lifts his days immensely. He resents his father for refusing to allow him to choose his own major, for ending all conversation about the subject with a cold *as long as I'm paying, you'll do as I tell you*, but is quietly proud of himself for not giving up on dance altogether, for keeping it in his life even if it's not as a career. It's as much defiance of his father as he is capable of, a nerve wracking, frightening thing, and it's electrifying to know he has the capacity to take something for himself when he wants it enough.

Staying at the student dorms is another quiet victory for Hosu.

Strictly speaking, he could commute to the campus, but Hosu is desperate to get out from under his father's watchful, judging eye, and he manages to convince his mother that the nearly three-hour daily commute would interfere with his studies too much. A few gentle words from her help convince his father, and Hosu is signed up for a room at one of the student dorms.

Moving into the dorms is a nerve wracking, exciting thing, loaded with anticipation. Harin, in her enduring role as his ever-faithful wingman, helps him move in, her own room already set up in a nearby dorm.

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Hosu's heart is rabbiting out of his chest as he stands in front of the closed door to his room, the first space he'll ever have that isn't under his father's scrutiny. Hope sits heavily in his belly that this will be a safe space, a place to come home to.

And then the door opens of its own accord, and Hosu is faced with a full-cheeked smile, instantly disarming, and something in his stomach unknots itself.

The boy is Jiyeong, Hosu's new roommate, and he meets Hosu's energy in equal measure, always seeming to harbour an ardent buzzing under his skin that's infectious, bleeding into Hosu when they're in close quarters. Jiyeong's talkative, and his eyes disappear when he laughs, which is often, and his bones do, too, causing him to crumple to the floor in a heap any time the giggles strike.

Friendship with Jiyeong is an easy, unavoidable thing, as natural as breathing. He knows everyone and his ready smile and good looks open every door, even the ones Hosu would have been too afraid to knock on. Hosu is the hyung, but those first weeks, it's Jiyeong who leads the way, who makes the introductions, who helps Hosu settle in.

They talk into the early morning hours, and it's effortless. Jiyeong shares easily and comfortably, and it's a thing of wonder to Hosu, this easy trust the boy hands him from the first day.

He mostly listens, at first, and Jiyeong seems content to let him, to wait out the time it takes Hosu to find his own surety, his own comfort level with the kind of openness that comes so freely to his roommate. And it comes, slowly, it grows as the weeks pass, as Hosu's walls slowly come down.

It's a month after Hosu moves into the dorm that Jiyeong throws him a curve ball that shakes Hosu, rattles him right down to the box he still carries in his chest.

It's a Thursday night, and both are home, sitting on the floor between their single beds, hands wrapped around sweaty beer bottles, their second. Hosu is pleasantly tipsy, a gentle tingling in his fingertips tells him, and his smile hurts his face where it sits, blinding in the shadowy room.

They've been here for an hour, and Hosu's backside is starting to hurt from sitting on the hard floor, but he's too tired and too lazy to move onto his bed, so he just wriggles. Jiyeong kicks out at his leg, halfhearted, the alcohol staggering his movements ever so slightly, making them a little haphazard, a little slow, foal-like.

"What's the matter with you?"

"Hyung. What's the matter with you, hyung."

Jiyeong, never sassier than when alcohol loosens his tongue and his limbs, rolls his eyes.

"Hyung," he parrots, tongue and lips careful, deliberate, "What's the matter with you, *hyung*?"

Hosu grimaces.

"M'butt hurts."

Jiyeong snorts at that, eyes locked firmly on his beer bottle, like it holds all the answers in the world.

"Just get on the bed then, *hyung*, give it a break."

And that sounds logical, it really does, only Hosu is drinking, and drinking really is better attempted while sitting up, so he shakes his head, morose without reason.

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“Can’t. Don’t drink and – lie down,” he finishes, frowning at his own lack of eloquence. Words were never his greatest talent, and they seem to be even harder to find tonight, shifty and recalcitrant as he tries to catch them. Jiyeong snorts again.

“Words to live by.”

It’s quiet then, for a little while, and it’s nice, comfortable. Hosu likes this part as much as he does their deep talks, the times when they sit and both allow silence to wrap around them, soft and soothing. He leans his head back onto his bed and closes his eyes, listening to the sounds of everyday life taking place outside their room, outside their bubble. Inside the room, the sounds are small, diminished, the humming of the small bar fridge, the small shuffling noises Jiyeong makes as he moves from time to time, both their breathing. It’s nice, domestic, peaceful.

When Jiyeong speaks again, Hosu doesn’t look up, stays leaning against his bed, eyes shut.

“Hyung?”

“Hmmm?”

“I kind of need to tell you something.”

And that’s different, because normally Jiyeong doesn’t preface his sharing with an announcement, allowing it to just slip out in the spaces between then and now, into the air that hangs around them, thin and unpopulated, waiting for syllables to fill it.

Hosu wills his body not to move, to feign indifference, to allow Jiyeong the space to not have to look at him while he shares whatever he’s about to share.

“Hmmm?” he hums again, just to let Jiyeong know he’s still listening, still present.

“I just. Okay, so the thing is, we’re sharing this room, right? And I might, like, want to, you know, bring someone home with me sometimes. For sex.”

Hosu snorts. There’s a little flutter of nerves at the back of his throat that always appears whenever sex is brought up, but he swallows it down, keeps his brave face on.

“Glad you clarified that, Yeong-ah. Okay, and?”

“Well, so I’d have to sexile you.”

And that makes sense, so Hosu nods. There have been nights in the past month when Jiyeong didn’t come back to their room until three am, quiet and carrying the scent of sweat and sex with him, and Hosu suspects his roommate has been sparing him from being sexiled by going to his partner’s room instead of his own.

He sighs, resigned.

“Yeah okay, just like, give me a text, yeah? I don’t fancy coming home to walk in on you getting freaky with some girl.”

There’s an uncomfortable pull in Hosu’s stomach at his own words. Sex is still something that fills him with anxiety, that tugs at the box under his sternum trying to let out the things he knows *boys don’t*, the things that stain his skin with sin in tumultuous shades of red. He can’t think of sex without thinking of Duri, and he can’t think of Duri without pain and anxiety and terrible, terrible guilt for how he allowed himself to feel and to be.

Our Gentle Sin - a novel by Tara Lemana

But Hosu is a boy, and there are expectations for how boys behave, and how they talk, and being free and easy when it comes to sex and sexual language is part of those expectations, and so he swallows his discomfort, pushes down the anxiety, and *talks like a boy* because that's what *boys do*.

Jiyeong laughs, but it sounds uncomfortable, and that pulls Hosu's attention back to his friend, away from his own anxiety around the topic. He lifts his head, opens his eyes.

"Yeong-ah? You okay?"

Jiyeong's chuckle is shivery, nervous, and that's new too, that's a thing Hosu's never seen before, not from Jiyeong, who is larger than life, loud and gregarious.

"Yeah...it's just. Shit. You'd think I'd be used to this by now, but it just doesn't get any easier."

"What doesn't?"

Hosu sits up a little more, shaken from his inebriation by concern for Jiyeong's obvious nerves. Jiyeong is staring at his hands, playing with the rings on his small fingers, twisting them around and around endlessly.

"Okay, so. Um. I need to tell you because I want to be honest with you always, and you'd find out from someone eventually anyway, so. I'd rather you hear it from me."

"Hear *what* from you, Yeong-ah? What, are you like, a serial killer or something?"

Jiyeong snorts at Hosu's poor attempt at humour, and it warms Hosu's heart a little.

"Yep. Ok, well, that's it, we're done here."

He makes to stand up but stops when Hosu gives him a death glare, and Jiyeong shifts, nervous, acceding. A shivery sigh, twitchy fingers, then a set in the shoulders, resolute.

"Alright, alright. Okay, so."

He takes a deep breath, in, out, nerves brushed liberally in shades of pink high on his cheekbones.

"I'm bi, hyung."

Hosu stares at him, blank.

"You're.....by what, Yeong-ah?"

"Bi, hyung. B-I, bi, as in bisexual. As in, I like both boys and girls. So if I bring someone home, it might not always be a girl, and I need you to know that. I kind of need you to be okay with that."

There's white noise in Hosu's ears, his blood rushing in his veins. Jiyeong likes boys. He likes girls, too, but *he likes boys* and he just said it, right out loud, pushed the words out, stained with nerves but written in shades of honesty and a gentle pride, too, and that doesn't *fit*. It doesn't fit with the box under Hosu's sternum, it doesn't fit with the words his father etched onto Hosu's bones, it doesn't fit with the aching way Hosu has tried to mold himself to do what *boys do*, to be what's expected of him, what he's *supposed to be*.

Hosu can't think, can't speak, his heart is racing and his body is frozen while his mind runs in loops through all the confusing bits of information that just don't *fit*. He feels rooted to the spot, terrified and confused, and all he can do is stare, eyes and mouth wide, full of doubt and fear.

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And just like four years ago with Duri at his back, Hosu doesn't realise his silence has stretched too long, that the air has shifted from nervous into something painful and sharp, doesn't realise it until Jiyeong speaks again in fragile, papery syllables.

"Hyung? Please say something?"

He's never heard Jiyeong sound quite so insecure, never seen his face stained in such shades of vulnerability and turmoil, and the sharp edges of it cut through the haze of his own fearful jumble of feelings. He shakes his head, trying to clear the fog.

"Sorry, Yeong-ah, I just – I wasn't expecting that. It's – it's fine, of course it's fine, it doesn't matter."

And it *is* fine, it's fine for Jiyeong, even if it feels like it's off limits for Hosu, even if the *why* of it escapes him, even if the thought of Jiyeong liking boys brings up a whole range of thorny emotions for Hosu that he's tried very hard to bury, it doesn't affect how fond he is of the boy.

Jiyeong looks unsure, still, eyes roaming Hosu's face, looking for answers that aren't there to find, buried as they are under layers of self-hatred and apprehension.

"Yeah? You mean that, hyung? Cause honestly, you kind of freaked me out a little just then."

Hosu grimaces at the shake in Jiyeong's voice, the fear in his eyes, the answering clench in his own chest.

"I know, sorry Yeong-ah. I promise I'm fine, it's all good, yeah? It's just – stuff my dad used to say. He's not a very nice guy."

Jiyeong's smile is a grim little thing, a pressing of lips into a tight line, false and painful.

"Lemme guess, being gay is a sin?"

Hosu sighs.

"Yeah, something like that. But I'm not him, Yeong-ah. I don't care. You see who you want, it's none of my business."

And that seems to help a little, seems to lift the corners of Jiyeong's mouth a little and loosen his brows.

"Yeah, okay."

And that's the whole of it, all the parts. The knowledge sits with Hosu now, walks a tightrope in his belly, a strange dichotomy, both comfortable and a little achy, unsettling. Jiyeong's loveliness, his kindness, the way he is one of the things that is *right* about this world, those are certainties, quiet convictions that sit like a comfortable weight in his chest. But right beside it, heavy and dogmatic in the *boys don't* box, sit *being gay* and *being bi*, and that doesn't fit, doesn't line up at all with who Jiyeong is and the space he takes up in the world Hosu inhabits. The thought that anything that's part of Jiyeong could be *wrong* is laughable, when Hosu knows him to be the warmest, most genuine person he's met in a long time.

It's confusing, perplexing, and the answer eludes him, slippery and baffling. If there is wrong, then it sits squarely either in the warm, courageous, kind creature sitting across from him, or it's inherent in the *boys don't* narrative, locked in the box with Duri and all the things he made Hosu feel.

Neither of those things seem rooted in any kind of reality Hosu knows.

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And so, in his accidental, unintentional way, Han Jiyeong creates a small crack in the *boys don't* box, out of sight, leaking occasional tendrils of doubt into his chest cavity, from where they travel up to tickle his conscience or down to stir warmth in his belly, depending on the provocation.

It's a barely conscious thing, something that doesn't fully reach Hosu's awareness, but it's there, a lack of conviction in the *rightness* of that box under his sternum. Unbeknownst to Hosu, where the tendrils touch, they start to rub off the dark stain left by his father's words, slowly revealing the colours hidden underneath.

As the weeks pass, Jiyeong becomes just the third person to breach Hosu's inner circle, to get close to him, and he does it through brute force and sweet charm, tearing down Hosu's walls with his smiles, his warm hugs and his honesty.

For the first time since Duri left, Hosu has a male friend he's close to.

Little by little, quiet moments of happiness find Hosu.

*

Weeks trickle into months, and life takes on a gentle, predictable rhythm for Hosu and Jiyeong. CNU becomes a kind of home to Hosu, mostly because Harin and Jiyeong feel like a kind of home to him. His trips home to his parents are sporadic, stilted and full of anxiety, now, the fear of the things his father might say a potent dissuasion of visiting, even though he misses his mother, and sometimes even his sister.

He calls his mother weekly, and the sadness in her voice when he says he can't come visit yet again hurts his heart a little, makes him feel ashamed of being a bad son, but the price of sitting and listening to his father rant against every soft, nice thing Hosu has in his heart and his life is too high, too painful, too sharp. So he talks to her for long periods, tells her all the simpler parts of his life, all the clean and easy-to-discuss parts that he can gift her to help her feel secure that Hosu is well adjusted, settled in and happy.

And he is, all of those things, mostly. Uni is going pretty well, his major might not be what he'd like it to be, but he gets to minor in his passion and spend time with people he adores, gets to have fun and relax and for once, not second guess his every thought, his every action, and try to view it through another's lens.

Harin remains a fixture in his life, always within reach, a grounding presence. They don't share classes, but drift in and out of each other's days by way of text messages and catch ups over coffees or drinks with their slowly expanding friend group, never drifting too far from each other's periphery, always there for each other.

The first time Hosu finds himself sexiled from his and Jiyeong's room, he has nowhere to go.

He's spent his evening having drinks with Harin, giggly and relaxed, a much-needed outlet after a long week of too little sleep and too much on his plate. He's on his way back to the dorms when Jiyeong texts him.

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Min

Hyung

Hyung

Hyung

Me

What

Min

Hyung

Don't come home

Please

Me

Are you kidding me rn

I'm in front of our building you knob

Where am I supposed to go

Min

Please hyung

Just gimme an hour

Please please please

I'll do your laundry for a week

She's so hot hyung

Please

Me

A month

You do my laundry for a month for this

Min

Fine

A month

But I get 90 mins

Me

You do know you're not the one holding the cards, right?

Our Gentle Sin - a novel by Tara Lemana

A month for an hour
You want 90 mins, it'll cost ya
2 mths

Min

....

Fine

An hour

Me

An hour it is
What do you say

Min

....

Please hyung

Thank you hyung

Thank you thank you thank you

Me

Who's your favourite hyung

Min

You

Always you, hyung

Best hyung ever

My dick and I thank you

Me

Gross
Go get laid
Clock starts now

Hosu sighs as he pockets his phone. An hour to kill with nowhere to go, no one to hang out with. He contemplates texting Harin but decides against it. She'd said she was tired when they parted ways, eyes droopy and yawns frequent, and chances are she's in bed by now, soft and warm and utterly disinterested in hosting a sexiled friend.

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Hosu pushes the door to their building open and makes his way to the communal kitchen on their floor, tiredness creeping in around the edges now he's slowed down, the sting in his eyes reminiscent of too many late nights up studying or talking and the heavy ache in his body of too much time spent dancing and not enough time spent sleeping.

He hangs his coat neatly over the back of one of the kitchen chairs and busies himself making tea, hands moving on autopilot as his brain zones out, mug, teabag, hot water, body sagging heavily against the counter, rubbing his stinging eyes with heavy hands.

"You too, huh?"

Hosu nearly jumps out of his skin at the sudden voice, close and loud, intrusive.

"Bloody hell!"

His heart is racing, and his hand comes up to rub at his chest subconsciously as he feels it trying to break its way out of his ribcage.

"Shit, sorry man, didn't mean to scare you!"

The guy in front of him is tall, tall enough that he slouches a little, like he's eager to get closer, be nearer the person he's talking to. He looks like he was smiling, before, eyes still creasing at the corners, lips still curled a little, as if they're chasing after a smile that's no longer there, scared off by Hosu's reaction, perhaps.

"It's – it's okay. I kind of scare easily."

"Huh. Okay. Well, sorry anyway!"

He moves easily, coming to stand next to Hosu at the counter and reaching into the cupboard to grab himself a mug and a teabag, and suddenly Hosu's brain catches onto the words he missed in his fright.

"What did you mean?"

"Hmmm?"

"You said *you too, huh?* What did you mean?"

The guy looks across at him and smirks.

"Oh. Sexiled."

Hosu feels the back of his neck flushing. He'll never get used to the easy way others talk about sex, the smooth, unconcerned way words like sex just *happen* like it's nothing, like they're talking to close friends instead of a complete stranger whose name they don't even know.

"Oh. Um, yeah. How'd you know?"

The guy grins, wide and toothy, eyes squishing into crescent moons, and it's so easy, so warm, it softens the knot of anxiety in his throat just a little.

"Your coat," the guy says, nodding at the chair Hosu left his coat on.

"You came in from outside and didn't stop to put it in your room so I just kind of figured you, you know, were denied access."

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“Huh. That’s very observant of you.”

The guy shrugs, still smiling.

“Been there, done that. Doing it right now.”

He turns to Hosu, then, beams that full wattage smile in Hosu’s direction and offers his hand to shake.

“Do Seongmin, ‘91.”

Hosu smiles back, shaking Seongmin’s large, warm hand.

“Kim Hosu, ‘90.”

Seongmin’s eyes light up.

“You’re my hyung! That’s awesome, can I call you hyung? All my friends are same age friends, I’ve never had a hyung before!”

The words tumble after each other, fast and heedless, and Hosu can’t help but laugh. Seongmin seems hyper, excitable, like a puppy, and it’s endearing.

“Sure.”

“Wow. Thanks, hyung.”

It’s sweet, really, how excited Seongmin seems over such a simple thing, and Hosu feels a little awed, a little embarrassed too, at the thought of someone getting excited over being his *dongaeng*,

He turns to their mugs to hide his pink cheeks, swatting Seongmin’s hand away with a *let hyung do it*, much to the younger boy’s delight.

They sit on the couch companionably, drinking their tea and chatting, commiserating over their shared fate of having horny roommates, until Hosu’s face hurts from laughing so much at Seongmin’s boundless energy and his quirky way of seeing life.

When the hour is up, Hosu leaves with Seongmin’s number saved in his phone under Seongie, and the curious, giddy certainty that he’s made a new friend for life.

*

It’s towards the end of his first year at CNU that something happens to reach into Hosu’s chest and tear at the crack in the box he carries there.

He’s spent the afternoon and well into the evening at the university’s dance studio, rehearsing a particularly difficult choreography, and he’s tired, achy and in desperate need of a shower when he reaches the dormitory. Relief settles on him as soon as he’s in front of his and Jiyeong’s room, and he pushes open the door already mentally preparing to step into the shower and never get out.

It takes him what feels like a lifetime to process the sight that greets him, to make sense of the number of limbs and the amount of skin, the noises and the salty, visceral tang in the air.

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He's rooted to the spot, unable to move, taking in the image of Jiyeong, naked, hips snapping, another boy on all fours on the bed, backside in the air, moaning into the covers of Jiyeong's bed. It's overwhelming, shocking and filthy, but it's hot, so hot, and Hosu isn't prepared, he isn't prepared at all, and he can't move.

He just. Can't. Move.

Jiyeong turns, then, and sees Hosu, hips faltering, eyes wide and shocked, a mirror of Hosu's own.

"Hyung! What the hell are you doing here! Get out!"

And that does it, that unlocks Hosu's limbs, a wave of mortification washing over him, hot and itchy, and he backs away, out of the room with a mumbled *ohmygodwhatthehell*.

He runs straight to Seongmin's room.

Seongmin takes one look at Hosu's face and sucks in a lungful of air.

"Damn, hyung, you look like you've seen a ghost, what the hell happened?"

Hosu collapses on Seongmin's bed, boneless, staring up at the ceiling.

"I walked in on Jiyeong going at it with his hook-up."

Seongmin hisses.

"Oh shit. Didn't he text you? He normally texts you, right?"

Hosu pulls out his phone and tosses it onto the floor in front of Seongmin. It's dead.

"Died while I was at practice. I had no clue."

"Damn."

There's a roiling in Hosu's stomach. He closes his eyes, only to snap them open again as the image of Jiyeong with his hook up replays on the inside of his eyelids. It has a heat welling up in Hosu's stomach that he can't, won't, doesn't want to examine right now, or ever, preferably.

"See anything hot?"

Hosu looks over at Seongmin, shocked, to see the younger boy grinning widely and wiggling his eyebrows at him. Hosu swallows hard and goes back to staring at the ceiling, counting the ceiling tiles.

"Saw everything. Every damn thing. Too many dicks, too much skin. I'm officially never sleeping again."

"Too many dicks? Wait, there was more than one dick?"

Hosu freezes. Shit, did he just out Jiyeong?

"I... shit, Seongmin, forget I said that, it's not my place, just, please, forget it?"

"Jiyeong is *gay*?"

Seongmin's tone is incredulous, and Hosu feels sick with guilt. Not only has he just breached roommate code by walking in on his roommate having sex, he's outed Jiyeong to one of their friends. He's going to have to leave town, Jiyeong will hate him.

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He covers his face and groans.

“Oh god Seongmin, please, I shouldn’t have said that, please forget it? Please please please pretend you don’t know?”

“Oh no, nope, can’t do that, hyung! I can’t believe you! Your extremely hot roommate is gay and *you didn’t tell me?* Do you know how long I’ve been salivating over that guy?”

There’s a jolt in Hosu’s spine, and it propels him upright.

“Wait. *What?*”

“How could you not tell me?”

Seongmin looks incredulous, but Hosu’s brain is glitching. *Seongmin* is salivating over *Jiyeong?*

“What the hell?”

“What, hyung?”

“*What the hell?! You’re gay? Is everybody gay now?*”

Seongmin frowns.

“Um, yeah, hyung, wasn’t that obvious?”

“No! Why would that be obvious?”

Hosu is almost screaming now, too much in his brain, too many shocks to his system for one day.

“I’ve hooked up with guys while you’ve known me, hyung! I’ve even told you about some of them!”

“What? You only told me about Jisoo and Yoobin!”

“So? They were guys!”

Hosu screeches, eyes wide, disbelieving.

“Those are unisex names, Seong! I thought they were girls!”

“Oh. Huh.”

Hosu’s head is spinning. So is Seongmin’s, it seems.

“Wait, so – but what about Eunji?”

“Who?”

“Eunji. Jiyeong hooked up with her in autumn, he told me!”

“Oh. Yeah. He’s bi.”

Hosu sags back down onto the bed, head spinning. Seongmin hums like everything makes sense, pleased in his own little bubble, completely oblivious to Hosu’s inner turmoil.

“Oh. Cool. Want some ramyun?”

Hosu nods, listless.

“Kay. Stay here, I’ll be right back.”

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As he listens to Seongmin leaving the room for the shared kitchen, Hosu tries to blink away the visceral images that float in front of his mind's eye. Tries to block the memory of the scent of sex in the air, the sounds coming from his roommate and the man he was with.

He rubs at his eyes and tries to push down the heat building low in his pelvis, tries to think about his upcoming assignments, about the conversation he had with his mother last week, about *anything* other than his very naked friend having very naked sex with a very naked guy, tries to ignore the way the blood is rushing to his groin because nope, that is *not* happening.

He groans and buries his face in Seongmin's pillow. What the hell is wrong with him?

When he walks back into his and Jiyeong's shared room two hours later, it's with pink cheeks and a shamefaced expression.

Jiyeong is lying on his bed looking at his phone, thankfully dressed and alone. He doesn't look up when Hosu comes in, studiously ignoring Hosu's mortified presence, and Hosu's throat feels tighter at that. He drops onto his own bed with a groan.

"Shit, Yeong-ah, I'm so sorry."

Jiyeong looks up, brows drawn, face cloudy and dark. Hosu hasn't seen him angry before, and it doesn't feel good, it drops a stone in his belly to see Jiyeong upset with him.

"What the hell were you doing here, hyung? I texted you, why did you come home?"

"Phone died at practice, I didn't know, I swear! You think I wanted to walk in on that? I can never unsee that!"

"Hey!"

Hosu catches the pillow Jiyeong throws at his head.

"I'll have you know people would pay to see that, and you got the show for free, you should be thanking me!"

Hosu snorts, then sobers.

"I really am sorry, Yeong-ah."

Jiyeong's face clears, the cloud lifting.

"Ah, hyung, me too. I should've made sure you got my text before – you know."

Hosu grimaces.

"Don't remind me. I really wish I hadn't seen that, Yeong-ah. I won't be able to look you in the eye for months."

Jiyeong snorts, wriggling his eyebrows with a grin.

"Why, hyung? Think you'll be dreaming of this ass?"

And that's just a shade too close to the truth for comfort, and Hosu's neck feels hot, and he covers his face with Jiyeong's pillow, groaning loudly. Jiyeong's laugh is infectious, rolling giggles spilling in

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the charged air between them, and it helps a little, despite Hosu's shame. At least Jiyeong isn't angry anymore.

As Jiyeong's laughter fades out, though, Hosu remembers his other misstep, and nerves wash through him again. He peeks out from underneath the pillow to see Jiyeong focused on his phone once more.

"Yeong-ah?"

"Hmmm?"

"I um...I kind of did something else you might not be very happy about."

Jiyeong looks up, blinks, eyebrows raised.

"What, hyung?"

"I um, I kind of outed you to Seongmin by accident. I swear I didn't mean to, I ran straight to his room from here and I was so flustered, I wasn't even thinking. I'm so, so sorry."

"Huh. Okay."

"Okay? You're not mad?"

Jiyeong shrugs.

"Nah. I kind of thought he knew already. And I'm not ashamed of who I am."

"Oh thank God. I felt really bad, I thought you'd hate me."

"Nah. What'd Seong say though?"

"Well, he hates me for not telling him sooner, because apparently he thinks you're hot."

Jiyeong blinks again, then bursts out laughing.

"Wow, hyung, you're really spilling all the tea today, aren't you?"

Hosu groans again and pulls the pillow back over his face.

"Shut up, don't tease me, I'm still in shock!"

"So while you're spilling, does that mean Seongmin is gay? And that he might be into me?"

"Apparently so, yes. Which is another thing I learned today."

Jiyeong's laughing again, and it's pulling Hosu out of his funk a little, though he tries not to let it show.

"Wow hyung, today is just full of life lessons for you, isn't it?"

"I hate you, Han Jiyeong."

It comes out muffled by the pillow, but Jiyeong catches it all the same.

"Nah, you don't. You love me. And you're going to dream about my naked ass."

Hosu throws Jiyeong's pillow back at him with a loud exclamation of *nightmares! I'll have nightmares*, then stalks off to the shower, Jiyeong's cackling laughter trailing after him.

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Jiyeong and Seongmin dance around each other for months after that.

It's a strange experience for Hosu, all the mixed emotions it brings up for him are utterly confusing.

The looks they both dart at each other when they think no one's watching are so familiar to Hosu, sparking a desperate longing in his chest that he doesn't know what to do with. It settles in his bones, this recognition of what he once had and lost, it makes him ache in a way he hasn't in a long time, makes him remember things he thought he locked away for good.

The surreptitious smiles and supposed accidental touches that pass between the two pull at his insides, make him remember Duri's fingertips on his skin, Duri's gummy smile, that secret one with the soft eyes and all the love pooling at the corners. It hurts him, cuts at his soft parts, but he swallows it down.

Because mixed in with the hurt, the longing, is a desperate wish for Jiyeong and Seongmin to be happy, to not love and lose the way he did, even if there is still something in him that squirms in discomfort at the sight of the two orbiting each other. The certainty that it will end in pain because *boys aren't meant to love each other*, aren't meant to be together, is still locked deep inside him, wobblier now, but there, still, roots buried deep. It wars with what his eyes tell him, constantly butting up against his heart's conviction that Jiyeong and Seongmin are *right* for each other, and it's a heartbreaking, exhausting battle.

It only gets worse when the two finally find their way into each other's space, when they connect and make things official. Hosu has never seen either of his friends with an actual partner before, as part of a couple, and he's dismayed to find they are clingy and handsy in public, prone to making out in public places with no thought for public decency or Hosu's poor, aching heart.

It hurts, and it makes his anxiety spike for the inevitable painful breakup to come.

He tries to hide his feelings, swallowing them down and plastering on a half-genuine smile, bolstering the feeling of happiness for his friends that's mixed in with everything else, doing his best to focus on that.

Jiyeong notices, of course. He ignores it for a while, pretends he doesn't see Hosu look away when his friends kiss, that he doesn't see the ache embedded in Hosu's smiles.

He ignores it for a while, until he doesn't.

They are sitting in their room, slotted onto the floor between their single beds as always, mugs of tea warming their hands, when Jiyeong broaches the subject.

"Are you alright, hyung?"

Hosu looks up, surprised.

"Yeah, why?"

Jiyeong shakes his head.

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“Lemme rephrase. I know you’re not alright, hyung. You’ve been off, lately. You look sad a lot, especially when Seongmin and I are together, and it kind of feels like – like you don’t approve?”

Something cold drops down Hosu’s spine, and his eyes go wide.

“Oh, no, Yeong-ah, it’s not that, I promise!”

“Then what, hyung? Because it really seems like you hate seeing us together?”

Hosu hesitates, bites his lip, tries to find words. Maybe there is a way he can talk to Jiyeong about this without actually talking to him about the things he needs to keep buried, locked away, for his own safety. Because Hosu’s hurting, and confused, and maybe Jiyeong can help, or maybe just talking about it will help, and if nothing else, he needs Jiyeong to know that it’s not about him, or Seongmin.

He sighs, staring into his mug of tea.

“It’s just...do you think what they say is true, Yeong-ah? That it’s better to have loved and lost, and all that?”

“Better than never to have loved at all?”

Hosu nods, throat tight, knuckles white around his steaming mug.

“Yeah.”

“Yeah, I do, hyung. I can’t imagine never loving anyone, going through life all alone, you know? Forever? What would be the point? Isn’t the point of life to share it with others, to love people and share yourself?”

Hosu nods, reflexively, not really sure whether he agrees yet.

“So...if you and Seongmin ever broke up, you’d still be glad you were together? You wouldn’t regret loving him just because you got hurt at the end of it?”

Jiyeong’s response is instant.

“I’ll never regret this, hyung. Even if Seongmin and I don’t last, we have right now, and it’s amazing, he’s amazing. If we ever break up, I’ll be heartbroken, I won’t lie, I’ll be a mess for a long time, but I could never regret being with him in the first place. Ever.”

Hosu nods again, turning Jiyeong’s words over in his head.

“So you’re not afraid?”

Jiyeong considers, thoughtful.

“Let me ask you this, hyung. We’re all going to die someday. Including you. Do you walk around day in, day out worrying about how and when and where you’re going to die? Do you think about it? Or do you just go about your life and live it, enjoy it as best you can?”

And that’s a thing. There’s a ring of truth to Jiyeong’s words, a perspective Hosu hadn’t considered, something that lifts a little of the weight off his shoulders.

“You’re right, Yeong-ah, that makes sense. I hadn’t really thought about it that way.”

It’s quiet then, for a minute, two, just the humming of the fridge colouring the air around them.

Our Gentle Sin - a novel by Tara Lemana

“Is that what happened to you, hyung?”

It’s an unexpected question and it startles Hosu, eyes wide.

“What?”

“It’s just, you get so sad sometimes, and you never seem interested in dating anyone, or even hook ups. And there’s nothing wrong with not wanting that, but – well, with how sad you get, I’ve wondered if someone hurt you?”

There’s a thick lump at the back of Hosu’s throat now, making it hard to swallow, and he looks away from Jiyeong’s earnest eyes, breaks away because he can’t cry, won’t cry, won’t show weakness.

“You know you can talk to me, right, hyung? I won’t ever judge.”

Hosu hums.

“I know, Yeong-ah. I know you won’t. It’s just – it hurts, you know?”

Jiyeong nods.

“Yeah, I know, hyung. But maybe talking about it will help?”

The silence settles between them again, then, while Hosu struggles to control his breathing and find words to voice some of what he’s feeling to Jiyeong without voicing *everything*, never *everything*, never that.

“There was someone. I let them in, and they ripped my heart out, and I’ve never – never gotten over it. It still hurts, and it’s been four years. I don’t think I’ll ever...”

He swallows, tears threatening. Jiyeong waits, silent.

“I don’t think I’ll ever get over it, Yeong-ah. Over them. I keep thinking that it was wrong, it must have been wrong, for us to be together, else why would it have ended? Why would it have hurt that bad? If it’s right, it should last, right? And it shouldn’t hurt?”

Jiyeong leans back against his bed, eyes on the ceiling.

“I don’t think it works like that, hyung. Sometimes what’s wrong is not the person, but the timing. Like, you’re meant to be together but not then, one of you isn’t ready for it for some reason. And sometimes you’re not meant to last, but you’re still meant to spend that time together, to be together for a period and learn something from each other. I think every person we’re with, every person we meet in our lives, that they’re there for a reason, you know? We’re meant to meet them all, meant to learn something from each of them, grow in some way. They’re not all meant to stay in our lives forever, some of them are just meant to be there for a little while, to teach us something just by being who they are, and then move on.”

He shifts, looks at Hosu, who is watching him, listening.

“It’s like...take you and me, for example. We might be friends for life. I really hope we will be. But if that’s not what happens, I still believe you’re here because I’m meant to help you grow in some way, and you’re meant to do the same for me. We’re meant to be friends right now and help each other become who we’re meant to be. That growth might take months or years or a lifetime, who knows. And maybe there’s more than one thing we’re meant to learn from each other, maybe it’s a whole bunch of things. I hope so, ‘cause I really want to keep you.”

Our Gentle Sin - a novel by Tara Lemana

Hosu can't help but smile at that, eyes watery, and Jiyeong smiles back, soft.

"But whatever happens, even if you move on one day and I never see you again, and even if I miss you with all my heart, I'm never going to regret this, right here, right now."

Something untangles itself in Hosu's chest, and he feels his lungs expand, feels the tight band that's sat around his rib cage since Duri left loosen up just a little bit.

"So...you don't think it was wrong? Them and me, I mean? You don't think it ended because we were wrong to be together?"

Jiyeong's headshake is emphatic, and his eyes are kind, warm.

"No hyung, absolutely not. You loved them, right?"

Hosu nods, eyes filling.

"Then it wasn't wrong, hyung. Love isn't wrong, ever. I'm so sorry they hurt you, and if you ever need to tell someone about it, I'm here, but hurting doesn't mean it was wrong. It was still love. That's something. That's everything."

Hosu nods, incapable of forming words, terrified of his gratitude and the years of pent-up hurt spilling out on the threadbare carpet between their socked feet, but Jiyeong sees, and Jiyeong knows. He shuffles across the gap and leans against the bed next to Hosu, sides pressed together, warm and reassuring.

Hosu's body is tense, taut with the strain of holding everything in, the effort of not showing *weakness*.

Jiyeong nudges his shoulder.

"Hyung. Hey. It's alright, you know? You can cry, it's okay."

Hosu shakes his head, wooden.

"Boys don't cry, Yeong-ah."

Jiyeong's laugh is incredulous as he stares at Hosu.

"What the hell? Who told you that?"

Hosu flushes, bites his tongue. He feels small, ignorant, embarrassed.

"Boys cry, hyung. I cry all the time! You've seen me cry!"

Hosu swallows hard around the lump in his throat, eyes locked on the wall opposite.

"Hyung. Come on, look at me."

Hosu is terrified, afraid to look, afraid to fall apart, to *be weak*, but he looks, and it feels like the most courageous thing he's done in a long time.

Jiyeong's face is soft and open and so, so gentle as he looks Hosu in the eye.

"Hyung. You're allowed to be sad. You're allowed to cry. It's healthy and it's normal. I'm here, I've got you, and I won't tell anyone. You're safe."

And that does it. Hosu's face crumples and the tears come, horrifying and overwhelming.

Our Gentle Sin - a novel by Tara Lemana

Jiyeong pulls him close and holds him while the dam breaks, allows Hosu to cry himself out on his shoulder, to cry until Jiyeong's shirt is soaked and Hosu's face is painful and raw, until his voice is hoarse and cracked. And when Hosu's sobbing ends, he refuses to allow Hosu's apologies or his shame, even his gratitude.

He tucks Hosu into bed, wraps the blankets around Hosu's curled up form and crawls in behind him, on top of the blankets, arm thrown over top of Hosu's side, and orders Hosu to go to sleep. It's strange, and it aches a little, reminding Hosu of yet more of the things he locked away in that secret place below his sternum, but it's also comforting and grounding, so he allows it.

Hosu is asleep within minutes.

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It eases off slowly after that, the ache Hosu feels when he looks at Jiyeong and Seongmin together. He finds comfort in the knowledge that even if they end, Jiyeong will be okay, he won't regret it, and over time, little by little, Hosu lets go of the fear of hurt in the pair's future.

The complicated feelings their relationship raises in him ease off a little too, even if they don't disappear completely. There is still a sense of unease that's hard to shake, but he adores them and is happy they're happy together, even if it makes him sad sometimes.

For his part, whenever Jiyeong notices Hosu's face falling, he'll smile and pull him into a hug, which Hosu pretends to hate while being deeply grateful for the healing touch, and slowly, slowly, Hosu's sadness fades, too, easing back into the background where it doesn't overwhelm him quite so often.

And so, as Hosu's second year at CNU comes to a close, he realises he's found a home, here, a family, people who love him, who rally around him and who don't mind his quirks or his softness.

Hosu, against all his expectations, finds a form of happiness.

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Chapter 4

Seoul, January 2006

Seoul in winter matches the bleakness soaking Duri's insides.

He falls and falls and falls, a spiral that drags him down and down and down, deeper and deeper until he can't see where he started, can't see the light, can't feel his way out.

Our Gentle Sin - a novel by Tara Lemana

He's always been resigned to moves, before, always a little quiet, a little morose, but the resilience that courses through his bloodstream buoyed him, kept him from sinking too deeply, for too long.

Not this time.

This time, Duri is made of pain, ice crystals flooding his veins, needles in his skull, everything hurts, hurts, hurts. Every thought, every tear, every breath sears his mind and his body until he cannot bear it anymore, until he wishes he could simply vanish into thin air, be gone, be still, be nothing.

He cries until he's empty, barren, until he feels like he's just skin and bones and anything that held his essence is gone, evaporated, leaving him a gossamer, weightless apparition with no substance, no feelings, no worth.

There's relief in that, in being empty, in being gone, in simply not existing. There is no pain, no loss, no regret. It's comforting, the lack of anything, the soft greyness of the world around him, the way it wraps him, cocoons him in nothingness, where the pain of losing Hosu is dulled, muted.

Once all he is is emptiness, he lies awake and watches the wall in his room, watches the spider in the corner of the room build its web, its industriousness meaningless but something to watch, something to detach from.

When his mother comes and hovers, tries to rouse him, to make him eat, get up, shower, he doesn't see her.

When his father comes and tries to reason with him, cajole him, scold him, he doesn't see him either.

When Seongjae comes and tries to talk to him, joke with him, annoy him, Duri doesn't know he's there.

He hardly eats, barely sleeps, rarely showers, all he does is *fade*. He grows thin and sallow, his skin is grey and almost translucent, much like his insides, much like the world around him.

Days drag on into weeks, which seep into months, and Duri doesn't know, doesn't care, doesn't mind the way time slips him by.

It's not until his mother breaks down and cries after he hasn't eaten for a whole week, falling on her knees in front of his bed and begging him to eat, to move, to come back to her, that there's a crack in the greyness, a tear through which Duri can look out, can notice enough to mind, can feel enough to care.

He eats a little of the food she brings him, that day, and from then on, in small, slow, tasteless bites. It helps him feel a little less floaty, a little more solid, but not too much, just enough for his body to work a little again. He still desperately clings to the emptiness, protects it, walls off all the things that hurt, everything *Hosu*.

It makes life a little more bearable, the emptiness inside his skin. It makes it a little easier to slowly go back to being a semi functional human being, to sometimes rise in the morning, to shower once in a while, to eat breakfast most days, to make conversation with his family when the words are willing, to watch tv, to go to bed. It all feels pointless, arbitrary, and unreasonably heavy, these small things he does now, but he does them for his eomma, to wash the pain off her face, to wipe it smooth.

It's just barely bearable, but it's progress.

Our Gentle Sin - a novel by Tara Lemana

Little by little, the tear in the grey fog cocooning him widens. Small slivers of life start to intrude on his emptiness, snippets, but they're enough to remind Duri he does still exist, still has a place in this world, one that he's been neglecting.

He starts to hear his brother and his father again, become aware of the little jokes and the banter between them, and slowly, slowly, starts to listen. Starts to care, a little, not too much.

The fog starts to thin, too. The emptiness fades, and with it, the sadness comes back. Thoughts of Hosu seep in again, though Duri tries to keep them at bay, tries to distract himself. Feeling his feelings is too hard, too painful, but little by little, they press in on him, forcing him to cry himself to sleep some nights, making him morose some days. The weight of what he has now is too thin, it lacks substance, like the *meaning* he had when he belonged to Hosu has been siphoned out of him, leaving him a meaningless, empty shell.

But he's upright, alive, and for now, that's all he can ask for, all anyone can expect. He's breathing, putting one foot in front of the other, putting words together in sentences, even.

By April, he's missed five months of the school year, a deficit too large to catch up, and the decision is made that he will start school in September for the new school year and repeat his grade.

Spring passes in a blur, tumultuous and unfriendly to a boy who knows no one, not even himself.

And then, suddenly, seven months after the move, the wall Duri has built around himself is smashed wide open, and once again, it's his eomma whose hands shape the breach.

She steps into his room and sits beside him on his bed where he's listening to Epik High. It's *High Society*, their 2004 album, since he still can't listen to *Map of the Human Soul* without thoughts of Hosu washing over him like a tide, and he's only just managed to stay afloat, he can't risk drowning again.

There's a deep disquiet inside him, still, a whirlpool of emotions that never settles. Pain, loneliness, sadness, hurt, a desire to keep going and a lack of understanding of exactly *how*. Waves push up against the fortifications he's built for himself, and it's all he can do to keep them standing, to be strong, to not slip into that deep, dark hole again.

The sadness is always there, still, filling his lungs, never fully retracted, always sitting in the back of his throat waiting for the opportunity to crawl out of his eyes and mouth and make itself known, and he feels it unravel little by little, welling up ready to break, ready to spill.

His eomma sits quietly beside him, at first, and there's a pulling inside his chest, inward, outward, a tearing and chafing. She's too close, too much, and when she reaches out to touch his hair, he recoils, curling away from her, away from the softness, away from the touch, a tightness in his chest and the whirlpool in his belly roiling wildly. Her hand drops down to the bed, but he feels it still, like a brand on the top of his head.

"Baby..."

"Don't, eomma..."

The words almost choke him, eking out through a tight, bitter throat. They're harsh, sharp, pushing against the softness coming from his mother that's threatening the wall he's built for himself, shoring up his defences in a desperate last stand. His body is rigid with tension and pent-up emotions, a taut bowstring ready to snap.

Our Gentle Sin - a novel by Tara Lemana

“Duri, I’m so sorry...”

“Eomma *please!*”

His voice breaks, coming out thin and broken, a wail railing against the force of the push inside him, and the taste of tears on the back of his tongue is salty and unwelcome. He can feel each one of the knobs of his spine, painful from the unrelenting pull of his muscles as he holds himself coiled *tighttighttight*.

“You loved him, didn’t you?”

There’s nothing but gentleness in her voice. No harsh inflection, no judgement, just love and openness, and it breaks him, it rips his heart right out through his mouth and the tears come. He can’t stop them, they break and wash over him in silent, painful, heaving waves even as he denies it, shakes his head stubbornly, incapable of forming words but determined to fight, still body rigid, to be *strong*.

But his eomma sees, his eomma knows, just like she always did when he was small, when he was just a baby. She reaches out again, tentative, a gentle touch to his hair, and he lets her, this time, the tearing inside him too violent to put up a fight any longer.

“You loved him.”

It’s not a question, this time, and the denial dies on his tongue as the dam breaks and everything he’s been holding back and pushing down into a bitter, black lump rotting away deep inside him breaks free, pushes its way out, out, out, the sound of his sobs filling the air around them. He feels her shift on the bed, feels her lie down and curl up behind him, her small form fitting to his back, thin arms wrapping around his waist to hold him, the way she used to do when he was little and his world was simple, when his world was *her*.

She starts to hum a song that pulls at something deep inside him, a lullaby she sang to him when he was small, the song he swore was magic for the way it always calmed him when she sang it. It’s just a tune, meaningless, soft, repetitive, but her voice lends it the power to reach in and soothe him, clinging to his torn and broken insides like a balm.

The scent of her wraps around him, too, soothing, the scent of home, of her floral perfume and that underlying earthy sweetness that pulls at the core of him, the part that’s *eomma*, and it works its own magic.

They lie like that for a long time, mother and son, and it’s healing. It gives Duri comfort he’s been denying himself for so long, to be acknowledged and loved this way.

She strokes his hair, his back, his sides, his face, gentle and soothing, endlessly until eventually his body stops shaking and the tears dry up. Her acceptance is quiet, wordless, unreserved, and it’s more than he ever dared hope for. He stays silent, his face pressed into the blankets, her hands an anchor on his form. She takes her time, just like always, words gentle, sparse.

“You loved him.”

She says it again, quietly, forehead pressed against his shoulder, and he blindly grabs her hand, presses his face against it and nods, desperate, aching for her love and acceptance, silently pleading *lovemelovemedontletmego*.

“I’m so sorry, my baby.”

Our Gentle Sin - a novel by Tara Lemana

She doesn't say more, doesn't promise him it will get better, doesn't try to trivialise what he had with Hosu, doesn't patronise him. Just holds him and accepts what is. Duri is overwhelmed, shaking with the unexpected simplicity of his mother's acceptance compared to the incalculable depth of meaning it holds for him. The tears well up again, wet against her fingers, but she doesn't shift, doesn't pull away, just lets him take what he needs from her.

After a while, Duri starts to drift off to sleep, and she gently disentangles herself to cover him with his blankets. Duri rouses and shifts, blinking up at her blearily with eyes that ache, leans into the kiss she presses to his head, heart blooming under her soft smile and the gentle pat to his cheek before she turns to leave.

When her hand is on the doorknob, Duri calls out to her.

"Eomma?"

She turns, the smile still there, small and tender on the face Duri knows and loves so well, and his insides feel pink, warm.

"Thank you."

It comes out a little sad, a little broken, just like Duri's heart, and his eyes fill again.

His mother's smile widens, and she nods, a small thing.

"Your dad applied for a permanent role here at the Seoul branch, baby. He got word today that he was accepted. We're staying. Permanently. No more moves."

She hesitates, body stuttering on words unsaid, a silent flutter in her hands.

"I'm sorry it couldn't have been Gwangju."

With that, she leaves, closing the door softly, the olive branch hanging in the air behind her.

The relief that washes over Duri is strong, but it's laced with bitterness and the sting of regret. To set down roots is all he ever wanted, but it's too late, too late for Duri, too late for Hosu, too late for Gwangju and all they had, all they could have had.

For the first time in months, Duri picks up his phone and looks at his messages. He knows there are none, he's had no notifications since he left Gwangju, none at all since that day Hosu ran away from him.

He stares at the last text he got from Hosu, a happy *see you soon hyung* sent on the last day they spent together, the day Duri broke Hosu's heart and shattered his own, last November.

Seven months. Seven months of no communication, of absence, of cold where there used to be warmth, of rejection where there used to be love and acceptance. Duri had been *incommunicado*, incapable of even feeding himself, let alone texting anyone, caught in a downwards spiral, but what about Hosu? If he'd changed his mind, if he'd wanted to hear from Duri, to talk to him, to fill the silence with anything other than more emptiness, he could have texted, could have called. But he didn't.

Seven months and not a word.

The silence speaks volumes, screeches loudly into empty space. Hosu may not have been the one to leave, but he's left Duri behind all the same.

Our Gentle Sin - a novel by Tara Lemana

Duri swallows around the lump in his throat. His thumb hovers over the *delete contact* button, but he can't bring himself to erase their text history, it feels too much like erasing *them*, like erasing *Hosu*, and he doesn't want to do that. His mother's gentle acknowledgement of Duri's unconfessed sexuality, her unqualified acceptance, has shifted something in him. He feels a little calmer, a little stronger, a little clearer now. A little more *solid*.

He's known who he is for years now, has known down deep in his soul that Im Duri is different, that Im Duri likes rap, likes black, likes the piano, and likes boys. Meeting Hosu, loving and losing him, bleeding all of his colours into someone only to watch them bleed them out onto the floor, unrecoverable, has changed him, in many ways, but he can't let it change the core of him, can't let it twist him into being someone he's not, someone who denies who he is and who he loves.

He loved Hosu, tied his threads to him, let him bury his roots deep into his ribcage. He will probably love Hosu for a long time to come, though he'll try not to, will try to move on, to disconnect, to learn how not to love the boy he left behind, the boy who broke his heart.

But he won't try to erase Hosu anymore. He was *everything* to Duri, for a while, and he deserves a place in Duri's history, in his heart, just for that.

He puts his phone aside and curls up in bed.

For the first time in months, Duri sleeps a full twelve hours, uninterrupted.

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It hurts a little less, oddly enough, once Duri decides to stop fighting it.

The thoughts of Hosu come, unbidden, but his decision to allow them to have a place in his story, in who he is, slowly siphons the pain out of them, dulling the sting. Over time, he finds he can function while also thinking of Hosu a hundred times a day, reminded by little things but not incapacitated by them, not anymore.

He doesn't consider calling Hosu, doesn't contemplate texting him, to mend fences, to rebuild. Hosu asked to be left alone and hasn't reached out, and Duri will respect that.

But he begins to make room for things in his life that remind him of Hosu, while accepting that what they had is in the past. It still hurts, but it's bearable, and slowly, it gets better, less agonising.

He still can't listen to the mix tape Hosu made him, but he knows he will, one day. He takes it out once in a while, only to pack it away again, not yet ready to face the onslaught of memories he knows it will bring.

September arrives, pressing its way into Duri's existence with a cacophony of autumnal colours and a welcome softening of the tumultuous summer heat into something a little less stifling, a little more forgiving. The thought of starting at his new school is a relief by then, ten months spent in his own abysmal company more than enough, and Duri is chafing at the bit to stop treading water, to start living again.

It feels like a new beginning, and for the first time since leaving Gwangju, Duri is excited, a giddy hum that hovers in the back of his throat and keeps him bouncing on the balls of his feet.

Our Gentle Sin - a novel by Tara Lemana

Duri is seventeen, though he doesn't remember his seventeenth birthday, didn't notice it pass in the haze of pain and emptiness, but he notices it now, sitting in amongst mostly sixteen-year-olds in his new class, the hyung to all of them.

Somehow, he doesn't mind it. The expected derision for being held back a year doesn't come. Maybe it's his *scary emo vibe* as Hosu used to call it, maybe it's the fact that he's keeping up just fine, or maybe it's just traditional values showing their impact, but his classmates look to him for advice and help and treat him with a certain level of deference.

It serves to keep him a little aloof, a little way above them, their hyung, and while it helps him find his place, it also hinders him making friends somewhat. But Duri is used to being separate, used to not fitting, and the divide isn't a cold one, isn't rejection, so it's fine, Duri is fine, even if his breaks are still devoid of true connection, even if he misses Hosu's brightness, his smiles and his soft hands.

It's fine.

It all changes when in week four, Minjun comes crashing into Duri's life, shattering both his peace and his loneliness.

Duri is sitting at his usual table in the cafeteria, surrounded by a sea of friendly but disconnected faces steeped in uniform greys and more of that infernal navy blue. Voices ebb and flow around him, soft with staccato bursts intermittently stabbing his ear drums, words not meant for him catching on his awareness all the same as a loud laugh or exclamation pierces his bubble.

He shares his table with a small group of students, sitting with them but not engaging, caught up in his own thoughts, a disconnected part that, as always, doesn't quite fit.

"Um, Duri-ssi?"

The voice is hesitant, deferential, and Duri doesn't pay it any mind, other than a quick look up to barely register the tall, gangly boy it belongs to.

"Hm?"

"I, um, could I, um, is it okay if I sit here?"

He gestures to the seat opposite Duri, and Duri frowns, blinks, not used to people seeking him out, pushing into his space.

"Why?"

"Um, I, um, there's, there's a power point right, right there and um, I need to charge my phone. But if you don't want me to I could...um..."

Duri glances up, sees the boy start to look around the room for another power point, clearly uncomfortable. He sighs heavily.

"Sure. Sit."

"Are...are you sure? I could...find another one?"

The face hovering above him is wide-eyed and uncertain, and Duri does a double take. He's familiar, this tall, lanky boy with the awkward manner and the awful home haircut. Duri thinks he recognises him from one of his classes as the boy who sits at the front of the class and always has all the answers. Geeky. Smart. Clumsy. A loner, like Duri.

Our Gentle Sin - a novel by Tara Lemana

“There aren’t any others. That’s why I sit here. Just – sit down.”

He’s not trying to be brusque, but he feels the chopped off way the syllables leave his mouth as he says it, sharp, as though bitten. He tries to smile, but it’s been a while, and it feels crooked and weird on his face.

The boy looks mildly terrified, but he nods, a hurried, anxious bobbing of the head.

“Oh-okay, Duri-ssi.”

He goes to pull out the chair opposite Duri, holding a large milkshake cup in his other hand. His backpack shifts as he bends to move the chair, slipping off his shoulder and knocking the drink all over the table and Duri’s lunch. Duri stares down at the soggy mess of food floating in chemically pink-tinted milk and swears, jerking back from the table to avoid the rivulets of pink disaster that are starting to run down the sides of the table.

“For God’s sake!”

The boy goes deathly pale and blinks alternately at the mess and at Duri’s angry face. His hands are shaking, and Duri feels a small pang of pity for the hapless soul.

“Oh my god, oh my god, Duri-ssi, I’m so sorry, so sorry!”

Duri closes his eyes and counts to ten, slowly, silently, willing his calm to return. He opens them when he hears the boy’s hesitant *Duri-ssi?*

When he looks up, the boy’s shaky hands are holding handfuls of napkins in front of Duri’s face, and he’s biting his lip, clearly and obviously nervous.

“Here,” he says, “or – or would you like me to...?”

“I think you’ve done enough, don’t you?”

He didn’t mean it to come out so sharp, all edges and right angles, and the way the boy flinches makes him feel a little guilty, and he sighs as he takes the napkins out of those big, clumsy hands.

“Sorry.”

It comes out mumbled, pushed out at the table, at the mess, rather than at the boy in front of him.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean.....just, just sit down, okay?”

The boy nods nervously and sits down, hands held up uselessly as Duri cleans up what he can of the mess. One of the cafeteria staff comes to his aid with a cloth and a mop, and once she leaves with Duri’s soaked tray of pink food, they’re left facing each other across a sticky, sickly smelling table.

The boy still looks terrified, sitting with his backpack perched on his lap, as if he’s certain Duri will tell him to leave any second now. Duri sighs and forces a smile, looking somewhere at the kid’s chin, eyes never quite making contact.

“Look, kid...”

“Minjun.”

Duri frowns.

“What?”

Our Gentle Sin - a novel by Tara Lemana

The boy smiles, and it's shaky, but he juts his chin out a little, as if he's trying to seem braver than he feels, to pull his colours back inside his edges.

"Minjun. Seo Minjun. It's my name, Duri-ssi."

Duri blinks.

"Oh. Um. Okay."

"I'm sorry about your lunch, Duri-ssi. You can share mine, my eomma – I mean, I brought more than enough."

There's a faint touch of pink on Minjun's cheeks, then, and his eyes cut away, embarrassed at having outed himself as a sixteen-year-old whose mother still makes his lunch. Duri feels a little curl of amusement at that, but schools his face to neutrality, bland and inoffensive. Minjun busies himself digging around in his bag, bringing out a large lunch box that he opens up to reveal several smaller containers. He arranges them on the sticky table between them, a rainbow-coloured array of boxes filled with gimbap, rice balls, bulgogi and fruit.

Duri stares at the familiar array, smells the mouth-watering scents, and in between one breath and the next, finds himself back on that blanket under the trees in Namhansanseong with Hosu. The memory washes over him, full of joy and warmth, and it's been so long since he really sunk into his happy memories with Hosu, it overwhelms him for a moment. He swallows hard, still staring at the food in front of him, full of emotion.

"Duri-ssi? Are you okay?"

It's hard to tear his eyes from the food, hard to drag his gaze up to Minjun's face, slow and heavy, like walking through molasses. Minjun's expression is concerned, his eyes soft, all fear seemingly forgotten.

"Are you okay?"

Duri clears his throat, feels his cheeks flushing a traitorous pink.

"Um, yeah, sorry. I, um..."

He stops, breathes, gathers himself. Minjun stills, watches, perhaps understanding Duri needs a minute for reasons that have nothing to do with him, perhaps just uncertain of what to do.

Duri tries to smile again. It feels a little less crooked, this time, a little less forced, and Minjun rewards him with a small smile in return.

It feels like encouragement, so Duri tries again.

"I'm okay, thank you Minjun-ssi. Thank you for, um, for sharing your lunch, you didn't have to do that."

"I definitely do, Duri-ssi, I spoiled yours. Can't have you going hungry."

He gestures at the food.

"Please, dig in."

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Duri nods and tries to look up, tries to make the effort to make eye contact with Minjun, to notice him. He almost succeeds, skimming the boy's sharp eyes briefly, gaze snagging on sharp corners, heavy lids, chocolate pupils. *Dragon eyes*, his mind supplies, analytical, useless.

But his eyes wander again, too used to wanting to stay under the radar, too well adjusted to being invisible.

They eat in silence for a few minutes, helping themselves to small portions from the containers between them. It's familiar, comfortable, and as the minutes pass, Duri feels himself relax into it.

"Where are you from, Duri-ssi?"

Duri looks up, but Minjun isn't looking at him, the question directed at the gimbap he's trying to unstick from its container.

"All over, really. Most recently from Gwangju."

Minjun hums and nods, then makes a small, triumphant *ah* sound when he manages to get the gimbap unstuck and into his mouth.

"You're in my English class, I think," says Duri, more for something to contribute to the conversation than because he feels like it's important information.

Minjun looks at him, head tilted, face shifting into an expression Duri can't quite place. He looks amused, maybe, the corners of his mouth tugging up, a crinkle near the corners of his eyes. Duri blinks, once, twice, off-balance.

"What?"

Minjun grins, then, and dimples like craters open up in his cheeks, and Duri stares.

"English, and Korean Cultural Studies, and Maths, and Science too, Duri-ssi."

Oh. All of those, and Duri didn't notice. The back of his neck feels hot.

"Right. Um. I'm sorry. I guess I haven't been paying attention."

Minjun smiles, and it's softer this time, gentle.

"It's okay, Duri-ssi. I'm not really worth paying attention to."

A jolt runs up Duri's spine at that. The self-deprecation stings, reminds him of Hosu again, of the way he'd shrink into himself, the way he'd spill words like *I don't think he likes me very much*, the way he didn't know how bright he shone.

Duri feels a flare of protectiveness towards this big, gangly kid that looks like an exercise in trigonometry, all angles and planes, and he frowns. He takes a breath and looks up at Minjun, *really looks*, stares him straight in those dragon eyes.

"Yah. Minjun-ah. Don't talk like that."

The sudden switch to informal speech is intentional, and he sees the flash of recognition on Minjun's face. He smiles, soft, and the sharpness fades from his eyes somehow, too.

"Okay, Duri-ssi..."

"Hyung." Duri lets his eyes slide back down to the food and picks up a rice ball.

Our Gentle Sin - a novel by Tara Lemana

“Call me hyung.”

He pops the rice ball in his mouth and pretends not to notice Minjun’s wide, dimpled smile.

*

Seoul, 2007

There is an unlikely friendship on the face of it.

Minjun, who inhabits his body like he woke up in it this morning after falling asleep in an entirely different, much smaller one last night, who has an utter lack of spatial awareness and a haphazard type of control over his limbs and seems permanently surprised at the way his body betrays him.

Minjun, who is smart and geeky and kind, who sometimes talks in words Duri needs a dictionary to understand, but who is so open and warm, so humble and gentle.

Minjun, who dispenses his wide, dimpled smile liberally and frequently.

Minjun, who for some reason decides that Im Duri is going to be his new best friend despite his horrible embarrassment at the way they met.

And Duri, a full head shorter, to whom words are something not to be wasted, something to dispense carefully, thoughtfully sprinkled on, never to excess.

Duri, to whom listening is an art and speaking is something best left to those with needful things to say.

Duri, whose face rarely strays far from carefully neutral, gruff even, except in those moments when he lets his guard down and Minjun gets to see that wide, gummy smile that’s almost always followed by a shy ducking of the head.

They’re an odd pair, but they work, somehow, complementing each other, filling in the gaps between the lines of each other’s stories. It grows slowly, steadily, a process of months, a careful tying of individual threads to other, mindfully chosen, complementary threads.

It’s a relief, to Duri, to be able to sink into a friendship without fear of having it ripped away, to know that it’s okay to let himself connect with a person, to just *be*.

They laugh a lot, and Duri learns that Minjun is even deeper and kinder than he seems, that he likes to have long conversations about topics Duri has never thought about before meeting Minjun.

Duri learns that he likes that, likes to listen to Minjun talking about supernovas and women’s rights, about the influence of climate on social norms and behaviours, about the impact of genderisation of children’s clothes on gender identity and other things Duri wasn’t even aware of existing. It’s soothing, knowing that if Duri hasn’t thought to be concerned about something he should be concerned with, that Minjun certainly will have, and if Minjun hasn’t, then it probably isn’t worth thinking about.

Slowly but surely, Minjun fills some of the spaces Hosu left behind.

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Not all of them, to be sure, not nearly all of them, but a great number. They become inseparable, a unit, names spoken in the same phrase routinely, *Duri and Minjun*, two very different peas in a pod. Minjun isn't Hosu, but he becomes important, becomes integral to Duri, the person his threads are now tied to.

Minjun doesn't fill the space that makes Duri breathless, or the one that makes him giddy and makes his heart race, the space that makes him feel excited or the one that makes him want to do stupid things just to be noticed.

He doesn't fill the space that makes Duri *want* or *need*, or the one that makes him want to *touch* or *be touched*.

Neither does Duri fill those spaces for Minjun.

Those spaces stay vacant, waiting to be filled by someone else, someday.

But as the months pass, they grow together, roots striking deep into each other's ribcages, fusing in the kind of friendship that tastes like *forever*, like *home*, like *unconditional*, and there's a deep kind of healing in that, for anyone, but especially for Duri.

It's on a Saturday afternoon towards the end of Duri's first school year in Seoul that the conversation turns to love.

They've been to the cinema, spent an afternoon sunk into a beautiful French art film with stunning cinematography that Minjun ferreted out. It leaves both boys pensive and a little shell shocked, walking to a nearby park with bellies full of soda and popcorn and minds still caught on the romance and heartache that poured off the screen and into them over the past two hours.

They flop down onto the grass and lie down to stare up at the blue, cloud-dotted sky.

"Do you think that kind of love is what's in store for all of us, hyung? For everyone?"

Duri thinks, mind slow like molasses, images still filtering through like vistas through sunlight, a little washed out. He closes his eyes against the brightness of the sky and watches the scenes play out on the inside of his eyelids.

"What do you mean *that kind of love*, Jun-ah?"

"Just...that intense? That painful? Do you think that's what it's always like?"

Duri hums, considering.

"I don't really know. I think...I think it's unavoidable that there's pain somewhere along the way, because love is vulnerability, and vulnerability is risk. I don't think you can be vulnerable, really vulnerable, and never get hurt, you know? It's just part of it. But for the right person...maybe it's worth it?"

Minjun is quiet, considering.

"Have you ever been in love, hyung?"

It's a big question, one that opens the door to all the things, few as they are, that Duri hasn't been brave enough to share yet. But love is vulnerability, and Duri loves Minjun, loves him deeply and quietly and honestly in all the friendship ways, and he trusts Minjun.

And so he breathes deeply, and opens the door.

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“Once.”

“Did it hurt?”

“Beyond anything I’ve ever experienced, Jun-ah. It broke me.”

“Do you want to tell me about it?” It’s said softly, unassuming.

It’s quiet then, for a heartbeat, two, ten, as Minjun holds space and Duri searches for the courage to spill the words that sit behind his teeth.

When he speaks, they fall out easily, so easily, like it’s nothing, and he thinks that might be because it’s Minjun who’s there to catch them.

“His name was Hosu. We were at school together, in Gwangju. Met on my first day there and just clicked. He was so bright, Jun-ah. So beautiful, I couldn’t keep my eyes off him. I didn’t even know I was in love with him for the first few months, but I think I was done for from the moment I met him.”

Duri stills, breathes. Thinks back, Hosu’s smile playing out in his mind’s eye. A small part of him notices that Minjun doesn’t comment on the pronoun, the loud and meaningful *he*, and that’s a soft kind of relief, like a gift expected that arrives as promised.

“We were together for about six months, best friends for three before that. Always together, every day. He was everything, you know? All I ever thought about, all I ever wanted. My first kiss. First love. I was his, too.”

The space between the words stretches, long, heavy, as Duri remembers what followed, the hurt.

“What happened?”

Minjun’s voice is blue, pewter. Duri sighs, trying to push old hurts out of his lungs.

“We moved here. I tried to get my parents to reconsider but they wouldn’t. They didn’t know about Hobah, didn’t know what he was to me, but even if they had, I’m not sure they would’ve understood, or changed their minds. When I told him...”

Duri’s chest feels tight, constricted, and he presses the heel of his hand to his breastbone to try and ease it, rubs the ache to try and disperse it.

“I was an idiot. He was afraid I’d leave, and even though I knew I probably would end up having to, I promised him I never would. When I told him we were leaving, it broke his heart. He ran. Refused to talk to me after that. Never even got to say goodbye.”

It hurts, even now, but the telling, speaking the words to another person, voicing the importance of that time, of Hosu, to someone other than his own mind, that feels good, validating, cathartic. It gives shape to a part of Duri’s history, a part of who he is, that has never been allowed to take shape.

“I was a wreck. Just lay in bed for months. Couldn’t eat, couldn’t sleep, couldn’t do a damn thing. Just cried and spaced out. My parents were so scared. It’s why I got held back a year, I basically missed three quarters of the school year by the time I was well enough to go back.”

It’s quiet, just the noises of the city around them, muted by the trees surrounding them in the small green oasis they’re in.

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“Was it worth it?”

Duri considers the question. Was it worth it? Would he trade what he had with Hosu for never having had to go through that pain?

The answer reverberates loudly, rattles his insides.

“For me, it was. I would go through that ten times over if it meant spending more time with him. I just...if I regret anything, it’s that he got hurt. I’d do anything to go back and change that, but I can’t. I don’t care about my pain, he was worth it, but his? I wish I could take that back, that still cuts me up. I never wanted him to get hurt. And I...I don’t know, if you asked him the same question, I don’t know that you’d get the same answer. I don’t know that he’d say it was worth it. I guess I’ll probably never know.”

Duri’s eyes are wet, and he wipes them with the back of his hand. There’s a trail from his right eye down his temple and wetness in his ear from a stray tear that he missed. There’s movement beside him as Minjun shifts and quietly takes Duri’s free hand, squeezes it before letting go again.

“I’m sorry, hyung. About the hurt. About his hurt, too. But I’m glad you don’t regret the love. I’m glad you don’t regret him. I’m...I can’t say I’m looking forward to experiencing that hurt myself. But if you say it’s worth it, that love is good enough to make that worth it, then I look forward to that. And I hope you get to have it again, one day.”

It’s sweet, and Duri smiles through his tears.

“Thanks, Jun-ah. I hope you’ll think it’s worth it too.”

*

Seoul, 2009

Duri and Minjun graduate, and the future feels like it’s spread wide open in front of them, untapped potential leaking out of all its seams.

The future lies in wait at Seoul National University, and Duri is excited, full of giddy jitters at the prospect of rooming with Minjun, about the fresh start in a different kind of world.

Seoul feels like home now, three years on, more than anywhere else Duri has ever lived, more than Gwangju, because Gwangju wasn’t home, Hosu was home.

Seoul is home now, the taste of the city embedded on the back of his tongue, a permanent stain of rubber and hot concrete laced with dirt, imprinted now with the sense of belonging Duri looked for and never found until Hosu.

Minjun is home, too.

Minjun, all words and heart and dimples, all the parts that make up Duri’s closest friend, the person who kept watch and held space for Duri while he picked up the pieces of his soul and stitched them back together with careful, shaky hands.

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Duri is something close to whole now, more whole than he has been for a long while, less fragmented, less blue, less undone. Life looms large in front of him, full of possibility, of hope, and thoughts of Hosu are less painful, less all-consuming too. They're there, but they're softer, warmer, their edges less sharp, and Duri feels less like he's bleeding to death from a thousand cuts and more like he's being held together by his threads, like he's staying inside his lines, not always leaking outside of them.

Choosing a career path is arduous, mind numbing. Duri agonises over it for months, his practical side (and his parents, too) pushing for something easily filtered into food and rent and all the necessities of life, something *logical, realistic*. But another part of him, a quieter but more heart-centred part, tries valiantly to push him into another direction. It sings pretty words about *meaning*, about *passion*, about *making a difference*.

Its song is too vague for Duri to grasp, though. Too soft, too lyrical, too lost in the loudness of *practicality*.

In the end, the need to pay bills once he's out on his own weighs out over the desire to pour himself into his passion or search for meaning, and he decides to focus on a sure-fire line of work. Computer Science is only somewhat interesting, he doesn't hate it. It doesn't make his heart sing, but there's certainty in it, reassurance. He minors in music production, and it's enough, for now, together with his practice in his free time, enough to feel like he's not giving up on what he loves.

University life is what Duri expected, really. Freedom, stress, friends, more stress, no money, a terrible diet, too much alcohol and too many questionable choices.

Navigating it with his closest friend by his side makes it feel less reckless, feel like there's always someone to catch him if he falls, because there is. He knows there is.

They look after each other, make sure each navigates this life in a way that sees them coming out the other side still whole, still with all their pieces locked firmly together.

When Minjun catches the flu, Duri nurses him until he's better, then Minjun returns the favour when Duri wakes up sick with it the moment Minjun starts to feel better.

Minjun makes sure Duri eats and sleeps when he's in the middle of exams, sometimes resorting to bodily picking him up when he's falling asleep at his desk and tucking him into his bed, grumbled protests of *I'm fine Jun-ah I don't need to sleep* firmly ignored.

Duri gently pulls Minjun out of his existential crises when he sees him spiralling, interrupting his overwrought rambles with a gentle *breathe, Jun-ah* and a soft admonishment to take things one step at a time, Duri who helps him function by taking care of the day-to-day stuff for him and reminding him of his lectures when he loses sight of all the things that suddenly feel too hard.

When Duri is stuck on a composition, it's Minjun who listens and says *what about trying this right here* and when that doesn't work, *how about that right there*, over and over again deep into the night until they work out the right thing in the right place and *it just fits*.

When Minjun gets off a phone call with his mother and spirals into questioning his choice to major in philosophy because *how will you find work, Minjun-ah*, it's Duri who listens and reminds him to breathe, who makes him tea and cleans it up when Minjun spills it and who brings him back to *what does your heart tell you*. (That neglected part of Duri admires Minjun his fortitude, admires the way he is following his heart where Duri instead followed his head, and is determined to support him.)

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They bolster each other in everything. It's Minjun who Duri first allows to hear him rap, months after a gentle request from his friend, a quiet, wistful *one day I would love to hear you rap, hyung*.

Duri doesn't respond to it in the moment, sweeps it away with the back of his hand, too flustered to contemplate the possibility of this other side of him, this side that *no one but Hosu* has seen being brought out into the daylight, of it being exposed, open to criticism. Duri isn't sure he's ready for that, ready for praise or ridicule or *feedback*.

But it sticks in his mind, an earworm that refuses to leave him be, whispering that *this is Minjun, Minjun is safe, Minjun won't judge, we love Minjun*, and he does, and Minjun won't.

And so, one day when Minjun comes home, Duri doesn't, but there's an email in his inbox that just says *listen to this while I'm out*, and an attached file named *Repercussions*.

Minjun listens again and again and again, and then listens again. It's Duri, clearly, the voice is recognisable, but the aggression, the anger, those are sides of Duri he doesn't often show.

The song is unfiltered, blistering truth. It tells the story of his battle with depression, the months during which he was broken and tormented, tells of his parents' fear, his own dissociation from it, from the rest of world, from himself. There's no mention of Hosu, or love, or heartbreak, but there doesn't need to be, Minjun knows the story, hears the pain. It moves him, makes him inexplicably happy to know Duri wrote this, that his music helped him process something so painful and channel it into something so beautiful, so raw.

When Duri comes home, Minjun rushes him, all his feelings in his limbs, bursting, and he sweeps Duri up in an uncharacteristic hug, warm and full of excitement, and it makes Duri feel *just so*, overwhelmed and rattled, flustered, but not bad, not bad at all. He bats at Minjun, though, bats with nervous hands, ducks his head to hide his smile because this isn't like them, they don't really hug, they're not touchy, and it's *weird* but it's also kind of *nice*.

"Get off, Jun-ah, what are you doing?"

The complaint is weak, whiny, pushed out as it is through a mouth full of smiles.

"I'm just – I'm happy, hyung. Thank you for sending me your song. I love it. You're so good, hyung. You're so *good!*"

There's pink on Duri's cheeks, then, all his feelings staining his outsides, and that feels like betrayal, so he huffs, grumbles *stop it Jun-ah you're so embarrassing*, hides his face until Minjun laughs.

But it drops a little something into Duri's chest, a kernel of *maybe*, of *maybe I can do this, maybe I'm not bad*, a little tiny bit of self-belief that grows with every song he slips Minjun behind the buffer of his email account.

This is how their first year at university flows, learning and growth and a gentle spreading of wings.

Connections with others come and go, too, some brief, flash-in-the-pan, others more lasting, more solid.

Minjun meets Minjee, whose teeth are straight and white and whose smiles scrunch her eyes up into crescents. She bounces while she walks and her voice reminds him of summer in Ilsan, the blue ocean and sand between the toes, and Minjun is *smitten*. They go on three dates and sleep together twice, and Minjun talks about her with stars in his eyes and a softness that Duri hasn't heard before in his voice.

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But Minjee is on an athletics scholarship and her time is divided between the gym and the volleyball courts, and she doesn't have time, not for Minjun, not for anything more than hook ups. But Minjun wasn't made that way, wasn't painted in colours that allow him to be casual, to hook up when the mood strikes and not catch feelings. Minjun's heart is wide open, and all the good people leak right in there whether he likes it or not, so he can't, can't let her slip in and out because once she's in, the out will hurt too much.

It still hurts, but Minjun has Duri, has floor space between their dorm room beds to spill the words he needs to, to get the sting out, words that Duri catches and turns over and keeps safe, locked away for when Minjun needs them again.

Duri meets Daehyun, handsome and sharp-featured and tall, with a freckle under his left eye that Duri can't stop staring at and sinful lips that taste like mint and something sweet, honey maybe, or mangoes.

Daehyun is a nice guy, unapologetically sexy, and hooking up with him is fun, but the connection is loose, careless. There's no thrum in Duri's chest when he sees him, no buzz under his skin at his smile, no ache when they go a week without seeing each other. Daehyun is objectively gorgeous, but Duri doesn't dream of seeing him in all the different lights the world has to offer, doesn't fantasise about him under moonlight or cast in the pinks and oranges of sunrise, doesn't want to see what he looks like stained by starlight blues.

Daehyun comes and goes, fades away when he's dating someone, fades back in when he's not. It's convenient, low maintenance, easy, but it's not love, more of an unassuming, loose friendship. It suits Duri, whose heart isn't free, still caught as it is on a boy in Gwangju, snagged on a pair of soft eyes with sharp corners and a heart-shaped smile that he will never see again.

During their second year at SNU, Minjun meets Jiah, a third-year drama major with a quiet kind of strength, a depth that makes her seem more solid than anyone he's ever met. She's intimidatingly beautiful, with long, thick hair and an elegance that persists whether she's dressed in sweats and sneakers or an evening dress. She reminds Minjun of green velvet, rich and smooth, too luxurious to touch, too expensive to maintain, but utterly desirable.

He meets her at a poetry reading he attends one night, sitting in the back by himself because Duri is working on a composition. She approaches him afterwards, recognising him from around campus, and he's in awe of her, tongue tied and sweaty palmed by the time the conversation ends, but he somehow leaves with her number in his phone and no idea how it got there.

Somehow, it sticks. Jiah likes Minjun, who is permanently a little dazed and confused as to why, and they settle into a slow and gentle dating period that involves a lot of handholding and a little kissing, and it's nice, allowing Minjun to find his equilibrium around her over time.

Duri, on the other hand, throws himself into his studies, focused and single-minded, and in the spaces between, *slowly slowly slowly*, starts fostering that little kernel in his chest into something more substantial, more *real*. He books studio time and uses some of it to record himself spitting bars to new songs.

The first time he plays a song for someone other than Minjun, it's accidental and terrifying, panic bleeding a sour, acidic stain at the back of his throat. Duri is at the studio well past dark, the building sitting shadowed and silent, all but abandoned in favour of more leisurely pursuits. Duri is working on one of his own songs after finishing up the piece he has to present for his production paper, using

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the last hour of his booked studio time to work out the kinks in the track that's been his obsession for the past three months.

He's tired, body aching from lack of sleep, too many hours wrapped up in lyrics around his already heavy study schedule, eyes burning with fatigue and poor decisions. His ears hurt from wearing his headphones for too long, the skin sensitive despite the cushioning on the earpieces, abused and unheeded. Duri grunts and he rips the headphones off, unplugs them from the console and leans back in his seat, closing his eyes as he lets the sound of the track wrap around him, delicate fingers of sound tickling the skin of his arms and neck.

It's taken him a long time not to hate the sound of his own voice when listening to his tracks, but he's getting used to it, slowly becoming accustomed to the odd difference between the taste of the syllables on his tongue and the way they reverberate around his head when he plays them out loud.

He sinks into the track, lets it wash over him, feeling the weight of the bass vibrate his bones, the sting of the angry bars against his ear drums, listens the way he always does, critically, ready to cut parts or scrap a track altogether.

The music drowns out everything else, his own breathing, the scuff of his feet on the floor, the hum of the air conditioner, the gentle whoosh of the door when it opens.

When Duri opens his eyes after the last few bars fade away, his TA, Donghyun, is leaning against the door, and Duri's heart lurches, cold fright pebbling his skin. He squawks loudly.

"Oh my god, you scared me, Donghyun-ssi! What are you doing here?"

Donghyun laughs, his wide, toothy grin pushing his round cheeks up to squish his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Duri-ssi, I didn't mean to scare you. You asked me to come by and listen to your project piece, remember?"

Duri rubs his eyes and groans as Donghyun drops into the chair beside him, the chair creaking softly as it adjusts to the sudden weight.

"I forgot, sorry, sunbaenim."

Donghyun hums.

"What was that you were listening to, just now?"

Duri flushes, skin prickling with embarrassment.

"Oh, that was, um, it was nothing."

Donghyun raises one eyebrow, features stained with disbelief.

"Oh, I definitely wouldn't say it was nothing. Was it you?"

Heat crawls all over Duri's body, mortification made corporeal, and he wishes the ground would open up and swallow him. He winces, screws his eyes shut, tries to resist the urge to curl in on himself and hide.

"Um, yeah, it was."

"For real? Duri-ssi, that was phenomenal! You never told me you rap! How do I not know this?"

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Duri's cheeks are on fire, and he's so, so embarrassed, but the praise feels good, too, unexpected, warm. Donghyun is his TA, not his friend, he owes Duri nothing but unvarnished truth and constructive criticism and without fail, that is what he has given him for every piece Duri has created for his papers. There is no room for Duri to dismiss Donghyun's praise as *he's my friend, he's supposed to say that*, because he knows better, knows that Donghyun's word is stained with unconditional truth.

The kernel in his chest grows a little warmer, a little rounder. He huffs, caught between embarrassment and a warm, pleased feeling.

"I...I mean...I don't, I don't let people hear me, normally. You kind of caught me out, sunbaenim."

Donghyun's expression is speculative, thoughtful.

"Then I'm glad I did. You shouldn't be hiding this away, you have a real talent there. Will you let me hear something else?"

There's a rush of fear, cold apprehension at Donghyun's request, and Duri stutters.

"I...I'm...um"

Donghyun leans forward, ducks his head low to make eye contact.

"Duri-ssi. You don't have to if you're not comfortable. But I'd like to hear more if you'll let me. I think you have something special."

So Duri breathes deeply, fills his lungs with all the courage he can muster, and nods.

"Okay, sure, sunbaenim."

He queues up two more tracks, nerves boiling in his belly as he does so. Donghyun listens with a focused expression, nodding occasionally, filling the air with the odd quiet exclamation at a lyric or riff he particularly likes.

When the last bars fade out, Donghyun looks at Duri, and Duri's stomach lurches, fear and uncertainty leaching in from their hiding places behind Duri's ribs.

"Duri-ssi. Stop hiding this. You are far too talented not to share this. Your lyrics, your composition, cadence, flow, everything, it's spot on. Are you really telling me you're just sitting on these tracks?"

Duri squirms in his seat.

"Um, yes?"

Donghyun clacks his tongue, and the sound feels like annoyance.

"Well stop it. There's a time for modesty. This isn't it. Get this online and share it!"

Donghyun sits back then, claps his hands, seemingly deciding the topic is closed.

"Now then, let's hear your project piece!"

And Duri, relieved and flustered, switches to his composition piece, a pleased warmth lingering in his belly.

Our Gentle Sin - a novel by Tara Lemana

It takes Duri another month to gather up the courage to create a Soundcloud page, but Donghyun's regular probing eventually pushes him into doing so, heart in his mouth, fluttering up against his teeth. When he finally creates it, using the stage name of *D-Day* that Hosu coined for him all those years ago, Minjun has to talk him out of a panic spiral and convince him not to immediately delete the page and take back all that courage, all that brave energy that abandoned him the second he hit *post*.

The page stays up, three of Duri's tracks available to listen to, their titles staring at Duri from the screen, taunting him with secret, silent voices that say *this was a bad idea, you're not good enough, they'll hate it, they'll hate you*.

But Duri breathes deeply, swallows down the urge to hit *delete account* and allows his soul to stay online, open for anyone to listen to, to love or hate, to praise or destroy. When Duri tells Donghyun in gruff, stuttered sentences, he immediately follows the page and then shares the link with his 5000 Insta followers, much to Duri's horror.

But the horror slowly turns to a sweet, giddy warmth as many of Donghyun's followers give his songs a listen and become Duri's followers too, leaving enthusiastic comments on both his page and Donghyun's. The kernel in Duri's chest grows a little with each new like, each new kind comment.

Slowly, ever so slowly, Duri grows and blossoms.

There are nights Minjun drags him out to come drinking with their gradually growing friend group, an eclectic collection of slightly odd types that somehow all fit together perfectly, like a patchwork blanket, warm and cosy even if it looks a little loud and offbeat from the outside.

Bora is a third year in Duri's Music Production class who is loud and opinionated and unreasonably funny. She wears ripped jeans and docs with oversized t-shirts and slouch beanies, argues with Minjun about everything just for the sake of arguing, and has a long-standing, deep running crush on the pretty bartender at their favourite bar despite never having spoken more than a handful of words to her. Duri adores her, not in the least because of the way she manages to fluster Minjun when she engages him in long, drawn-out philosophical debates until he is utterly confused about what point he was trying to make.

Sunyoung is a second-year maths major with bright red hair who wears colourful hand-knitted jumpers with black jeans, black converse and leather jackets. Duri meets her in the library and they become regular study buddies. Sunyoung is quiet but sharp in much the same way Duri is, sharp-eyed and sharp-witted, and Duri feels at ease around her, calm, like the things in his chest that might be tight on any given day loosen up a little around Sunyoung.

Minho is a grad student in the Computer Science department who serves as Duri's TA for his computer papers and insists on dressing in vests and trousers like a man three times his age. He is smart and talkative in a gentle, kind way, and he reminds Duri of Minjun, minus Minjun's complete lack of awareness of his own limbs. His smile stretches wide and crinkles his eyes, and he has an infectious laugh that makes Duri grin whether he wants to or not, and that makes Duri feel at home.

Minho slots into their friend group with barely a ripple besides some gentle ribbing from Bora about his sweater vest, to which he responds with a wink, a toothy grin and a quickfire *I'll lend it to you sometime, it goes with your beanie*.

Our Gentle Sin - a novel by Tara Lemana

It's a good group, supportive and fun, and Duri feels like he fits, for the first time with more than just one person in his life. They are all a little quirky, a little weird, and that makes him feel like he's part of a matched set.

He doesn't date. It's not a time thing, though he doesn't have much of that, and it's an excuse that comes in handy more than once. It's more of a heart thing, a threads thing, a roots thing.

Duri isn't waiting for Hosu, not exactly, but whether he likes it or not, part of him is still in Gwangju, still lingering, still captured, and no matter where he looks, who he looks at, no one he meets *shines* like Hosu did.

And so he holds his threads, keeps them tied to Minjun, to his friends, and secretly, to Hosu, and doesn't try to tie them to anyone else, for now. He sees Daehyun when Daehyun is free and single, and that's enough, for now.

*

Seoul, 2010

It's enough, until it isn't.

It's been a bitterly cold winter, and Duri feels the air biting his face as he huddles in his winter coat, the sting of it acidic, painful against the pink of his skin. It's a Saturday night early in the second semester of their third year, February beating cold against the teeth, the brief breath out before the push towards the end, towards exams, graduation, caps and gowns, towards the real world.

The city is blue-white underneath his boots as he trudges along the footpath, golden pools of light warming it underneath the streetlamps he passes with his hands buried deep inside his coat pockets, fingers aching with the cold that freezes his breath as it leaves his mouth.

He's alone as he makes his way to drinks with his friends at their favourite bar near the university, alone and a little bit lonely, steeped in blues. Minjun has been spending more time with Jiah lately, thoughts and words and eyes thoroughly wrapped up in her as they approach their first anniversary, and while Minjun's happiness sits like a warm glow between Duri's ribs, he feels his friend's frequent absences as a frigid sense of lonesomeness that makes his fingers tingle and his throat feel tight.

The bar is full, voices and music spilling over into the street as Duri approaches, warm and welcoming, a cocoon waiting to pull him in, and it makes him smile, soft, unintentional, anticipation of a good thing making itself known in the lines on his face.

He reaches the door at the same time as a group of guys around his age do, and he stands back, content to wait as they enter. One of them holds open the door for his friends, then turns to Duri as they file through, smiling wide as he gestures for Duri to follow. His hair is bright, bright red, red like cherries, red like strawberries, a beacon among the city dressed in white, and Duri's eyes snag on it, and he blinks, stares, blinks, slow.

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The boy's smile widens, and it's soft, stary eyed, lovely, and now Duri's eyes are bouncing, from that hair *redredredsoaredredred* to that smile *softsoft*, and he's a little stuck, a little speechless.

"After you?" says the boy, and it comes out like a question, tilting up in the last syllable, in the boy's head, in his eyebrows, because Duri is frozen, caught on the pretty, pretty sight in front of him.

Duri clears his throat, shakes himself, feels the flush creeping up the back of his neck as he gathers his thoughts.

"Um, right, okay, thanks, sorry, I was just...."

He blinks, words fluttering on the tip of his tongue, just out of reach, flustered. The boy's smile turns into something smaller, something sweeter, gentler.

"Buffering?" he offers with a small duck of his head, eyes soft, soft, soft, and it feels like summer rain.

Duri smiles, too, taking the offering, relieved, a little embarrassed, *a lot, a lot*.

"Yeah."

His feet move, then, though he doesn't remember asking them to, and he enters the bar, cheeks hot, hands icy, voice rough and low as he remembers to push out a soft *thank you*, a little late, a little slow.

But the boy doesn't seem to mind, or not too much, and he smiles, says *you're welcome*, and Duri stumbles deeper into the belly of the bar, wishing he could have had an excuse to talk to him some more.

He finds his group near the back of the small bar, seated around a small table, voices at a pitch that suggests they're only one drink in, and Duri slips into the free seat between Sunyoung and Minhoo, fingers tingling in the warm air.

Duri sips his beer and listens to Bora complain about the misogyny that's rife among faculty, the imbalance of only five out of forty faculty members being female and how it's symptomatic of what's wrong in the entire world. Her monologue feels hollow without Minjun there to fill it out, to play devil's advocate or agree with the principle but disagree with her proposed solutions, and Duri shifts in his seat, slouching a little, trying to stave off the flare of loneliness at his friend's absence.

Sunyoung nudges his shoulder, pulls him back to the present, eyes searching Duri's face.

"You okay, oppa?"

Duri smiles, hums, a little blue, a little forlorn.

"I'm okay, Sunyoungie. Just...you know."

And Sunyoung doesn't, couldn't, he thinks, but she nods anyway, kind, and smiles. Picks up her glass and clinks it against his, then sips, thoughtful, like the answers to all their questions are infused in her beer and all she has to do is savour it to understand all there is to understand.

They sit in companionable silence for a while, watching idly while Minhoo and Bora fall into a deep discussion on the merits and pitfalls of dress codes in school. Duri isn't really paying attention, zoning out and just letting his tired brain relax for a bit, eyes drifting over the crowd of people in the small bar.

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Duri's wistful, sad mood continues, and he wishes he could shake it, wishes Minjun was here to snap him out of it the way only Minjun knows how to do. But that's an unfair thought, and unhealthy, too, to wish Minjun was here to be his crutch, instead of somewhere enjoying Jiah's company, and Duri gives himself a mental shake up, tells himself to snap out of it.

His eyes drift aimlessly towards the bar, and a flash of strawberry red pulls his attention, hooks him. He makes a snap decision, throwing back the last little bit of his beer and standing with a *hyung's buying, who's drinking* that's met with three enthusiastic responses.

Nerves drop in his belly as he pushes through the crowd, eyes on the shock of cherry red hair like a silent beacon ahead. This isn't what he does, approaching pretty strangers in bars is something Im Duri never, ever does, but something about this boy makes him want to try, to see.

The boy turns just as Duri approaches, and smiles widely when he recognises Duri, all straight teeth and soft, crinkly eyes.

"Hi again!"

Duri can feel the pink staining the back of his neck and brings his hand up to cover it, wishing he could rub it off, smooth it away and dispose of it in secret, smudge it onto his jeans where no one would know.

"Hi," he says, nerves tangling his tongue, a silent curse behind the words for not having had a clever line thought out up front.

"Um, I...er, it's, it's my round," he says, nodding to the bar and holding up his empty beer glass by way of explanation, awkward and, he thinks, terribly obvious.

The boy smiles wider, and Duri's stomach wobbles a little, does a thing he hasn't felt in a while.

"Of course, by all means, don't let me stop you."

Duri smiles, or tries to, feeling ridiculous and off-kilter, sure his smile looks terrifying, and steps up to the bar, arm up to try and get the bartender's attention.

"Having a good night?"

Duri looks over and wishes he hadn't. The boy is leaning on the bar, looking relaxed and awfully, painfully attractive, *hot*, white t-shirt dipping low to show off sharp collarbones and rows of piercings in both ears. He's pretty, too pretty, tanned and delicate-featured, with a straight nose and straight, white teeth paired with round cheeks that shouldn't be so endearing on someone his age, but somehow are.

Duri blinks, realising he's staring, and feels the flush starting to creep from his neck to his cheeks, *pinkpinkpink*. He resists the urge to cover his cheeks with his hands, clearing his throat instead, horribly, painfully self-aware.

"Yeah, thanks, it's, it's going alright."

The boy hums, and it sounds pleased, warm, comforting. Picking up his glass, he sips his beer with the edges of his smile still lingering as he watches Duri place his order and pay.

Duri turns back to find him watching, and the flush on the back of his neck feels like it spreads every which way at once. He feels awkward, full of tangled-up syllables that stumble behind his teeth as he tries to get words out that make some kind of sense.

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"I um...like your...hair?" he tries.

The boy looks surprised, then barks a laugh that sounds delighted, genuine.

"Was that a question?"

Duri's face is hot, so hot, and he would so love it if the ground would open up and swallow him right about now, but he's stuck here, in this reality where he's making a fool of himself in front of a very cute – *terribly sexy* - boy.

He groans and screws his face up, rubbing a hand across his eyes.

"God, sorry, no, it wasn't. I like it. Your hair. It's – it's good. Nice. I like red."

The boy is still looking at him, still smiling, and he chuckles.

"Thanks. I like red too."

He leans forward into Duri's space, a little too close, a little too familiar. The air around Duri suddenly fills with warmth, cinnamon, wood, a deep scent that clings to the boy's skin and dips into the hollow in Duri's belly, fanning the heat that's simmering there.

His voice dips lower as he leans in.

"I like yours, too. It's pretty."

Duri's hair is black, right now, his own, boring, natural colour, and he scoffs.

"It's boring."

The boy keeps smiling, unperturbed, eyes locked on Duri's, and the prolonged eye contact is making Duri's heart race.

"Not on you. It's pretty on you."

And that sounds a little too close to calling Duri pretty, which is a little overwhelming, and Duri feels a little breathless, a little lost.

"I...thank you?"

It comes out squeaky, and the redhead looks unreasonably fond for a complete stranger.

"You're welcome."

He leans back then, sticks his hand out with an expectant look on his pretty, pretty face.

"Song Subin."

Duri swallows hard and shakes the hand in front of him. It's delicate, warm, soft, strong, a lovely collection of contradictions.

"Im Duri."

Subin nods as if that settles a question he's been pondering.

"Nice to meet you, Duri-ssi. Come here often?"

He says it with a little smirk, cheeky, as if he's silently acknowledging the cheesiness of the line.

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"All the time," Duri nods, deadpan. "You?"

Subin shakes his head, eyes dark, still locked on Duri's, mouth still curling up at the corners.

"First time," he says, "but I'm thinking I might need to come more often."

Everything he says has a weight to it, like there are triple meanings behind the words, and Duri feels off kilter, too slow to keep up, feels like he needs more time to dissect the words and filter out the various meanings before responding, but Subin is too quick, flashing another smile as he moves on.

"Are you at SNU, Duri-ssi?" he asks, with a nod in the general direction of the campus down the road.

Duri nods, too, glad to be on safer ground, but still off balance.

"Yeah. Third year, computer science. Are you?"

"Freshman, media studies."

The bartender places Duri's drinks in front of him, and he nods his thanks, grabbing one to take a sip. He grins as he swallows his beer.

"Oh, a freshie! How are you liking it?"

Subin is still watching him, but his eyes are on Duri's mouth now, and he seems distracted.

"It's – it's fine. Good. You, um, you have a little..."

He points to his own mouth, and Duri flushes all over again, wiping his lips with the back of his hand.

"Shit, sorry. Can't take me anywhere."

Subin hums, eyes still on Duri's mouth, and it's a little unnerving. Duri stills.

"You're fine."

He seems to shake himself then, looking up at Duri's eyes again, smiling widely, and Duri feels a little whiplashed.

"So, computer science! You like it?"

Duri clears his throat, shrugs, tries to seem unaffected with a belly full of flutters.

"It's alright, not really my passion, but it's kind of interesting. And there's work in it, you know?"

"Right. But I take it there's something else you'd rather do? Something that there's not a lot of available work in?"

Duri nods, feeling a little squirmy on the inside. All the attention is a lot, he's not that fond of talking about himself, but Subin seems so genuinely interested.

"Yeah. I minor in music production. I love it."

Subin's eyes widen comically.

"Wow, really? That's so cool! Are you a musician, too?"

Duri shrugs. He's still not particularly comfortable talking about his rapping, so he deflects, a little ungracefully, rubbing the cold, prickly skin at the back of his shoulders.

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“Yeah, sort of. What about you though? Do you like media studies?”

Subin doesn't seem to notice his deflection, or if he does, opts to ignore it for now and flow with it. He shifts positions against the bar, weight shifting to the opposite hip, and Duri's eyes catch on the leather pants encasing his slim thighs. His throat feels tight, and he swallows hard, drags his gaze back up to watch Subin's face, all his focus on not staring, on ignoring the heat in his belly.

“Yeah, I do. I mean, I wanted to be an actor, but it's just too hard to make a living that way, you know? Not enough jobs for too many candidates. But I'd still like to work in an area that has some kind of connection to tv, even just peripherally. Like, I don't know, news anchor maybe, or editor for a glossy magazine, or managing PR for some clueless famous people or something.”

Subin's enthusiasm is palpable, and it's endearing, but it's also confusing. It's strange, this mix of contradictory sensations the boy stirs in him, the way he's cute one minute and insanely hot the next. Duri's head is spinning. He gives himself a mental shake up, tries to suppress the heat in his belly and focus on the *cute* part.

“So really, you just want to rub shoulders with famous people then?”

Subin doesn't deny it, just nods happily, grinning, all his teeth on display and his eyes squeezing shut.

“Yeah, why not? I reckon it would be a lot of fun.”

“I suppose.”

There's a pause, and Duri has another sip of his beer, wiping his mouth scrupulously afterwards.

“So, Duri-ssi, you're a sort of musician majoring in computer science. Where are you from?”

“That's a simple question with a surprisingly complex answer,” he smiles.

Subin raises one eyebrow.

“It is?”

Duri hums, looking down at his beer.

“Yeah. I was born in Daegu, but we moved around a lot from when I was five. Never stayed anywhere for more than a year. So I don't really feel like I'm from anywhere, you know? Though I've been in Seoul three years now, so it kind of feels like home.”

Subin nods in acknowledgement.

“That's good. I think it's important to have a home base, have some stability. Must've been hard to move around so much?”

He phrases it as a question, double checking, not making assumptions, and Duri feels surprisingly grateful for that small consideration.

“Yeah, it was. It really sucked.”

“I guess that's why you don't have an accent then.”

Duri snorts at that.

“I do, actually. It comes out when I'm tired. Or drunk. Or angry.”

Subin grins, wide and delighted, all teeth and crescent eyes.

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"I'd love to see that sometime. Well, maybe not you angry, I think you'd be scary when you're angry. But the other two. I want to hear that Daegu satoori!"

There's a lot of layers there, a lot of nuances that Duri only barely has time to process, as Subin looks past him, seeming to spot something behind Duri.

"Ah. I think you're wanted, Duri-ssi. Or maybe those drinks are."

Duri looks over his shoulder to see his friends staring at him from their table. He sighs, resigned, turning back to Subin.

"Do you like coffee, Duri-ssi?"

More whiplash.

"Coffee? Um, yeah, but I don't think they serve it here?"

Subin chuckles at that. He grabs a napkin and digs a pen out of his pocket, scribbles something down.

"I know. There's this café about a block from here. I'll be there tomorrow at ten, having coffee. If you also like coffee, you could maybe be there too, and we could both have coffee."

He folds the napkin into a small square, his face pulling into concentrated lines, then grins and reaches out to hold the napkin in front of Duri, who takes it, blinking, a little shell shocked. Did he just get asked on a date? Is that what just happened?

"Like...a..."

He doesn't finish the sentence, too afraid he's got it wrong, too nervous to put sound to the words pushing up behind his teeth. Subin grins at him, unperturbed.

"A date? If you'd like it to be, yeah."

"Oh. Um. Yeah, okay, I'd like that."

Subin's smile widens, eyes all sparkly and squished.

"Yeah? Good. I was going to say, if you didn't want it to be a date it could just be two friends having coffee, but I'd really prefer it to be a date, so...yeah."

His cheeks are a little pink, and Duri realises suddenly that he's not the only one feeling a little flustered. It's kind of reassuring, nice even, to think pretty, hot, confident Subin is interested enough in Duri to feel a little shy. He can feel his own smile stretching wide, unbidden, and he knows he's showing all his gums in that way that makes him feel self-conscious, and he can feel the flush heat up the back of his neck again.

"Okay then. A date it is."

He tucks the folded napkin in his pocket and picks up the drinks.

"I'll see you tomorrow then, Subin-ssi."

"See you tomorrow, Duri-ssi."

Duri makes his way back to his table, putting the drinks in front of his friends with a nervous fluttering under his breastbone.

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“Who was that, oppa?” Sunyoung asks.

The back of Duri’s neck feels hot, and he can’t look at her, at any of his friends, keeps his eyes on the crowd around them as he sits, focuses on trying to suppress the giddiness bubbling up in his belly. He tries to downplay it, tries to keep the date his little secret for now, tucked under his breastbone.

“Um, no one. Just – just a friend.”

He sniffs, eyes everywhere, but still feels the moment three pairs of eyes turn on him, taking in the way his cheeks burn, the way he’s biting his lips to try and stave off the smile that’s pushing at his cheeks, and Duri knows he’s caught.

“Just a friend, huh?”

Bora is staring over Duri’s shoulder, presumably trying to see Subin, and Duri’s stomach drops when she suddenly raises her hand high in the air and begins to wave like a maniac, grinning and calling out *hellooo, helloooo*. He kicks her leg under the table and hisses a desperate *stop it, Bora!*

The smirk that spreads slowly over her face is lethal, and Duri feels terrified.

“Just a friend, my skinny arse, oppa! Tell us who he is or I’m going to find out for myself!”

“Fine, oh my god! I’ll tell you, just, just *don’t!*”

All three of them are staring at him with matching smirks, and Duri’s cheeks are on fire. He stares at the table, fingers clinging tightly to his sweating beer glass, cold against his overheated skin.

“That was, um, my um. My date. For tomorrow.”

Silence greets his words, and he risks a brief glance up at his friends to see their stunned stares directed back at him.

“I’m sorry, your *what?*”

Bora’s voice is incredulous, and Duri suppresses a grin.

“My um, my date!”

His friends burst out in a chorus of laughter and pleased exclamations, and Duri feels so, so fond and so, so embarrassed, all at once, looking everywhere but at them, hushing them with quiet, gruff protests under his breath.

Bora grins widely at him.

“You sly dog, oppa! Gone all of fifteen minutes and gets more action than I’ve had in three years!”

Duri flushes red at that and kicks her again, not too hard, just enough to make her grin and poke her tongue out at him.

“Yah! There was no action, no action at all, you behave!”

Sungyoung smiles at him, all sparkly and round-cheeked, and Duri suppresses the urge to pinch her cheek. Her voice is soft and genuine when she leans in.

“That’s really nice, oppa, I’m happy for you!”

Duri feels a little warm, a little giddy, and a lot pleased.

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The rest of the night passes in a pleasant haze. Duri feels Subin's eyes on him more than once and looks up to catch his eye a half dozen times. The small, secret smiles the redhead sends him across the room when he does are enough to send a tingle along Duri's spine.

When Duri and his friends leave the bar a few hours later, walking past Subin and his group on their way to the door, Subin voices a soft *hope to see you tomorrow, Duri-ssi* with a small duck of his head, and Duri thinks he'll never stop blushing again.

*

Duri meets Subin at the café the next day. It's a nice place, a quiet sort of busy, bright and airy with plants everywhere, book displays between the couches and on the wood panelled walls. Most of the tables are taken, but the buzz of voices is hushed, an undercurrent, like all the patrons are too hungover or too laid back to be bothered to speak above a mumble.

It's nice, relaxed, it makes Duri feel like he's at an open-air café where the noise has room to escape, only without the sunburn.

Subin is beautiful in the daylight, with his strawberry hair freshly washed and fluffy, a grey beanie pulled over it so the ends of his bangs tangle with his lashes, delicate fingers playing with the edges of the sleeves of his loose, white jumper. He's hard to look away from, Duri finds, hard not to keep staring at, unrelentingly sexy.

The conversation flows surprisingly freely. Subin makes it easy, somehow knowing instinctively how to draw Duri out in a way that's gentle and non-threatening, giving him space to share without pressuring him to do so, and switching seamlessly to talking about himself anytime Duri starts to feel antsy about oversharing.

Hours pass without Duri realising it, hours filled with comfortable conversation, genuine laughter and soft smiles.

Duri learns that Subin can't sing, is not a musician, but still loves music like Duri loves music, likes to soak in it, to absorb it into his skin until the different nuances stain his bones in shades that match the feelings embedded in the notes.

He learns that there are parts of Subin he can't look directly at without feeling breathless, parts like his collarbones, his mouth, his slender wrists, the way his tongue swipes across his lower lip from time to time.

He learns that Subin can be big and loud, but also small and quiet, that he's forward and honest about what he wants but shy about compliments, that he loves dogs and wants three someday but that he doesn't think he'll be a good dad, so no kids.

He learns that when Subin's fingers brush his own, there's an answering flare in his belly that makes him feel unhinged, electric.

He learns that Subin says what he means and means what he says, that he loves the smell of bacon but hates the taste of it, that he prefers heat to cold, that he drinks his coffee sweet and creamy, that he hates tomatoes and pickled foods and being lied to, and that the last time he was at the

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beach, he stepped on a jellyfish and his best friend had to pee on his foot to take the sting out and now they are both bonded and scarred for life.

Duri learns that he likes the way Subin's eyes disappear when he smiles his biggest, loudest smile, the one that's all teeth and happiness, that the way Subin looks him right in the eye to show he's listening when Duri talks makes him feel both a little squirmy and *seen*, and that the sight of Subin's bare, tanned thighs through the rips in his jeans stirs a flutter low in his belly.

Duri learns that he'd really, really like to see Subin again.

And again and again and again.

Subin walks him home that day, and kisses him soft and slow, a gentle thing at first, just gentle lips that taste like strawberries and coffee, but the longer it lasts, the more Duri falls into it.

He lets it build, relishes the taste of Subin's mouth, the slide of his tongue, the press of a lean, hard body against his, the tightening grip on his hips. It's dizzying, and when they part, they're both breathless.

Saying goodbye and walking to his room alone with his body still aching for Subin's hands and mouth feels odd, different from the loose-and-fast connection he's used to with Daehyun, but the anticipation is also nice, exciting.

They flow from date to date, fall into getting to know each other, into building their connection. They talk for hours, building a genuine friendship, ending their dates with long make out sessions that end reluctantly, the temptation to just fall into bed together strong. But Duri needs time to figure out what spaces inside him Subin will fill, knows he wants more than what he had with Daehyun, more than just hookups, more than heat and slick skin between tangled sheets, so he holds off, asks Subin to wait, and Subin does.

He tells Subin about Hosu on their third date, as they sit side by side on a couch at the same café they had their first date at. Subin listens with soft eyes, fingers wrapped around Duri's palm, warm and steady. When Duri says he's not sure he's left Hosu behind entirely, when he tries to voice the threads still lodged in his chest, Subin doesn't let go.

"I don't think you're meant to, hyung. I don't think you're meant to forget your first love, you're just meant to figure out how to give them a place in your history, in your heart, but you're never meant to let go entirely, I think."

And that makes sense, perhaps, and it eases something in Duri's chest, even though he still doubts, still isn't sure how much he has to give, how many spaces he can free up for Subin. It's early days, and this is nice, and they aren't committing to anything right now, so it's okay to explore this, to *see*.

When Subin walks him home, that day, Duri pulls him wordlessly into the room with him, sick of waiting, ready to explore further. Subin comes willingly, and Duri kisses the *are you sure* off his lips before it has time to fall.

Giving into the heat that's been building in his belly since meeting Subin, getting to touch and taste, being with someone he really likes, someone who might grow to be more, someone who fills up a few of the spaces that have stood empty for so long, is cathartic for Duri, a release in more ways than one.

Subin kisses him like he matters, like he can't get enough, like there is nothing better than this. It's nothing like kissing Daehyun, not an arbitrary, meaningless connection, it feels full and deep-

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reaching and soulful. It reminds Duri of the way Hosu kissed him, and that's hard, a deep ache in his chest he has to breathe through, but he tries to give it space, tries to accept it as just part of his story, and focus on Subin instead.

Being with Subin, relishing all that soft, golden skin against his body, watching Subin fall apart and knowing it's because of him, is a heady mix of exhilarating and painful, sitting somewhere between joy and loss. Subin is beautiful and wonderful, and Duri thinks in time he could grow to love him and be happy, but he's not there yet, not yet.

Falling asleep together afterwards, when their bodies have stopped shaking and their breathing has slowed, is healing, soothing. Duri loves this part, Subin wrapped in his arms, his red hair tickling Duri's cheek, his breath ghosting across Duri's skin until it pebbles.

He holds Subin tighter and falls a little deeper, relishes the gentle untangling he can feel in his chest as he closes his eyes.

And as Duri finishes out the year, Subin's hand is wrapped warm around his, a steady, hopeful presence by his side as he and Minjun graduate from SNU with a Bachelor's degree and big dreams for a bright future.

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Chapter 5

Gwangju, 2011

September arrives in a rush of heat and movement, the emptiness of CNU's campus making way for the press of overheated bodies as the new semester begins.

It's Hosu's last year at university, and it feels like pressure, a dull throb in his chest that reminds him he has to *do well*, has to *graduate* and then find a job, make a living, *grow up*. His mother's weekly call, once a welcome touch point, filled with a soft kind of expectation that felt manageable and fair, now leaves him with a shortness of breath and a tightness in the chest, filled as it is with weighty words like *grades* and *plans*.

There's another word that starts to slip in more and more frequently, one that weighs Hosu down in different ways, that puts a lump in the back of his throat. *Girlfriend* makes a regular appearance now.

She only applies it to him infrequently, only asks him outright whether he's *found a girlfriend yet* once in a rare blue moon. The first time it happens it leaves him mute, filled with a sense of failure at not having realised he is expected to be *looking* for a girlfriend.

Our Gentle Sin - a novel by Tara Lemana

But most often, the word crops up sideways, sneaks up on him in stories about boys he grew up with who are engaged to *girls from nice families*, and occasionally, gushing reports about beautiful weddings she and his father attended. Those stories are the hardest for Hosu to bear, they thicken the air in his lungs until it's unbreathable, until he coughs to try and dislodge the lumps of expectation that her words coagulate into and pushes out half-truths about classes he has to go to, just to get off the call.

His friends field his panic-filled post-call rants with varying approaches.

Harin rants with him, encouraging him to get everything out, then reminds him that it's his life and no one else gets a say in it, until he calms. Jiyeong listens calmly, then reminds him it's his life and it's no one else's business, then takes him out drinking until the stumble in his tongue matches the one in his feet and the buzz in his brain drowns out the echo of his mother's words.

Seongmin engages him in a competition to make up increasingly outrageous insults for parents who won't respect their children's right to privacy, until Hosu tears at the seams and laughs so hard his legs collapse.

Between them, they keep Hosu afloat, keep him in a mental space where he can cope with the pressure and the insecurity and find a teetering balance between duty and sanity. Harin encourages him to try and delay the calls, space them out more, to separate himself out a little bit, give his heart a little room, and he does, citing study needs whenever his mother asks why he has to skip a call.

It helps, diffuses things, allows him to feel a little lighter, a little less inhibited.

Still, it's a precarious balance, and there is a slow buildup of anxiety and frustration that sits in Hosu's gut.

He meets Iseul as autumn starts to lose its heat and colour, as the temperature shifts from mild and pleasant into something that stings the senses, that nips at the skin in the mornings and bites at it at night.

It's a rare Friday night where Hosu has let Jiyeong bully him into pulling on his tightest jeans and a slick, midnight blue silk shirt of Seongmin's. No sooner does Hosu have all the buttons done up before Jiyeong is undoing a breathless number of them and dragging him out to a nightclub. The week has been stressful, filled with exams and trepidation, and it feels like a night to open his chest to let out some of the pressure, to drink enough to shut down the part of his brain that insists on regurgitating his worries over and over again and switch off for a while.

Hosu's skin is slick and sticky from dancing, both with his friends and alone, and his body feels like its veins are filled with helium, light and floaty, a little transparent maybe, and it's nice, empty, free. He cut himself off when the tingle became a buzz, and it's been hours, but he still feels *high*, the endorphins rushing his system from throwing himself into his dancing with just enough alcohol in his bloodstream to not care about what anyone around him thinks. He feels like maybe he's smiling too much, but he's so *happy* and everything is so *nice* and he *loves* his friends and the music is so *good*, why shouldn't he smile?

He's in the middle of the dance floor by himself, king in his own world, perched on his own cloud, when he opens his eyes and there's a girl right in front of him, dancing with her eyes shut, smiling to herself.

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She's small, a good head shorter than him, just a tiny thing with messy brown jaw-length hair, white tee on ripped skinny jeans and black sneakers on her feet that look new, expensive. Her round cheeks are turned up to the ceiling as she moves with her head thrown back, and she dances like she loves it, like she *lives it, breathes it*.

She's hypnotic, and Hosu stares, excitement buzzing in his belly. He loves meeting people who feel about dance the way he does, who *need* it to be a whole person, to hold themselves together, and this girl looks like he feels when he dances, entranced, captured, unencumbered.

When she opens her eyes and looks at him, he's still smiling, still dancing, and maybe she sees what he sees, because she smiles back at him. It makes Hosu's grin stretch wider, because she has dimples not on her cheeks but down nearly on her chin, below the corners of her mouth, recalcitrant, like it was too hot for them one day and they melted out of place.

She waves at him, a small thing, acknowledgement of a kindred spirit, perhaps, then goes back to dancing with her eyes closed, shutting herself off from the world in her own bubble. Hosu does the same, floating out into space with a tiny, dimpled stranger in sneakers and ripped jeans, together alone.

Time flows oddly for a while, and Hosu isn't sure whether minutes or hours have passed when he feels small fingers tap him on the forearm. He opens his eyes to see that wide, dimpled smile tugging at those round cheeks again as she mimes *drink* with her other hand, eyes questioning, voice muted under the heavy bassline of the club's music. He nods, and her fingers wrap around his wrist to tug him towards the bar, unperturbed by the crowd, determinedly pushing her way through, Hosu trailing in her wake. It's a little overwhelming, awe-inspiring even, the way she barges through, all five-foot-three of her, alive with this evident certainty that the crowds will part for her, make way, and the most flummoxing thing is that *they do*.

There's a crowd at the bar, all clamouring for the bartender's attention, but as before, a gap magically opens up for the small girl pulling Hosu's arm, and he watches, fascinated, as she slips in and the bartender turns to her immediately and takes her order.

She doesn't ask Hosu what he wants and ignores him when he tries to offer to pay.

When she turns, she has two tall glasses of coke, and she hands him one with a small smile. She leans in close to be heard.

"It's late and you don't seem drunk, so I figured you either don't drink or you stopped drinking a while ago."

Hosu grins and nods his thanks, sipping his coke gratefully, the glass a little slippery in his hand. The girl looks around, then with a *come on* pulls him around to the far side of the bar, away from the dancefloor, a calmer space with couches and high tables that feels like it's in a bubble of its own, a little way outside the immediacy of the incessant boom of the bass that vibrates the bones of the club.

Hosu watches as she drops down onto a couch, feeling a little uncertain, a little itchy underneath his skin, unsure of what to do, where to sit, not wanting to cross invisible, unspoken boundaries with a stranger. He stays standing, a little fidgety, until she notices and slaps the seat next to her with an *aren't you going to sit* and ends his dilemma.

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He does, dropping down, graceless, his tiredness suddenly making itself known, attaching itself to his bones like lead paint. He melts into the couch, feeling unreasonably grateful to be off his feet for a bit, and the girl opposite him grins. She holds her hand out then, ready to shake.

“Ahn Iseul, ’87.”

And somehow it doesn’t surprise Hosu that she’s older than him, with the amount of self-assurance and fortitude she radiates. He grasps her hand, a little self-conscious, a little embarrassed about the condensation from his glass that clings to his fingertips. Her hand feels small in his, but her grasp is firm, strong.

“Kim Hosu, ’90.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Hosu-ssi. You love to dance, huh?”

The misplaced dimples are back, and Hosu is smiling so hard it hurts.

“I do, I wish I could do it all day, every day. It makes me happy.”

He feels a flush rise up his neck at his own honesty, feels a little off balance at saying something so vulnerable in front of a complete stranger, but he doesn’t fear Iseul’s judgement about this, about dance, feels certain she gets it. And she seems to, nodding vigorously, eyes wide.

“Yes! Me too, it’s so...” she flutters her hands, seemingly at a loss for words, “so, I don’t know, it’s just *everything*, it makes me feel so *alive!*”

“Yeah, it’s amazing. I wish I could have majored in dance.”

“Mmm yeah, me too. So you’re at CNU? What’s your major then?”

Hosu shifts, turning sideways to face Iseul and settling in more comfortably.

“Business studies, third year,” he grimaces, and she chuckles.

“Clearly you love it.”

He laughs, and a distant part of him marvels at how quickly he’s settling into feeling comfortable around Iseul.

“I really don’t. But it’s versatile, lots of different career options in it, which is all my parents care about.”

He tries to keep the bitterness out of his voice but the stain is there nonetheless, and Iseul’s sharp eyes catch on his for a second, two. She doesn’t acknowledge it though, talks over the hitch in his voice, ignores the tang of something not right, for now at least, and Hosu feels grateful for the kindness.

“I get that. It’s sort of why I went into civil engineering. Though I really like it. Not as much as dance, but still. It’s fascinating.”

“Wow, really? Civil engineering? So you’re like, smart?”

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Iseul laughs, throwing her head back, and it's the best thing Hosu's seen all day, pulling another wide-lipped grin out of him.

"I guess? I don't know, it's just fun."

And that strikes Hosu as funny, somehow, the thought that something as cerebral as civil engineering could be *fun*, and he laughs, feels it bubbling up from low in his belly.

"Fun? Okay. So wait, are you at CNU then?"

Iseul nods.

"Yeah, post grad, third year."

He whistles lowly.

"Wow! You really are smart, Iseul-ssi!"

She grins and swats his leg sharply.

"Shut up!"

"No, really! That's awesome!"

She shrugs, and Hosu feels a little awestruck.

"I guess. It's easy when you enjoy it. So what about dance?"

"I minor in it, so I still get to do it, just not as much as I'd like."

She hums, nods, understanding in her voice, her features, softness in her eyes.

"That's relatable. I bet you could dance every day and it still wouldn't be enough?"

There's an unvoiced giggle in her words, a gentle smirk on her face, and Hosu likes it, this soft amusement, it puts him at ease, makes him feel like laughter is a thing that thrives around Iseul, a thing that might spread to those around her given time and space and edges to touch.

He nods, grins, cheeks achy and that happy buzz from earlier still sitting firmly in his belly, despite sitting here with a random girl.

"Yeah. You too, huh?"

"Yup, definitely."

"Hyungie!"

Jiyeong's voice cuts in, pitch high and vowels stretched the way they get when he's had a few too many drinks. He drops down on the couch, squished between Hosu and the armrest, and his head lands heavily on Hosu's shoulder.

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“Where you been, hyung, I missed you!”

Hosu chuckles and ruffles his hair, fond and a little exasperated.

“I was right here, Min. Where’s Seongie?”

Jiyeong waves loosely in the direction of the bathroom.

“He’s gone – you know. Hi!”

The last part is directed at Iseul, who Jiyeong seems to have just noticed, and who’s watching the two of them with a quirked eyebrow and a curl to the corners of her mouth.

“Hi!”

The amusement is still laced thickly in her voice, and Hosu can’t help but smile.

“Who are you?”

Her eyebrows quirk a little higher at that, and Hosu swats Jiyeong’s leg.

“Don’t be rude, Yeong-ah. This is Ahn Iseul-ssi. Iseul-ssi, this is Han Jiyeong.”

“Pleased to meet you, Jiyeong-ssi.”

Jiyeong waves loosely, still sloppily leaning on Hosu, and Hosu rolls his eyes, foreseeing his roommate duties later on tonight will involve looking after a drunken, touchy, vomiting Jiyeong.

“Nice ta meetcha, Iseul-ssi.”

It comes out slurred, all the edges blurring together, and Iseul bites her lip as if trying to hold back laughter.

Seongmin appears, then, looking the more together of the two, eyes still reasonably clear, and Hosu feels relieved.

“Yeongie! Where’d you go? Come on, let’s go dance!”

“Seongie! Missed you!”

Seongmin grabs Jiyeong’s hands and pulls him up off the couch, catching him when he stumbles. Hosu catches Seongmin’s eye over the sagging form of Jiyeong in his arms.

“You got him?”

Seongmin nods, smile wide, all teeth and cheeks and sparkle.

“I got him, hyung, don’t worry.”

His eyes cut across to Iseul briefly but he doesn’t comment, just gives her a small nod and smile before dragging Jiyeong away with him to the dancefloor.

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Hosu turns back to Iseul and finds her watching him, eyes intent and searching, and smiles at her.

“Sorry, that was um...”

“Boyfriend?”

The question stops him in his tracks, eyes wide, cold chill running down his spine, a prickling sensation all over his skin.

“Um, what? No?! That was, um, roommate, he’s my um, my roommate?”

“Oh.”

Iseul shrugs.

“You guys just seem close, that’s all.”

There’s a tightness in Hosu’s throat, discomfort flaring in his chest as the conversation edges just that little bit too close to all the things he stores there, all the things he doesn’t talk about, and he rubs his breastbone reflexively with the heel of his hand.

“We are. But not – not like that. They’re um, they’re actually a couple, so...yeah.”

“Oh. Cool. They’re cute together.”

She pauses, eyes locked on Hosu, and he feels like he’s being studied, the way she’s looking at him, watching, analysing.

“I made you uncomfortable. I’m sorry.”

He shrugs, trying to shake off the antsy feeling under his skin, the redness of his ears.

“It’s okay, it doesn’t matter. I just – we’re not, so. And I’m, um, not, um....I’m....not. So. Yeah.”

“You’re not what, Hosu-ssi?”

The smirk is back, and Hosu doesn’t miss it. She’s teasing, he knows she is, and it makes his cheeks burn.

“Not – you know.”

She leans forward then, closer, closer, head tilted, eyes sharp and mocking, mouth quirked, and Hosu blushes, *redredred*, because this is a lot, and she’s a stranger, and what’s in the box is *secret* and it aches to talk around it, to talk past it. The guilt and the shame burn him, licking flames at his bones.

She watches him from just inches away, just watching, watching, smirking, mocking, maybe, but she holds her tongue, silence sitting heavily between them, and it pulls at him, waiting for him to breathe into the cracks and fill them with words.

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His voice feels stuck in his throat, the words tucked behind his teeth, sticky, and Hosu clears his throat, nervous, itchy under his skin.

“Not – gay. I...I’m straight. So.”

It feels so awkward, saying it like that, and it tastes wrong on his tongue, like coffee with salt, jarring to the tastebuds, but he knows that’s what’s right, what he’s meant to say, what he’s meant to be, because *boys don’t*.

Her reaction is unexpected, and it cuts the tension, brings air back into the room. She sits up and laughs, loud and airy, head thrown back, then grins at him, lush and genuine, dimples on full display.

“Good to know, Hosu-ssi. None of my business, of course, but good to know.”

She pats his leg as she says it, fingers light and delicate, nails clean and manicured but unvarnished, and it bridges the gap, dispels the heavy atmosphere. Relief tastes sweet on Hosu’s tongue, and he smiles, a little shaky, still, a little wooden.

She does the talking while he finds his equilibrium, chattering happily about her studies, about dance, asking him about his life, his friends, and as Hosu’s heart resettles into a normal rhythm, as his lungs remember how to breathe, the lightness and comfort in Iseul’s presence seeps back in.

He finds his words again, too, unglues them from his teeth, remembers how to use them, how to ask questions and answer them, how to find common ground, how to enjoy another person’s company with whom he has things in common.

When he leaves, it’s with Iseul’s number in his phone and a smile on his face.

*

It grows slowly. There are text messages and coffee dates, a slowly growing friendship. Hosu feels a little in awe of Iseul, of her presence, her confidence, of the way she takes up space in the world and doesn’t apologise for it.

He feels caught in her wake sometimes, swept up in the phenomenon that is Ahn Iseul, but he’s comfortable there, safe.

She moves through life as though it’s just waiting for her to take what’s hers, never in a way that hurts others, never in a way that chafes, but in a way that’s organic, generous, somehow, taking everything that’s hers but nothing that’s not. Iseul is like a lone tree, extending its roots to absorb the rain that reaches them while its leaves soak up all the sunlight they can get.

She’s ambitious, driven, has goals for her life, plans. She works hard and inspires Hosu to do the same, despite not enjoying his studies, despite wanting to sink into dance in an all-exclusive way. They start studying together, and she teaches him better study habits, better ways to maximise his time. His grades come up, and for the first time, he starts to find a little enjoyment in his major, in the way that things you understand and are good at have a tendency to be enjoyable.

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There are moments when Hosu turns to find her watching him with soft eyes, and he's not entirely sure what it means, but he likes her, likes her company, her conversation, likes laughing with her and spending time with her.

For all her power in taking what she wants, she's careful with Hosu, gentle, seems to know not to push, not to move too fast. She'll link their pinkies sometimes while they're walking, small, in between full-throated laughter and inconsequential words, almost like an afterthought, something she's not aware of doing. And Hosu isn't sure whether she is, whether it's accidental, but the contact is welcome, touch starved as he is.

There are movie dates and walks. Iseul joins Hosu's friend group and slots in easily, hitting it off with Jiyeong instantly despite him not remembering their first meeting.

Harin is slower to warm up, used to being the alpha female in Hosu's life as she is. But even she comes around eventually, warming up slowly, until she and Iseul are wrapped in raucous laughter on a regular basis, all delicacy lost as they try to drink each other under the table or compete at some game or other.

The looks she bestows on Hosu grow longer, more deliberate, and she smiles at him in ways he never sees her smile at anyone else, small ways, secret ways. She touches him more, too, always chaste, but frequent, fingertips to his arm, his hand, his leg, his cheek, the back of his neck. It feels nice, warm, comforting, and it makes him smile.

And then, suddenly, it's late December and winter break arrives. Hosu dreads spending two entire weeks in his parents' home, can feel his lungs constrict even just at the thought of it, can taste the metallic flavour of the unrelenting pressure he'll be under for the duration, pressure to *do*, to *be*, to *have* things he's not sure he can ever live up to. Jiyeong invites him to come back to Busan with him, but the obligation to go visit his family is strong, stronger than his desire to stay away, and fear of repercussions makes him shake his head and huff out a morose *thanks Yeong-ah, but I have to go*.

It's as bad as he expects, when he finally gets there. The air in the house is oppressive, heavy with his father's presence, a perpetual dark storm cloud in the periphery, judgement a thick miasma around him every time he speaks.

From the first dinner, expectations are set of Hosu's behaviour, his future, his career, his wife. Hosu feels as though his parents saved up every bit of commentary on his life that they couldn't deliver to him in person over the past semester and are determined to regurgitate them all in the two weeks he's home for. Every family meal, every conversation is like a sparring match, and his father's footwork is far superior to his, leaving Hosu open to quick combinations and sharp jabs.

By the end of the first week, Hosu's frame aches from the constant pressure, the endless judgement and expectation. He's in a constant state of fight or flight, fingers twitching, throat tight, desperation to go *home* boiling in his veins, home to his friends, to his dorm room, to his life.

He texts his friends constantly, but there's little anyone can do but tell him it will be okay and to not listen.

The second week, a little relief arrives in the form of his sister. She's twenty-five now, living away from the family in Seoul, coming home for the holidays only, an ally on the ground for Hosu to commiserate with, someone to share the burden of their parents' expectations.

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They're not particularly close, not in that two-peas-in-a-pod-twinsies way that their grandmother always seemed to believe they ought to be, but they look out for each other, provide support and shelter as needed in an unqualified, unceremonious manner. The age gap that always seemed too large to bridge, too great for mutual understanding, feels like it's closing as they get older, and Hosu feels her presence now in a way that is friendlier, less like another source of potential judgement.

She catches up quickly, scents trouble in the air soon after she arrives, sees it in Hosu's tight frame, perhaps, or in the angry way his ears colour when their dad makes yet another scathing comment about Hosu's lack of plans for the future.

They wash the lunch dishes silently, sharing glances as their mother busies herself around them muttering softly to herself. When it's done, Dawon sighs and announces, eyes firmly caught on their mother, that she's going for a walk to get some air and digest her lunch.

"Come with me, squirt?"

He nods, grateful for the way out, the chance to get a break from the oppressive atmosphere in the house, the heavy stares. Tugging on his sneakers and shrugging on his warm coat feels like an escape, and stepping outside behind Dawon is pure relief, easing the load on his bones.

She leads them across the road towards the park that lays blanketed in white as the cold clouds the breath leaving their mouths.

The memories he made with Duri are thick here, hanging in the air underneath the trees, tangible and sweet on his tongue, but he swallows them down, pushes them back into the box he carries underneath his breastbone, locks them up. The tree they stood under to share fleeting kisses before Hosu went home tries to catch his eye, bare and sullen, but he ignores its baleful stares, denies it, tells himself there's nothing, it's nothing.

It gets a little easier as they stroll further into the park, away from the places he would routinely say goodbye to Duri. This was never one of their hangouts, too close to Hosu's home, too heavy with risk.

As they walk, he falls into step with Dawon, hands deep in the pockets of his coat. She's small, his sister, smaller than he is, delicate in a way he never was, and with a strength about her that he never had. She nudges his arm with her elbow.

"You alright, Su-ah?"

He nods, shrugs, tongue against his teeth.

"Yeah, nuna. You know. They're a lot."

"Hm, yeah. Rough first week huh?"

"Yeah. It'd be nice to just be *enough* for once, you know?"

She looks at him, eyes soft, knowing.

"You are, squirt. You know that, right?"

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It aches, and he swallows hard.

“Not for him.”

“No,” she agrees, “but that’s him. No one is enough for him, not even himself.”

His eyes burn in their sockets, and he can taste the tears on the back of his tongue. He should bite his tongue, shouldn’t vent to his sister, but his friends aren’t *here* and he needs to get it *out*, needs to talk to someone before he explodes, and so he does. He pushes the words out in a rush, a wild flurry of syllables spilled onto the snow in front of his feet as they walk, spilled and trod on in the same breath.

“It’s bullshit, nuna. I’m trying so hard and it’s just never enough. And now apparently I’m supposed to find a girlfriend and get married, too, and I’m, I’m not even twenty two for God’s sake, I’m not ready to get married!”

She lets him rant, doesn’t reprimand him for the cursing like she normally would, and it makes him feel a little closer to her, a little more like she’s a friend, not his nuna.

“It just never, ever stops. When I meet someone, it’s not like they’ll ever be good enough for appa, he’ll be criticising them constantly even while eomma’s pushing me to marry them. I feel like I can’t win!”

A thought intrudes then, and he looks at her, sideways, at her side profile. They have similar features, the same straight nose and sharp eyes, but her mouth is different, her jawline and cheeks softer, her hair long.

“How have they been with you and Heechul-hyung?”

She huffs a little, smiles, but it’s sad.

“Pretty much like that. Eomma’s always asking me when the wedding is, sending me links to dresses and venues she likes, that kind of thing. She’s really ramped it up recently, I think a few of her friends have had their kids get married and she’s trying to keep up, you know?”

Hosu nods.

“Yeah, that sounds right. She keeps talking about who got married and how lovely the wedding was.”

“Yeah. I think she’s feeling the pressure a bit.”

They walk silently for a bit, before Dawon speaks again, voice soft, pastel against the snow under their feet.

“She might give you a break soon though.”

He frowns, looks back at her. She’s watching the ground in front of her feet.

“Yeah? And why would she do that?”

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"Because Heech asked me to marry him."

He stares, wide-eyed, shock sending an icy shiver down his spine.

"What?"

"Hm. Yeah."

"And you said yes?"

"Not yet. But I think I'm going to."

"Oh my god. *Oh my god what the hell!*"

He's stopped walking, and she outpaces him by a few steps before she stops too, turning to look back at him, pink high on her cheekbones and a small smile, uncharacteristically shy, curling the corners of her mouth.

"Have you told them?"

She shakes her head, long hair flying.

"No. I'll tell them once I actually say yes."

"Oh my god."

He starts walking again, and she falls into step beside him, silent while he processes.

"Are you happy, nuna?"

It feels important to establish, but also a little forward, a little too familiar for the relationship he has with his sister. She doesn't seem to mind, though, smiling up at him.

"I am. Heech is great. It's....I mean, it's hard to know if someone is *the one*, you know? But we're good together."

This is new, this level of openness, of sharing with his sister. He wants more, to talk more, to know more, to understand more, but words are not his friends, sharing is hard, knowing boundaries is difficult. He looks at her, sidelong, takes in the way she looks soft, so unlike her usual, brusque demeanour, and decides to risk a little more.

"Is that why you haven't said yes yet? Because you don't know if he's *the one*?"

She looks at him then, and there's surprise in the way her eyes widen. It worries him for a moment, makes him feel uncertain that maybe he's pushed too far, asked too much, pried too much. But when she answers, her voice is calm, her words upright, honest.

"I guess so. I don't really want to go into marriage thinking *oh well if it doesn't work out, we can get divorced*, you know? So I had to really think about it. Heech is lovely. He's dependable, kind, generous. He's got my back and he loves me, he really loves me a lot."

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The words she doesn't say are loud, too loud, and Hosu shouldn't ask, but he has to, he needs to, so he does, a little hesitant, a little soft.

"Do you love him?"

She hesitates. It's brief, brief enough that Hosu wonders if he imagined it, but the pause is there, eloquent in its silence.

"Yeah. Yeah, I do."

"Yeah?"

She smiles up at him.

"Yeah, squirt, I do. We're not one of those lovey dovey passionate couples, but we work. He's my best friend, we're a team."

He huffs.

"Best friend? Harin is my best friend but that doesn't make me want to marry her!"

She laughs, loud against the eerily quiet, snowy landscape around them.

"Well, he's more than that, too. But lust is overrated, you know? It passes, and then you better have something more holding you together besides that."

He makes a face of disgust at the thought of his sister being lusty for his future brother-in-law.

"Ew, gross. That's officially too much information."

She thumps his arm, laughing, and he feigns injury, whining.

"Stop being a dick."

He grins, linking his arm through hers. They walk quietly for a while, in step, leaving footprints in the snow.

"Seriously though, nuna. I'm happy you're happy. Congrats."

She smiles, squeezing his arm tighter.

"Thanks, squirt."

"And thanks for coming to take the heat off me."

The snort she lets out is undignified and unladylike, and it pulls a laugh out of Hosu, one of those that make his bones feel soft and his legs feel wobbly.

It's good, this new friendship with his sister, this foal-like closeness. They chat, their arms still linked loosely, as they walk back home, words airy and free and full of a lightness he hasn't felt all week.

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And as Hosu pulls the front door closed behind them, the air in his parents' home feels lighter, too.

*

The reprieve is imaginary. The weight settles back on him as soon as their parents join them again, and Hosu is once again the centre of their unwelcome attention.

On her second day in the family home, Dawon goes for a walk alone, phone in hand, and comes back smiling widely, cheeks rosy and eyes full of stars.

At dinner, Hosu's spine is rigid as his mother dishes him up food and launches into an excited monologue.

"And the Kim girl is getting married this spring too, did you hear, Dawon? You used to be friends with her, didn't you? Appa and I are so looking forward to the wedding, aren't we, dear? Not as much as I'll look forward to my own children's weddings of course, but who knows when that day might arrive. We might get there soon with you, Dawon, but Hosu isn't showing any signs of blessing this family with a daughter in law yet, are you, my son?"

She laughs, but it's hollow, and she continues to talk non-stop, each word a barb that digs under Hosu's skin, making him feel smaller and smaller until he fears he'll disappear. Breathing is hard, his lungs feel solid, immobilised under the weight pressing on his chest. He sits with a mouth full of food, unable to chew, unable to move, unable to do anything at all.

Dawon catches his eye across the table, her face lined with worry. Hosu just stares at his plate and focuses on breathing, on getting through, on trying to block out his mother's voice.

Suddenly, Dawon's voice cuts across his mother's, raised up a little to be heard.

"Actually, I have some news, eomma, appa."

Their mother stops her monologue, words frozen mid-sentence, and blinks at her eldest child.

"You do?"

Hosu's eyes dart up to catch Dawon's, but she just sends him a small smile before turning back to look at both their parents in turn.

"Yeah. I, um, I'm getting married!"

The smile on her face doesn't touch her eyes, and worry flares in Hosu's chest. His mother doesn't catch it though, hearing only the words she's dreamt of hearing for so long, clapping her hands together and squealing loudly.

"You are? Is that boy finally making an honest woman of you, my girl?"

Dawon grimaces.

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“He has a name, eomma, and you know it. It’s Heechul, and yes, he asked me to marry him, and today I said yes.”

Chaos erupts, then, and Hosu sits passively amongst it all. His father grumbles about the youth of today not observing tradition and asking a father for their daughter’s hand before asking the girl, Dawon objecting that *no one does that anymore, appa, don’t be a grouch*, their mother squealing and hugging Dawon and fantasising out loud about details for the upcoming wedding.

Hosu sits quietly, regaining his breath, grateful for the momentary diversion of attention from his own objectionable life. He remembers how to breathe, willing the nausea in his belly to settle.

Dawon catches his eye from time to time, sends him small smiles, silent encouragement that he tucks away under his heart for a rainy day.

He is all but ignored by his parents for the rest of the evening, and even that is vastly preferable to being subjected to their constant criticism.

For the rest of the week, the wedding is the focus of their mother’s attention, as Dawon fields endless questions and suggestions for *the wedding of the year*, as their eomma has taken to calling it, a titter in her voice and excited pinks on her cheeks.

She wastes no time calling all her friends to announce the news, basking in the attention and thinly veiled jealousy, recounting with glee every barbed congratulatory comment from every person she calls.

Dawon spends most of her time with Hosu, a mix of frustration and endearment at their mother’s antics staining most of their conversation. It’s a relief to Hosu to be out of the spotlight, and Dawon swats away his guilty apology with an *it was my turn, you got it the first week*.

But the relief doesn’t last. By the third day following Dawon’s announcement, excitement has mixed with disappointment in their mother’s voice, disappointment in her son’s lack of *progress* at finding a girlfriend, at giving their family claim to *two weddings* in one year. She latches onto this idea, dogged, unyielding, determined to marry off both her children in one fell swoop, and once again the pressure is on, the bitter taste of being his parents’ greatest source of embarrassment thick on his - tongue.

Her desperation infects him, settles under his skin like a cancer, slow growing but deadly, metastasising into something that feels like it’s *his*, something innate rather than externally generated.

By the end of his time at home, Hosu’s sense of his own inadequacy is in overdrive, spilling an endless stream of ugly words inside his chest, words like *worthless* and *stupid*, like *bad son* and *not good enough*, words spoken in the timbre of his mother’s voice with interjections by his father.

The Hosu who arrives back at the dorms is a somehow smaller, less upright version of the one who left, and his friends eye him with heavy concern, try to catch out his inner dialogue when it surfaces, to stamp out the negative thoughts and bolster his confidence with their genuine love and admiration.

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It helps a little, straightens his spine a bit, but his mother's regular calls reinforce the sense of *lacking*, the sense that the only way Kim Hosu will ever be good enough is to deliver an illustrious career, a beautiful wife and, he guesses, grandchildren.

Every call from his mother is a recital of her plans for his sister's wedding mixed with enquiries about girls and grades and laments about his lack of *progress*.

The weight on his chest gets heavier with each week that passes.

It's the Friday night of Hosu's twenty-second birthday. February slices at the skin with a deep, insistent cold that makes fingers and toes ache and legs move with urgency to bring destinations closer quickly.

Hosu is surrounded by his friends, two drinks in and feeling lighter than he has since coming back from his parents' home. It's still early, the bar less vibrant than it will be later on, and Hosu feels warm and pleasantly buzzed as he looks around at the people he loves most.

Jiyeong and Seongmin are cosied up beside him, Jiyeong's leg slung over Seongmin's lap, Seongmin's hand on Jiyeong's waist as they lean into each other. Iseul is on his other side, Harin beside her, deeply entrenched in conversation about a topic that escapes Hosu's tired mind, slips through his fingers as he tries to grasp it.

The conversation flows around him, alternately raucous and gentle, a steady rhythm that feels soothing against Hosu's heart. Beside him, Iseul sits close, thigh pressed against his, warm and firm, and it feels reassuring, calming. Her fingers do their push-pull thing, darting in to brush his leg or arm, only to dart away again and find somewhere else to settle. Hosu leans back and closes his eyes, only half-listening to the conversation ebbing and flowing around him, allowing his focus to drift untethered, feeling peaceful and a little floaty.

He feels a touch to his inner thigh, Iseul's fingers settling on a patch of bare skin exposed by the rip in his jeans, warm and dry. Hosu expects them to shift again, to move on, continue their haphazard, stuttering journey, but they don't, staying on his inner thigh, the lightest touch.

It's warm and almost comforting until her fingers start moving in lazy circles, edging higher and higher up his thigh while she chats to Harin, her voice and laughter bright as they swirl around Hosu. A sudden burst of heat rises in Hosu's belly at the light brushes of fingers against the sensitive skin of his thigh, so close to where he hasn't been touched by anyone but himself in so long.

He keeps still, fights the urge to squirm in his seat, as the heat rises from his groin up his spine, creeping higher and higher still until he feels it staining the back of his neck and ears. His skin itches and he fights to keep his breathing steady as her hand slides upward.

The floatiness is definitely gone now, and all of Hosu's awareness is zeroed in on the hand on his thigh and the heat in his groin. Confusion boils in his chest, clawing and grasping, mixing with the heat from her fingers, the buzzing under his skin, the electricity low in his pelvis. Iseul is his friend, his *good* friend, someone he likes and values. Never once has he thought of her *like that* and yet here he is, losing his composure because of her hand on his leg, hapless and in danger of going hard from a simple touch.

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He opens his eyes and looks at Iseul. She's turned away from him, facing Harin, seemingly unaware of her hand's travels as she talks. Her fingers reach to the top edge of the highest cut in his jeans, slipping delicately under the edge, softly stroking the widest part of his thigh, featherlight, almost ticklish, and a feeling like static electricity crosses the small divide between his thigh and his groin.

It's too much, it's too close, and Hosu jerks upright, hand grabbing Iseul's and yanking it quickly down his leg.

His sudden movement stills the conversation at the table, all four faces turning towards him, at least three of them blissfully unaware of Hosu's turmoil.

"Su-ah? You alright?"

Harin's tone is tinged with a little concern, and Hosu feels his cheeks flush, feels the blood run every which way.

"Y-yeah, sorry, just, need to, um, restroom!"

It comes out high, squeaky, and he feels their eyes on him as he squeezes out of the booth past Jiyeong and Seongmin.

Once in the restroom he locks himself inside a stall, shuts the toilet lid and sits on it, willing his breathing to slow and the tightness of his jeans to lessen into something less mortifying, more forgettable.

Confusion swirls in his belly right along with the unmistakable arousal. Iseul is lovely, he likes her and she's his friend, but he's pretty sure he sees her as just that, a friend, nothing more. Or at least he *was* sure, but it seems his body has other ideas, ideas that fill his belly with wanton heat and mortifying electricity.

This is new. Hosu cannot remember a single time since Duri left that he felt arousal from the touch of another person, but he also hasn't let anyone else ever touch him so intimately. Is it possible to get turned on by someone you're not attracted to? Or is he attracted to Iseul and just didn't realise it?

He leans back, eyes closed, lets his thoughts linger on Iseul, testing the waters. Pictures her face, her smile, the way her dimples pop, her pouty lips, her bunny teeth, her cute little nose. She's objectively pretty, he can see that, he's not blind. But what he feels when he thinks of her is warmth, fondness, not heat, desire, arousal.

He shifts focus. Pictures Iseul's body. Compact, muscular, round in all the right places, ostensibly. Long legs, bubble butt. He can picture her in outfits he's seen her in that show off her calves, her flat tummy, all her nicest aspects, but all he feels is a detached sense of admiration for a well-built friend, devoid of any sexual feelings whatsoever.

He pictures her hands on his own body, sliding across the bare skin of his chest, cupping him through his jeans, and jerks upright, eyes flying open, skin flushing pink with a sense of *wrongness*, a sense of being caught doing something that just *isn't right*.

And yet, isn't this *exactly* what he's been told all along is what's right, what boys are *supposed to do*? Isn't Iseul *exactly* who he's meant to think about, meant to want, meant to date? Isn't the fact that

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she touched him and he *felt something* a sign that it could work, that she could grow to fill up spaces inside him that have stood empty for so long? That given time, they could be something *more*, something good, something that would make him happy *and* make his parents happy?

Something that would finally make him *enough*?

Iseul could be the person who helps him lock away the *boys don't* box for good, who helps him be who he's meant to be. She likes him, as a friend, and she's clearly interested in more, even Hosu can't deny that, not with the trail of her fingertips on the soft skin of his thighs still fiery hot inside his jeans.

So maybe it's worth trying?

Hosu sighs. He leaves the stall and washes his hands, splashing water onto his face for good measure, grimacing at his face in the mirror, cheeks still flushed pink and an unhinged, wild look in his eyes.

He pulls a face at his own reflection and wills himself to *get it together* before breathing deeply, picturing *courage* filling his lungs and *nervousness* being drained from them on the exhale. He visualises a newly unflappable, calm Hosu returning to their table, a Hosu who's in control, a Hosu with *gumption*.

When he returns to the table, Seongmin is leaning forward to chat with Harin. Jiyeong and Iseul watch him, twin smiles on their faces, Jiyeong's clad in gentle concern, Iseul's more mirthful, paired with a twinkle in her eye that tells Hosu all he needs to know. He clammers over Seongmin's legs to retake his place between them, and Jiyeong leans in close, breath warm on Hosu's ear as he voices a gentle *are you okay, hyung?*

Hosu nods, smiles his best soothing smile with a soft *hyung's fine, Yeong-ah, don't worry*.

When he turns to Iseul, she is watching him with knowing eyes and a curl at the corners of her mouth. She quirks an eyebrow at him, and Hosu suppresses the urge to laugh nervously.

She leans in, then, mirroring Jiyeong on his other side, *closecloseclose*, and Hosu's breath hitches with a brand-new uncertainty of what she'll do, what she'll say, nerves staining the back of his neck pink again.

"I'm going to go, Su-ah. Walk me home?"

She leans back, just a little, just far enough to make eye contact, and Hosu's tongue feels glued to the back of his teeth, sticky with the expectation on her face, so he nods, wordless, eyes wide.

She smiles, nods and pats his leg, then turns back to Harin while Hosu swallows hard and stares at her hand on his thigh.

They say their goodbyes, Harin holding Hosu's gaze with raised eyebrows, unspoken questions loud between them, but Hosu looks away, finds safer places to steer his eyes. She settles for grasping and squeezing his fingers as he hugs her, breathes a soft *don't do anything I wouldn't do* into his space before he pulls away.

And then they're outside, the cold air thin and crisp in their lungs, boots crunching on frosty ground.

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They walk in silence for a little while, hands occasionally brushing, until Iseul reaches out and links their fingers without comment, like she's done many times before. Only it's different now, because the air between them is different, because Hosu is different, because the taste of *possibility* won't wash off Hosu's tongue no matter how hard he swallows.

The thought of *what if* sits heavy in his chest. *What if.*

What if finding the one isn't meant to feel like Hosu thought it did?

What if it's meant to be soft and sweet and warm, kindness and friendship and ease instead of passion and intensity and need?

What if passion can grow over time? What if it doesn't always spark when you meet a person, what if it just needs time to bloom as you get to know a person?

What if Iseul is *the one* and all he has to do is give her a chance?

What if Hosu's expectations are just far too high?

These are the thoughts that dance in Hosu's mind as he walks beside Iseul, fingers tangled in the cold night air, breath as cloudy as his feelings.

"Su-ah?"

Iseul's voice is soft, uncharacteristically so, for this girl who is loud and confident, who takes what she wants and doesn't apologise for taking up space.

"Hmm?"

"Are you okay? Did I upset you?"

Hosu huffs a small laugh, braver than he feels.

"No, nuna, you didn't upset me."

"Okay. Because I wouldn't want that. You know that, right? I care about you."

She's being so forthright, it makes Hosu feel warm, and he looks sideways at her, her open, honest face, free from the teasing smirk she showed him at the bar.

"I know. I care about you too."

She squeezes his fingers then and tucks herself a little closer to his side as they walk. When they reach the door to her building, there's a heavy sense of anticipation hovering around them, thick in Hosu's lungs as he breathes.

She turns to face him, and the anticipation is there, too, in her eyes, on her face, splashed liberally in shades of midnight blue and moon-pale whites. Hosu's insides are a swirl of confusing emotions, nerves warring with *what ifs*, as they watch each other silently for a breath, two.

"Su-ah?"

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Her voice sounds different, somehow, lower, and Hosu's breath gets stuck in his throat for long seconds when she steps in closer, when her warmth fills the spaces against the front of his body.

His words fall silent, hiding like cowards when he looks down on her, a full head below his eye level, small and so intimidating, so tangible and *close*.

"Kiss me."

She says it softly, but it's not a question. Relief washes over Hosu at not having to decide, not having to think about it anymore, and he leans down without hesitation, watches Iseul's eyes fall closed as he gets closer.

He kisses her to find out *what if*. Her lips are soft, supple, the taste of wine still clings to them, but it's nice, it's lovely. She sighs, a soft *ahh* that slips into his mouth as he opens it in reflex.

The tip of her tongue brushes his bottom lip and Hosu welcomes it, meets it.

Iseul's kisses are different from any Hosu has had before. They are soft but dominant, gentle but guiding. She takes charge, presses into him, and he relishes it, welcomes the sense of someone else making the decisions and allowing him to just *let go*.

They kiss for long minutes, wet and warm and alluring, until her kisses grow more heated and the press of her body against his front reignites the fire at his core. It's startling, and suddenly it's all a little too much, too fast, and Hosu breaks away, breathless and off kilter.

He leans his forehead on the top of her head, chasing the breath that escapes his lungs.

She giggles, body shaking slightly under his forehead, and pats his shoulder.

"Okay, hot stuff, that's enough for tonight."

Her tone is unaffected, but her breathing is laboured and when Hosu leans back to look at her, her cheeks are stained dark violet, blood mixing with the night's blues, and her pupils are blown.

"How about coffee tomorrow?"

He smiles, clears his throat, wills his words to come unstuck.

"Yeah, that'd be nice, nuna."

"Okay. The usual place, ten o'clock. I'll see you there?"

He nods and smiles a soft *yeah*.

"Okay. It's a date."

A date.

The word feels strange tumbling around inside Hosu's head, but it matches his thoughts from earlier in the evening, slots in nicely with the *what ifs* clutched at his chest, and so he takes a deep breath and nods again, more firmly this time.

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"It's a date, nuna. See you then."

And because it feels like *the right thing*, he leans in then, leans down, pushes through all of the question marks tapping at the back of his teeth and kisses her gently, just a peck, to say goodbye.

Hosu's walk back to his own dorm is a maddening swirl of icy cold and confusing, unfocused heat.

*

Dating Iseul happens gently.

She doesn't rush Hosu, seems content to wait for him to settle into being something more than friends with her.

Not much changes between them. They still go on coffee dates, hang out together, study together, laugh together. Only now, they kiss when they say goodbye, and she holds his hand all the time, not just sometimes.

The kisses still unhinge Hosu, the press of her along his front sending heat into his pelvis. But that heat only lasts for as long as she's physically touching him, never lingering when they're apart. She never invades his dreams or his fantasies, never inspires them. Hosu feels like he's caught in a strange in-between place where he doesn't quite understand himself or what Iseul is to him.

With so many key pieces of the Hosu puzzle locked up tight in the *boys don't* box, understanding eludes him, and he becomes more and more frustrated, more and more confused.

In the end, he turns to Jiyeong.

They're spending a rare Friday night with just the two of them, a month into Hosu's relationship with Iseul, slouched on the mat between their beds in their dorm room.

It's Jiyeong who broaches the topic of Iseul.

"How are things with Iseul-nuna, hyung?"

Hosu shrugs, stomach in knots at the mention of his girlfriend.

"Good, I guess."

Jiyeong quirks an eyebrow at him, disapproval loud in the gesture, and Hosu knows he won't get away with such a vague answer.

"You guess? So, not good, then?"

And Hosu is confused, he's tired and his brain hurts from thinking himself into knots over this for weeks now, and maybe Jiyeong can help. So he breathes deeply, lungs aching, and opens his chest to show Jiyeong some of the tangles he can't unravel himself.

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"It's just...Seulie-nuna is great. She's one of my best friends, we get along so well, and we have so much fun. But..."

He hesitates, desire for insight warring with fear of letting himself be seen. Jiyeong waits for him to finish, gives Hosu the space he needs to find the words and the courage to push them out between clenched, recalcitrant teeth.

"But...okay, let me put it this way. When you're not with Seongmin, do you think about him?"

"Think about him? Of course I do."

"No, I mean..." Hosu cringes internally, feeling a red-hot flush creeping up the back of his neck. His ears feel hot, and he touches them reflexively.

"I mean, like, sexually. Do you like, you know. *Think* about him."

"Oh. Yeah, yeah definitely. Why, you don't? About nuna, I mean?"

The discomfort is everywhere, crawling on Hosu's skin like ants, and he resists the urge to scratch his arms raw.

"N-no. I just. When she's not with me, I just – I don't feel any inclination to think about her like that."

"Oh. Well, what about when you are with her? How do you feel then?"

Hosu's eyes are locked on the rug between them, stoically refusing to make eye contact and let Jiyeong see his mortification.

"I um. I like kissing her. It feels good."

Jiyeong hums.

"Okay. Does it turn you on?"

Flames, everywhere, every inch of Hosu feels like it's on fire. He hides his head in his hands and nods.

"Hyung. Hey, hyung. There's nothing to be ashamed of, you know that, right? This is just normal stuff."

Hosu nods, forcing himself to drop his hands.

"I – I know, Yeong-ah. I'm just – just not used to talking about this."

Jiyeong smiles, eyes soft.

"I know, hyung. I think maybe this is bothering you enough that you need to, though."

"Yeah. Yeah, I think so."

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“Okay. Okay, so. You like kissing nuna, and that turns you on. But when you’re not with her, you don’t think about her like that. Right?”

Hosu nods, wordless, face flushed.

“How do you think about her then?”

Hosu blinks.

“Um. Like, like a friend? She’s been my friend for a while, you know, before we started dating, and she’s awesome. She’s funny and amazing and so smart.”

Jiyeong smiles, eyes crinkling, pleased.

“Yeah, she is, hyung. So you mean – you see her as a friend more than anything?”

“I mean, I guess? But at the same time, also not? Because – I mean, I still get turned on when I’m with her.”

“But only when you’re kissing. When she’s touching you.”

Hosu nods, ignoring the heat in his cheeks.

“What about...other stuff?”

Hosu blinks.

“W-what?”

“You know. Fooling around, sex? Have you done any of that yet?”

Hosu shakes his head, a little frantic.

“N-no, Yeong-ah! It’s only been a month, we’re not there yet!”

“Okay, hyung, that’s okay, all in good time.”

He leans back against his bed, picking at the label of the beer bottle in his hands.

“Okay, so what about.....I mean, okay, you told me once there was someone before, right? Someone you loved?”

Hosu’s stomach drops through the floor, and he can feel the blood drain, can feel the *nonono* rising from his chest, but he swallows it, forces himself to nod soundlessly.

“Okay. So with them, was it like that? Or was it different?”

Hosu doesn’t want to think about this, doesn’t want to think about Duri, doesn’t want to open up that box, and he swallows hard, biting back the panic rising at the back of his throat. It takes interminable seconds to find the words, to push them out, but Jiyeong just waits patiently.

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"It was different. I – I wanted them. All the time."

Jiyeong nods.

"Okay. Was there ever anyone else?"

Hosu shakes his head, throat too tight for words.

"Okay. I mean, it could be a lot of different things, hyung. Maybe you're just not that into nuna? Or maybe you're someone who needs to get to know someone well to feel that kind of spark outside of direct physical stimulation. Or..."

Jiyeong pauses, eyeing Hosu with an uncharacteristic hesitation. It makes Hosu feel nervous, wondering what Jiyeong is thinking.

"What, Yeong-ah?"

"Well, there's....I mean, I kind of don't want to say because I might be completely off base. But....you haven't gone into detail about this previous person, hyung. And you don't need to now. But if they were....if maybe they were a different gender than nuna, you might want to consider that that might be a factor here."

Hosu stares. The *boys don't* box feels explosive in his chest, the lid hanging off its hinges and the contents eking out through the cracks. He slams the lid shut, heart racing frantically.

Sweat trickles down his spine, and he shifts uncomfortably on the rug.

"N-no, Yeong-ah, that's not it. It must be something else."

Jiyeong nods, face placid but eyes shuttered.

"Okay then, hyung. So maybe you just need a little more time to see if this thing with nuna grows into anything or if you're just not right for each other?"

Hosu nods, grasps at the olive branch Jiyeong is offering him.

"Y-yeah, I think so, Yeong-ah."

"Just...hyung, just don't string her along, okay? If you start feeling you're just not that into her, let her find someone who is? You both deserve to have someone who's crazy about you."

Hosu sobers.

"I will, Yeong-ah. You know I really like her though."

Jiyeong smiles, soft. It doesn't touch his eyes.

"That's good, hyung. I just want you to be happy."

Talking to Jiyeong hasn't given Hosu all the answers he needs, but it's helped. He feels like the pressure in his chest has eased off a little, like it's okay for him to take his time exploring this with

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Iseul because he may just be someone who needs time to grow into attraction to someone he cares about.

In the rare moments he allows Duri to sneak into his thoughts, usually late at night when he's tired or a little drunk and his guard is down, he reasons that he didn't feel attraction to Duri right away, didn't *want* Duri from the moment they met either. He glosses over the fact that not being attracted to someone and not recognising attraction to someone aren't the same thing, suppresses the memories of all the times he longed to hold Duri's hand, to touch him in ways that *boys don't*, even before that first kiss.

The box in his chest is cracked and full of holes, but Hosu clings to it desperately, unwilling and unprepared to expose its contents to the light and face the truths about himself he's managed to deny for so long.

He gives himself permission to *see how things go*.

*

And things go.

The best part of his relationship with Iseul is that they are well-matched as friends. There is a genuine connection there that's warm and full of appreciation for the other, something that over time could easily deepen into love.

The physical side of the relationship remains confusing to Hosu, but Iseul doesn't pressure him, allows him to set the pace. The kisses deepen and lengthen, and in time, when hands start to wander, the heat in Hosu's belly makes him feel okay about letting them, about exploring.

The first time he finds himself on Iseul's bed with his legs entangled in hers and his hand on her soft belly, just under her t-shirt, it feels overwhelming, but the pressure of her hip against his groin and the heat of her kisses against his mouth stir arousal deep in his pelvis that wars against the overwhelm and make him want to keep going, keep exploring.

And little by little, it becomes familiar, less overwhelming, to touch and be touched. His fondness for Iseul grows, deepens into something fuller, slowly but surely.

Hosu graduates at the same time as Iseul finishes her postgraduate study. His parents and sister attend his graduation ceremony, and Hosu's heart rabbits in his chest as he clutches Iseul's hand and introduces her to his family as his *girlfriend*.

The look of delight on his mother's face sends a wave of deep satisfaction through Hosu, and while his father's quiet approval when Iseul mentions having just finished her Masters in Engineering has a sting in the tail because it's not approval for *Hosu*, there is still a distinct sense that his father is pleased with Hosu's choice of girl, if his mumbled *hold onto this one, son, she's a keeper* is anything to go by.

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It's exhilarating, this sensation of approval from both of his parents. Hosu can't remember the last time he felt it, the last time he felt like they approved of anything he did, the last time he felt *enough*.

He finally feels *enough*.

It's Dawon who hits him with something that tastes like disappointment. She smiles at Iseul and chats with her at length, seeming to take an instant liking to the girl. But Hosu catches her looking at him sadly on more than one occasion, and it's a look he can't understand, a look that speaks of things just out of reach.

He clings to Iseul's hand and looks away.

As the summer of 2012 begins and Hosu closes the CNU chapter of his life, excitement for the future fills his chest. He scores an entry-level job at a large corporation, logging service requests into their internal database for tech support to attend to. It's mind numbing, boring work, but it's a stepping stone, and there's plenty of room to grow within the organisation.

More importantly, the job pays enough for him to get a flat with Jiyeong and Seongmin and live independently, free of the expectation to tailor his life to his father's demands, free to limit his trips home to what he can feasibly contend with.

The relief of not having to live at home, of being financially independent, is momentous, and Hosu feels giddy after they sign the lease.

The first thing he does once they move in is join a nearby dance studio and sign up for weekend classes. When he tells Iseul, she signs up alongside him, and Hosu feels buzzed at the thought of them dancing together.

His life is entering a new season, and for the first time, Hosu feels like he's on the right track, with a fledgling career, a promising relationship, dance a major part of his life, a break in the constant pressure from his parents, and friends who love him and who have his back.

And if sometimes, in the moments when Iseul arches against him between the sheets in her moonlit room, memories seep unheeded out of the *boys don't* box and colour her moans in a deeper voice, only Hosu needs to know.

If the shape he sees when he closes his eyes is different, harder in the body, broader in the shoulders, sharper in the eyes, it's Hosu's secret to keep.

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Our Gentle Sin - a novel by Tara Lemana

Chapter 6

Seoul, 2012

Summer breaks over Seoul with a vicious heat that leaves its inhabitants breathless and dreaming of colder climates. The smell of the city becomes more and more oppressive as the heat boils the tarmac and marinates its people in sweat and hormones.

Duri is grateful for the air conditioning that keeps him from suffocating at his desk at his new job, and he soon develops a deep appreciation for the relaxed dress code at his new company and the way it allows for staff to wear short sleeves and forego ties.

The job is far from Duri's ideal. He provides phone-based technical support to the company's small business clients; it doesn't challenge him from a skills perspective, but spending all his days on the phone is draining. He almost didn't apply for the role, knowing his own hatred for talking on the phone, but his friends convinced him to give it a shot, that it could be a good step up to a role that would suit him more.

It's a frustrating job a lot of the time, dealing with people like the top-level manager angry about his desktop PC not working in the middle of a power outage, demanding Duri fix it despite his assurances that it would spring back to life as soon as the power was back on – and not a moment sooner.

It does have its rewarding moments, too, times when Duri gets to help people retrieve work they thought they'd lost, when he gets to solve problems for them. Duri *likes* solving problems, he *likes* helping people. He'd like to do it on a grander, more meaningful scale, but this is (just barely) a start. It's a way he can make a small difference to someone's day.

So it's okay, for now. It's not enough, but it pays the bills and fills his days.

Harder to swallow is the way his music has stagnated. It's a constant ache, a hollow feeling in his chest that makes him sit up until three am, trying and failing to put words on paper.

Nothing comes. The words he does manage to put together feel regurgitated, meaningless, contrived. They taste like *trying too hard*, stinking of artificiality no matter what he does. It chafes, and a well of frustration boils away under the surface, seething.

Duri feels like he's treading water, his music moving nowhere fast, with a mediocre job that pays the bills but does nothing to make him feel like he has a purpose in the world. He feels a little stuck, stagnant, but also like he has time to figure things out, so he's okay.

He's okay, for now.

Minjun's post graduate studies mean his budget is tight, his sole income coming from his hours serving at their favourite café, but they manage to find a small flat on the outskirts of town that suits their needs and doesn't stretch his budget too far. And if Duri quietly covers extra expenses for the flat without telling Minjun about them, well, that's what a good hyung does.

Life finds its rhythm without too much fanfare, a gentle ebb and flow. Things aren't perfect, far from it, but Duri is doing alright, getting settled into adult life little by little.

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Subin is woven into that life, one of the better parts of it, in fact. He is a thread of bright red meshing with Duri's blacks and blues and greens, colourful and eye catching. Their relationship is growing steadily, forming a treasured connection that means the world to Duri.

Subin is full of life, full of joy, full of kindness and generosity. Duri adores him and is proud to be at his side.

The time they spend together is wonderful. The younger man has a talent for thinking up new ways to surprise Duri, coming up with unusual date concepts and knowing intuitively when Duri needs quiet time at home versus a fun outing somewhere unexpected.

They laugh a lot, and it's one of Duri's favourite things about Subin, the humour he injects into everything they do, the way he doesn't take himself too seriously. Duri finds it ridiculously attractive, this irreverent way of looking at life that Subin personifies, and laughing together invariably leads to falling in bed together, high on laughter and life and Subin's ability to reach in and stoke the fire in Duri with a laugh as easily as with a kiss.

But as summer fades into autumn, as the leaves fall and the months trickle by, as winter nips cold at November's heels, their steady, strong friendship and heated attraction doesn't deepen into *love* the way Duri thought it would, the way he hoped it would.

At least, not for Duri. The moments where he looks at Subin and his heart catches on a memory of Hosu never go away, the comparisons never bleed out, never fade. No matter how wonderful Subin is, Duri never quite falls in love with him, because he never quite falls *out of love* with Hosu. If Subin is the red thread in Duri's life, Hosu is the gold one, the one that catches the eye no matter which way the light falls, the one that outshines all other threads.

It takes time for Duri to realise it, for the truth to find its way into his heart and settle in its chambers.

It's a Saturday in January, around eight months after they start dating, when it finally hits him.

It's not a loud moment, not a thunderous, momentous occasion the way one might think. It slips silently into the space between them, soft and quiet, and it's infinitely more painful for it.

Subin has come over to Duri and Minjun's flat, arms full of pastries and coffees for brunch, all of Duri's favourites *just because*, and they are sitting on Duri's couch, bellies full of sweets and coffee. He has pulled Duri's feet into his lap and is massaging them, hands firm and comforting. He's telling a story about Doyun and HaJun's prank on Jiho, and telling it in a way that makes Duri laugh, giggles bubbling up in his belly, joyful and heartening.

There is a moment, suddenly, when Subin looks over at Duri, smile soft and gentle, and his body stills, a calmness coming over him.

"I love you, hyung."

It's not the first time he's said it, but something about the way he says it hits differently this time. There's a tilt to his head, an inflection to his voice that clicks something in Duri's brain, and time stops. For a moment, it's not Subin he sees, but Hosu. Hosu's sharp eyes, his pretty Cupid's bow, his more pronounced cheekbones. Comparisons suddenly flash through Duri, cataloguing all the things that Hosu was and Subin isn't, all the things that Subin is that Hosu wasn't. All the ways Hosu wasn't *better*, just *different*, different in a way that still stops Duri's heart, that still leaves him stuck in Gwangju even after all these years.

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He realises something else, then, sees clear as day all the striking similarities between Subin and Hosu. Subin is what Duri imagines an older, less downtrodden Hosu would be like, free from his father's scathing opinions. The Hosu Duri caught glimpses of in moments when he felt confident, moments when he briefly forgot to be what his father wanted him to be, when he felt comfortable in his skin and able to *take up space* in the world.

He sees the similarities in their looks, too, suddenly, the way their features are alike, with Subin's version just being softer, a little less defined, cheeks a little fuller, lips a little less heart-like, eyes a little less sharp.

It's sobering, unsettling, such unvarnished truth suddenly being thrown at him, rubbed into old wounds like salt, sharp and stinging. It screams at him, echoing loudly inside his head, accusing, *you don't love him, he's a placeholder, he'll never be enough for you*, loathsome words, heartbreaking.

The moment doesn't last long, but it leaves him shaken, filled with guilty despair, heart fluttering in his chest, breath too thin in his lungs.

Duri looks for the right words, words that give Subin what he deserves, words that will make his smile stretch wider, that will make Duri's heart burst into flames.

But the words don't come. They stick in his throat, awareness that Subin deserves better than a placating lie stopping them from making their way out past his teeth.

And then, between one heartbeat and the next, time restarts, Subin smiles and launches into the next story, heedless of Duri's inner turmoil.

Once it's sunk in and made itself a home in Duri's chest, the realisation that he may never truly fall for Subin is irreversible, clinging to him, dogged and traitorous. The thought that Subin is, at the heart of it, a *substitute* for Hosu haunts Duri, keeps him up at night. He treasures Subin, cares for him deeply, and the thought that he's been unwittingly *using* him to relive what he had with Hosu, to try and *replace* Hosu, cuts deeply.

Duri doesn't last long, after that, guilt and self-hatred forcing his hand within weeks.

He invites Subin out for a walk by the river, a heavy feeling dragging on his frame as they amble along. Duri is quiet, searching for words while Subin chats beside him. When they reach a bench perched in the middle of a sheltered, grassy area overlooking the water, Subin veers off the path and pulls Duri with him onto the seat.

They sit quietly for long minutes, watching birds soar over the water's choppy surface. Duri's thoughts cycle endlessly through what he needs to say and do, the way he has to hurt Subin, shying away from the moment he actually begins the process, delaying it as long as he can.

And then, suddenly, he's out of time.

Subin sighs, grasps Duri's hand and turns to face him.

"Hyung."

Duri looks at him, and he knows his face betrays everything he's feeling, all the sadness and the guilt, he can feel the stain of it on his cheeks, clinging to his mouth, pulling at his eyes.

"Just...just say it, hyung. It's not working, is it?"

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Subin, beautiful, kindhearted, clever Subin, of course he'd see, of course he'd know. Duri grimaces, annoyed at himself, and shakes his head.

"I'm sorry, Bin-ah."

Subin looks downcast, and Duri hates himself a little more.

"I kind of knew it was coming, I guess. You haven't seemed happy."

He's playing with Duri's fingers the way he always does when they sit and talk, and Duri lets him, one more time.

He sighs as he squeezes Subin's hand.

"I...it's not you, you know that, right? You're amazing."

Subin scoffs at that.

"Right, hyung."

A heartbeat, two.

"Why then? If I'm so amazing? Why aren't you happy? What am I doing wrong? And don't give me that *it's not you, it's me* crap."

Duri swallows hard. The reality is that it *is* him, not Subin.

"You're not doing anything wrong! I...I don't know how to explain it if I can't tell you it's not you, because it really isn't. I'm just – I keep trying, but I just can't, I can't..."

The words fade out, getting stuck to the roof of his mouth, and he huffs in frustration, hands pulling out of Subin's grasp to ball into fists in his lap.

Subin watches him in that way that always makes Duri feels scrutinised.

"You can't *what*, hyung?"

Duri looks away, eyes seeking refuge, cowardly, afraid of seeing the hurt in Subin's face. He stays silent, unwilling to add more hurt, to twist the knife.

"*What?*"

"Don't. Don't make me say it, please."

He can feel the moment when Subin understands, feels him watching, then pulling back, eyes dropping away from Duri's face, his warmth receding from the air around Duri like he's pulling all his love back into himself, revoking it.

Duri shivers.

"It's him, isn't it? Your ex?"

The words come out cold, brittle. Duri feels exposed and shameful, but he makes himself nod, makes himself own his failure with bitterness on his tongue.

"I'm sorry, Bin-ah. I really tried."

"Have you seen him, then? Are you getting back together?"

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The thought that Subin thinks he's leaving him for a real Hosu, a Hosu who is here, present and willing to be part of Duri's life is somehow both better and worse than the reality, and Duri winces, digging his nails into the palms of his hands reflexively.

"No, I haven't, nothing like that. I haven't spoken to him in years, I probably never will again. I just...I can't shake him, as ridiculous as that is, I don't know how to, I need to figure that out first. And you deserve someone who is yours completely, someone who can love you as much as you love them, not someone who's still getting over an ex. You're wonderful and you deserve so much more, you deserve everything, and I can't give you that right now."

Subin nods, but there's a bitter curl to his lips, something strained in his expression, and it hurts Duri to think he put it there.

"So that's it then? You're leaving me for a ghost?"

And that stings, but it's not inaccurate, so Duri bites his tongue, swallows the bitterness down.

"I'm leaving you free to find better than me, someone who's ready for you. And I'm going to try and figure out how to leave the ghost behind."

"Right. Well, I guess I should be grateful. Better now than in five years' time."

It comes out salt-laced and ringing with hurt, and the guilt feels heavier on Duri's chest as the words hang in the air.

"I'm sorry. Please don't hate me."

Subin rubs a hand across his eyes and sighs deeply, making a visible attempt to shore himself up.

"I don't hate you, hyung. You've always been honest with me, you never pretended, you told me about the hold he had on you from day one. I guess I just hoped things would be different, is all."

"Me too."

It's said softly, simply. Subin looks at him and squeezes his hand, a flash of something soft in his eyes.

"I'm going to go, hyung."

He stands, then, dropping Duri's hand as he does so.

"I'll see you."

He turns away but seems to hesitate, turning back to look at Duri.

"Hyung? I don't hate you, but I'll need some time to get over you, okay? So just – I'm going to disappear for a bit, take some space. But I'll be back eventually, and we can try being friends if you want to."

Duri nods, heart full of regret.

"I'd like that, Bin-ah."

Subin nods, red bangs falling into sad eyes, before he turns and walks away with a soft *bye, hyung*.

Duri sits, fists balled into his lap, nails still digging half-moons into his palms. Anger and self-hatred sit hard and heavy in his belly, a bitter lump that scents every shuddering breath he takes. Subin's

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expression is etched onto his brain, the hurt and sadness, the self-doubt. That part stings the most, perhaps, makes Duri feel like a real piece of work, the fact that he has brought bright, beautiful Subin to a place where he feels like any of this is *his fault*.

Because it isn't. This is all Duri. Duri and his stupid hang ups. Duri and his ridiculous inability to *move on*. Duri who just can't let go of someone he hasn't seen in seven years.

He forces himself to breathe, to hold onto his threads, to keep himself together long enough to walk home. He focuses on that, on the motion, one foot in front of the other, moving away from prying eyes, away from *people*, to his safe place where he can hate himself in private.

The walk back to their apartment passes in a blur, his feet taking him along the familiar streets on auto pilot, bitterness slick on the back of his tongue. He unlocks the door and steps inside, shutting it behind himself and immediately drops to the floor, sitting heavily against the inside of the door.

Stupid, stupid, stupid. Why can't he recognise a good thing when he has it? Why does he have to be so hung up on something he can never have again? All he had to do was fall in love with a beautiful, wonderful man who was perfect for him, was that so hard?

The frustration is boiling over, bubbling away in his chest as he starts to tug at his shoes, struggling with the laces. When he finally gets one off, he yells and heaves it across the small foyer with all the power he can muster.

It hits the opposite wall with a thump, and Duri lets his head drop back against the door, breathing heavily.

"Hyung?" Minjun sticks his head around the door to the living room, looking at Duri with concern etched onto the familiar lines of his face. Duri lets his eyes drift shut.

"Everything okay?"

"Everything sucks."

"Oh."

He steps into the little space, shutting the door behind him. His eye catches on Duri's discarded shoe, the other one still on his foot.

"Can I sit down or are you planning on throwing the other one?"

Duri huffs and shrugs. Minjun sits opposite Duri, folding his long limbs underneath him. Duri opens his eyes and watches him. *Trigonometry*, his brain supplies, the way it always does when Minjun's angles take over his body in the haphazard way they do.

It almost makes him smile.

"So. Want to tell me why we're sitting in the hallway?"

Duri sniffs.

"I messed it up, Jun-ah."

"Ah. And what would *it* be, hyung?"

"Everything. Subin. I broke it off, like an idiot."

"Ah."

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Minjun's face is carefully neutral, a perfect match to his tone.

"Why?"

Duri scoffs.

"Because I'm an idiot who can't get over his ex who he's never going to see again."

"Ah."

"Yeah. Ah."

It's quiet in the hallway for long seconds, before Minjun speaks again.

"So let me get this straight. You still love Hosu?"

"Apparently so."

"And you broke it off with Subin because you still love Hosu?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. So...I'm sorry, but can you enlighten me on which part of that, exactly, makes you an idiot?"

Duri huffs, chest heavy, full of guilt.

"All of it, haven't you been listening?"

"Oh no, I have. That's why I'm asking. From where I'm sitting, you can't help who you love, and breaking up with someone is the only right choice if you are in love with someone else."

Duri bristles.

"But it's *ridiculous!* It's been *seven years*; I should be over him by now! Why am I not over him? I can't have him, but I had Subin, and he was amazing! Why am I hung up on someone I'm never going to see again instead of being in love with the person who's right in front of me?"

Duri swallows hard. He lets his head drop back against the wooden door, reveling in the dull pain. It feels right, feels deserved. He hurt Hosu, he hurt Subin, it's only right that he should hurt too.

"If you're not over him, you're not over him, hyung. There's no time limit on grief. Or on love."

Duri's throat feels tight, achy, tight around the words as he tries to push them out. There's a vice-like pressure building up in his chest, pushing down on his lungs.

"I hate it, Jun-ah. I just want to move on, I don't want to be stuck like this. I want to live, and fall in love, maybe get married, one day, get some dogs, who knows. I just want a life...but instead, like some lovesick teenager, I look for Hobah everywhere. All the time. I looked for him in Subin. I look for him, and when I don't find him, I'm disappointed. It doesn't even matter how wonderful Subin is, he's not Hobah, they're different, so he'll never be right. He was *perfect*, and my stupid ass still couldn't fall in love with him. And he deserves better than that, he deserves more than someone who's hung up on their ex."

Minjun nods, and his small smile is sad.

"He does, hyung." A heartbeat, two, then "You know you do too, right?"

Duri scoffs, bitter.

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"No, I don't."

"You do, hyung. You deserve better than to be hung up on an ex. You deserve to move on, to fall in love."

Duri can feel his hold on himself slipping, anger mixing with grief in a way he *knows* will cost him his control over the situation, over himself, and he digs his nails deeper into his palms in a futile attempt to *hold on*.

"I don't know *how*, Jun-ah. How do I *do that*? How do I fall in love with someone when I can't seem to fall *out of love* with Hobah? I *tried!* I tried so hard to fall in love with Bin, and I just *couldn't*, and it's so unfair to him, I feel like such a *jerk* for what I did to him! But I just couldn't do it, I'm *stuck!*"

Tears burn behind his eyes now, and his chest is growing tighter as he fights not to let them fall, fights not to let it all out. He pushes his knuckles into his mouth and bites down angrily, the ache enough to lessen the sting of his frustration with himself, with the situation, with the world in general.

"I think maybe it starts with you, hyung. Inside of you. I think maybe it's a matter of forgiving yourself for hurting Hosu and deciding that you deserve to be happy. Maybe you're not allowing yourself to have love, to have happiness, because of what happened with Hosu. Maybe all of this, not being open to loving Subin, maybe it's all your way of subconsciously punishing yourself."

Duri wants to think it's ludicrous, the idea of him punishing himself, but he can't, there's an uncomfortable feeling of truth to it, a recognition that hums under his skin. It lines up with the dull ache in the back of his head where he thumped it on the door, with the sting in his knuckles where he bit down on them.

He can't deny the guilt he carries, the amount of self-hatred he still feels when he thinks of the way he let himself fall for Hosu, to get *entangled*, in the full knowledge he would likely have to leave him behind. The guilt that eats at him for not having been strong enough to stop it, to stay behind, to never leave Hosu.

All he's wanted for years is to find a way to hold Hosu in his memories while also moving on, fall in love with someone new, be happy without Hosu, and now he's learning that maybe, just maybe, he's the one stopping himself from being able to do any of that. It's overwhelming, entirely, and he feels like his chest is breaking open as a sob tears its way out of his throat, raw and unhinged.

He fights it with every fibre of his being, body tense and aching, fists clenched as he bangs the back of his head against the door again, hard, a loud curse tearing its way out of his chest.

But his control is collapsing, crumbling, slipping through his fingers like water. Duri wraps his arms around his raised knees and hides his face in them, ashamed.

Breathe. He needs to breathe, to focus on inhaling and exhaling, to calm down.

He thinks maybe he'll make it, maybe he'll get through this without falling apart, just.

And then Minjun speaks, and Duri breaks.

"It wasn't your fault, hyung. You didn't want to leave. You tried to stop it, but you were a kid, you were just a kid with no power in the world, there was nothing you could *do*. *None* of it was your fault. You need to stop punishing yourself for something that was *out of your control*."

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Everything spills out then, years of self-loathing, of guilt and regret and hurt and anger, it all comes pouring out. Minjun's hand comes up to rub between his shoulder blades, tentative, and Duri flinches. But the dam has broken, and Duri can't stop the outpouring of feeling, sobbing shamefully into the space between his legs and his torso. Minjun's hand stills, a warm weight on his back, and it's as grounding as it is alien. Duri's jeans become soaked with his tears, his eyes feel red and painful, and still the tears just keep coming.

When it finally stops, when his chest finally stills and the tears dry up, the afternoon sun has disappeared from their windows, leaving the living room shadowed.

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Later, when they're curled up under blankets with fresh mugs of hot chocolate, sated on takeout that Minjun ordered, half-full containers strewn across the coffee table, Duri voices the thing that gives him the greatest amount of guilt about Subin.

"You want to know the most messed up part, Jun-ah? The thing that really messes with my head?"

Minjun watches him quietly, sips his hot chocolate and leaves space for Duri to continue.

"Subin looks a lot like Hosu, and I never even realised until a couple of weeks ago. And once I saw it, it's all I could see, and all I could think was that I was using him as some kind of *replacement* for Hobah, some kind of messed up stand-in."

Minjun hums, seems to consider that for a moment.

"That seems harsh, hyung. Maybe you just have a type? I mean, are we talking clones? Do they look *exactly* alike? Or just – similar?"

"No, not clones. Hosu was taller, and kind of – more intense, I guess? Like – they look alike, but Subin's face is – softer? Hosu is a little sharper everywhere – sharper eyes, stronger mouth, sharper nose, just – sharper features. If that makes sense? I dunno. Just – really similar, but not the same."

He feels a little silly trying to explain it, how he saw so much of Hosu in Subin, hearing the clumsiness of his own words echoed back at himself. But Minjun just smiles.

"So maybe that's just your type then? You know, good looking, gay."

That pulls a small smile from Duri, in turn, which makes Minjun dimple. He shoves his friend's shin with his foot.

"I think you can let that one go, hyung. You have enough other things to guilt yourself about without that."

It eases the tightness in his chest some more, to hear Minjun reduce this big, shameful secret to something so simple and unremarkable. It doesn't wash away all of his concern, doesn't make him feel entirely relieved, but it pulls the magnitude of it from horror at himself back to a quiet unease.

Maybe Minjun is right. Maybe the resemblance is coincidental, maybe he has a type. Maybe not, maybe he's subconsciously looking for Hosu in every boy he meets.

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It's sobering, to be here again, all these years later, with his roots still firmly buried in the same brown-eyed boy. To have a break up expose him in this way, make him realise that for all his progress, for all his growth, there is still a part of him that can't quite *let go* of Hosu and all that he embodies. And he wonders if Minjun is right, if this is all about forgiveness – forgiveness for himself.

As he stares out over the mess of mugs and takeaway containers in front of him, all he sees is that smile, those eyes, the years falling away.

"I was really protective of him, you know?"

Minjun doesn't ask who Duri is talking about.

"He was so gentle. So good, but kind of broken, too. His dad...he was an asshole. Taught him all that homosexuality is a sin crap, taught him he was never good enough, that he was too *soft*. I've never wanted to hit someone so bad, Jun-ah, I swear. I just wanted to take Hobah away, keep him safe, stop that asshole from dulling his shine. Help him be himself, be bright, be sparkly, be everything he was meant to be."

There's an unused napkin on the floor, and he bends to pick it up, long fingers warm from the hot chocolate. The paper is dry against his skin as he twists it up tight between his fingers.

"I just wanted to keep him safe, and instead I was the one who hurt him the most. That's a really hard thing to forgive myself for."

Minjun hums.

"It is. But that wasn't you. Or rather, not *this* you. That was baby you, the one with no power, remember?"

Duri nods.

"Yeah, I remember. And it helps. Intellectually, I know I couldn't have stopped what happened. It might take me some time to really *feel* it though."

"That's fair. I mean, you're very well practiced at beating yourself up over things. I guess it might take some effort to stop."

"*Yah!*"

Minjun dodges the kick aimed at his shin, laughing and spilling his hot chocolate all over his sweatpants in the process. He swears as he stands and moves towards the bedrooms to go and get changed with a *not a goddamn word*, *hyung* cast at a laughing Duri over his shoulder.

Duri finishes his hot chocolate and stares at the brown muck left behind at the bottom of the cup.

Forgive himself.

He needs to forgive himself, somehow, for what happened when he was a stupid kid, for hurting someone he loved, someone he still loves. And in the process, hopefully finally move on from that person.

It seems like a monumental, impossibly difficult task, and Duri has no idea where to begin.

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Winter fades into a wet, mild spring.

Duri is focused inwards, head and heart once again caught up in trying to let go of threads that are so tangled up with his, they're hard to unravel even all these years later. He's not sure how to go about that, but his own reaction to Minjun's suggestion he needs to forgive himself gives him a clue as to where to start.

And so, one Sunday, he sits on the window seat in his room overlooking a grey and watery Seoul street, feet tucked up under a blanket, and opens a brand new, crisp notebook. It's still stiff and unyielding, and he cracks the spine to allow it to sit flat on his lap, runs his hand along the pages, the silky texture dry and full of promise against his skin.

Writing comes naturally to Duri, albeit usually in a different form. He's used to pouring his heart out between thin blue lines on velvety paper, pouring it out in harsh, cutting syllables that confront and deride, that tell unvarnished truths trapped between rhythm and cadence, infused with flow.

This is not that.

This is making peace. This is letting go, a gentle examination of words unsaid, of feelings unaired, of dreams unfulfilled. He writes to Hosu, a letter never meant to be sent, a letter for his own healing and closure.

In it, in blue ink on white pages, he purges all the words he wishes he'd had a chance to say to him all those years ago, all the things he felt, the things he still feels, all the dreams he had, all the sorrow, all the regrets. He writes fast, hand speeding across the pages, his spidery characters sprawling across six double sided pages by the time he runs out of things to pour out of his chest and onto paper. It's a release, an emptying.

He sits and stares out over Seoul for a long time when he's done, before closing the book and dressing silently to go out and walk in the rain, eyes dry even as every other part of him is soaked to the bone.

The second letter is a lot more frightening, a lot harder to steel himself for. He doesn't feel ready to tackle it until several months later, after a promotion at work and a night celebrating with Minjun.

When Duri wakes late the next morning with a sense of calm he hasn't felt in months, he knows it's time to write his second letter.

He grabs his notebook from its spot on the bookshelf in his room. It hasn't moved from its position since he wrote to Hosu, and there's a little dust on the top, a silent testament to his struggle to get to this point. He blows it off, watches the motes drift and twirl in the weak spring sunlight.

He curls up on his window seat again, pillows propped up behind his back and blanket tucked around his bare legs. The notebook is still a little stiff, still crisp, with none but the first six pages written on, just the letter to Hosu marring its bright whiteness.

He skips a few pages, looking for a fresh start, craving the feeling of a brand-new book for this letter. He breathes deeply, searches inside himself, and puts pen to paper.

And then he writes.

Our Gentle Sin - a novel by Tara Lemana

This letter is to himself at sixteen, a boy with cheeks still round and jaw still soft, belly full of hope and bravado, brimming with hormones and emotions. A boy with big ideas of his own place in the world, his own power, with grandiose plans for his first love, thwarted by life, by fate, by youth.

He writes and writes, pours everything out onto the pages. It's much harder to write, this time, the words hidden deep in his belly, unacknowledged and shameful, yanking at his insides as he reaches in and grabs them. His inner critic fights him, wanting to shame and ridicule, to punish the boy he was, but Minjun's words ring louder, ring truer, and Duri fights back, silences the negative voice that tries to derail his healing.

It's deeply painful, and at some point, he becomes aware that his cheeks are wet and the pages he's writing are spotted with teardrops, but the words keep coming.

He writes to young Duri, the Duri so brim full of his inexperienced, exuberant kind of love, full of his own importance, scrawls words of kindness and forgiveness onto velvety page after velvety page. Words that ease, that breathe *it's okay*, words meant to stamp *it wasn't your fault* onto young Duri's heart in blocky characters, words to slip into the cavities in his chest and remind him that he couldn't have stopped what happened, couldn't have not loved Hosu, couldn't have stayed, couldn't have fixed it.

He forgives young Duri for his lack of power, for his lack of understanding, for all the things he should have done better, all the ways he should have been *more*.

He tells him he did the best he could, and it's okay.

When the last of the words trickle out, when forgiveness has bled all over the pages of the notebook, when nothing is left unspoken to dig splinters into his flesh, Duri signs the letter and dates it, closing the notebook and slipping it back into its spot on the shelf.

Then, limbs heavy and spent, chest shattered and open, he crawls back into bed and allows himself the release of crying properly, of mourning all the years he spent punishing himself for things he had no control over.

Eventually he drifts off to sleep, cheek pressed into his damp pillow, waking hours later to the smell of fresh coffee and Minjun's presence in his room.

And as they share coffee sitting on Duri's bed, wrapped in comfortable quiet, Duri relishes the new sense of calm resting in his chest.

*

As 2013 trickles away, Duri tries to find a new rhythm, tries to build something with larger meaning out of work, friends and his stagnating fledgling music career.

After almost three years together, Minjun and Jiah call it quits. Jiah is planning a move to London to pursue her acting career, and Minjun isn't going with her. She doesn't ask him to come, and he doesn't ask her to stay. They both agree that long distance is impossible; Jiah's move is permanent, and Minjun is happy in Seoul, with no desire to leave.

They're in agreement, but the hurt is big, this time. It's hard, intensely painful.

Our Gentle Sin - a novel by Tara Lemana

Duri is there to catch Minjun, as always.

His way of supporting his friend is quieter, softer. Duri meets words with gestures, with loving actions, feeling patently unqualified to offer words of advice or even comfort.

"I should have gone with her," says Minjun, splayed out on the living room floor.

"Hmm," says Duri, nudging Minjun's hip with his foot as he places a bowl of jjajangmyeon on the coffee table beside him.

"Here," he says, "eat up."

"Why didn't she ask me to come?" asks Minjun another day, a sad day, one where his sweats are stained and his hair is greasy.

"Jun-ah," says Duri, voice soft.

"Come on, hyung washed your favourite sweats for you. They're in the bathroom; go shower and I'll go out and get us hotteok for after."

"I'll die alone, hyung," says Minjun on a Really Bad Day, after too many glasses of soju and too many hours spent stalking Jiah's Instagram.

"Not alone, Jun-ah, you'll always have me," says Duri, tucking Minjun into his bed.

"Stay, please, hyung," says Minjun, and Duri does, settling on his back on top of the blankets behind Minjun's curled-up form, a warm, soothing presence at his friend's back.

"Sleep, Jun-ah," says Duri, and closes his eyes.

"Thanks, hyung," says Minjun, and falls fast asleep.

Little by little, Minjun weathers the storm, finds his way out, Duri functioning as his lighthouse as he does so.

Slowly, Minjun's colours return, his yellows and oranges and bright, bright blues replacing the greys and blacks of the past months. The conversations change, day by day. One day, Duri realises they've spent most nights of the past week just hanging out, talking about work, about Minjun's upcoming birthday, about a lot of things, but not about Jiah, or dying alone, or being sad.

It makes him smile.

It's good, this time with Minjun, and Duri relishes the reprieve from having to focus on himself, on everything he wants in his life that he doesn't have, on *lack* and *want* and *purpose*. But little by little, as Minjun finds his feet and his need for Duri's support lessens back into something less all-consuming, something more mundane, the restlessness returns.

Every boring day at work, every day where his job is more frustrating than fulfilling, every day that ends with Duri's need for purpose being unmet, leaves him chafing, hollow, crying out for *more*.

His promotion earlier on in the year had seemed like a step up, a good thing. But where before, every single day involved Duri helping someone fix some small thing, involved him making someone's day better, his new role as Technical Team Leader has him dealing with staff issues, assigning jobs and fighting fires. It's miles and miles of red tape and a complete absence of a sense of purpose, of making a difference. It's soul destroying, and Duri feels like his will to live is slowly being sucked out through his fingertips with every job he types up.

Our Gentle Sin - a novel by Tara Lemana

On a Friday in late August, the emptiness aches more than usual, leaving Duri with a pain in his belly that sours his mood and leaves him snapping at those around him.

As he rides the train home that night, he's stuck in a seat facing the center aisle, having to crane his neck to see out the window across the aisle from him past the heads of other passengers if he wants to watch the landscape go by.

He settles for people watching instead, letting his eyes wander aimlessly, waiting for something to catch his eye, something interesting enough to snag his attention and pull him out of the puddle of frustrated misery he finds himself in.

He finds it a few rows further up.

Two boys sit side by side, facing Duri, heads together as they talk softly. They're young, seventeen maybe, dressed in school uniforms of the same infernal navy-blue Duri remembers wearing throughout his school career. Everything about them is regulation – their uniforms, their clunky school shoes, even their tidy, short haircuts – everything but the fact that they are a couple. It's instantly recognisable, written all over them in bright splashes of adoration, all over their body language, the intimate way they look at each other, the soft, fleeting touches. Nothing they do is overt, there is no hand holding, no kissing, nothing obvious, but the love is loud in their eyes, in their smiles, in the way their fingertips brush each other, and most of all, in the way they only see each other, completely oblivious to the world around them.

It's familiar, in a bittersweet way, it transports Duri back to all those days sitting at the back of train carriages with Hosu, hiding linked hands under jackets or behind backpacks. He smiles as he watches them, a soft warmth flaring up under his sternum, dulling the ache momentarily.

The warmth lasts until a sudden movement further up on Duri's side of the aisle draws his attention away from the boys in their little bubble. From where Duri sits, he has a clear vantage point of both the young couple and the group of four boys sitting across the aisle from them. They look to be a few years older than the couple, twenty maybe, and they're clearly looking for trouble.

The group is watching the couple with looks of disgust and derision loud on their faces. They sneer as they talk amongst themselves, and Duri catches glimpses of balled fists, set jaws. He can almost taste the anger in the air, a sour taste that makes his mouth go dry.

The boys across the aisle seem oblivious to the attention they've attracted, and a cold sense of apprehension settles in Duri's stomach. He wills the couple to notice the danger, to *be more careful*, hating the thought as soon as he has it, knowing they are doing absolutely nothing wrong but wanting to protect them from danger that's threatening them all the same.

As he watches the group cast disgusted looks at the boys as they talk amongst themselves, he stares at the young couple, hoping one of them will notice, hoping they'll make eye contact, that he'll get a chance to warn them, somehow.

But they don't. Completely encapsulated in their small bubble, engrossed in their soft conversation and lingering looks, they have eyes only for each other, and the buildup of tension across the aisle from them goes unnoticed.

The taller boy reaches out to gently brush an eyelash off his partner's cheek, the touch lingering as they make eye contact with a small smile, and Duri can just make out a hiss from the boys across the aisle.

Our Gentle Sin - a novel by Tara Lemana

The group is becoming more agitated, their low-pitched conversation sounding staccato, clipped, and Duri feels sweat begin to trickle down his spine as he worries about how this will unfold. The fear that it may turn violent starts to press in on him, making it hard to breathe.

He looks around at the other passengers, a mix of men and women in suits and smart casual office wear similar to Duri's, most clearly on their way home from work, tired and disconnected. A few college students with vacant expressions and dark circles under their eyes, scrolling on their phones or leaning back with headphones on and eyes closed. A grey-haired *ahjussi* with a large nose, larger ears and a hump, and a tiny *ahjumma* with dyed-black hair and red lipstick bleeding into the lines around her mouth sit a little further down the aisle, just as much in their own world as the young couple.

No one besides Duri seems to have noticed the unfolding scene between the two boys and the group. The carriage is near-full, buzzing with the low hum of half a dozen conversations, and that makes it unlikely the group will make a scene here. It makes Duri feel a little better, briefly, but as the minutes tick by and the group's agitation seems to keep growing, so does Duri's concern that they may decide to follow the boys off the train when they reach their stop. Duri has heard too many stories of friends of friends being attacked over the mere suspicion of being something other than *straight*, and bile rises in his throat at the thought he may be watching a scene like that in the making.

Duri isn't a coward. He has never shied away from taking a stand when it's needed, has never hidden from who he is or apologised for it. He's not a fighter, but he knows how to hold his own, and while the thought of taking on four boys is daunting, there isn't a moment's doubt in his mind that he'll do whatever he can to stop yet another gay teen being victimised by bullies.

A movement across the aisle draws his eye. The taller boy is standing, pulling his backpack up onto his shoulders, fingers linked with those of the boy still sitting. Duri watches as they smile at each other, adoration brushed liberally all over their faces, and exchange a small squeeze of fingers, before the taller boy turns and heads for the exit.

Duri's body aches with tension. He watches the group as they watch the couple, praying they don't split up to follow both boys, praying they stay together and don't make Duri have to choose which boy most needs a protector.

His luck holds. The group seems to confer and decide to stay put.

The taller boy steps off the train with a small wave and a smile to his boyfriend, and Duri stays in his seat, sweat making the skin on his back itch as he sits and waits. His stop is next, but he's already decided to stay on the train and try to make sure the boys are safe.

The train moves away, and the remaining boy sits facing away from the group, looking out the window at the houses parading past in a haze of fast-moving colour. They're nearing the outskirts of town, leaving behind the anxious press of cars and the dizzying high rises in favour of blocky suburban homes.

At Duri's stop, the boy stays seated, eyes glued to the gauzy vista outside the train window while his right leg bounces to music only he can hear. He looks peaceful, relaxed, oblivious to the tension around him as he smiles a small smile and watches the world go by.

The group across the aisle stay in their seats, casting quick glances at the boy, and Duri grinds his teeth, a quiet fury buzzing under his skin. He keeps his eyes locked on the scene further up the aisle

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while shifting aside minutely, just enough to make way for a group of college girls to get off the train. The scent of floral perfumes mixes with the sour scent of anger and tension in the air, cloying and sickly.

The train pulls away again, rumbling its patient hum as it does so. The tension is so thick in the air, Duri can't understand that no one else seems to have noticed it. He feels it crawling on his skin, thick and sticky, seeping in through his pores, making him nauseous. He swallows hard and has to force himself to unclench his jaw.

When the boy stands as they approach the next stop, Duri's stomach roils in a heaving wave. The boys across the aisle are fidgeting, picking up backpacks, moving surreptitiously, clearly trying to look disinterested but preparing to get off at the same stop, so Duri shoulders his bag and gets ready to disembark too.

The boy waits by the door, and the group pushes in behind him, too close. Duri watches as the boy casts a look over his shoulder at the group, a clear unease starting to creep into his body language, awareness starting to bleed in.

As the doors open and the boy steps out, Duri jumps up and follows the group off the train on jittery feet. He gets caught up in the press of weary bodies at the exit, and it holds him back, costing him precious seconds, falling behind a little by the time he sets off behind the group. He follows the boys, walking about twenty metres behind the group as they trail a short distance behind the boy.

The lone boy walks fast, backpack hitched over one shoulder, head down and shoulders a little hunched, as if he's trying to disappear, make himself invisible. The posture is painfully familiar, a jarring reminder of a young Hosu trying to make himself invisible as he moved through the world, insecure and repressed, and Duri's throat tightens at the sight. Rage coils inside him, adrenaline pumping through his veins. Every sensation is heightened, sight and sound sharpening, colours brightening, all his focus honed on the boy and the group following him. Anger and adrenaline make Duri feel invincible, like a vengeful giant, ready to take on the world to protect this stranger, this young boy out here, alone and in danger.

The boy walks, casting occasional looks over his shoulder. He crosses a road, ducks down a side street, crisscrossing as he goes, as if he's trying to shake the group, but the boys stay behind him, dogged.

As he walks, Duri reaches into his messenger bag, rummaging around for something, anything, to use to defend himself. His fingers pause briefly on his keys, before closing on his deodorant spray. Not as lethal as his keys, but effective, and he doesn't need to get quite so close to use it. He clenches his fist around the slender cylinder and transfers it to the pocket of his jacket. He keeps his hand firmly wrapped around the cool metal, appreciating the soothing, grounding sense of safety the touch provides.

He watches as the boy ahead of him turns a corner, and his heart rate spikes as the group takes off at a sprint, running after him. Duri breaks into a run, swearing at the sudden change of pace, the drastic escalation. It takes endless seconds to reach the corner, seconds during which he can hear yelling and swearing from the street he's about to enter.

When he turns the corner, his heart drops. The group have the boy surrounded, crowding in on him in the middle of the empty street. As Duri watches, the tallest of the group, a broad shouldered, beefy boy with a cap and big hands, grabs their target's shirt and punches him in the stomach, hard enough for the boy to double over and collapse.

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Duri swears and sprints faster than he's ever done in his life, legs burning and lungs aching as he closes the distance, pulling the can of deodorant out of his pocket as he goes. The group is milling around the boy as he writhes on the ground, seemingly waiting for direction from the ringleader, who seems content for now to yell slurs at the boy slumped at his feet and shove him with his combat boots.

Duri is nearly upon them when he sees the ringleader draw his foot back, making to kick at the helpless boy, and something in him snaps.

"Get away from him!" he roars, as he barrels down on the ringleader, crashing into him and knocking him away from the fallen boy. His face connects with the boy's flailing limbs as the bully goes down, but Duri barely feels it, the adrenaline coursing through his system safeguarding him for now. He manages to keep his feet, only just, stumbling before righting himself.

Everything stops, for a second, two, time measured in heartbeats. All Duri hears is the blood rushing in his ears, his breath coming in gasps, the injured boy's soft whimpers against the pavement. He positions himself between the boy and the ringleader, a fierce wall of fury and protective energy, feet planted, deodorant tucked invisibly into his palm.

The taste of metal seeps into his mouth, and Duri doesn't need to wipe across the wetness on his chin to know he's bleeding.

"What the hell?"

The bully pushes himself to his feet, grit on his cheek and his hands from where he fell, wary as he advances on Duri. He's tall, a good four inches taller than Duri, heavier and more powerful, all thick thighs and broad shoulders. But Duri's righteous anger thrums in his veins, pulsing, filling him up until it boils over, pushing outwards, larger, fuller, all his edges blurring. He risks a quick glance around, finding hesitance and trepidation buzzing among the bully's friends, a soft withdrawal, an eagerness to let their leader deal with Duri alone.

It's welcome, safety suddenly a little closer at the prospect of dealing with one bully rather than four.

"I said, get the hell away from him!"

"What do you want, little man?"

The bully's tone is sneering, harsh, but there's a tremor in it, too, and Duri scents fear, a bully unused to pushback. Age and experience are in Duri's favour even if his size isn't, and it eats away at any fear he might have felt, heightens his rage and his determination not to be cowed by this stain on humanity, this bigoted coward who likes to pick on kids.

He puts all his venom, all his deepest anger and disgust, into his voice, grinning with teeth he knows must be blood-stained.

"I want you to go pick on someone your own size, you pathetic little shit! Think you're a big man, huh, picking on a kid by himself? Four against one? You bloody coward!"

Duri knows his voice is steely, intimidating, years of spitting furious bars infusing it with power, with rage, brutality in his consonants and a strength that carries it out into the street.

The bully falters, hesitant, a stumble in his feet, uncertainty etched on his features.

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“Shut up!”

His voice lacks conviction, and Duri curls his lip, the gesture full of derision.

“Shut up,” he parrots, “Piss off, little man, you’re out of your league! You think you scare me? You and those idiots? You’re nothing on your own, don’t even have the balls to take on a little kid like that without back up. Bloody pathetic, go home, you sad excuse for a man!”

The bully is still advancing, eager to save face, but his nervousness is blatantly obvious, his movements subdued, intimidated. He edges closer, and Duri’s thoughts move a mile a minute.

He knows he can’t let the bully get within reach, knows there is no way he can physically overpower someone so much bigger and more powerful than his own petite frame. Duri’s power is his anger and his courage, and the small can of deodorant clenched tightly in his right fist. His options are limited; it’s either intimidate the kid into walking away or get him just close enough to disable him with the spray before he can attack.

The decision is made for him. As Duri watches, the bully casts a nervous glance at his friends, and when he turns back to Duri the look on his face is loudly determined. Duri knows, then; desperation to save face in front of his friends is overriding everything else playing in this kid’s mind, and he won’t back down unless Duri makes him.

He sighs inwardly, resigned. He postures, makes a show of planting his feet and smirking at the bully, bringing his left hand up while surreptitiously shifting the deodorant in his right hand around so it’s poised and ready for use.

One more step is all he needs. One more step and the bully will be in reach of the spray.

“Too stupid to walk away, aren’t ya? Come on then, you little prick, come and get it. Your buddies can watch you be beaten by a twink in office wear.”

It’s enough. The bully growls and steps towards Duri, and Duri swings his right hand around between them, depressing the button with full force.

The deodorant hits the bully straight in the face, and he howls, hands flying up to cover his eyes, feet stumbling. Duri sees his chance, stepping forward and landing a hard jab to the kid’s unprotected solar plexus. The bully doubles over, one hand still covering his eyes while his other arm clutches at his stomach. His friends finally spring into action, lurching forward to catch him and pull him out of Duri’s reach.

Duri practically growls at the nearest of the bully’s accomplices.

“Get the hell outta here! Piss off, you little pricks!”

The boys don’t need to be told again. They turn and run, dragging their limping, coughing, crying friend with them.

Duri watches them go, making sure they’re a safe distance away before turning to the boy still heaving and whimpering on the ground behind him. He crouches down, touching the boy’s shoulder gingerly.

The boy flinches.

“Hey, hey, it’s okay, you’re safe, I’m not going to hurt you,” Duri soothes.

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"Come on, can you sit up?"

The boy nods soundlessly, struggling his way up into a seated position with his arms wrapped around his midriff and his face red from crying. Duri's heart aches.

"There ya go, you're doing great," he says, syllables soft and blurry with gentle concern.

He reaches into his bag for the unopened bottle of water he bought on the way to the station and uncaps it.

"Here," he says, holding it out to the boy, "it's fresh, haven't drunk from it. You need it."

The boy watches the bottle with narrowed eyes, and Duri chuckles, shaking the bottle at him.

"It's not poisoned, kid, just drink."

The boy nods again, still silent, and takes the bottle, upending the bottle and pouring some of the water into his mouth, drinking quickly.

"Not too fast," warns Duri, "you'll throw up."

The boy slows down obediently. He looks small, cowed, and Duri drops out of his crouch to sit on the empty street beside him. He scans the road warily, but there is no sign of the bullies.

The boy still hasn't spoken. He's staring at his hands, white knuckled around the water bottle, and Duri suddenly doesn't feel invincible anymore, wishing he could take away the trauma this kid has just been through. And for what? For who he loves?

The outrage still sits heavily at the back of his throat. Duri swallows it down, focuses on staying calm, on soothing and being a safe place.

"You okay, kid?"

A quiet nod again.

"Are you hurt anywhere?"

A shrug, then a quiet voice, finally.

"Not really. Just – got badly winded."

Duri nods. The boy looks at him then, grimacing when his eyes drop to Duri's mouth, and that's when Duri remembers.

Right. He's bleeding. He must look quite the part.

He digs into his bag to find a discarded napkin, and wipes at his chin and mouth as best he can.

"Are – are you alright, sir?"

The boy's voice is timid, and Duri smiles. It feels achy and crooked, and the boy does not look remotely comforted.

"It's nothing, kid. Just a little cut."

"Here."

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The boy holds out the water bottle to Duri, and Duri takes it, leaning away to pour a little water into his mouth to rinse and spitting it out onto the concrete. He wets his hand and wipes it across his mouth and chin, drying himself on a clean corner of the napkin as best he can.

“Better?”

The boy looks and nods.

“Yeah.”

“Okay. You like hot chocolate?”

Eye contact. A frown.

“I...pardon, sir?”

Duri suppresses a smile as he stands up and holds his hand out.

“Hot chocolate. It has healing powers. I know a place near here, come on. My treat.”

There’s a moment where the boy hesitates, eyes on Duri’s outstretched hand, before he seems to come to a decision and grabs it. Duri pulls him up unceremoniously, pretending not to notice the way the boy winces as he stands.

Duri starts to walk in the direction of the coffee cart he knows, and after a moment the boy falls in step beside him.

“You got a name, kid?”

“Why?”

Duri shrugs, keeping his eyes on the road ahead of them.

“No reason. You don’t need to tell me, I can just keep calling you *kid* if you prefer.”

The boy huffs a little, a hint of a laugh, and Duri turns away to hide his smile. There’s no answer for long seconds before the same soft, timid voice reaches him.

“It’s Baekhyun.”

“Baekhyun,” Duri repeats, committing it to memory, “good name. I’m Duri.”

They walk along side by side quietly for a while before Baekhyun speaks again.

“Duri-nim?”

“Hmm?”

“Thank you. For – for what you did back there. I...I don’t know what would’ve happened to me if you hadn’t...”

His voice cracks, and Duri rushes in to soothe it.

“Shhh. It’s okay. I’m glad I was there.”

Baekhyun swallows hard and nods.

“Did you know them?”

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The boy shakes his head.

“No. I don’t know where they came from, I’d never seen them before.”

“They were watching you. On the train. With your friend,” Duri says.

Carefully, carefully.

He risks a glance at Baekhyun’s profile. His cheeks are dusted pink.

“Oh.”

They reach the coffee cart, then, and Baekhyun stands aside wordlessly as Duri orders and pays for their hot chocolates. The woman behind the counter chats happily as she goes about making the rich brew, adding marshmallows to Baekhyun’s cup with a cheerful *none for you, I know* to Duri’s raised hand. Duri sees her eyes flick to his mouth a few times, but to her credit, she says nothing.

They drink their hot chocolates as they walk, Duri sipping with the uninjured side of his mouth. It stings a little, but the sweet, rich flavour washes away the copper taste of the blood.

Baekhyun is still quiet, sipping slowly.

“Baekhyun-ssi. How would you feel about reporting what happened to the police? I’m happy to come with you and make an eyewitness state...”

“No!”

Duri looks up at Baekhyun. His eyes are wide, and he looks terrified.

“I can’t, sir, please don’t make me!”

“Shh, it’s alright, I’m not going to make you do anything. But I need you to think about it, please. This is important. If you don’t report it then they’re free to do this again, to you or the next person who comes along.”

“I don’t care, I can’t, please, please don’t make me, Duri-nim, please!”

The boy is frantic, and Duri holds up his hands, placating.

“Okay, okay, don’t panic, it’s alright. I won’t make you.”

“Promise? You have to promise, please?”

Duri sighs.

“I promise. I’m on your side, I’m not going to force you to do anything, I’m just trying to keep you safe.”

“O-okay. Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it. Will you – will you at least let me walk you home? To make sure you get there safely?”

Baekhyun looks at him sideways, hesitant.

“Come on, kid. If I wanted to see you hurt, I wouldn’t have intervened back there, would I? I swear, I just want to make sure you’re okay.”

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Baekhyun nods.

“Okay. I’m sorry, sir, I don’t mean to be rude. I’m just...”

“Shaken up,” Duri nods, “I get it, it’s okay. Another reason I want to make sure you’re okay. Will you let me walk you?”

The boy nods.

“Okay. But not all the way home, just – just to the end of the street? I don’t want my parents to see you and ask questions I can’t answer.”

Duri frowns.

“You’re not going to tell them what happened?”

Baekhyun looks at him.

“And say what? How do I explain why I got targeted?”

“Ah. They don’t know? That you’re...”

Baekhyun frowns.

“That I’m what?”

His voice is a little shrill, and Duri backs off.

“Nothing, it’s okay.”

“You think that filthy stuff they said is true? You believed them? That I’m...that?”

Duri looks at the boy, hurt in his heart. He tries to keep it from his voice as he responds, but the feeling is fierce, and it pushes its way into his tone all the same.

“I don’t care what you are, Baekhyun-ssi. I don’t care who you love. It’s no more my business than it is theirs. It’s no one’s business but yours.”

Baekhyun bristles.

“You’re right, it’s none of anybody’s business, but I’m not *that*.”

Duri sighs.

“Okay, kid.”

“I’m not!”

“*I said okay!*”

It comes out sharp, a little of Duri’s earlier anger bleeding into his tone. He stops and rubs his eyes.

“I’m sorry, kid, just. Look.”

He turns to face Baekhyun then, makes eye contact, forcing himself to keep his tone level.

“You don’t know me, I don’t know you. You don’t owe me an explanation. I’m telling you, I don’t care who you love. But I don’t take kindly to people acting like there is something *wrong* with being

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gay, or bi, or whatever, so just – quit that. Stop acting like the very thought of someone thinking you might be gay is an insult. It's not."

He turns away then, and starts walking again, not waiting for Baekhyun to follow. After a few steps, the younger boy catches up to him. They walk in silence for a few moments before Baekhyun speaks again.

"I'm sorry, Duri-nim."

"Forget it, you're fine."

"No, I'm...I'm really sorry. I'm just – I'm used to denying it."

There's a stabbing sensation in Duri's chest.

"Been there, kid."

"You have?"

The boy's eyes are wide as he stares at Duri.

Duri nods.

"Yeah."

"Oh."

Baekhyun hesitates. His voice is brittle when he talks again.

"I...my parents, they...they wouldn't approve. They say being gay is an abomination."

Duri swallows the anger that boils up at the unwanted reminder of the vile things Hosu's father used to say.

"Heard that one before."

"Yeah. They'd kill me if they knew about Siwoo."

"The boy on the train?"

Baekhyun nods, cheeks pink. Duri smiles softly.

"You two looked happy."

The pink turns to red, and Baekhyun squirms a little. Duri laughs.

"Please don't, Duri-nim. I'm – I'm not used to talking about this, it's embarrassing."

"Okay, okay, I'll stop. But one last thing."

Duri stops, turning to Baekhyun again.

"This is important, are you listening?"

Baekhyun turns to face him, eyes wide, nodding.

"Okay. Listen up. You need to know that it is *okay* to be gay. Or bi. Or pan, or whatever fits your vibe. It's *okay* to love who you love. There is nothing wrong with it, and you need to find a way to never let anyone tell you differently, okay?"

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The boy swallows hard, eyes shiny, and nods.

“Okay. I’m done embarrassing you now. Let’s walk.”

After a few steps, Duri stops again.

“Baekhyun-ssi?”

“Yeah?”

“I have no idea where we’re going. Lead the way?”

The boy laughs, and it’s a welcome sound even if it’s a little watery, a little broken.

He leads Duri the rest of the short walk to his street, and before Duri knows it, Baekhyun stops on a corner, looking fidgety and a little shy.

“This is me.”

Duri hums and reaches into his messenger bag, rummaging around until his fingers close on a thin rectangle. He pulls it out and holds it out to Baekhyun.

“So. If you ever need someone to talk to or need help or whatever. This is me. You can text me. I’ll help, okay?”

Baekhyun takes the business card with a look of awe on his face.

“Seriously?”

Duri nods.

“Yeah. Seriously.”

“Why?”

Duri looks away, smiles a little.

“Let’s just say you remind me of someone I used to know.”

Baekhyun smiles.

“Okay then. Thank you, Duri-nim. For everything.”

He bows formally, and Duri returns the bow, a little less deeply, with a smile.

“Don’t mention it, kid.”

Baekhyun smiles and waves then, before turning to walk up the street. Duri watches until the boy steps into a driveway, then turns to make his way home.

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The emotions from his encounter with Baekhyun and the bullies stick to Duri like a second skin. He can feel the indignation, that righteous anger, sitting heavily in his belly with nowhere to go, seething and demanding an outlet.

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Everywhere he looks, injustice screams at him. Social media, the news, the real world he walks, it's everywhere, in the comments people make, in the stories they tell, in the way they treat each other. Every other news item seems to be about some form of social injustice, a murder, a persecution, people hurting people, and the weight of it presses in on Duri more and more each day.

He cannot forget how it felt to make a stand against it, to put himself between a bully and his target and say *no more*, to finally *do something*, to *make a difference* to the way things are. It's a jubilant, exhilarating feeling.

The knowledge that because of him, Baekhyun was spared a worse fate that day, lifts him up, sprouts wings under his breastbone that flutter when it crosses his mind.

And there's more, too: the knowledge that he got to do for Baekhyun what he wishes someone with more authority than sixteen-year-old Duri had done for Hosu all those years ago; to tell him that it was *okay* to be him, that there was nothing *wrong* with him, and not to let anyone tell him differently. It felt so good, to be that voice in someone's life, to counter all the horrible, negative messaging raining down on the boy from everywhere else, even for just a few moments. He hopes it stuck, that his words found a way into Baekhyun's heart and made their home there, an antidote to the poison fed to him by the world around him.

He wants to be that for people, that antidote. He wants to scream acceptance from the rooftops, press it into the hearts of anyone who needs it, but especially kids like Baekhyun and Hosu, kids inundated with the message that they aren't enough because who they are is a sin.

The thought plays over and over in his mind, the thought that *this is his purpose*, that *he is the antidote*. It feels good, it feels *right*, and he treasures it, keeps it polished and shiny, but tucked away for now.

Because while now he knows the *what* and the *why*, the *how* is still a mystery to him.

He has no idea how to approach his newfound purpose, this vague sense of wanting to help kids navigate the kinds of challenges that Baekhyun faces. It seems too big, too overwhelming to contemplate, but Duri was never one to give up. He carries it around in his heart, waiting patiently for the pieces of the puzzle to fall into place and give him a clear picture, for the solution to present itself.

Duri has a new fire burning in the pit of his stomach, and he lets it light his way.

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Chapter 7

Gwangju, June 2013

Hosu's twenty fourth year is full of celebration, a collection of happy snapshot moments in bright technicolour, aqua skies and too-wide smiles a theme that etches itself onto his retinas.

His first anniversary with Iseul goes by amidst the sparkle of a late winter snow, the chill painting their cheeks pink and making their breath hang cloudy between them as they walk to their favourite restaurant.

It's a night that passes in a blur of smiles and wine, of laughter and twined fingers, of too much food and tangled legs between sheets of brushed cotton, warm against the winter cold. It's a pleasant night, and Hosu is content, if not wholly happy. There are gaps in his peace, fissures he cannot quite seem to find a way to fill, but life is good, it's settled.

Dawon's wedding to Heechul is meant to be the biggest celebration of them all, but for Hosu, it feels cracked and stained with the weight of the expectation cast at him. Attending it with Iseul beside him, the picture of the pretty daughter-in-law lodged firmly in his parents' imaginations since before Hosu was even born, Hosu's insides feel watery.

The smiles his parents level at him, the way they look proud when they introduce their son and *his future wife* to their nameless, faceless friends sits edgeways in his stomach, a little too sharp, a little too sour. The validation he longed for all his life is here, squatting in his hands, but it's crooked and hollow and the edges don't line up the way they should. It's conditional, the way it ought not to be, dependent on *this wife, this life, this job, this house*, and Hosu feels empty even as they smile with their shiny, shiny eyes.

And then there is the lead-trimmed expectation woven into every conversation, pressed onto his shoulders by unfamiliar fingers, by unknown entities with false teeth and false smiles. Dusty strangers and forgotten family members breathe congratulations at him, as if his sister's wedding has a bearing on Hosu, as if it were an achievement in his name. He learns to anticipate it, learns to hear the inevitable *and when will your wedding be* question before it slides insidiously across lips stretched in jealous, painted-on smiles.

Dawon's happiness offsets some of the irritation, but as the day wanes, there's a stoop that creeps into Hosu's shoulders, an ache that bows his spine, and Iseul eyes him across her wine glass, a worried slant to her mouth. She is his shield, intercepting the questions before they can make him stoop further, deflecting with the practiced skill of a politician, smooth and silky, managing to make Hosu look modern and magnanimous by insinuating he is indulging her request for a bit more time before they tie themselves down.

But the times when she is not by his side, when he is cornered alone, Hosu is left chewing his words, stumbling over them as they attach themselves to his tongue and his teeth and refuse to let go in the order he means them to let go in, stuttering out in hapless, uncoordinated piles.

By the time the wedding is over, Hosu is exhausted, bone-weary in a way he only ever is after spending time with his parents.

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Walking into their hotel room, Hosu sags against the inside of the door, lead in his bones and an odd mix of sadness and contentment swirling in his chest. Iseul steps in between his legs and wraps her arms around his waist, her awareness of his need for touch to bring him back to center an intrinsic part of their relationship now, something she meets in full without hesitation, generous as always with the things she knows Hosu depends upon.

He curves into it gratefully, arms slinging loosely around her back and eyes closing on a sigh as she tucks a soft *are you okay* under his chin with the top of her head.

"I'm glad it's over," he says, and she hums, acknowledging.

"Me too. If I never have to hear *when are you getting married* ever again, it'll be too soon."

Hosu huffs a laugh, but it's brittle, false. It hangs between them, this thing, the *expectation, getting married*, something Hosu isn't ready for, isn't sure he wants. They don't talk about it, haven't talked about it, and its presence is loud and obnoxious tonight.

"Stop thinking so loud, Su-ah."

She looks up at him when he doesn't reply, and his smile feels all wrong when he tries to paste it on. The way her brows draw together and the curious angle at which she cocks her head tell him she sees right through him.

"What?"

He shakes his head.

"It's just – I'm sorry about them. About all the pushing, and the questions. About you having to answer for me. We haven't even talked about it, you shouldn't have to answer to my nosy relatives about our relationship. I'm sorry I put you in that position, Iseul."

She shrugs, and it's light, airy.

"It's fine, you know I don't mind that stuff. It's much easier for me, I'm not the one they're putting pressure on. I have no issues shutting them down, you know that."

It lifts some of the weight, to hear her say it, to feel the lack of tension or annoyance in her body, to hear the feathery lightness in her voice, and Hosu breathes a little easier. But there's still a lingering question, and now that they're talking around it, so close to talking about it, he might as well be brave, lean in.

"Is it...is it what you want? With me? Marriage?"

Iseul shrugs again, relaxed, long hair heavy around her bony shoulders, untethered now in the aftermath of a day too stilted in its formality.

"One day, maybe. We have time. You're only twenty-three, we've only been together a year, it's too soon to think about that."

The rush of relief swallows the thick lump in his throat, stinging as it goes down.

"So...you're not, like, freaking out that I haven't asked you yet?"

Her arched eyebrow speaks a language all its own, loud in its disapproval.

"Freaking out? When have you ever known me to freak out about anything?"

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She smiles, a genuine swathe of softness that rushes in on him, lifting him, making things lighter, better, so easily. Her tip toes lift her up to him, and the kiss she presses to his nose is small, a little sticky with the remnants of her lip gloss.

“Come on, you dork, stop stressing and let’s go to bed, I’m tired.”

Shoes are discarded, careless and loud against the wooden floor, the echo jarring in the silent hallway. Hosu lets himself be dragged to their bedroom, fingers tangled and smile radiant, a quiet gratitude for Iseul’s strength, for the way she fills in his gaps and makes up for his shortcomings, settling softly between his ribs.

She makes things better with her unapologetic way of caring for him, of being who she is, of carving out her space in the world and allowing him to share it.

It’s a good life, and Hosu has a lot to be grateful for.

*

Seoul, September 2013

The experience with Baekhyun and his bullies follows Duri as the weeks crawl by. It plays in his mind daily, a swirling mess of memory and emotion, of questions and possibilities that refuse to resolve into answers or a concrete plan.

He tells Minjun the story, huffy sentences spilling out as soon as he walks in the door that same night, anger pushing everything out in a loud, incongruent mess. He keeps the piece about *purpose* locked up tight, unsure of its value just yet, of where it will fit in the grand scheme of his life. But the outrage, the relief, the frustration, that he lets out, and Minjun catches it all, bounces it back in his signature calm, reflective hues.

He chews on the question of *purpose*, of the *how*, day after day, turning it over in his mind, worrying at it until it blurs around the edges, the answer no closer.

It’s a phone call late on a Tuesday night that changes everything.

Duri and Minjun are on the couch, wrapped in slouchy hoodies and sweats, Minjun with a book and Duri with his laptop balanced on his drawn-up legs, when Duri’s phone rings. The number is unknown, and Duri grimaces at the display, considers letting it go to voicemail. But there’s a twist in his gut that tells him to answer it, to ignore his anxiety at his personal time being invaded by a stranger, that this is important.

A nervous buzz hums under his skin as he answers the call.

“Hello?”

There are soft sounds at the other end of the line, sniffing, shuffling maybe, before a small, broken voice comes back at him.

“Duri-nim?”

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It's stuttering, uncertain, and Duri frowns.

"Yes? Who is this?"

"Y-Duri-nim, I'm, I'm sorry to call you, I know it's late a-and you barely know me but I – I didn't know who else to call and y-you said it was okay, you said I could talk to you. I'm – I'm sorry, I'll..."

The pieces drop into place; the small, broken voice, the faint familiarity in the slant of the syllables. Duri pushes his laptop onto the couch and stands, body taut as a bow spring. From the corner of his eye, he sees Minjun sit up, watching intently.

"Baekhyun-ssi? Is that you?"

"Y-yes, oh thank god, you remember, I'm so sorry, I just, I just didn't know who else to call..."

"Shh, it's okay, I'm glad you called. Can you tell me what's wrong? Do you need help?"

The sniffing intensifies, and Baekhyun's voice is wet and watery when he speaks again.

"I – maybe? I don't know what to do, my dad – my parents threw me out and I don't know where to go."

Duri's feet are moving before he has time to think about it, adrenaline kicking in and pulling him across the living room to the hallway, *movemovemove*.

"Where are you? Are you hurt?"

"I – um, yes, but it's not, it's not bad, I'll be okay. I'm – I'm near the shops where we bought hot chocolate, but everything is closed."

"Okay, stay there, I'm coming, okay? I'm coming, and I'll help you, alright? Promise me you'll wait there?"

"O-okay, I promise, Duri-nim. I'll wait by the coffee c-cart."

"Hyung, Baek-ah. Call me hyung. I want you to stay on the line with me, don't go, okay? I'll be right back."

He turns to see Minjun by the hallway door, eyes wide and worried, hands out with fingers poised *just so*, ready to help even before knowing what's needed.

"It's the boy from last month, Jun-ah, he's in trouble. I'm going to go get him, I'll bring him here if I can convince him to come, will you get some blankets and stuff ready, just in case?"

Minjun nods, earnest.

"Yeah hyung. Go and take care of him, I'll wait up."

Duri slips his feet into a pair of threadbare loafers and hurries out the door, phone to his ear, heart racing at the back of his throat.

"Baek-ah, are you there?"

"Y-yeah, Duri-nim, I mean, sorry, hyung, I'm here."

"Good boy, hyung is on his way, okay? Are you safe where you are?"

"I think so."

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Duri speed walks down the street, sparsely lit by streetlights, beacons in a starless night. It's quiet; his watch tells him it's ten fifteen, and the thought of Baekhyun standing alone in the dark by the closed coffee cart makes his skin itch with worry. It pushes his feet into a loping jog, breathless chatter flowing constantly in an effort to distract the boy from his situation.

He reaches the coffee cart in only six minutes, throat dry and chest heaving with the exertion.

"I see you," he tells the boy on the phone when he comes into view, "turn around."

He does, wide eyes glinting with the reflection of a nearby streetlight, and Duri waves, jogging a little faster until he's standing in front of Baekhyun.

Duri's heart plummets into his stomach when he sees the boy's face. His lip is split, the torn skin already crusted over, dried blood caked on his chin in an ominous swathe. Baekhyun shifts a little, and the light catches swelling on his left cheek and eye, the skin violet and puffy around the socket.

Duri grits his teeth at the sight, and an ache blooms behind his temples.

"What the hell? What happened?"

Baekhyun grimaces, fingers reflexively darting up to touch the side of his face, body curling in on himself in a way that speaks of shame, and the ache in Duri's head worsens.

"I – it's okay, hyung, really."

"Don't give me that, there's nothing okay about what I'm seeing. Tell hyung what happened?"

The boy shrugs, embarrassment heavy on his frame, and Duri has a hunch, one that leaves a sick feeling under his solar plexus.

"Baekhyun...did your dad do this to you?"

That same mute shrug again. Duri takes in the boy's small, shrunken posture and sucks in a deep breath, forces himself to calm. The boy is lost and afraid, and if Duri is reading him right, more than a little ashamed; scaring him will only make him push Duri away and end up alone.

"Hyung's sorry, kiddo, I'm not mad, okay? I just don't like to see you hurt, is all. Can I – can I have a look at your face? Just to see if we need to treat it?"

The boy nods wordlessly, and Duri reaches up his right hand, keeping the movement slow and steady. He pauses just shy of the boy's face, waiting for permission to touch.

The boy gives it wordlessly with a tentative tilt of his head towards Duri's poised fingers.

Duri touches, then, a gentle brush of fingertips against swollen, discoloured flesh, turning the boy's face so the light hits the injured side more fully. They both wince at the movement, and Duri bites back angry words at the sight of the injury and forces himself to look without judgement.

"Your eye looks okay, Baek-ah, just swollen. The skin isn't broken. Your lip is split, but it's not a big split, it'll heal on its own, I think."

He probes around the boy's eye socket with careful fingers. The boy winces, but the pain doesn't seem too bad, not intense enough to suspect a break.

"I think you'll be okay, but we'll keep an eye on it, alright?"

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The boy nods, eyes shiny in the lamp light. Duri drops his hand to Baekhyun's shoulder and gives it a sympathetic squeeze.

"Are you hurt anywhere else?"

Baekhyun shakes his head, eyes down, and his lip is trembling. Duri's chest feels tight, and there's a buzzing at the back of his throat. He forces his voice to stay level, projects calm.

"Okay then. Let's sit for a minute, let hyung catch his breath."

They sit, side by side on the hard wooden slats of a nearby bench, and Duri lets the quiet hang around them for a little while, gives Baekhyun a minute to gather his threads together and find his feet.

"Hyung?"

The voice is so small, so tentative, and Duri's heart hurts. He hums, eyes straight ahead.

"Thank you for coming, I...I know you hardly know me, I just didn't know who else to call."

"It's okay, Baek-ah, I told you, I'm glad you called. I mean it. You can always call me; I'll look out for you."

He feels, more than he sees, the boy's nod.

"Do you have somewhere to stay tonight?"

The boy is silent, and Duri risks a glance, to find him staring down at his fingers with dark, damp lashes. The boy's head shake is small, almost invisible.

Duri sniffs, looking away, keeping a tight lid on the anger boiling away in his belly. It's an effort to keep his voice level.

"Okay then. You can come sleep on hyung's couch, okay? Would that be alright?"

The silence beside him draws Duri's eye again, and he finds the boy staring up at him, his good eye wide and blood-stained jaw slack.

"Are – are you sure? Hyung, are you sure? You don't even know me!"

Duri shrugs.

"I'm a good judge of character. And I'm not going to leave you out on the street. So, if it's okay with you, you can have my couch for as long as you need it, til we figure something out. Okay?"

The boy's nod is frantic, his eyes teary.

"O-okay, yes please, hyung, thank you, thank you so much!"

Duri stands, then, holding out his hand for Baekhyun's bag.

"Come on then, let's go. Hyung'll carry your pack."

Baekhyun hands it over, grumbling a little that he's *perfectly capable* but not daring to go against his new hyung's explicit order. Duri looks away to hide a smile.

He sends Minjun a quick heads up to let him know they're on their way, then pockets his phone for the walk home.

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Baekhyun is quiet at first, and Duri is content to give him his space. When the boy speaks, the sudden shift is a little startling.

“Someone outed me to my parents.”

Duri looks up sharply.

“What?”

The boy hums. He’s staring down at his shoes as he walks, scuffs them onto the pavement in odd, deliberate movements that announce his nerves louder than any words ever could. His hands are deep in his pockets and his shoulders are hunched in that same, aching familiar posture from the day they first met.

“Yeah. I was at the park with Siwoo the other day. We weren’t even doing anything, just...he was upset, you know? I just wanted to make him feel better. So I held his hand, and he had his head on my shoulder. And when he cried, I held him, and I kissed his cheek. And I guess – I guess someone saw.”

Duri stays quiet, giving Baekhyun the space to share what he needs to, what he feels safe to. The boy sniffs, kicking at a stone on the path.

“I got home after school today and they were waiting for me. Appa was so mad, he...he just started yelling. I denied it at first, but he wouldn’t listen, had his mind all made up. So, I got angry. I figured, he’s already decided, he’s mad anyway, what’s the point in denying it anymore? So I told him it was true, that I love Siwoo and we’re together.”

He draws a shaky breath, lifts watery eyes to stare down the street as they walk.

“It’s funny, you know? I thought it would feel good, to finally tell them the truth, to stop hiding. I think part of me still hoped that maybe they’d just be mad about me lying to them, but that they’d accept me being gay, that they’d love me enough for that to not matter.”

He laughs, the sound of it hollow and bitter.

“So stupid. He just kept yelling at me, told me no son of his was going to be a – you know. I told him I couldn’t help it, that it’s who I am. Asked him why he couldn’t just be happy for me. He hit me and told me to get out, that I was dead to him.”

His voice cracks on a sob, and Duri’s heart cracks right along with it.

It’s quiet for a long time before Baekhyun finds his voice again. Duri doesn’t touch him, just walks beside him, holding space, allowing the boy the room to compose himself. The anger boiling in his chest is loud and viscous, but he keeps a lid on it, pushes it down, denies it an outlet because *this is not the time*.

“I just grabbed my school bag and left. Wandered around for ages. I called Siwoo, but he’s in Daegu visiting family, he won’t be back for a week. I was going to walk to the bridge and sleep there but then I started looking through my pack for some food and I found your card. And you said...you said to call if, if I needed anything, so I thought...”

“You thought right, Baek-ah. You did good, calling hyung.”

The boy makes eye contact for the first time in a long time, and Duri offers him a soft smile.

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"Let's get you off the street and get some food into you, then we'll sleep. We can figure out the rest tomorrow."

Later, when the boy is asleep on Minjun and Duri's couch in some borrowed clothes with a belly full of hot chocolate and leftover jjigae, after Duri has treated his injured face with balm and sat in the armchair beside the couch pretending to read until the boy drifted off to sleep, Duri finds himself sitting on the edge of Minjun's bed, exhaustion seeping right down deep into his bones.

"Bloody hell, poor kid."

Minjun hums agreeably. He's sitting up in bed, a novel perched on his lap, one long index finger tucked between the pages to mark his place.

"Yeah. Shitty thing to have happened. He's so young, too."

"I want to help him, Jun-ah, but I don't know how? I told him he can stay on the couch as long as he needs, and I meant it, but it's not right for him, not in the long run. He needs to go to school, finish his education, he needs normality, stability, not bunking on a stranger's couch."

Minjun nods. His glasses are crooked on his nose, and Duri resists the urge to reach across to straighten them. He sighs and lets himself fall back onto the bed instead.

"Does he have other family? Aunts, uncles? Anyone more sympathetic to him who might be willing to take him in?"

Duri blinks up at the ceiling.

"I don't know. I'll ask him, maybe there is someone. We can help him reach out. And if there's no family, maybe he has friends he can stay with."

The angry, bitter thing in the depths of his belly flares at the unfairness of the boy's predicament, and he grinds his teeth. Minjun cocks his head in that peculiar, questioning way of his.

"What, hyung?"

Duri shakes his head.

"It's so unfair, you know? He doesn't deserve this, he's just a kid. It makes me so angry, I just...this stuff happens all the time to kids like him. And it's happening to them because they're like me! It's so messed up and it makes me so angry and I just, I want to help, and I just don't know how! I need to *do something*; I can't take watching them just be thrown away because they're *queer*!"

His eyes sting, and he wipes at them viciously, only for his hand to come away wet. He huffs out a furious breath and balls his hands into fists, digging the nails into his skin.

"So let's do something then, hyung. Let's figure it out and help."

"*How*, Jun-ah? I've been wracking my brain for weeks and I can't figure out what I can do?"

Minjun hums. He straightens up, clearly warming to the topic, brightening.

"Well...let's look at Baekhyun. When this happened tonight, what was the first thing he needed?"

Duri thinks back.

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“Someone safe to talk to. Someplace safe to go.”

“Yeah! Exactly. So, what if we could figure out how to be that *someone safe*, that *somewhere safe*, but on a bigger scale? For more kids?”

“You mean – like a safe house?”

“Yes! Like a safe house, a refuge for queer kids who need somewhere to go or someone to talk to. It could be a place they can come for advice and support, like a drop-in centre, but also have dorm rooms, somewhere to sleep for kids with nowhere to go. Like Baekhyun.”

Duri sits bolt upright.

“Oh my god. Oh my god, that’s genius. And we could have classes. Sex education that’s inclusive. Self-defense classes. And – and maybe other things, other subjects, for kids who have to leave school because they can’t afford to finish?”

“Yes! If we can get sponsors, we might even be able to have scholarships for kids to finish their education!”

“We could have a directory of queer-friendly businesses for kids to go to, so they feel safe!”

The ideas are sparking, some wild and extreme, others foundational and important, and every one fuels the fire in Duri’s veins. He feels giddy and overwhelmed in the best way, excited and suddenly full of plans.

They talk until neither can keep their eyes open, until every third word is interrupted by a yawn.

When Duri crawls into his own bed that night, it’s with a buzz under his skin and a wide grin stretching his cheeks. He feels like a puzzle piece has just slipped into place, like something *important* has clicked in his brain and his heart, and his head is full of excited chatter.

Sleep is slow to come, that night.

When it finally finds him, his dreams are wild and chaotic.

*

Baekhyun’s stay with Duri and Minjun lasts three weeks.

Initially, he’s quiet and withdrawn, steeping in the knowledge that his parents have rejected him, the shock of it still close under the skin, stinging when his thoughts skitter on a tangent to the family he left behind. Gradually, he opens up, talking about things with Minjun and Duri, allowing them into his inner world, his worries, his fears.

They offer hope where they can, hope and reassurance, a quiet ear and a total absence of judgement, and it fills Baekhyun up, little by little, until his spine straightens and his smile returns.

He loses his nervousness around his new hyungs, showing them more and more of his playful side as the tension and shock of what he’s been through starts to fade. He fills the air around the flat with giggles and laughter, and the sound of his voice becomes a part of the soundtrack they live by,

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blending with the noises drifting up to their fourth-floor apartment from the city streets, familiar like he's always been there.

Baekhyun when he's not moping is cheeky and mischievous, a sparkly-eyed source of tinkling laughter and endless jokes, but he's never disrespectful. He's eager to please and helpful around the flat, always looking for ways to show his gratitude to his hyungs in small acts of kindness, cups of tea brewed unasked-for, loads of washing done and folded quietly and in the background.

When he thinks no one is listening, he sings to himself, and it's a homey, lovely sound that blends with the apartment's ever-growing soundtrack in a way that's soothing.

Minjun helps the boy with his homework, making sure he doesn't get too far behind, and Duri teaches him to cook japchae, jjajangmyeon and kimchi jjigae. The boy is a quick learner, and by the second week Duri lets him take the lead on dinner while Duri supervises.

It's nice, this new addition to their flat, the extra presence, even if it's cramped and their budget has taken a hit feeding the extra person and springing for a few sets of clothes for Baekhyun to wear. They meet Siwoo as well, once he returns from Daegu, shocked and horrified at all that's happened, tearful with apologies for not being there when Baekhyun needed help.

The flat is crowded with three. The boy sleeps on a borrowed mattress in the corner of the living room now, and his clean clothes are stashed in a drawer in Duri's room, hastily freed up by Duri stuffing the contents in plastic bags in his small closet. There's little privacy for anyone, and it's not ideal in the long term, even if it's nice having the boy around for now.

Baekhyun has few relatives he knows well enough to feel comfortable with, and most he writes off as an option to call for help on the basis of their being close with his parents, afraid word will have travelled, or will travel, and he'll find himself kicked out of yet another home, unwanted and rejected.

In the end, a call to an aunt he hasn't seen in years provides the boy with the solution he needs, the permanent home he craves.

He tells Duri she used to be his favourite aunt when he was little, how he has fond memories of weekends at her house and crying when it was time to go home. He remembers birthday parties where she baked his cake and played games with him, outings to the park and days spent in her garden or her kitchen. Years of memories, until three years ago, when seemingly out of nowhere, his aunt became *persona non grata* and Baekhyun was forbidden from contacting her or even speaking her name.

He's never understood why she was suddenly taken from his life and has never stopped missing her.

It's not difficult to find her once Baekhyun thinks of her as a possibility. Her number is listed, and the boy programs it into his phone nervously, staring at the digits for a long time before daring to dial them.

The fear his aunt won't want to speak to him or that she will side with his parents makes the boy's hands shake, and Duri sits beside him as he stammers through the brief conversation, trying to lend the boy a little of his strength through nods and looks and the occasional pat to the shoulder.

Baekhyun talks to his aunt in halting tones, afraid to give away too much. He keeps silent about the reasons behind his parents' rejection of him, afraid to be pushed away again, cheeks pink as he stammers his way through a true but incomplete retelling of what happened. His aunt doesn't probe

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deeply, doesn't push for more details, accepting his explanation that he fought with his parents, and they kicked him out, disowning him and forcing him to sleep on a friend's couch for the past three weeks.

The woman's instant reaction is a sharp but contained sort of anger, and her offer to have Baekhyun move in with her is easy and immediate. Duri watches as Baekhyun tears up, stammering his way through brittle, watery thank yous with eyes brimful of hope.

The woman asks to speak to Duri, then, and there is relief on the boy's face when he hands over his phone. Duri stands and walks to the kitchen, putting a careful distance between him and the boy, creates the barest amount of privacy in case she asks him questions about her nephew.

"Hello?"

"Duri-ssi. Thank you for helping my nephew, my family owes you a debt."

Her tone is brisk and practical, but kind, with a soothing warmth behind it. Duri feels a little uncomfortable at her gratitude, uncertain of what to do with it, and he shrugs before remembering she can't see him.

"Not at all, Haewon-ssi. The boy didn't deserve his treatment, I was just rectifying an unjust situation."

The woman sighs, the sound oddly thin in his ears.

"Indeed. My brother always was shortsighted. I take it this is about the boy's sexuality?"

Duri splutters, taken aback.

"I – um...I don't...you know?"

She chuckles softly, unperturbed, the sound devoid of judgement.

"I always knew, Duri-ssi. It's part of why I've always tried to keep a close eye on him, to look after him. He and I are alike, if you catch my meaning."

It's said so easily, and a careful sense of relief swells in Duri's chest.

"I see."

"Hm. It's why my brother no longer speaks to me. I'm telling you so you'll know the boy is safe with me, he won't get rejected again. I will make sure he's okay, he'll have a home and a family with me, and he'll finish school. You needn't worry."

Duri smiles as a small knot loosens in his chest.

"Thank you, Haewon-ssi, that is very, very good to hear."

"Shall I come and collect him this afternoon then? I can be there around four."

"That would be great, thank you. I'll send you the address."

They say goodbye, Duri smiling widely as he hangs up, relief soft and fluttery inside his ribcage.

Baekhyun looks up from his perch on the couch when Duri walks back into the room. He looks nervous, hands still tugging at the frayed edges of the jumper.

Seeing Duri's smile, the boy seems to settle a little, fingers loosening on the fabric.

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“Everything okay, hyung?”

Duri nods as he makes his way across to the couch and sits, toes buried in the fluffy white fibres of the soft area rug. The boy pulls his legs in, tucking his feet in close on top of the couch, making himself small.

“Everything’s fine, Baek-ah. She’ll come and get you this afternoon and you’ll go stay with her.”

“Oh. O-okay.”

The boy looks unsettled, eyes cast resolutely down.

“Hey. What’s wrong, kiddo? I thought you liked your aunt?”

The boy nods vigorously, but the tension is loud in his posture.

“I do, hyung, it’s just...what if she doesn’t like me anymore?”

Duri frowns.

“Why wouldn’t she like you anymore?”

The boy shrugs, bony shoulders protruding through the old jumper’s loose stitches.

“You know...”

The penny drops, and Duri sighs.

“Ah. You don’t need to worry about that, kiddo, I promise.”

“How do you know, hyung?”

“Just trust me, okay? It’ll be fine. You can tell her the truth and she won’t reject you, I know it. And no matter what, you can always call hyung, okay? If for any reason it doesn’t work out, or you need to talk, or you just want to say hi, you can always call me. I’ll be here.”

The look Baekhyun gives him is raw and hopeful.

“For real? You mean it?”

Duri smiles and reaches out, ruffles the boy’s hair.

“Yeah, kiddo. I mean it.”

Between one breath and the next, Duri has a bony teenager clinging to him, skinny arms wrapped around his torso and face buried into his shoulder. He chuckles, awkwardly patting the boy’s back.

“Thank you, hyung. For – for everything. Thank you so much.”

“It’s alright. Come on, stop crushing hyung. Let’s go make lunch.”

Predictably, the boy jumps up at the mention of food, eyes still watery but smile stretching wide.

“Can we make japchae again? Please, hyung?”

Duri rolls his eyes but grins wide, eyes scrunching fondly.

“Sure kiddo, we’ll make japchae again. What’s that, the fourth time this week?”

The boy’s grin stretches impossibly wider.

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“It’s not my fault you make the best japchae ever, hyung!”

“Yeah, yeah, flattery will get you everywhere. Come on, get me the noodles.”

And as they busy themselves cooking lunch, the boy darting here and there around the kitchen as Duri has him fetch things, prattling happily, Duri thinks to himself it’ll be awfully quiet once he goes.

*

Gwangju, February 2014

Hosu doesn’t hate his job.

It isn’t what he wanted, it isn’t what he would have chosen if he’d felt free to follow the urging in his bones, the pull in his chest. It’s not his passion, it’s not life, it’s not exhilaration.

It’s not dance.

But it pays the bills, and he’s good at it.

Since leaving uni, wearing the skin of the dutiful son, Hosu has worked hard, eking out a spot for himself in the insurance company that hired him with the ink still drying on his degree. It was client services, at first; phone-based support that saw him spend his days helping people navigate the claims system.

It didn’t take long for him to settle in and feel comfortable in his role, for the self-doubt to clear. He’s not the shy kid he used to be while living under his father’s thumb; Hosu at twenty-three has had several years of living away from home, of growing into himself, of excelling at dance, years of attention for his looks and his skills and years of unconditional, loving support from his friends and his girlfriend.

Hosu at twenty-four has blossomed and grown.

Out on his own two feet, Hosu is more outgoing, more lively, more exuberant; his sparkle leeches into his aura now, catching the light when the sun hits just right.

His growing confidence has seen him working his way up at work quickly. Within a few months of starting on phone-based support, his personality and positive attitude saw him handpicked to be trained for an in-person sales role. Months later, he’s one of the youngest sales reps at the Gwangju branch, and his sales figures are some of the highest nationwide. The standing joke around the office is that Hosu could sell sawdust to a lumber mill, and as much as he rolls his eyes and feels his ears going pink anytime the joke comes up, it sends a pleasurable sort of chill down his spine to *know*, to *really know* without a shadow of a doubt that this is something he is *good* at.

On his best days, he feels light and yet entirely solid, like his bones are made from something stronger than they were before and the weight of his world has lessened its inexorable press on his shoulders.

The doubts are still there, of course, in his quiet, dark moments, the times when he’s alone with nothing but his own insecurities for company. Mostly, those insecurities centre in the same place

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they always have: his parents' view of him, his value as a Real Man, and everything he still keeps locked up in a battered, cracked and bruised box in his chest that holds all of the things he cannot let himself look at too closely.

Knowing that Iseul has his back helps. She makes him laugh and listens to his vents about his parents and his work problems, she reassures and gives him solid advice with an uncanny instinct for knowing exactly how to handle any situation. He often thinks her talents are wasted in engineering, working with figures and facts rather than people, but she loves what she does, so perhaps she's in the right place after all.

Memories of Duri will still pop into his mind at the most inopportune moments, in bed late at night with Iseul's hands on him, with her skin against his own, her sweet and salty taste on his tongue. Hosu will close his eyes and Duri will be there, waiting, body slick and hard and wanting, voice deep and breathless, taste and scent and feel so different than Iseul's, and Hosu's body will come alive to the memory, will flood with sensation to hurtle him over the edge.

He's come to accept it, has rationalised it to himself as just a response to physical stimulus, an unavoidable association, has shut his doubts about it away in the ramshackle box under his sternum, shut away the deep well of emotion that threatens to overwhelm him when the memories intrude.

He tries not to dwell on the way Duri's touch turned his insides to lava in a way Iseul's never has, or the way he *wanted* Duri constantly, in every way, in ways he has never wanted Iseul. The fact that he *does* love Iseul, does adore her in so many ways, has his threads all tangled up, a mess of haywire feelings in his chest, expectations and memories of Duri and genuine care for Iseul all swirled together into something overwhelming and chaotic.

He doesn't dwell on it, keeps pushing it down as far as it will go, holds on tight to the parts of being with Iseul that feel *right*, the parts that feel *comfortable*, and ignores everything else for fear of rocking the boat.

It works, for the most part.

There are times when it stops working, times Hosu comes to think of as rips in his tapestry, things he needs to repair before moving on.

Each of those rips centres on someone who threatens to break open the box under his sternum and shatter Hosu's carefully built-up persona.

Park Bonhwa is the first such rip.

He's a temp, brought in to be a sales assistant in Hosu's department for a few months over the company's busy season, and it falls to Hosu to train him.

At barely twenty-three, he's a year younger than Hosu and achingly pretty. He bows deeply and smiles widely at Hosu when they're introduced, eyes creasing and cheeks bunching with the force of it. He's a little shorter than Hosu, but broader in the shoulders, and his hair is a little too long, falling into his eyes as he sits bent over Hosu's desk. He sits a little too close and laughs a little too breathlessly while they're going over the training manual, and Hosu's stomach feels a little wobbly as he stares at Bonhwa's face, at his perfect skin that's still tanned a golden brown even with summer well behind them, skin that carries a gentle sprinkling of freckles across the nose.

Bonhwa laughs easily, his slightly chubby cheeks squishing his eyes into crescents, and Hosu is smitten.

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It sinks into his stomach and swishes around heavily. It's a swoony feeling that makes his limbs feel tingly and keeps a perpetual smile on his face as he casts sideways glances at the boy beside him. It's so nice, such a divine, light feeling, so unfamiliar that it doesn't register at all at first that this is probably something he shouldn't be feeling outside of his relationship with Iseul. It's completely unlike how he feels about Iseul, a giggly, breathy, fluttering feeling compared to a steady, even warmth, so *other* that he doesn't process the two as related at all, at first.

It's not until Iseul asks him, later that night, how his day was, not until he tells her about training the new temp, that it registers. It's the moment he goes to answer Iseul and Bonhwa's pretty smile pops into his mind, the moment butterflies appear and flutter delicately under his sternum, that a warning flare goes off in the back of Hosu's mind.

It keeps him awake that night, and many nights following. Bonhwa is a persistent presence in his mind, competing for attention while he talks to Iseul, intruding sometimes when they're tangled together in the sheets, though Hosu pushes the image away. His mind catching on memories of Duri is something he can rationalise as muscle memory, as something natural, but to have it stray to Bonhwa's hands, his straight teeth and broad shoulders, that feels taboo. Bonhwa came *after* Iseul, while Duri came *before*, and in Hosu's mind, that means thoughts of Bonhwa are off limits.

The images keep coming, though. Bonhwa's hands, his laugh, the curve of his neck and shoulders, the way he smells, his voice, his mouth. Day after day, Hosu sits through training the younger man with sweaty palms and a racing heart, day after day he lives with a mix of guilt and exhilaration deep inside his chest.

Bonhwa flirts with him a little, Hosu thinks, and it makes his breath catch in his throat and the back of his neck flush hot. It's gentle smiles, at first, looks filtered through long lashes. Then it's touches, inconsequential ones easily passed off as accidental. A brush of fingers against his hand on the desk in passing, a press of thigh against thigh as they sit together.

Hosu aches. This is all new, and it's not allowed, it's out of bounds for him in more ways than one. He cannot touch because he's Iseul's, and he cannot touch because *boys don't – or do they?*

Guilt and loyalty to Iseul win out. He doesn't act on his fledgling crush, keeps it locked up in his chest, a delicious secret no one knows about, something he can enjoy as long as he doesn't *do anything*, doesn't touch, doesn't act. He keeps his hands to himself, limits himself to looks and smiles and flutters under his sternum.

Eventually, Bonhwa finishes his temporary assignment with the company and moves on to another company. He squeezes Hosu's hand as he says goodbye, thanks him for all his support, and leaves with a smile that seems wistful.

It fades in time, burns out as fires do, without Bonhwa there to fan the flames and make his pulse race. As Hosu's workday returns to its steady, even-keeled norm, as the intoxicating presence of the boy vanishes from his life, his crush bleeds out, suffocates.

Hosu feels a strange mix of sadness and relief, missing the exhilarating feeling of butterflies, the excitement his crush brought, but mixed in with it, a rush of gratitude for getting through it unscathed, morals intact, to feel the guilt lift off his shoulders.

As he leaves it behind, the wild attraction, he feels a relieved sense of satisfaction that he was right, that it was normal and harmless, that it's *okay* to have a passing, superficial crush on someone other

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than his partner, provided he doesn't act on it. He can enjoy the butterflies without hurting Iseul, without compromising his relationship, as long as he keeps his distance and stays faithful.

The second time it happens, it's months after Bonhwa's leaving, and it's the barista at his favourite café. Beomseok is young, too, maybe twenty-two, a post graduate student, so Hosu learns, working his way through med school. He's unbearably sexy, with his trim form and tattoos trailing stories across his forearms. His smile lights up the room and he makes Hosu feel like the only person in the world whenever they talk; Hosu is infatuated and distraught.

He has craved the feeling, has missed the butterflies, and comes to the café time and time again to stare covertly at the man behind the counter, to admire the way he moves, the timbre of his voice, his slightly crooked smile. He always stops at Hosu's table for a chat, always a little flirty, and Hosu's heart can't handle it, stuttering his way through nervous, inconsequential words.

The guilt is there, always, but as before, he doesn't act on his feelings, rationalises them away.

One day the barista is gone without warning and a new one is in his place, and Hosu is both disappointed and relieved to be spared more pining.

Like the first time, the feelings die out over time, without the object of his affections there to fuel the flames, and life flows back into calmer waters.

The barista is the catalyst that makes Hosu finally examine himself more closely. The existence of these crushes and the fact that they are exclusively on men is confusing to him. Without his father's constant presence to reinforce the *boys don't* message, the box in his chest is falling apart little by little. Watching Jiyeong and Seongmin's love deepen and grow over the years, seeing them go from strength to strength, has slowly chipped away at his fear of there being something inherently *wrong* with a love between *boys*.

His own crushes slowly but surely start to build a new, tentative, translucent sense of his own identity, constructed partly from the Hosu he thought he was and partly from things he's kept locked away inside his chest.

There is still resistance, apprehension. He talks to no one about his feelings, about his fear, too afraid of judgement, too afraid to admit to feelings, however fleeting, for people who aren't Iseul, people who aren't girls, people who are men. But inside himself, a wavering, hesitant picture of a Hosu who doesn't just *like girls* starts to form, a Hosu who might *like boys* a little, a Hosu who *maybe likes both*, a Hosu who maybe doesn't fit the picture his father built of what's *right*.

It's scary, uncomfortable, but not as scary or uncomfortable as it used to be, despite the guilt, despite Iseul, despite his father. He never crosses any lines, never touches anyone but Iseul in a sexual way, never acts on his crushes, just waits for them to fade out over time, trusts that they will, and they do, eventually.

Hosu is twenty-four, has a thriving career, a loving girlfriend.

Hosu is twenty-four, and he might be *bi*.

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Seoul, Winter 2014

Duri is right: the apartment *is* awfully quiet once Baekhyun goes.

It's strange, the lack of singing around the house, the tidy living room, the backpack missing from the little hallway. It's oddly empty, at first.

But the emptiness is helpful, too, in its own way. It frequently reminds Duri of Baekhyun, and those reminders push him to start digging into the idea of the safehouse. It sits at his very core, bright like a beacon, pulsing with his need to make it happen.

He and Minjun talk and plan late into the night, week after week. Both steal work and study time to find out about permits and costs, working out all the many details that need to be organised.

Duri tracks everything in a spreadsheet, every idea, every cost estimate, every supplier, dreams turning to plans between straight, orderly lines.

They drag Bora and Sunyoung into their plan, both girls eager to make the idea a reality, and before long, their entire friend group is spending weekends looking at possible locations for the safehouse.

As the plan starts to take shape and the cost estimates start to come in, reality comes crashing in.

The cost of a project this big is simply astronomical, and Duri doesn't know how they'll ever be able to make it happen. His own savings barely top ₩5 million, which won't even stretch to installing a very basic kitchen or bathroom, let alone outfitting an entire centre.

Without capital, Duri's dream is a castle in the air, gossamer and unreachable. Weeks trickle into months as they talk and plan and dream, the new year dawns with their goal no closer. Winter gets its teeth, then begins to lose them as spring sweeps in to breathe a soft green glow onto trees and a gentle warmth into the breeze.

"We need an investor," Duri tells Minjun over dinner one day.

Minjun nods, swallowing his mouthful of kimchi fried rice before answering.

"We do. Got someone in mind?"

Duri shakes his head.

"No. Not yet. But I'll find someone. I'm not going to a little thing like money stop me from making this happen, Jun-ah."

Minjun nods, dimples deepening at the way Duri punctuates his words with his chopsticks in mid-air.

"Glad to hear it, hyung."

"Know anyone who knows how to put together a solid business plan?"

Minjun nods, head bobbing enthusiastically and grains of rice flying from his chopsticks.

"Damn straight I do! You remember Han Minwoo? He came and had drinks with us a couple of times?"

Seeing Duri nod, Minjun continues.

"He's a professor in the Business Studies department. He'll help us out, he's a good guy."

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Minwoo is easily persuaded to lend a hand, happy to show Minjun how to turn their detailed spreadsheet into a convincing business proposal to take to potential investors.

Once it's finished, the meetings begin. Together with Minjun, Duri pitches their idea to bank after bank, earning rejection after rejection laced with varying degrees of visible disgust. It sets Duri's teeth on edge, having to bite his tongue in front of these people with their suits and their sour disapproval, these middle-aged men and the odd token woman.

The ninth rejection is the one that hurts the most. It's the last major bank and leaves them with only smaller organisations as their option, the loan shark type that charge astronomical amounts of interest and leave debtors with no way to ever repay the principal.

The woman who stamps their application *declined* does so with a sour pucker to her mouth and a line between her brows that seems permanent. Duri takes the paperwork she holds out to him with a bow that's edged in bitterness, pushing an ingenuine *thank you* through his teeth as he stands.

He is seething as he leaves the office, the bitter taste of bile burning at the back of his throat. He doesn't bother calling Minjun to give him the news, just fires off a quick *no luck* text before pocketing his phone. He feels angry and mopey, downhearted about the fact that his entire future, and the future of so many kids, is hanging by a thread, dependent on money, on convincing someone who has a lot of it that a bunch of queer kids is a fantastic way to spend it.

In a country where being queer is still taboo, it feels hopeless, and the thought of it makes Duri grind his teeth and kick at the pavement. It's a frustrating kind of limbo, and it stains Duri's mood with a despondent kind of grey.

Four days pass. Everything smells like rain and misery to Duri, as he chafes against the situation he finds himself in. The anger bites, it sits in the back of his throat and nips at his words as they make their way onto his tongue, twisting them into staccato syllables that make him snap at everyone around him.

On the fifth day, Duri's personal phone rings while he sits at his desk at work. He frowns at the unexpected interruption, suppressing the flash of annoyance he feels as he answers it.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Im Duri-ssi?"

The voice is crisp, formal, a woman. Duri's annoyance fades into surprise.

"Yes, this is he. Who's calling?"

"Im Duri-ssi, this is Yeo Jiwoo calling from Jung Corporation. I'm Jung Juwon-ssi's personal assistant. I've been asked to request a formal meeting with you and your business partner, So Minjun-ssi, for the purpose of discussing a partnership regarding your proposed business venture."

Duri blinks and stares at his phone.

"I'm sorry, could you – could you repeat that, please?"

"Certainly, sir. Jung Juwon-ssi would like to meet with you and your business partner to discuss a possible arrangement between Jung Corporation and yourselves, with regards to your proposed rainbow centre for youth. Are you amenable to meeting with him?"

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Is he amenable? Would Duri like to come and meet some mysterious businessman to talk about a possible *arrangement* for his rainbow youth centre? Is she asking him whether he might possibly be open to discuss sponsorship?

Duri clears his throat.

“Um, yes, yes, of course, thank you, that would be wonderful.”

“Excellent. Would tomorrow at 10am suit?”

Duri agrees without a second thought. He doesn't care what's on his work schedule, he'll make it work, and he knows Minjun will do the same for what could be their last shot.

The meeting is booked, and the woman ends the call. Duri dials Minjun's number with shaking hands. Minjun answers on the second ring.

“Hyung? Are you okay?”

Duri nods and swallows, tries to push words out past his teeth but only manages a shaky breath.

“Hyung?”

Minjun sounds worried. Duri tries again, and his voice comes out squeaky.

“Jun-ah, we – we've got a lead! A possible sponsor!”

“What? Hyung, that's amazing! Who?”

“I – this woman called, from some company, Jung Corporation, I think. Her boss wants to meet us and talk about a possible partnership!”

“Jung Corporation? Are you serious? *Jung Corporation?*”

Minjun is shouting now.

“Yeah! That's what she said, Jung Corporation!”

“Hyung, oh my god! Please tell me her boss is Jung Juwon?”

Duri frowns.

“Um, yeah? Why?”

There's sounds of shuffling, followed by muffled shouting. When he comes back on the phone, Minjun sounds out of breath.

“Jung Juwon! Jung Juwon, hyung, oh my god, we're meeting Jung Juwon!”

Duri is starting to feel a little exasperated with being out of the loop.

“Who is Jung Juwon?”

“Are you kidding me, hyung? He's only Korea's youngest freaking CEO and the only openly gay millionaire in this whole stupidly backward country! He was on last year's Forbes Korea Most Eligible Bachelors list; don't you keep up?”

Duri feels a giddy laugh bubble up, fizzing as it fills his chest and pushes its way out of his throat. He gives in and lets it spill out.

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“Oh my god. Oh my god, Jun-ah!”

“Oh my god, hyung! If we ever had a chance of getting backing, this is it!”

Duri jumps up from his desk, restless, giddy energy pushing him to walk around his cubicle.

“When’s the meeting?”

“Tomorrow at 10. You can make it, right?”

“Of course I can make it, as if I’d miss it!”

The rest of Duri’s day passes in a haze, excitement tempered by fear that the meeting may disappoint, that he may have misunderstood its purpose.

Minjun shows him *Forbes Korea’s* article, and Duri hits him over the head with the magazine for making him even more nervous than he already was. As if it wasn’t enough to have his dream potentially hanging on this man’s word, now he has to deal with being intimidated by his unfairly good looks.

Sleep is elusive that night, as Duri stares at the ceiling in the dark, imagining all the ways the next day’s meeting could possibly go.

Duri is practically vibrating in his specially shined shoes as he and Minjun ride the elevator to the twelfth floor of Jung Tower at 9:55 am.

His rarely worn suit makes him feel even more nervous than he already was, and he fidgets with his collar, fingers slipping down to adjust his tie reflexively every few minutes.

“Stop fidgeting, hyung,” hisses Minjun from beside him.

Duri snorts and thinks that Minjun himself isn’t much better; his shoulders are tense as he stands rigidly, hands behind his back, rocking back and forth on his heels in the way he does when he’s got too much energy but it’s inappropriate to jump up and down.

The elevator opens up to a spacious lobby with a shiny reception desk. As they step forward, an equally shiny, bright-eyed receptionist looks up and smiles at them, bowing respectfully. He’s young but polished, well dressed and groomed, and Duri feels even more nervous.

“Good morning, sirs, how can I help?”

Duri swallows as he returns the bow, feeling Minjun do the same beside him. He smiles a smile that feels like a grimace on his face and as he speaks, his tongue feels entirely too thick to wrap around words.

“Hi. So Minjun and Im Duri to see Jung Juwon daeponim, thank you.”

“Of course, sirs, right this way.”

They are shown to a glass-walled conference room, black walls offset by chrome accents and fixtures. The glass tabletop makes Duri feel more nervous still, an irrational fear that it will somehow get smashed during their meeting despite being an inch thick sitting heavy inside his chest. The way Minjun keeps looking nervously at the table and tapping the glass with his knuckles, Duri thinks he might be worried about the same thing, which is far from comforting given his friend’s clumsiness.

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The room is quiet, nothing but his and Minjun's quiet breathing and the occasional shuffle or rap of Minjun's knuckles against the glass tabletop disturbing the silence. It feels oppressive, too quiet, and Duri wants to scream. He clutches to the black folder in his hands like a lifeline, a tangible reminder of his reason for being here, for pinning his dreams on a stranger, risking rejection all over again.

And then, all of a sudden, there's a flurry of activity as Jung Juwon barrels in the door with an assistant on his heels.

He's a force of nature, that much is clear to Duri in seconds. He bursts in and the room comes alive; his grin is wide, and his voice is booming. Duri and Minjun both stand and bow as he bustles in, but he waves them off good-naturedly.

"Good morning, good morning, so sorry to keep you waiting! Please, please, none of that, we're all friends here, I'm not much for formality."

He steps in and holds his right hand out to Duri, smile still stretching wide. Duri shakes it and smiles back nervously.

"Jung Juwon, it's nice to meet you."

Duri introduces himself, and Juwon looks pleased, nodding enthusiastically before turning to Minjun.

"And you must be So Minjun-ssi? It's wonderful to meet you as well!"

Minjun, ever the diplomat, smiles like he doesn't have a care in the world and shakes the hand offered to him.

"Likewise, Juwon daepyonim."

Juwon nods once again, as if to say that all is going to plan and indicates his assistant.

"I believe you've spoken to my assistant over the phone? This is Yeo Jiwoo-ssi, the smartest person I know and the reason I am in business at all."

He throws a winning smile to his assistant who, shockingly, rolls her eyes at him, which earns her a laugh from her boss. Duri tries hard to keep his face impassive, to hide his surprise at their dynamic.

Juwon grins at Duri and Minjun.

"She hates when I do that, she'll go home and complain to her husband about me later. It's true though. She's smarter than anyone else in this building and she's going to replace me one day."

He pulls a chair out and sits, waving for Duri and Minjun to do the same. He tugs a little at his tie, grimacing.

"Now. Onto why you are here. I'm betting you're wondering how I know about your business idea?"

Duri nods, swallowing against the tightness in his throat.

"It crossed our minds, yes."

Juwon smiles that same wide, genuine smile again. It's a little crooked, Duri notices, a little wider on one side than the other, and his eyes squish into crescents in a way that's ridiculously adorable and makes him look like a cute boy rather than a powerful millionaire businessman.

"I'm a shareholder in three of the banks you approached with your idea. I've found they can be a little, shall we say, conservative in their approach, so I have someone at each branch who forwards

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me any rejected proposals they believe I might be interested in supporting. Yours has landed on my desk three times now, and I had Jiwoo-ssi do a little checking into you both to see if we could work together.”

He leans forward, elbows on the table.

“Right now, I believe we can.”

Duri’s heart is racing. Could this really be happening?

“I’m...I’m really glad to hear that, sir.”

Juwon laughs.

“Please, we’re hopefully going to be working together, and we’re close to the same age, Duri-ssi. Juwon-ssi is fine, for the moment, while we’re getting to know each other.”

He pauses a moment.

“Do you mind if I speak freely?”

Duri blinks. That wasn’t freely?

“Of course, Juwon-ssi, please do.”

“Okay then.”

He folds his hands, looks at them. When he looks Duri and Minjun in the eye, he’s different, smile faded, older, more serious, and suddenly the weight of this man’s presence and his power is pressing down on Duri.

“You know who I am, what I stand for. I’m not shy about declaring what’s important to me, and doing so publicly. My life is very public, and I don’t doubt you both already know much of what there is to know about me. I make it a point of knowing the people I work with, the people I align myself with. I know all there is to know about both of you from a public record perspective, where you were born, your families, your educations, your work history. What I don’t know is who you are, what makes you tick, why you want to do this. Why a centre for queer kids? Why now? What’s in it for you? If I’m going to invest in your idea, if I’m going to invest in you, I need to know what I’m walking into.”

Juwon pauses, and his stare feels heavy.

“I’m asking a lot. I know this is not standard protocol for a business meeting, for a sponsor to ask for personal information. But I’m not a standard kind of guy. I invest in people, in change, in ideas that I think will shape the world in the way I’d like to see it shaped. I already know the numbers and the facts. I need to know the people behind those numbers and facts. You do not have to share everything, but I need to get an understanding of who you are, to understand your *why*. I need to know that you are doing this for reasons that align with my values.”

Duri nods. Juwon is not wrong, he’s asking a lot. But nothing he’s asking for is a secret, and Duri thinks that if he were in Juwon’s shoes, he’d want to know who he was investing in, too.

And there’s something about Jung Juwon. Duri can’t help but notice the warmth he radiates, so unlike what he imagined, unlike anyone else he’s met so far on their quest for funds to make this happen. Duri *likes* him, and Duri doesn’t like people that easily. Jung Juwon might be rich and

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powerful, not to mention painfully handsome, but he's also relaxed and approachable, and it's putting Duri at ease more quickly than he would have thought possible.

He looks across at Minjun, exchanges glances with him, then turns back to Juwon and nods.

"That's fair. I think I'd feel the same way in your shoes, Juwon-ssi. I'll tell you, and you can decide from there."

Juwon nods, and Duri takes a moment, lines up his thoughts, sorts the relevant from the irrelevant, the private from the public.

He begins to talk, voice steady and quiet.

"I realised I was gay when I was eight years old. Really, I think I kind of always knew, but that's the age I remember having my first crush. I didn't really go through any kind of gay crisis like most of my gay friends did, it was just another thing about who I was, you know? Likes piano, likes black clothing, likes boys." Juwon smiles at that, and Duri finds himself mirroring it.

"I didn't come out to my parents until after my first break up, and even then, I didn't really come out as such. I've always resented the fact that we're expected to *come out* at all. My brother didn't have to come out as *straight*, why should I have to make some big announcement about being gay?"

Juwon hums at that, nodding, and Duri feels encouraged.

"Anyway. I didn't actually come out, my eomma figured it out and just let me know she knew, and that was that. It was very – anticlimactic, really. No big reveal, no fanfare, nothing. I had it easy."

He takes a minute to order his thoughts, and Juwon waits, patient.

"My friends didn't all have it so easy. Some of them had a really, really hard time. My first boyfriend had a horrible homophobe for a father, and it really messed him up. He was the typical *being gay is a sin* type, always filling his son's head with all the things boys shouldn't do. He didn't even know about me, didn't know we were together, that his son wasn't straight, and I can't imagine he'd have taken it well if he found out. It really stuck with me, even after we broke up, the way some parents mess their kids up, you know?"

Duri shifts in his seat, mind sifting through events to pick out the most important ones to share.

"I was just a kid back then, but I was always trying to help him, trying to boost his confidence, help him feel better about himself. I was raised to be a good hyung, I've always tried hard to look after my dongsaengs, to take care of them as best I can. I like doing it, it makes me feel like I'm making a difference, I guess."

It feels a little squirmy, talking about himself like this, and Duri suppresses a wince. But Juwon nods encouragingly, so he keeps talking.

"I got my degree in computer science – that part you know. What you don't know is that it wasn't my passion. I'm good at it, and it pays the bills, but I never felt like it's what I was put on this earth to do."

"What were you put on this earth to do?"

Duri smiles.

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"It's going to sound trite, but I think I was put on this earth to help people. Specifically, kids like me who weren't so lucky, kids like – like the boy I dated all those years ago."

Juwon hums.

"Hmm. Okay. So how did this all come about? Walk me through it. You were working in I.T. and one day just woke up and knew this is what you had to do?"

Duri laughs and shakes his head.

"God no, I wish it were that easy. There was a boy, a kid, about six months ago. He was targeted by a bunch of bullies, and I happened to be there. I intervened."

Minjun clears his throat, and both Juwon and Duri turn to him.

"That's not exactly what happened, though, hyung. You need to tell him the whole story."

Duri colours.

"Jun-ah..."

Minjun shrugs.

"It's relevant, hyung."

Duri grimaces, and Juwon seems to take pity on him, gesturing to Minjun instead.

"I think Duri-ssi is feeling shy, Minjun-ssi. Why don't you fill me in instead?"

Minjun grins widely, and Duri slumps a little in his seat.

"I'd love to. So. What really happened is that this boy was on the train with his boyfriend, and they were spotted by a group of boys. Hyung was there and he watched it all unfold. The kids, the couple, they didn't notice anything at first, and the bullies kept to themselves, but hyung could see them looking and talking and he was worried they would do something. Then the boyfriend got off the train, but the other boy and the bullies stayed behind. Hyung stayed on the train even though it passed our stop, just to keep an eye on the boy. When the boy got off, the bullies did too, so hyung followed them. He kept following them and when they attacked, he intervened. He sprayed deodorant in the leader's eyes and punched his lights out, and got a split lip for his trouble, but he scared them off. Then he took care of the boy and gave him his card in case he ever needed help again."

Minjun stops talking, and Duri groans inwardly, heat sitting uncomfortably on the back of his neck.

Juwon hums again, nodding.

"That's – impressive, Duri-ssi. Did you ever hear from him again?"

Minjun nods.

"Yeah, he did. He called hyung about a month or so later. He'd been outed to his parents, beaten by his dad and thrown out. They disowned him and he didn't have anywhere to go. Hyung went to pick him up and he stayed with us for about three weeks, until we found an aunt of his who was happy to take him in."

It's quiet for a moment as Juwon absorbs this. He turns to Duri then.

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"I see. That was a pretty great thing to do for a kid you barely knew."

Duri shrugs, embarrassed, and tells him the same thing he told Baekhyun not so long ago, keeping eye contact with Juwon despite the pink he can feel staining his neck and his ears and the discomfort in his stomach.

"I'm a good judge of character."

And it's a lot, all this attention, so he sniffs and deflects.

"Besides, that's where we got the idea for the rainbow centre from. I was really frustrated at what the kid was going through, we both were, and I felt really angry that they were getting treated like that because they're like me, you know? And I guess there's like, survivor's guilt or something, because I never had anything like that, it just wasn't hard for me, so I'm lucky, and I feel like I owe it to them to help, to make it a little easier for them. Something like that. So I was venting to Jun-ah and he said we should do something about it, that we should look at what Baekhyun needed the most and figure out how to provide that for other kids. And that's how we came up with the idea for a rainbow centre."

Juwon nods, and looks to Minjun.

"Okay. So I get why Duri-ssi is doing this, now. Why are you doing it?"

Minjun doesn't hesitate.

"Because it's the right thing to do. It's sorely needed, and if I can help make it happen, if I get to be a part of something like that, something that makes a difference in so many kids' lives, man, that'd be something else!"

He sounds awed, and Duri smiles fondly. He catches Juwon smiling softly, too.

"I can hear the philosophy major in you, Minjun-ssi."

Minjun smiles, shy and dimply, and Duri feels a rush of gratitude for the friendship of this steady, heart-driven man. He looks away from his friend with a smile.

Juwon leans forward onto the table.

"Thank you both, I really appreciate your honesty. I know some of that was very personal and not information I really have any right to ask for. I'm grateful you chose to share it with me. I'm happy with everything you've told me, but I do have one concern."

He looks between them, and Duri's heart drops. He had thought things were going so well, what did he say to make Juwon think otherwise? What was he concerned about? He exchanges a glance with a worried-looking Minjun, before looking back to Juwon.

The CEO looks them both in the eye.

"I'll speak plainly. In my experience, it's not always the best idea for couples to go into business together. It tends to get messy in the event of a breakup."

Duri frowns. Couples? Breakup? What is he talking about?

"I realise no one likes to think about these things, but if I'm going to invest in your idea, it needs to be discussed: do you have a plan for what happens to the centre in the event you two break up?"

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Duri blinks. Minjun stares. No one speaks for a moment, and the room is deadly silent.

Then Duri feels a sudden rush of giggles bubble up, and he can't help it, they spill out, taking all his nerves with him.

"Break up?"

Minjun is laughing too, now, and Juwon looks – amused? Startled?

"Is that funny? Jiwoo-ssi, did I say something funny?"

Jiwoo just shrugs, and Duri laughs harder. A stern voice in the back of his mind tells him to get himself together though, before the CEO's patience with them runs out, and he tries to pull himself together.

"I'm sorry, Juwon-ssi, I'm sorry, it's just, we're not, we're not a couple, the thought of it is a bit hilarious."

From the corner of his eye, he sees Minjun raise his hand like a kid in school, still laughing but trying very hard to keep a straight face as he nods hard.

"Juwon-ssi, I'm the token straight in our friend group!"

And that does it, they're both dissolving in laughter, and Juwon is giggling along with them now.

"Alright, alright," he says, grin wide, "I get it, I'm sorry for assuming. Not a couple. Do you have an exit plan, though?"

Duri shrugs. The tightness in his shoulders feels diminished, tension leaching out with the giggles.

"We'll take advice on that. We've been best friends since high school though, and have lived together for five years now without ever even fighting. I'm really not worried we're going to be at each other's throats one day. But I'm sure we can get a plan drawn up in the event one of us wants out at some point."

Juwon nods.

"That's good enough for me! Then, if you'd like to have me on board, I would love to offer you funding for your project. Congratulations!"

He grins widely, and Duri can't help but grin right back. He's screaming on the inside, excitement bubbling in the back of his throat. Beside him, Minjun looks fit to burst, grinning and fidgeting in his chair.

"Really? You're on board?"

Juwon's smile is radiant, and he looks almost as excited as Duri feels.

"Absolutely. I already read your proposal, and I really like all the ideas you have for the centre. I'd like to suggest we incorporate my SOS app as well, are you familiar with it?"

Duri clears his throat, forces himself to stay calm, to stay focused on what Juwon's saying. He wants to jump out of his seat and *do something*, to go and put his excitement into some lyrics, or run to the roof and scream until he loses his voice, or maybe cook someone a meal (Juwon, probably, since that's who he has to thank for this feeling). His hands are shaking, and he folds them together in his lap, the picture of composure.

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“I think so, is it that safety app for the rainbow community?”

“It is. My story is pretty similar to yours, Duri-ssi, and that app was my way of trying to do something to help. The app gives people a lifeline, a way to send an SOS signal to a trusted contact or authorities when they’re out alone and feel unsafe, without needing to make a call, it’s just a push of a button. And it’s free. I’m thinking once the centre is up and running, we make sure all the kids you see have the app. We could even look at rolling out an update that puts kids in Seoul in direct contact with the centre without needing to have the phone number in their contacts.”

Minjun is nodding enthusiastically, and Duri feels fizzy with excitement.

“That sounds perfect, I like that idea a lot, Juwon-ssi, thank you. And thank you for backing us, we’re so grateful, this is amazing!”

“You’re welcome, Duri-ssi. I look forward to working with you both. I have a request, actually. I’d really like to be involved with the centre in some way beyond money. I don’t mean in a managerial capacity, I don’t want to make decisions, that’s your department. But I’d like to help in a hands-on manner, wherever I can. I don’t care if I paint walls or man the phones, I’ll go wherever you need me. I volunteer at various charities on my days off, and I’d really like to put some of that time into this centre and be there in person to see the difference it’s making. If that’s okay with you both.”

He looks between them, and Minjun’s head is still bobbing excitedly, so Duri feels safe to speak for them both as he smiles and says *of course, we’d be glad to have the help.*

The rest of the meeting revolves around paperwork, around figuring out details and parameters. Duri feels overwhelmed, a little untethered, but Juwon keeps things on track. He has done his research and clearly thought about the project in detail. He contributes ideas without pressuring for them to be incorporated, doesn’t try to veto any of the existing plan, and has the experience and know how to help them achieve their goals while creating a business model that is sustainable.

When Duri and Minjun leave Juwon’s office several hours later, it feels like they’ve gained so much more than silent backing. Juwon fills a gap in their skills base, providing much-needed business insight, directed by the same amount of passion they both feel towards their cause, and Duri feels immensely grateful.

Their project is alive and kicking, and Duri feels like his life has new direction. His purpose has been given wings. Their rainbow centre is more than a pipe dream now, more than a castle in the air.

It’s real; still in the planning stages, still only on paper, but it’s happening, it’s going to exist in a tangible, brick-and-mortar form, and it will be because of Duri, and Minjun, and Juwon, too.

When Duri crawls into bed later that night, he’s utterly exhausted and utterly happy.

It’s April 2014, and Duri dreams of rainbows.

*

Chapter 8

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Seoul, August 2015

Duri wakes early, much too early for a Saturday morning, early enough for the world's colours to still be pastel, soft blues, baby pinks, gossamer golds.

Paper-thin rays of early sunlight seep in through the crack between his bedroom curtains, one of them persistent in its playful dance across Duri's eyelashes.

He groans, a discontented rumble that rises up from somewhere deep down in his toes, and rolls over to turn his back to the baleful brightness of the window. His eyes land on Juwon, sprawled on his belly, limbs still and face turned towards Duri, soft with sleep. His brown hair is a wild tangle around his head, rebellious strands of it sweeping across the dark lashes fanned out on his cheeks. There's a faint dusting of freckles and lighter brown streaks in his hair that paint a picture of lazy Sundays drinking coffee in the sun on the balcony, skin warm and smiles loose.

Duri watches him, how the blues and golds mingle on his skin, how the faint sweep of darker purple under his eyes speaks too loudly of too many late nights. The full lips that still make Duri a little weak at the knees even after a year together are slack with sleep now, a gentle gap between them that shows a sliver of teeth.

He looks relaxed and beautiful like this, free of stress and worries, free of the high-powered business persona he wears like a suit of armour when the sun is high. The sight of him makes a warmth well up inside Duri's chest, and he smiles, soft, sweetness on the tip of his tongue.

Looking back, Juwon slipped into Duri's life so easily. Months spent sitting side by side, bent over plans for the centre, months exposed to that square jaw and those lush lips, his eyewatering good looks so at odds with his disarming, high-pitched, squeaky laugh and the way he claps his hands when the giggles strike; months of trying to push down their attraction and keep things *strictly business*.

Duri had tried to keep his distance; he'd fought the attraction every step of the way, even going as far as to send Minjun to meetings with Juwon in his stead until his friend called him on it and told him to cut the crap.

It hadn't worked, of course. Duri never stood a chance. The night when Juwon first kissed him, soft and sweet, after they signed the lease on the centre's new premises in the heart of Seoul, Duri's fears and doubts were swept away ahead of all the things that Juwon made him *feel*.

He'd been worried, still, not willing to risk his dream over a fling, or even over a serious relationship. So Juwon, ever pragmatic and practical, had sat him down and drafted an exit plan to safeguard the centre should they ever break up, a plan that guaranteed continued funding as long as Juwon was at the head of Jung Corporation but allowed him to step back and take a silent partner role with no contact with Duri, should either of them wish it.

It had felt a little unfair, at first glance.

"But what if we split and you hate me, Juwon? What if you want nothing to do with the centre? This ties you into it for life unless you leave the company! That hardly seems fair!"

Juwon had smiled and taken Duri's hand, squeezing it.

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“Duri-yah. The centre isn’t something I’m doing for you. It never was. I didn’t offer funding to get in your pants, I offered it because I believe in the cause, because I want to be part of it. That isn’t going to change if we split. Even if we never want to see each other again, I’m still going to want to support those kids, I have zero doubts about that. Besides, I stay friends with all my exes.”

It was easy, after that, to fall into Juwon. Dates with him inevitably involved a lot of laughter and led to heated kisses and falling into bed together, waking up tangled and overheated amidst Juwon’s sheets.

A year later, they know each other well. Duri is one of the few who have seen Juwon’s secret soft toy collection; Juwon is one of the few people Duri will tolerate before his morning coffee.

Duri has spent many dinners with Juwon’s family being regaled with stories about Juwon’s obsession with taking things apart just to see how they work. Hearing about Juwon’s childhood antics feels nice; the laughter at stories about all the toasters his mother went through after her son took them apart but put them back together wrong tasting like comfort, like safety.

It felt lovely to be with someone again. To date, to kiss, to touch, to feel. Duri had felt ready to date again, had felt he may have finally put the ghost of what he had with Hosu to rest. And Juwon was different. He didn’t look like Hosu, not even slightly, something that gave Duri comfort, particularly early on.

Personality wise, too, Juwon was nothing like Hosu, extroverted and sharp-witted, a social butterfly, confident but humble. There was nothing about him that reminded Duri of Hosu, nothing that made him question his own motives for being with Juwon, and it eased something in Duri’s chest, calmed the nervous chatter under his sternum that always tried to tie everything back to Hosu.

He still thinks of Hosu sometimes, gets reminded of that time in his life by things that sneak under his radar and find their way into his mouth and ears, into his chest, things determined yet soft, persistent in their nagging at his heart. Common, easy things, like Epik High music, like picnics, like arcades and strangers calling out *hyung* to someone they know in tones that whisper *Hosu*.

He sees him sometimes, in a young man crossing the street or waiting in line for coffee, in the tilt of a head or a heart-shaped smile. He’ll hear him in the lilt of a jeolla accent, or the tone of a passing teenage boy’s voice, and he’ll be right back there, in Gwangju, lying on his bed beside Hosu, listening to him telling a story about the famous rapper D-Day and his hot dancer boyfriend.

But the memories don’t hurt now. They bring a smile, a gentle acknowledgement, a slight sadness occasionally, before they go again. And he never sees him in Juwon, never confuses Juwon’s eyes for Hosu’s, never finds himself wishing for Hosu when he looks at Juwon.

Duri is twenty-six, and he’s finally found a way to exist with his first love in the rearview mirror.

Juwon stirs, bringing Duri back to the present, to the beautiful, naked man in his sheets.

“Were you watching me sleep?”

His voice is morning-croaky, and it makes Duri smile.

“Maybe.”

Juwon’s eyes, still closed, crease at the corners as his lips curl.

“Creepy.”

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Duri huffs.

“s Not. It’s your turn to make coffee, I was just debating whether to dump water on you to wake you or whether you’d get up on your own.”

Juwon laughs at that, rolling onto his back.

“s Always my turn.”

“Mmm yeah. I’m going to go take a leak. If you’re not up by the time I’m back, I’m putting my cold feet on you.”

Juwon groans, swatting half-heartedly at Duri’s naked backside as he sits up and swings his legs over the side of the bed.

“God, you’re awful. Why am I with you?”

“You’re using me for my money, I think,” Duri snorts, “Or was it sex? I can never remember.”

“Oh, that’s right. Damn, the life of a sugar baby isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.”

Duri grins as he gets up and crosses the room to the bathroom.

“You’ve got one minute ‘til my cold feet are on you, I’d get moving if I were you!”

He can hear Juwon get up while he’s in the bathroom, and he smiles at himself in the mirror as he washes his hands.

Juwon is a rare breed, generous and kind, humble and loving, funny and unbelievably smart. Duri still catches himself wondering how he ended up with someone like him, what he sees in Duri, with his moods and his need for alone time, with his antisocial habits and his brooding.

Life with Juwon is good. It’s reliable, comfortable, sweet, familiar. There are moments when Duri worries that they’ve lost some spark, that things have gotten a little stale, but he reasons that that happens in every relationship eventually, that routine and responsibilities eventually get boring no matter what.

Juwon still feels *warm* to Duri.

He crawls back into bed, a chill in his skin, tucking up small to warm up. Juwon comes back in, long legs bare and sinewy under hastily thrown-on boxers, long fingers wrapped around two steaming mugs of black coffee. He smiles, wide and soft, face still a little puffy with sleep as he leans in to brush a kiss to Duri’s lips and hand him a mug.

“Here you go,” he says as he climbs into bed beside Duri.

This is their weekend ritual, coffees in bed, then breakfast with more coffee at the kitchen table or at a nearby café, depending on the weather and what they have on. It’s nice, cosy, and it makes Duri feel peaceful.

They drink in companionable silence, Juwon checking emails on his phone while Duri aimlessly scrolls through social media while the coffee warms his bones.

“Did Insu-ssi tell you when they need you in Gwangju yet?”

Duri hums. Insu is his manager at work, and last week he’d approached Duri about a trip to Gwangju to train new hires at the Gwangju branch’s service centre.

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"Yeah. I'm supposed to go for a week in October, for five full days."

"Hmm. How are you feeling about it now?"

Duri shrugs. He'd been nervous about the idea of going back to Gwangju after all these years, afraid of all the ghosts it held, afraid of seeing one particular ghost. Juwon knows about Hosu, knows he has a first love it took him many years to get over. But the depth of it, the sheer ferocity with which Duri's heart had clung to his Hobah, that was Duri's secret, the little piece he kept for himself, the one thing he could never quite convey in words to anyone who hadn't been there.

Juwon knows he has an ex called Hosu, and that ex lives in Gwangju, and Duri is nervous about running into him.

"I'm...okay, I think. I'm going to be in the office for most of my time there, I won't have time to go wandering around the city, so the chances of running into anyone I know are slim. It'll be okay."

Juwon smiles softly.

"It will, I know it. You'll be fine. And you're going to do an amazing job."

He leans in and kisses Duri on the cheek.

"Time to get up, come on. I'm doing a shift at the centre this afternoon, and you'll be needing to show your face too, show them you're still alive!"

Duri sighs, weariness heavy in his bones. He can feel Juwon's eyes on him, only fractionally lighter.

"You know it doesn't need to be like this, baby."

"I know. But I need to do this, you know that."

Juwon's eyes are soft, and he nods.

"I know. Just remember, you can change your mind anytime."

"I know."

Duri leans in then, kisses Juwon's shoulder, the skin warm and dry against his lips and chin. He feels Juwon kiss the top of his head before getting off the bed and walking across to the ensuite bathroom, and Duri sighs as the door clicks shut behind him.

His choice to stay in his full-time job while working twenty hours per week at the centre is a tender spot for them both. It's too much for Duri, the hours too long, too draining, wearing him too thin, and Duri's insistence to keep at it chafes at Juwon.

The centre is amply funded by Juwon's company. The facilities are well-resourced, generous even, with three therapy rooms, a communal kitchen, ten emergency housing rooms that each sleep up to four kids at a time, a music- and games room, showers and a laundry room, they have everything they need. The therapists on staff are salaried, as are Duri and Minjun, who share the centre management role between them. The front desk is manned by a rotation of big-hearted volunteers, including most of their friend group.

There is more than enough in the budget for Duri to quit his IT job and take on the centre management full-time instead, but the idea of being dependent on Juwon's company for his entire income makes him squirm. His independence is important and the thought of being a *kept man*

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leaves a sour taste at the back of his throat that won't go down no matter how much he tries to swallow it, and an itch under his skin that keeps him awake at night.

And so, he persists. He works his day job from eight 'til four, then heads over to the centre to work there until around nine. The long days are wearing on him, causing fissures in him in ways he didn't expect, ways that are slowly starting to press the certainty that he can't keep this up much longer into his skin. He's tired in a deep, bone-crushing way, a tiredness that extends well beyond what a few nights of good sleep will fix, something that dulls his edges, fills his brain with fog and weighs his limbs with lead.

He's forgetful and slow to react, feeling like his brain often misfires, like it stops working altogether sometimes, leaving him blank and uncertain, buffering.

Juwon is worried, and rightly so. He's lectured Duri more than once about burnout, and Minjun, much to Duri's disgust, has taken his side, gently adding his vote for Duri to resign and take the plunge. And Duri knows he will have to, soon, but not yet, not just yet.

He walks across to Juwon's wardrobe and pulls out clean clothes for the day from the drawers set aside for his things, jeans and a t-shirt with a loose button-up, casual but tidy enough to work at the centre. As he pulls a pair of boxers out of his underwear drawer, his fingers brush the notebook tucked away underneath the fabric, and he takes it out, smiling a little.

It's silly, really, the way he still keeps his lyrics notebook in his underwear drawer, the way he used to do when he was a teenager and didn't want any of his family to read his most private thoughts and feelings scribbled out in angry slashes across the pages. He doesn't need to hide it now, it holds no secrets, nothing he wants to hide from Juwon. Keeping the book tucked in his drawer is mere superstition, a vague and unsubstantiated feeling that if he changes his habits of years, the words that have stalled will never come back.

He's not actively writing right now, the words silent and brittle for the last few years, work and the centre draining all the life from them, sucking every minute out of his day and leaving nothing for his other passion, nothing but blank spaces flowing from his pen. But he keeps the notebook, and others like it, tucked away in drawers in all his spaces; here, at his flat with Minjun, one in each room, just in case. Just in case inspiration strikes, in case he wakes up at three am with words riding the curves of his brain and wanting to swoop onto the page.

It never happens.

Duri tries very hard not to feel the hollowness the lack of music leaves inside his rib cage. This is what being an adult is all about – growing up, setting aside childish dreams, being responsible. He does his best not to mind it, telling himself that he will have time again later, when things slow down, that finding and fulfilling his purpose should be enough, he should not want more.

Juwon is quietly sympathetic of his lost love of music, but as someone without an ounce of artistry or musicianship in his soul, he cannot grasp the magnitude of what Duri is missing, the way even with all he has, a part of him still feels empty.

He tells Duri to hang in there, that one day he'll be able to teach music composition at the centre, and every part of him believes that that ought to be enough, that it ought to fill the space in Duri that still aches.

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But Duri still catches his fingers tapping riffs on tabletops, and the pull to look at his notebook is overwhelming some days, even if all he does is reread old, unused words and daydream of putting out his own mix tape.

He tucks the notebook gently back underneath his boxers and shuts the drawer with a sigh.

Gwangju, October 2015

Hosu's phone buzzes in his pocket as he sits down on the subway seat. It's a new carriage, everything still bright and unsullied by graffiti and dirt, and everywhere he looks his eyes catch on shiny chrome and thick, fresh vinyl.

It's been a long day, depleting, one of those where he feels every minute of his twenty-five years in the way his back cracks as he stretches and the way his eyes ache from staring at his computer screen. The drag on his bones from sitting at a desk all day saps the grace from his posture and the suppleness from his limbs, his once-weekly dance sessions falling short of restoring either.

He sighs, arching his neck and wincing as it cracks loudly, blindly grabbing his phone and unlocking it. He taps into the message screen, smiling when he sees Iseul's name.

Seulie

Don't forget the wine

Jiyeong has texted four times to remind us not to be late and not to forget the wine

Is there something going on with him? Besides his birthday?

It's just dinner, right?

Me

Far as I know

Not sure why he's being weird

Guess he really wants wine

I got it already

Be home soon

Iseul

Kk

Love you

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Me

Love you too x

He swipes the app closed, smile still soft on his face.

It's strange to think they've been together more than three years, the truth of it still a bit lopsided, a little surreal, something he never saw coming when they first started dating. But being with Iseul just felt easy, comfortable, their friendship deepening until one day he looked at her and felt love, felt that thicker, softer warmth deep in his chest, and gave voice to it.

They're well suited, in many ways. Iseul has been good for him, her strength shoring up his frame, settling in his bones, giving him the confidence and the motivation to push himself at work, to study and work hard.

He's proud of what he's achieved in his career, even while acknowledging he didn't do it alone, proud that he had the smarts and the talent to work his way higher up the corporate ladder. But lately he's started to feel antsy, feel like maybe he's reached the ceiling of what he can achieve in his current company, in Gwangju maybe, and wondering whether he needs to look further afield for more challenging roles, spread his wings a bit. He's thought about floating a move to Seoul with Iseul, but something holds him back, a resistance in his gut he can't quite place.

For her part, Iseul's career has gone from strength to strength too, and she loves them being a professional couple, loves the comfortable lifestyle they live and their upmarket apartment.

His parents adore Iseul, and she plays her part well, always the dutiful daughter-in-law, always walking the knife's edge between a modern woman's independence and the traditional obedient wife that his parents want to see. It makes something a little sour curl at the back of Hosu's tongue when he sees her acting demure in front of them, hating her having to be anything she's not.

He brought it up with her once, voicing his doubts with that same sourness thick on his tongue, only for Iseul to smile softly and shrug. *We all play our parts, Su-ah, she said, it's fine.*

And that was that.

Their like of Iseul has meant that the pressure from his mother to *make an honest woman of that girl* has been suffocating, ramping up once Dawon and Heechul married, pushing and pressing down on him, suffocating. The endless grinding on his bones made him feel hollow, worn down little by little until two months ago he couldn't bear it anymore, buying a ring and asking Iseul to marry him through a mouthful of nerves and doubts. He was unsure, is still unsure, but he doesn't regret it, not when it made everyone around him so happy, not when finally, he's allowed to breathe, to think, the pressure easing up a little.

If in his more introspective moments he sometimes worries that the regret might still come, one day, if things don't work out the way he hopes they will, no one has to know.

Some things haven't changed. Hosu still struggles with intimacy, still finds sex overwhelming and a little nerve wracking. He's found a kind of thin equilibrium now, some level of comfort with who he is, a brittle acceptance that he's just not a highly sexualised person, not someone who *needs* sex the way other men do.

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Iseul, too, doesn't have a high drive, and their sex life is not a big part of their relationship, serving more as an occasional outlet for stress than anything else, a way to blow off steam.

The crushes, they've come and gone, and he's accepted them as just part of life, temptations put in his way to test him. He waits them out and watches them go, enjoying the thrill while they happen and the relief when they pass. Aside from his fragile, tentative sense of identity as a closeted bisexual man, he tries not to acknowledge or think about them too much, tries not to put his energy into giving them meaning or weight.

At twenty-five, Hosu still has a battered, cracked and bruised box in his chest that holds all of the things he cannot let himself look at too closely.

The voice over the speaker announces his stop in metallic, steely tones, and Hosu jolts out of his musings to pick up his laptop bag and the paper-wrapped bottle of merlot.

It's a short walk from his stop to the apartment he shares with Iseul, and he reaches it within minutes.

He calls out to Iseul as he walks in the door, toeing off his shoes in the hallway, both hands full, and hears her call out a distant *in here* from the bedroom down the hall. Leaving the wine in the kitchen and his bag in the office on his way past, he makes his way to the bedroom in his socked feet, loosening his tie as he goes. He hates having to wear a suit and tie; whipping off the restrictive clothing when he gets home is one of the best parts of his day, every breath feeling like the first to fully inflate his lungs since the moment he woke up.

Iseul is in front of her dresser mirror, fully dressed in a little black dress, hair curled and applying her make up, focused intently on her face in the mirror, mouth bowed in the cute pout she slips into when she's concentrating. He smiles, fond, and leans in to kiss her cheek, hand on her back, familiar.

"Hey honey. You look lovely."

She grins, dimples popping out on her chin.

"Thanks babe. Hurry up, go shower, we need to leave in twenty minutes."

Hosu groans. He's tired, the week's weight dragging on his frame, and all he wants is to pull on his comfiest sweatpants and curl up on the couch with wine and takeaways.

"Do we have to? Can't we call in sick?"

She swats his arm.

"No! It's your best friend's birthday dinner, and it's important to him! You can't be a downer tonight, go shower and bring back sunshine Hosu please."

Hosu rolls his eyes at the nickname and plasters on a fake smile, the one that pulls his own dimples in at the corners, saccharine sweet.

"Alright then. One sunshine Hosu, coming up."

Iseul laughs and swats his behind as he walks away, so he wiggles it, a sway in the hips that draws a giggle from her.

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Dinner, as always, is lovely, a sharing of flavours and laughter and *togetherness*. Jiyeong and Seongmin are lively, thoughtful, even if they are more touchy-feely than ever, hands and eyes and smiles everywhere. Harin is there too, the latest in a string of short-lived boyfriends trailing in her wake, handsome and quiet just like all the others before him, a replica that Hosu already knows won't last the month. He introduces himself as Byungho, then retreats into his shell, disengages for the rest of the night, speaking only when spoken to. Hosu tries to pull him into a conversation, tries to find some common ground, but Byungho stays quiet, monosyllabic, and eventually Hosu gives up.

There's something in the air tonight. Hosu can taste it as it arcs against his teeth, leaves a prickle on his tongue as he takes another mouthful of dinner, and his eyes keep skipping back to Jiyeong and Seongmin, to the loaded smiles and sparkly, adoring eyes that scent the air with anticipation of some sort.

It's when they all have their dessert of birthday cake with copious amounts of cream that Jiyeong finally decides to let them in on the secret they've been keeping all night, tangling his fingers with Seongmin's, twin smiles lush on their faces.

"So Seongmin and I have some news."

Hosu watches his friend, sees the happiness pooling at the corners of his eyes, the way their fingers intertwine on the table, the way Seongmin melts into Jiyeong until their colours smudge together at their edges, and he knows. By the time Jiyeong says the words out loud, there's a hitch in Hosu's chest and a grin pulling at the corners of his mouth.

"Seongmin proposed to me this morning, and I said yes!"

There's a wash of sound that wells up around the table, then, squeals and *congratulations*, every voice in the room begging for its turn in the limelight, a bright swirl of emotion that coils between them, staining the air with joy. Hosu's chest feels tight, love for his friends and happiness for their joy spread thick against the back of his throat, and he has to move, has to *do something* with all that love, has to hold them, squeeze them, put all of his love into his limbs and press it into them. He stands and launches himself at Jiyeong, still seated at the table, and Jiyeong laughs, arms wrapped tightly around Hosu's back, pressing in, down, around.

Jiyeong stands, and Seongmin does too, taller, lankier, and then they're tangled, Hosu hugging Jiyeong, Seongmin hugging both of them, limbs and love everywhere, the others still seated, smiling and warm.

When Hosu lifts his head off Jiyeong's shoulder, his eyes feel watery, and Jiyeong's smile is wide, his eyes are wet, and Seongmin squawks an indignant *no! no crying, you'll make me cry too* that sets everyone off laughing.

In the midst of all the chaos Hosu clings to his friend, smiling at him, whispering a soft *congrats Yeong-ah*, and Jiyeong's smile is full, eyes soft and shining as he says *thanks hyung*.

Later, when dessert has been eaten and the buzz has died down some, when the hugging has eased and the tears have stopped flowing, while Hosu helps Jiyeong stack dishes into the dishwasher, Jiyeong stops him with a hand on his arm. He looks shy, brittle even, so unlike his usual confident self, and a cold flash of worry surges in Hosu's belly.

"Are you okay, Yeong-ah?"

Jiyeong smiles, nods, face open, fond, nervous, pink on his cheeks and galaxies in his eyes.

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“Yeah, hyung. I just, I need to ask you something.”

“Alright..?”

“Okay, so...I know we can't, like, legally marry, but we still want to have a ceremony and do all of that, do it right, celebrate with all of you guys and our families and everything. So I was wondering if...would you marry Seongmin and me, hyung? Be our fake celebrant for our legally irrelevant, gay-ass wedding?”

Overwhelm washes over him all at once, pouring into all his spaces, and Hosu finds himself staring at Jiyeong with all his air trapped low in his lungs.

“Me?”

Jiyeong smiles, soft and hesitant.

“Yeah, hyung. Who else? You're my best friend!”

“Then hell yeah, I will!”

He clings to Jiyeong again, eyes leaking, chest full of happy, warm waves, throat *tighttighttight* with words too big to push out on a tongue that's stopped working.

It's not until later that night, lying in bed with Iseul asleep beside him, that he realises he felt happier hearing about his friends' engagement than he did about getting engaged himself.

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Seoul, October 2015

It's a random Thursday in early October, the soft chill of an autumn evening pebbling the skin on Duri's bare arms as he sits in Juwon's bed.

He feels like death.

Another thirteen-hour day, another dinner of takeaways in the Centre kitchen with Minjun looking on with sad, worried eyes.

His body feels heavy, like his bones are lined with lead, weighed down to keep him anchored. He fell asleep at his desk at the centre again, and his neck hurts from the awkward angle his head was at while he slept. There's a persistent ache at the back of his throat, and his head feels fuzzy, permanently cloudy and often painful.

He doesn't think he's ever been this tired.

He's propped up on Juwon's countless pillows, supposedly reading by the soft light of the bedside lamp, but the letters on the pages are blurring together, and he's caught himself almost drifting off several times now. He's fighting the pull, the desire to wait up for Juwon to finish up in the bathroom and spend a little time with him stronger than the need to give in and let himself be pulled under.

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Duri looks up when Juwon walks in, still toweling his hair, upper body bare above a pair of baggy old sweatpants, all tanned skin and softness.

He smiles softly, a tightness pulling at the corners of his eyes, worry that's perpetually etched there these days.

Duri smiles back.

Juwon hangs his towel over a chair and comes to sit on Duri's side of the bed. Duri feels a little seasick as the dip of the mattress rolls his body.

"Baby? Can I ask you something?"

He looks tender, tonight. Handsome and chiseled as always, but all the gentleness that Duri knows nestles inside his ribcage seems to be bursting out of him, splashed liberally all over his skin, pooling in the stray drops of water the towel missed.

Duri reaches out and takes his hand.

"Of course. What's up?"

"We're good together, right? You're happy?"

Duri frowns.

"Of course I am. I'm here, aren't I? Have been for the past year?!"

Juwon twines his fingers with Duri's and tugs on them a little, plays with them like he always does. His hands are rougher than Duri's, a little more callused, testament to years of tinkering with electronics and hardware, and the touch of them always makes Duri shiver a little.

"I've just been thinking. I really like us, Du-ah. I really like what we are, how we are together. We work, we have fun, we support each other. And I know it hasn't really been that long yet, I know it's kind of soon, but..."

There is a swooping feeling in Duri's stomach that doesn't feel like tiredness, a sinking feeling he can't escape, because suddenly he knows where this is going, and it's so soon, it's too soon, he isn't ready. But Juwon is, and he's not stopping, he's still talking, and Duri is frozen as he watches the scene play out.

"...but I don't want to wait anymore, you know? I mean, we're good together, we're happy, what's there to wait for? Right?"

He's looking at Duri now, and he seems to want an answer, so Duri swallows the taste of dread at the back of his throat and nods, blinking.

"Right."

It comes out a little squeaky, a little croaky, but Juwon doesn't seem to notice, smiling softly.

"Right. So I was just thinking that maybe you might like to move in with me?"

And there it is.

Move in with me.

Four tiny words but oh so large in their implications.

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Duri's head is spinning as he clings to Juwon's hands. Juwon is watching him, vulnerable and expectant, and Duri has to say something, but the words feel sticky on his tongue, syrupy and unwilling, and he swallows again.

"Juwon..."

He's stalling, breath and hands and heart shaking, brain buzzing. It all feels too much, too big. A part of him thinks it shouldn't feel this big, he shouldn't be so reluctant, he already stays at Juwon's flat all the time, practically lives here as it is. But his mile-wide independent streak is balking at the idea, at the very thought of giving up his own space, his own life, and becoming merely a part of Juwon's.

Juwon squeezes his hands, eyes soft, movements gentle like he's trying not to spook a timid animal.

"Hear me out, babe. I know you don't want to leave your job just yet. I know how important it is to you to be independent, to have your own life. I get it. But something has to change. You're barely sleeping, you're losing weight, you're half dead most of the time. You can't go on like this. So I thought maybe we could compromise."

Duri raises an eyebrow, incredulous, and tries to ignore the tight thrumming under his skin.

"Compromise? How is moving in with you a compromise? I thought you said you wanted me to move in because you love me and we're so good together?"

Juwon smiles, thumb rubbing soothing circles on the back of Duri's hand, warm and familiar.

"Well, obviously. I wouldn't extend the invitation to just anyone, you know."

Duri snorts at that.

"But think about it. You're here all the time anyway, it just makes sense. You move in here and give up your place. We can split the bills here, but the apartment is freehold, so there's no rent to pay. Your cost of living will drop to less than half, so you'll be able to talk to Insu-ssi about dropping back to part time at your work. If you could do twenty hours a week instead of forty, then between that and the centre you're just working normal full-time hours. You'll still have your own money and pay your own way. We can set up the spare room for you so you can work in there or just have your own space when you need it and keep your independence."

Duri swallows hard, throat tight and a little painful. It makes sense, it does, it's rational and logical and oh so pragmatic, and Duri knows, he *knows*, and yet. It's a lot. It's heavy, it steals the breath from his lungs as he leans into the thought, then leans away from it. Giving up his own place, his security, giving up a part of his identity as an independent person, someone who stands on his own two feet and owns his world.

And then there's Minjun. Not living with his best friend. Leaving him to have to find a new flat mate.

Duri bites his lip.

"I...I don't know. I...it makes sense, you're right. But...it's kind of big, you know?"

Juwon's huff is pained, stained with frustration as his eyebrows furrow.

"Is it really, though? You practically live here anyway."

Hearing Juwon echo his own thoughts is confronting, and he blinks, breath stuttering in his lungs.

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“Yeah, I know. But also, not really. You know how I feel about being dependent on you. I don’t ever want the thing tying us together to be money. I want to know, always, that we’re both here because we want to be, because we’re choosing each other, not because we have nowhere to go or we’re reliant on each other.”

Juwon’s smile is sad, a little blue around its edges.

“I know, baby. And I respect that, you know I do. You have no idea how wonderful it is to be loved for me, not for my wallet or my name. But you’re making yourself sick. And I think this is the way forward, the way you get to have your independence without working yourself to death.”

Duri sighs, pained, fingers a tangle with Juwon’s, apologetic.

“I know. I did say it makes sense. I just...I need time to think about it. Can you give me that?”

It’s Juwon’s turn to sigh again.

“Yeah, of course. I’m sorry I sprung it on you.”

Duri leans in to kiss him on the lips, and Juwon leans forward, closer, closer, eager for reassurance. Duri smiles as he pulls back, the warmth under his breastbone nearly enough to drown out the nervous trill still humming there.

“I mean it, Juwon. I love you.”

And Juwon looks soft again, all the sadness brushed away, as he leans his forehead against Duri’s.

“Love you too.”

He pats the bed beside himself, fingers a little shaky still as his pulse takes its time to slow.

“Come on, get in. You owe me cuddles.”

“I do?”

“Yeah. You need to make up for nearly giving me a heart attack.”

Juwon smiles as he moves around the bed and crawls into bed with Duri, weary limbs brushing weary limbs. They curl up together, tight and close, slotted like puzzle pieces, seeking reassurance through gentle touches and soft, lazy kisses that aren’t meant to go anywhere, kisses that are just about closeness.

When Juwon drifts off to sleep, breath tickling the back of Duri’s neck in a warm, soft caress, Duri is left alone with his thoughts, doubt laced loudly through them in too-bright shades of green that have nervous butterflies hovering in his belly.

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Gwangju, October 2015

The streets of Gwangju still look the same, and Duri feels steeped in nostalgia as he sits alone at a window seat in a small café, black coffee and a blueberry muffin untouched in front of him. The café

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is cosy and, most importantly, new to Duri, carefully selected for its lack of dangerous memories, but there is no way to avoid the feel of the city, the scent of it, the way the memories permeate the very fabric of it.

It's Duri's third day here, and the first time he's ventured out anywhere other than the office building where the branch is housed and the hotel he's staying at. Itchy about the way the city presses in on him, the way it demands he remember, he's tried to make himself invisible, tried to hide from its insistent presence.

But there is only so long Duri can stand to drink the instant coffee available in his hotel suite and at the office, and after two days of it, the hankering for a decent brew finally drove him to find a café the second he finished for the day.

He stares out the window at the people passing by, their faces blending together, and pretends he isn't looking for one particular face, a smiling, heart-shaped mouth and sharp eyes.

"Um, excuse me?"

Duri looks up to see a darkhaired man standing by his table, looking directly at him. He's tall, maybe a few years younger than Duri, handsome with a wide smile and sparkly eyes. His fingers are drumming a soft, soundless rhythm on Duri's table in a way that seems to be unconscious.

Duri raises his eyebrows in a question.

"Yeah?"

"I, um, I'm sorry, this is going to sound really weird, but your name wouldn't happen to be Duri, would it? Im Duri?"

Duri blinks.

"Um. Yes? Who wants to know?"

The guy grins wide, relief obvious on his face, and he drops down in the seat opposite Duri without asking.

"I knew it! You haven't changed at all! It's so cool to see you, Duri-ssi! I – shit, you probably don't remember me. Um, I'm Ahn Hyungwon, we were at school together back when you went here. I was in the year below you."

Duri feels completely caught off guard. He didn't think he made an impression on anyone at that school besides Hosu, didn't think his presence was noticed or missed.

"Oh. Um. It's – nice to meet you, Hyungwon-ssi."

Hyungwon grins.

"It's really nice to meet you too, Duri-ssi. What have you been up to? It's been so long!"

This conversation feels surreal. Hyungwon seems nice enough, but he is a stranger, a stranger who knows Duri, and that feels very off balance.

"Um. I'm in IT. Technical team leader. I'm here on business for a few days."

Hyungwon looks excited.

"No way! That's so cool! So you don't live here anymore then?"

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“No, I don’t. I’m in Seoul, these days.”

And because Hyungwon is looking at him with open enthusiasm and seems genuinely interested, Duri feels obliged to show interest in him, too, this overly familiar stranger.

“How about you? Do you still live here?”

Hyungwon nods enthusiastically.

“Yeah! I love it here, it’ll always be my home. I’m a teacher, I teach new entrants at one of the local primary schools. I love it, the kids are so cool!”

Duri relaxes a little. Anyone who chooses to teach little kids and looks that sparkly eyed when talking about it can’t be a bad sort, even if he is a little much. He smiles at Hyungwon, genuinely this time.

“That’s great, Hyungwon-ssi. I’m glad to hear that, you sound very happy.”

Hyungwon nods, his hair bouncing, and it’s endearing. Duri finds himself smiling wider.

“Do you keep in touch with anyone from school, Duri-ssi?”

Duri shakes his head.

“No. I wasn’t really here for very long, so I didn’t get to know many people.”

Hyungwon frowns at that, looking puzzled.

“Really? But what about Kim Hosu? You were friends with him, right? You guys were always together!”

Something cold drops in Duri’s stomach, and he feels himself blanch. He swallows around the lump in his throat.

“Yeah, we were. We don’t keep in touch anymore though.”

Hyungwon frowns.

“That’s – surprising. You two seemed so close, like, you know, BFFs.”

It stings, and Duri breathes deeply, the smile long since gone off his face. His eyes drop to his hands.

“Yeah, well. Not anymore. We – we had a falling out.”

Hyungwon looks sad at that.

“Oh. I’m really sorry to hear that.”

He leans forward across the table with an expression like he’s trying to figure something out. Duri wishes he’d stop thinking up new questions, stop thinking about Duri and Hosu, wishes he’d get up and leave, stop reminding Duri of Hosu and all the things that happened. He wishes he could stand to get up and walk away, but something keeps him there, glues him to his chair, some kind of masochist streak that makes him watch as Hyungwon leans in and frowns, thoughtful, and ponders before speaking.

“You know, I kind of always thought – ah no, I probably shouldn’t say.”

And Duri’s masochist streak opens his mouth and ask the question he definitely *doesn’t* want to hear the answer to.

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“What?”

Hyungwon watches him, pensive, and Duri sweats.

“I kind of always thought you were together. You and Hosu-ssi. Like – *together* together.”

And there it is, in cold hard syllables, spat out onto the table between them.

Duri stares. The cold thing in his belly swells until it presses on his lungs, making it hard to breathe. He wants to own it, wants to *claim* what he had with Hosu, but the thing is that he *can't*. Duri is out, has been out for years, but he doesn't know if Hosu is, and he can't be the one to out him.

He swallows hard.

“Um. No. No, we were just friends.”

He says it with his eyes on his muffin, unable to look Hyungwon in the eye while he pushes the lie past his teeth, hating the taste of it, loathing having to deny Hosu. He breaks a piece off his muffin and puts it on his tongue, trying to drown out the sourness of the lie.

Hyungwon hesitates, then seems to think better off it and leans back, waves his hand.

“Ah well. Must've been reading into things, I do that. Last I heard, he was engaged to some girl, so obviously I got it wrong.”

The muffin turns to ash on Duri's tongue.

Hosu is engaged. To a girl.

He knew it was possible. Likely, even, after all these years, that his Hobah would have moved on and found love with someone else. But somehow, he never imagined it would be with a woman.

He doesn't know why it bothers him more that Hosu is with a woman, but it does. It feels like rejection of everything he had with Duri, a denial that is so much more than just *moving on*. It stings a little more than it should, and he swallows around the lump in his throat.

Hyungwon is still chatting happily, updating Duri on people he's never heard of, but Duri doesn't hear a word, just lets his cheerful banter wash over him while he sits with his mouth full of ashes. The air in the café seems stale now, and there's an ache forming behind his eyes. He needs to get out, into the fresh air, to breathe and process.

When he can't take it anymore, he forces himself to make eye contact with Hyungwon, forces a smile.

“It was nice to see you again, Hyungwon-ssi. I have to get to a meeting, but perhaps I'll see you again before I leave!”

He busies himself pulling on his jacket while Hyungwon stands.

“Ah yes, of course, I've taken up enough of your time, Duri-ssi. I hope to see you again!”

Duri nods and walks off with a cursory wave, stumbling out of the café on numb feet.

He blindly pushes his way through the crowds towards the river, needing to get away from the throng of people, needing to find a spot to sit and process.

Our Gentle Sin - a novel by Tara Lemana

He finds an empty bench and sits, staring out at the water. His head throbs insistently, and his throat aches. *Stop it*, he tells himself, *get a grip*. This shouldn't affect him. Hosu hasn't been his for a long time, he has no right to feel affected in any way by hearing he's moved on. What the hell did he expect? Duri himself has moved on too, he's with Juwon, Juwon whom he loves, Juwon who loves him.

Of course, Hosu has moved on. Of course, he's with someone new.

He breathes deeply, tries to fill his lungs to ease the pressure in his chest. The ache that sits there is senseless, it's stupid.

He fixes his eyes on the horizon and breathes deeply, pushing down the lump in his throat.

After what might have been hours or minutes, Duri gets to his feet and begins to walk. His legs take him all over the city, to all the places he and Hosu used to frequent.

The arcade looks much the same, even if the games have changed. The basketball game is still there, though, and Duri stares at it for long minutes. Runs his fingers along the machine's surface while he says a quiet, private farewell.

He sneaks into two of apartment buildings in town and stares at the stairwells they used to hide out in, can almost hear the sound of Hosu's breathing, the giggles and the small, breathless *hyung* that always made Duri feel dizzy and powerless. He whispers a soft farewell there, too.

A train ride later he finds himself standing amidst the trees across the road from Hosu's parents' home. He can almost taste the kiss they shared there that first day, full of excitement for this new thing between them, full of nerves and trepidation and so afraid to be seen. He slides down to sit against the tree and talks to Hosu, softly, heard only by the trees and the grass.

"I still miss you, Hobah. It's ridiculous, but I do. It's time to let go though. You've found someone new, and I want you to be happy. I really hope you're happy. "

He sits quietly, lining up his thoughts for a moment or two.

"I wonder what you're doing now. Did you manage to become a dancer? You were so talented, I hope you learned to see that somewhere along the way. I wonder what you'd think of me now? I let it go, Hobah, I let my music go. I was doing it, at uni, I had my Soundcloud going, had my songs on there, had followers, but then work happened, life happened, and there just wasn't time. I miss it a lot. I wonder if you'd be disappointed in me. I hope not."

He pulls at the grass between his fingers as he leans back against the tree.

"I found someone too, Hobah. He's nice, I think you'd like him. He's smart. Solid. Trustworthy. Kind. Things are good. It's not the same as it was with you, but we're adults now, right? We don't really get to feel how we did back then, that's not how it is when you're an adult."

His thoughts are still tumbling wildly, and saying them out loud feels good, feels healing.

"He wants me to move in with him. And I...I think I'll say yes. I need to move on, and Juwon, he's...he's good for me. He loves me. And I love him. I hope you can be happy for me, too. It took me a really long time to forgive myself for breaking us up, Hobah, and I'm still so sorry I hurt you. I hope one day you'll be able to forgive me."

He stands, brushes the grass off his slacks, runs his hands along the tree's bark.

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“Goodbye, Hobah.”

The whisper lingers in the air behind him as he turns and walks away.

He falls into his hotel bed exhausted later that night and is asleep within minutes.

When Juwon calls him for their goodnight chat, Duri is fast asleep.

The call goes unanswered.

*

“I missed you.”

Juwon breathes the words into his hair as they lie tangled in the sheets, skin salty and sticky, heartbeats still a little too fast, breathing still a little rushed.

“I missed you too.”

Duri kisses the skin in front of his mouth, too lazy to move, and Juwon’s breathy chuckle shakes both of them as the kiss lands on his pectoral.

“So how was Gwangju?”

Duri frowns. He already told Juwon all about the project and how things went on their way home from the airport, so why is he asking again?

“I told you, it was...”

“Not the job, babe. Gwangju.”

Ah. That Gwangju. Hosu’s Gwangju, the Gwangju of love and loss, of laughter and kisses and happiness and heartbreak.

Duri sighs, and his heart constricts a little.

“It was...hard. But good, I think. I feel like I got closure, seeing the place again. Like I said goodbye.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I think there were too many ghosts hanging around the back of my mind, before. Now they’ve been exorcised, I feel lighter.”

Juwon’s arm squeezes a little tighter around him, and he feels the press of lips against his hair. Juwon’s voice is soft when he speaks again.

“That’s great, honey. Sounds like it was a good trip, then.”

Duri nods. There’s a little buzzing in his stomach, a mix of nerves and excitement.

“I...um...I thought about what you asked me before I left.”

Juwon’s frame tenses up underneath him, and Duri snuggles closer into him.

“You did?”

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“Yeah. And I think, if you still want to, then maybe I should...move in.”

Juwon is silent for long seconds before pulling back to stare at Duri, wide eyed.

“Wait. What? You’re serious?”

Duri grins, fond.

“Yeah. I’d like to, I mean, if the offer still stands?”

“If the...what the hell, of course the offer still stands! Are you kidding me right now?”

He leans in and kisses Duri hard, excitement and relief bleeding through into Duri’s mouth, the taste of it salty and sweet on his tongue. When he pulls back, it’s to lean his forehead against Duri’s and stroke his cheek with the knuckles of his right hand.

“Shit baby, we’re really going to live together?”

“Yeah. Yeah, we are. If I can drop back to part-time hours at work. I – I haven’t talked to Insu-ssi yet.”

Juwon nods, eager, excited, and it makes Duri feel a little bit buzzed, to see how happy he is.

“Of course, of course. But you want to? Live here? With me?”

Duri’s grin stretches wider, and he chuckles against the salt-laced skin of Juwon’s ribcage.

“Yeah, doofus. Who else?”

Juwon sighs softly into his hair and squeezes Duri closer, tighter.

“I’m so happy, baby. I love you so much.”

The words are soft, almost too soft to hear, and Duri kisses the skin he’s pressed against.

“I love you too, Juwon.”

Juwon drifts off to sleep first, wrapped around Duri, limbs everywhere. Duri feels safe, warm, loved. Life with Juwon is a life of companionship, of caring, of looking out for each other. He loves Juwon, admires him, feels taken care of and wants to take care of him, too.

And that is worth a lot.

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Gwangju, April 2016

Spring is uncharacteristically warm this year, the usual rains holding off in favour of a heat that usually doesn’t show itself until June kisses July.

Daecheon beach is hot, bathed in full sun, though the water is still laced with winter’s icy chill this early in spring.

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The condo Hosu booked for Jiyeong and Seongmin's stag weekend away is perfect, easily accommodating all eight members of their group, two of Jiyeong's work friends, a cousin of Jiyeong's from Busan, and two of Seongmin's friends from CNU, as well as Hosu. The atmosphere is exuberant, loud and excited, and Hosu finds himself swept up in the mood, laughing and talking easily despite never having met these people before.

It's something he's gotten better at, over the years, putting himself out there. He's no longer the painfully self-conscious boy he was in high school, ashamed of his quirks, his passions, his likes and dislikes. He's proud now, of some of it at least, of being a dancer, of being gentle, of his smile. His wardrobe even has some pink in it now, and the odd sparkly shirt for the rare nights he and Iseul go out clubbing. It's not much, he's not *loud* about these things, but he's no longer ashamed down to his bones, comfortable enough to make a quiet statement to the world that Kim Hosu is more than his gender, more than his relationship, more than his parents.

The doors and windows to the condo have all been thrown open to let in the evening air, and as the day's heat leaches out, the condo is starting to get cold, sweat from a day in the sun starting to chill on the skin. Hosu has watched as dusk slowly bleached the colours from the world outside, ensconced between warm, tipsy bodies sprawled on couches and chairs around the room, deep in conversation. It's dark now, mellow, and so is Hosu, a gentle buzz of alcohol warm in his veins, not disorienting, not roaring and all-encompassing, just enough to feel relaxed and free of his usual anxiety.

The body beside him, one of Seongmin's work friends, shifts and stands, moving across the room, leaving Hosu's side cold, and he frowns. He's trying to decide between staying put and getting up to pour himself another drink when a new body drops in the empty space beside him, pressing up against him, warm and firm, and Hosu suppresses the urge to sigh happily and lean into the weight.

He looks up to find the warm weight belongs to Jiyeong's cousin from Busan, and he's looking at Hosu with big brown eyes and a pretty, pretty smile. Hosu's breath catches in his throat as his stomach swoops.

"Hey. Hosu, right?"

Hosu swallows hard, grasping the firm, warm hand Yujun extends to him, hoping his hands aren't clammy.

He had noticed Yujun earlier and avoided him since, afraid of his own reaction to the younger man's presence, afraid of the way his eyes strayed down from Yujun's pretty face to his chest and his tight jeans, afraid of the way his breathing changed when they made eye contact and Yujun smirked.

But now he's here, wedged into this couch, Yujun beside him, pressed close, and his scent is intoxicating, and Hosu is buzzed and there isn't anywhere else he'd rather be, so he stays.

"Hey. Yeah. Yujun, right? Jiyeong's cousin?"

Yujun smiles, wide and delighted, like Hosu knowing who he is is the biggest compliment he could possibly receive, and Hosu's stomach swoops again.

"Yeah. How do you know Jiyeong-hyung?"

Hosu realises he's still holding onto Yujun's hand and lets it go quickly, ears burning under the small smirk Yujun sends his way when he does.

"Um, we were roommates at CNU."

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“Oh wow, really? You’re *that* Hosu? That’s awesome, he used to talk about you all the time when he came home for the holidays!”

“He did? Oh. That’s nice. We’ve been best friends ever since those days. Met Seongmin there too.”

Hosu feels awkward and sweaty, nervous. Yujun is mesmerizing, all dark eyes and golden skin, slender hands and dark tattoos trailing upwards from his wrist, disappearing under the short sleeve of his black t-shirt. His hair is messy, a little too long, a little damp from the shower he took after the beach, and Hosu shouldn’t be so hopelessly attracted to the rockstar aesthetic when Yujun’s twinkly eyes and bright, cute grin completely undermine it, but he is, he’s drunk with it, hopelessly so.

Talking to Yujun is a breathless, electric affair, and Hosu should get up and walk away, should make his excuses and go to bed, sleep this off, but Yujun is smiling his cute smile and scrunching up his nose and it’s enough to make Hosu want to stay for *just one more minute*.

They talk, and it’s easy, easier than it should be, and Hosu lets himself get caught up, follows through with conversation about their interests while deliberately ignoring the thrum underlying it all, the way his body responds to Yujun’s presence, the way he finds himself leaning in, the way Yujun’s fingers keep finding reasons to brush his and setting off a chain reaction, a buzzing that sizzles all the way along his skin from his fingers to his belly and lights a fire there. A distant part of him knows what this is, recognises that Yujun is about to become a rip in Hosu’s tapestry, that he is on dangerous ground, but the fact that Yujun lives in Busan and Hosu will likely never see him again makes him feel safe, a little reckless even.

He tells himself that it’s okay to enjoy this for what it is, a conversation with someone attractive, that nothing will happen because Yujun doesn’t live here, and Hosu will be going home to Iseul, and a little bit of one-sided attraction won’t change that. He feels safe to sink into the giddy feeling, to allow himself the bliss of crushing on a cute boy a little without worrying that it will develop into more, because it can’t, it’s just here and now, there’s no future here, there never will be, and it’s okay to look as long as he doesn’t *touch*.

And look he does. He watches Yujun, admires the line of his throat as he throws his head back to laugh, the cut of his collarbones where his black t-shirt dips low, the sharp angle of his jaw as he talks, the flex of his muscles under the tanned skin of his forearms. He lets himself trace a finger along the etchings on Yujun’s arm when he explains the meaning behind his tattoos and tells himself he imagined the hitch in Yujun’s breath when he does.

He reassures himself it’s okay, it’s nothing, one-sided, just a little flirtation that won’t go anywhere, keeps telling himself so as Yujun’s fingers find his and start playing with them, keeps repeating it in his head as Yujun’s eyes find his and his mouth stops moving, all the words halting mid-sentence, falling apart like dried leaves, crumbling, forgotten.

The silence stretches on, and the room is suddenly very hot and very small, narrowed to just the two of them, pressed together on the couch, the bass of some lo-fi track pulsing up through Hosu’s feet and vibrating his spine, or maybe that’s Yujun’s touch.

It stretches on, and Hosu thinks he should say something, but he doesn’t, too caught up in Yujun’s stare, frozen and clinging onto Yujun’s fingers like a lifeline.

And then suddenly, Yujun is in his space, and his mouth is on Hosu’s, and Hosu opens up, like muscle memory, tongue already searching for Yujun’s, his free hand shooting up to the back of Yujun’s neck.

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The *boys don't box* Hosu has carried under his sternum for close to three decades shatters into a thousand pieces.

Memories break free, flooding every part of him, reminding Hosu of a long-ago love and suppressed but precious moments. Heat bursts in his belly, familiar but long buried, a dizzying amount of *want* pulses through him and for a second, two, ten, he forgets everything, forgets Iseul, forgets who he is, just loses himself in this moment, this kiss.

It's an *oh* moment, a sudden awakening, but it's not new, it's an unearthing of something long suppressed.

Hosu learns. He remembers. *This* is what it feels like to *want*, to *be wanted*, to be desired. It's bewildering, startling, it's heat and chills and a capsized feeling in his stomach, it's breathing too fast and craving too much, it's hurtling towards things that burn, things that melt, things that have no bearing on *duty* or *responsibility*.

It's both exactly like it was with Duri and nothing like it. It's desire, hot, scalding, intense, but it's not love, not that.

It's nothing like what he has with Iseul, and in a moment of clarity, everything crystallises for Hosu.

He feels alive, every fibre of his being dancing with it, with the flutter of gossamer wings and the zap of pulsating energy. He *remembers*, everything, every touch, every taste, the way his body moves without his input, without thought or consciousness, the way it arches and jumps under every touch, every swipe of a wet, pink tongue.

Yujun doesn't taste like Duri, tastes like something else, himself, soju, a sweep of mint toothpaste underneath it. Hosu likes it, wants more, presses in and opens up, greedy for every taste, every lick, every breath.

Yujun's hand is on his face, cupping his jaw, the other roaming freely along his torso, across his chest, his belly, sparking currents along his skin before settling on his waist to pull him closer.

And closer Hosu goes. He lets himself be pulled in, tilting forward, hands settling on his hips now, pulling him in, into Yujun's scent, into the bubble that surrounds him, shutting them in and everything else out. He lets Yujun up the stakes, just for a minute, two, a few moments of having something he's denied himself for so long, just for a while.

He sinks deeper into it, into the feeling of boundless *want*, marvels at his capacity for it, capacity he thought lost with Duri, shudders in distant awe at the magnitude of it, of this unknown well of feeling inside him. He feels protective of it instantly, of this ability to feel like this, to feel this vividly and loudly, to resonate with it down to his bones, decides there and then that he never wants to lose it again.

When Yujun pulls him across to straddle his lap, Hosu goes, and it feels natural, arms slipping around Yujun's neck, fingers tangling in his hair, tugging. With his back to the room, the illusion of privacy is complete, their bubble is theirs alone, and Hosu sinks, uncaring for anything that isn't *this*, anything that isn't the taste of Yujun on his tongue, the heat curling in his belly, the slightly painful grip on his hips. His body feels electrified, lava under his skin and hot, fierce *need* beating its way out of his chest.

It's a sound that shatters the moment, a moan, soft but startling, and Hosu realises that it came from him, his own voice betraying him to anyone listening, watching. With a shock, everything comes

Our Gentle Sin - a novel by Tara Lemana

back into focus, where they are, what they're doing, who he is, who's waiting for him at home, and he pulls back, heart racing and breath coming fast, duty and responsibility tugging him back to the present.

He leans his head on Yujun's shoulder and takes a moment to breathe, to hide away before facing the consequences of what he just did.

When he looks up at Yujun, the younger man is smiling softly. He lifts a hand off Hosu's hip to stroke Hosu's cheek, and it feels unreasonably intimate somehow.

"You okay, Hosu-ssi?"

It's incongruous, the formal language, after that kiss, all the heat in it, and Hosu huffs a laugh. He keeps his eyes on Yujun only, not ready to face Jiyeong or Seongmin, and nods.

"Yeah, I'm okay. That was...really good, I won't lie."

Yujun nods, his smile cheeky, sparkly-eyed.

"It was. Thanks for indulging me."

Hosu chuckles again, hesitant, reality barreling down on him now.

"Ha. You're welcome, I guess? I really shouldn't – shouldn't have done that."

Yujun's nod is resigned, but his smile only falters a little.

"Ah. Not available?"

"No. I'm sorry."

"Don't be, I had fun."

He smiles, leans in, twinkly eyed.

"It's not like I was picking out china patterns, hyung, it was just a kiss."

And Hosu knows it was, knows it didn't matter in Yujun's world, that this was just a drunken kiss to him. But to Hosu, it was waking up, the end of lying to himself, the end of carrying that box in his chest, the end of being confused about who he is, the start of clarity.

He smiles at Yujun, grateful. Kisses his cheek, soft, an apology and a thank you all in one.

"Thanks, Yu-ah. I'm going to head to bed. I'll see you in the morning."

When he turns away, Jiyeong and Seongmin are watching him, Seongmin's face a mask of shock, while Jiyeong just looks sad.

Hosu smiles at his friends as he stands, awkward, grateful but pained at the way his tight jeans mask the way his body is lagging behind in its return to reality. He makes his way across the room, stopping only to squeeze Jiyeong's shoulder on his way past. His friend squeezes the hand on his shoulder briefly before he moves on, a wordless show of friendship, and it eases the anxious roiling in Hosu's stomach a little.

He lies awake for a long time as the party continues without him, thoughts spinning in his head, heat ebbing far too slowly from his body as the consequences of what this means for him piece themselves together in his mind.

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He half-expects Jiyeong to come and find him, but he doesn't.

Eventually, Hosu drifts off to sleep, long after the music has faded and everyone else has made their way to bed or drifted off on the couches in the living room.

In the morning, Hosu wakes to Jiyeong climbing into bed with him, the way they used to do occasionally at CNU when one of them was sad or stressed.

He opens his eyes to a too-bright room and a serious-looking Jiyeong.

"Hey, Yeong-ah."

His voice comes out crackly at the edges, dry and hungover.

"Hey, hyung."

"What's up?"

It's a stupid question with a far-too-obvious answer, but so be it. It's too early and Hosu is too hungover to beat around the bush.

"Thought you might need someone to talk to."

Hosu hums.

"Hm. Maybe."

He stops there, uncertain. The box may have shattered, but Hosu is still unpracticed, still scared, still holding years of shame and insecurity, and this is new, and it's big, and he doesn't know exactly where to start putting words to all the things he's never shared.

"I..I don't know where to start."

Jiyeong takes his hands, tangles their fingers together, gives Hosu something to ground himself, and Hosu feels grateful, steadied.

"You could start with last night? Yujun?"

"Hm. Yeah. That was....something."

Jiyeong huffs a laugh.

"Hyung. I don't know if you noticed, but Yujun is a guy."

Hosu smiles a small smile. God, he loves Jiyeong, always knowing how to ease Hosu into things.

"Yeah, I spotted that."

"You don't....usually kiss guys. At least, not that I'm aware of. Do you?"

"Not for a long time, no."

Jiyeong nods, like that isn't unexpected.

"Not the first time, then?"

Hosu sighs, swallows hard. He can do this.

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"No, not the first time."

Jiyeong is quiet then, for a beat, two.

"Your ex? The one you told me about when we were at uni?" he guesses. Hosu nods.

"Yeah."

"Okay."

They lie quietly for a while, Hosu lost in his thoughts, Jiyeong waiting, patient, giving Hosu space.

"I tried, Yeong-ah. I really did. I tried to be what they wanted me to be, so hard, but I can't. I just...I can't."

"What did they want you to be, hyung?"

Hosu swallows hard, fights the tears prickling at the corners of his eyes.

"Perfect." A pause, then, softer, whispered, "Straight."

"Ah. So...you're not? Straight?"

Hosu laughs at that, but it's tight, humourless.

"Isn't that kind of obvious at this point, Yeong-ah?"

Jiyeong shrugs.

"I don't want to assume, hyung. You could just be curious."

Hosu's eyes are burning and his chest hurts, his lungs ache like they're about to burst. He can't look at Jiyeong's face anymore, at all the sincerity and gentleness radiating from it, can't take another second, so he closes his eyes, leans his forehead against Jiyeong's and breathes deeply. He can smell Jiyeong's shampoo, the same apple shampoo he's used since uni, and it's soothing, familiar, grounding.

"I think...I don't think I'm just curious, Yeong-ah."

"No?"

The words are thorny, hard to push past his teeth for the first time, but this is Jiyeong, his person, his best friend, the one person he knows won't ever judge him, for anything, so he pushes harder, holds on tighter, and spills the scary truth he's never voiced before out onto the sheets between them.

"I think I'm gay."

Jiyeong squeezes his hands tighter, holds them closer to his chest.

"That's okay, hyung."

And that's such a lovely thought, so soft and pretty, and Hosu wants to hang onto it so much, but there's a fear in his chest that wants attention, that wants to settle in under his breastbone and pull the shattered box back together, reconstruct itself, and it screams at Hosu that Jiyeong is *wrong*, that it might be okay for him and Seongmin but it certainly isn't okay for Hosu.

"Is it?"

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“Yeah, hyung. It really is.”

“It doesn’t feel okay, Yeong-ah. I feel so guilty. What about Iseul?”

“Look at me, hyung.”

Hosu breathes, deep and unhinged, grateful for Jiyeong’s hands holding his, and opens his eyes, looks his friend in the eye.

“This is not your fault. You do not carry guilt for this. You did not choose to be who you are, you’ve tried to be what you’re not all your life and it doesn’t work, it’s not possible. You can’t run from who you are, you can’t hide from it, and you can’t ever be truly happy pretending to be someone you’re not. Iseul will be sad, she will be hurt, but she will understand, I know she will, and she will move on and find someone who will love her like you can’t.”

The lump in Hosu’s throat is bitter, bilious, and he swallows hard. There’s a dim awareness that he’s shaking, that his hands are squeezing Jiyeong’s fingers too hard, that he’s holding himself too tightly coiled in an effort not to crumble.

Jiyeong must see it, because he sighs a soft *oh hyung* and pulls Hosu close, closer still, letting go of one of his hands in favour of wrapping his arm tightly around Hosu’s shoulders, tugging Hosu’s face back into his shoulder.

“It’s not your fault, hyung. You’re not wrong for feeling like this, for being who you are, you were made like this and it’s who you’re meant to be. It’s okay to be you.”

Hosu does crumble then. All his efforts to hold himself together dissolve into nothingness, a whoosh of air, and the tears come.

Hosu cries.

He cries for the years he spent trying to be who he isn’t, for the mold he tried to press himself into that was never made for him.

He cries for the boy he was, who thought he wasn’t good enough the way he was, who believed he was wrong for being who he was.

He cries for the hurt he’s going to cause Iseul, hurt that could’ve been avoided if he hadn’t been made to feel like being him was a sin, was wrong, was broken.

He cries for the fear he still feels when he thinks of his parents, of having to tell them this, tell them who he is, of the disappointment and the judgment he will face.

He cries for the certainty he feels deep inside himself that this means he will never, ever be good enough for them.

He cries for the relief he feels at finally having acknowledged who he is, finally having put the pieces together in a way that feels like it might fit.

Jiyeong holds him through it, lets him cry himself out until he has nothing left, lets him rid himself of everything until he’s empty.

When the tears slow and the shaking subsides, he registers Jiyeong’s voice reciting a gentle mantra of *it’s okay, hyung, you’re okay* in his ear.

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And as Hosu lets out the breath he feels like he's been holding for decades, he holds onto the hope that maybe, just maybe, it will be.

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Telling Iseul is excruciating.

He tells her the night he comes home from the stag weekend, the words bursting out of him as he sits opposite her on the couch, body tense and eyes fixed on his hands.

It hurts, to hurt someone this way, to know you made them promises and are taking them back, to make them feel like their time with you was a lie, a wasteland, all pretend.

She doesn't believe him, at first, feels sure that their years together, the love he feels for her, the intimacy they shared, mean he can't possibly be *gay*, that he must be *bisexual*, and that by extension, that means it's not about his sexuality but about *her*.

He tells her the truth, but a truth with gentled edges, with holes in it, to spare her, and maybe himself a little, too. His leaky truth is that he loves her but is not *in love* with her, *was never* in love with her because he is *gay*, not because she isn't wonderful.

It's too soft, and as a result, it takes time for her to believe it, to accept it.

He can't tell her what it really means, can't tell her that for all the times they were intimate, he never *wanted* her, never felt *desire* for her. He can't tell her that kissing a stranger lit him up in ways he never felt with her, that he has lusted after men he never even knew in a way he never did after her.

Most of all, he can't tell her that it was thoughts of Duri that helped him be intimate with her, to block out the things about himself he wasn't ready for, the things he tried to bury and never look at again.

He feels despicable, keeping these things from her, knowing that these things were the truth in the first place, feels like a horrible, terrible person for not being able to love her like she deserved, for lying, for hiding, for hurting her.

But telling her all the things that cut, all the things that still lie buried in his chest and claw at him from the inside, that would hurt her more, would destroy her. And so he keeps them, holds onto them in silence, bears them for her, and finds other ways to get her to believe him, to get her to let him go.

He tells her about Duri, lays his first love bare for her, the outlines of it, the edges and the softness of it, but not the flesh, not the blood and bone, not all of the things that made it so real.

He tells her about Yujun, the catalyst, too. She thinks he's leaving her for Yujun, then, and convincing her otherwise takes some doing.

It's not enough. He's still hiding things, and she knows, she tastes the bitterness of it in the air between them and it makes her question what he's not telling her.

Our Gentle Sin - a novel by Tara Lemana

She cries. She cries and talks and asks questions for days. It aches, to keep going over it, but it's what she needs, to see that he's sure, that he's not going to change his mind, that he really is who he says he is, so he gives it to her.

He sleeps in the spare room while she goes through her mental separation process, gives her space when she needs it, is there for her when she needs it. The spare room at Jiyeong and Seongmin's apartment is ready and waiting for him, but it doesn't feel right to leave yet, so he stays, sees it through.

In the midst of it all, Jiyeong and Seongmin get married. Iseul stays home, the prospect of watching their friends be married by Hosu, the potential added insult of meeting Yujun, all of it too much for her to swallow.

It's a surreal experience for Hosu. The strange mixture of joy at his friends' happiness with sadness and guilt over what Iseul is feeling because of him makes the day a rollercoaster ride that leaves him exhausted at the end of the day.

Yujun is there, too, cutting a fine figure in a tailored suit. It's hard not to look, and Hosu does, he looks and looks. Yujun looks, too, looks in a way that makes it hard for Hosu to remember his own name, and he has to remind himself that he can't *touch*, not yet, not until things are closed off with Iseul, until they're officially *done*.

He keeps his resolve, this time, steels his spine and doesn't stray beyond looks, lets the sexual tension go unresolved.

It's two days after the wedding, a little over a week after he comes out to Iseul, when she tells him over coffee that she's ready for him to go now. It feels sudden, even though it's been nine days. He's a little rudderless, unprepared for the shift in her. She's calm, certain, clear-eyed and ready, the Iseul he knows and loves, and that's reassuring, even if she's a little distant, even if her eyes are still swollen and her body is stiff when she hugs him goodbye.

It takes him no time at all to get dressed and grab the bag he packed days ago when he expected to be leaving.

An hour later, Hosu unlocks the door to Jiyeong and Seongmin's empty apartment with his spare key. His chest is a whorl of confusing emotions, the steely blue sadness of his ending with Iseul mixing with the exuberant yellows of a new beginning, a new phase, a frightening but authentic journey ahead of him.

He sits alone on his friends' couch and contemplates a future alone while his friends celebrate their honeymoon on Jeju Island. It's a bizarre contrast that's not lost on him.

But Hosu is okay. For the first time in a long time, he feels like he's living his truth. He's scared shitless, but at least he's not lying to himself anymore.

Hosu has never been more terrified or more excited in his life.

Our Gentle Sin - a novel by Tara Lemana

Chapter 9

Seoul, April 2016

Spring is easy on the senses, even in Seoul city. It's the time of year before the heat of summer really hits, before the smell becomes overpowering, that acrid scent of tar and rubber that lines the back of the tongue and bleeds into every meal, every drink, every kiss.

Duri loves spring, loves it more here, despite the lack of blossoms, the lack of buds and greenery. He never did grow up around the fragile side of life, the newness of an unfurling leaf or the birth of a lamb, the rawness of death, the side that Seongmin saw as he helped his parents on the farm, the side that Duri only knows from books.

He loves the way the streets shine after the spring rains, loves the slickness of the black under the moon when he walks back to the apartment from the centre, loves the balminess of the air, the mild, damp touch of it against his skin, too warm to be cold but too cool to make him sweat and lose his coat.

His shoes scuff the pavement, drops of rain splattering the toes, catching the light as he passes under streetlights. His umbrella keeps him moving in his own little world, his own bubble within the dreariness of a weeping city.

It's late, again. His shift at the centre was meant to be over at seven, but he'd lingered behind when a boy had wandered in off the street as he was leaving, sodden and shivering and miserable. He'd stayed to see him settled, doing the thing he loves most, soothing a lost kid with nowhere to go, giving him a safe place, dry clothes, food, a listening ear.

He'd handed over to the volunteers once the boy calmed down, but by then, he was well and truly late. He'd tried to call Juwon several times before leaving, getting voicemail each time, giving up after the fourth try with an apprehensive tug in his chest.

It's been four months since he packed up everything he owned and moved out of the flat he shared with Minjun and into the apartment Juwon owns in the heart of the city. It's been a transition, a wobbly, rocky phase of adjustment, the excitement of living together liberally brushed with the frustrations that come with finding new ways to be together, sharing space not just *sometimes* but *all times*, now that the apartment isn't just Juwon's anymore, now that it's *their space*.

Duri's doing better; the dark violet stains under his eyes are less prominent now, less threatening, and the hollows in his cheeks have filled out some. He sleeps better, and the cracks in his memory have slowly filled in as the weeks trickle by.

His day job still has him doing too many hours, with Duri committed to five hours a day on top of his shifts at the centre. Juwon had bristled at that, his anger spiky and sullen, but Duri had been stubborn in his refusal to leave the company, acutely aware of how lucky he was that Insu had been willing to accommodate him, finding a part-timer to fill the other fifteen hours.

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It's still a long week, but it's better, much better, and Duri feels human again, like the past four months have slowly drip-fed his substance back into his skin, filling all his spaces until he's fuller again, more solid, not-quite-whole but something like it.

He checks his watch and sighs; it's ten thirty. Juwon is bound to be home by now. His flight had been scheduled to come in at seven and they'd been planning to meet at home for a late dinner, but Duri's probably missed the chance to eat with him by now. A sense of unease at Juwon's lack of response to his earlier calls sits heavily in Duri's belly, but he pushes it away, tells himself not to overthink things, that Juwon is probably just tired after his week in Tokyo and has fallen asleep on the couch.

He reaches the apartment and shakes his umbrella out before entering through the front door, nodding a greeting to Haneul, the warm, round-cheeked father figure who mans the door in the evenings, and makes his way to the shiny elevator.

Everything is opulent in this building, excessive, and Duri still feels out of place despite being an almost daily visitor for almost two years and a resident for four months. He stares straight ahead at the crack between the elevator doors, avoiding his own reflection that stares back at him from golden, mirrored surfaces on all sides of him, loud and judging.

Walking into the apartment he and Juwon now share is an entirely different experience. It's comfortable, relaxed, and Duri breathes a sigh of relief. It's still more luxurious than he needs, but it feels like home, sort of, almost, and Duri smiles softly to himself as he takes his shoes off and slips his tired feet into his slippers.

There's no sound from the quiet apartment as he walks in, and the living room and kitchen are dark and still. He can smell the takeaways Juwon must've brought home for dinner, and he feels a pang of regret that they didn't get to eat together as planned.

He makes his way through the silent apartment to the bedroom. Juwon isn't on the couch, asleep in front of the tv as expected, and Duri frowns a little as he realises that means he didn't wait for Duri to come home, despite the fact they haven't seen each other for a week.

It stings a little, even though he is the one who was late.

He brushes his teeth in the guest bathroom and quietly slips into the master bedroom. It's dark and silent there, too, Juwon's quiet breathing the only thing stirring the air.

Duri sighs and slips out of his clothes, dropping them in the hamper. He puts on a t-shirt and crawls into bed next to Juwon, using his feet to tuck the duvet around his cold toes to try and warm them up without waking the man asleep beside him.

Minutes pass, and Duri has just started to drift off when Juwon stirs beside him.

"You're here."

His tone is off, too neutral, too level, and discomfort stirs in Duri's belly again as he opens his eyes. Juwon is looking at him in the dark room.

"Where were you?"

"At the centre, Juwon. You know I had a shift."

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"Yeah. Til seven. It's nearly eleven. Where were you after? We were meant to have dinner together."

"I told you, at the centre. A boy came in just as I was leaving. He was really upset, I wanted to help settle him before I left, so I stayed behind for a bit."

"You couldn't have called?"

"I did. You didn't pick up."

"Right, so it's my fault?"

Duri bristles.

"I didn't say that, babe. Why are you being like this? I just stayed to help the kid settle, is all. I'm sorry I was late, but he needed me!"

Juwon huffs.

"I needed you, Duri. We haven't seen each other for a week! All I wanted was to have dinner with you after not seeing you for so long, and instead I came home to a cold apartment."

"I know, I'm sorry I wasn't here. But you know this comes with the territory. This is what I *do*! You *know* that, you're part of the centre too, you *know* how important it is!"

"I know that, but it shouldn't be more important than us, than this! I just asked you for *one lousy night*! You couldn't have left Minho to look after the kid, just this once?"

Duri sighs, guilt mixing with annoyance against his ribs. He rubs his temples, long fingers reaching around his forehead to press in and around, slow and steady, massaging against the early throb of an impending headache.

Juwon rolls onto his back, jaw tight and hands clenching onto the duvet as he stares up at the ceiling.

"I'm sorry I was late," Duri says from behind his hand, "I don't know what else you want me to say?"

"You do though. You know *exactly* what I want you to say."

It comes out through gritted teeth. Duri's hand drops away from his head as he looks across at Juwon's profile, disbelief souring the taste of his tongue.

"Are you kidding me right now? This again?"

"Yeah, this again. We had a deal. Twenty hours at the office, twenty hours at the centre. Instead, you're still doing twenty-five at the office, and you stay late at least two nights a week at the centre. I hardly see you! When will you stop being a stubborn ass and quit the office?"

The sour taste in Duri's mouth is spreading quickly, a hot bitterness dripping down the back of his throat.

"Oh, *I'm* the ass? You're the one pressuring me on something you *know* full well I don't want to do but *I'm the ass*?"

"We had a *deal*!"

He's raised his voice now, and Duri feels his anger rising. He throws the duvet off and climbs out of bed, movements staccato with suppressed fury.

Our Gentle Sin - a novel by Tara Lemana

“We did, Juwon. The deal was I drop down to part time and move in here, and you stop pressuring me to make myself dependent on you! I kept up my end, so why haven’t you?”

Duri can feel the moment Juwon rounds on him behind his back, spitting angry words into the space between them as Duri pulls on his jeans, hands snapping the denim in angry, cutting motions.

“Why is it such a big deal to you to be all in with me, huh? What the hell are you afraid of? Don’t you trust me? Don’t you want this? What’s so terrible about sharing everything with me? What’s mine is yours, all of that? Is this all just a joke to you? Am I just an *option*?”

It’s unfair. Duri knows Juwon is lashing out in hurt, that he doesn’t mean it. But it stings, it chafes against a wound that never quite heals properly, and his teeth grind as he spits back.

“The big deal is I don’t want to owe you, don’t you get that? I don’t want to be beholden to you, I don’t want to be dependent on you for a handout, to have to beg for an allowance like some trophy wife. I want to be Im Duri, who *chooses* to be with you, not Im Duri who has no choices left! Why can’t you just respect that and appreciate that I want you for *you*, not your money?”

“You wouldn’t even have met me if it wasn’t for my money, Duri! It was good enough for you then, so why start being all high and mighty about it now? In for a penny, in for a pound, right?”

At that, Duri turns, anger blistering, cold on his bare shoulders.

“Go to hell, Juwon.”

Grabbing his sweatshirt off the floor, he stomps out of the bedroom, ignoring Juwon calling his name behind him.

The anger roils hot and cold in his stomach as he moves through the apartment, slamming the living room door behind himself, bare feet slapping against the cold kitchen tiles as he flicks the light switch and makes his way to the fridge.

Juwon doesn’t come out as Duri moves around the kitchen, angrily slamming cupboard doors as he makes himself a mug of hot chocolate, leaving the dirty saucepan in the sink when he’s done in a petty display of rebellion.

He’s sitting on the window seat overlooking the city lights when Juwon comes out forty minutes later and drops down on the seat, next to Duri’s feet. Duri ignores him, eyes resolutely fixed on the pretty, sparkly view.

“I’m sorry, I was out of line.”

Juwon sounds calm, voice steady. Duri’s shoulders are tight, and his feet are cold, but his hands are warm, wrapped around the mug. He doesn’t turn.

“Yeah, you were. That was a shitty thing to say, and you know it.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“Why’d you say it?”

Juwon sighs.

“Pissed, I guess. I don’t get it. I’m really trying to, Du-ah, but I don’t understand why this is so important to you. Why you’re okay using the money for the centre but not for you.”

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Duri finally turns then. He stares at Juwon.

“Are you serious? You still don’t get it? After all the times we’ve talked about this?”

Juwon shrugs.

“Guess I’m an idiot, because I really don’t.”

“You don’t see that it’s not the same thing? Using your money to help those kids, as part of a business arrangement where you benefit as well, versus using it to pay for my own bills?”

“It’s still the same money though. And they’re *our* bills now, not just yours.”

Duri sighs. The anger dulls into something softer, more manageable.

“It’s not about that, babe. Look, what happens if we split and I’m reliant on you for my income? What then? I have to leave the centre for us to get a break from each other? How’s that going to work?”

“But how is this any different? Whether you’re there full-time or part-time, we’re stuck with each other either way? And don’t forget we have an exit agreement in place. If that happens, I pull back from the day-to-day management and become a silent partner, remember?”

“Yeah. A silent partner who pays my wages. Wouldn’t you rather know that I’m choosing to be with you because of *you*, and not staying because I can’t afford to leave?”

“I already know that though. If you being a stubborn ass about this has made anything crystal clear, it’s that you aren’t here because you can’t afford to leave. I already know you’re choosing me for me, Duri. You don’t need to keep proving it to me.”

Duri looks at him, long and hard, studies the handsome face, the long lashes, the sleep-mussed hair.

“Who says it’s you I’m trying to prove it to, dumbass?”

Juwon blinks.

“So...this is about your pride? You’re being stubborn over *pride*?”

It’s Duri’s turn to shrug.

“I guess. Either way though, it’s my choice, not yours, and you’re not going to pressure me into quitting before I’m good and ready. I promise I’ll try to be better about my hours, but you know there are going to be times when I want to stay late to help out, and you’re going to need to deal with that. That’s part of this.”

Juwon’s sigh is resigned.

“I know. It’s okay, just...try to be here on the special nights, yeah? I really missed you, babe, and not finding you here when I got back made me feel like you didn’t miss me at all.”

The anger fizzles out into something more like guilt, and Duri reaches out to grab Juwon’s fingers, weaving them between his own.

“I’m sorry. I really am sorry I wasn’t here. I wanted to be, I missed you so much.”

Juwon’s smile is small, tentative.

“Come back to bed then?”

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Duri returns his smile, nodding.

“Yeah. My feet are freezing.”

Juwon keeps their fingers tangled as they move back to the bedroom through the cold apartment.

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Gwangju, April 2016

Of all the decisions Hosu has ever made, the decision to leave Gwangju for Seoul is perhaps the easiest.

The urge to start afresh is strong, to have a clean slate somewhere where no one knows him, somewhere where he won't run into Iseul and be confronted with his guilt, somewhere he won't feel like the disapproving eyes of his parents and their friends are around every corner.

He takes the coward's way out and tells his mother about his split from Iseul over the phone. The fear of a painful conversation, of a violent chafing at his insides, makes him recoil from the prospect of visiting his parents in person to break the news.

It's a little easier, but not much.

“Eomma?”

“Hosu-ah! My boy, you called your eomma!”

The smile in her voice starts out on full beam, ignorant of the *disappointment* her son is about to bring her, and Hosu swallows hard.

“How are you, eomma?”

He only half-listens to her reply, the happy prattling on about her friends and local events, waiting for a natural lull in the conversation to cut in.

When it comes, he isn't ready.

“Eomma? I, um, I have some news.”

“Oh, you do? What is it? Oh, don't tell me. You and Iseul finally set a date for the wedding! Am I right?”

She sounds excited, and Hosu fights against the tightness in his throat and the burning behind his eyes.

“Not quite, eomma. Actually, um. It is about Iseul and me. We...we broke up, eomma. We decided to go our separate ways.”

It's silent on the other end of the line, and Hosu feels cold. When she speaks, the humour and softness are gone from her voice.

“What? Hosu, this isn't funny.”

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"I know, eomma. I'm not joking. It's true. We – we weren't happy together. We wanted – different things, so we decided to split up."

The lies fall off his tongue so easily, too easily, and he feels sick, but he can't face telling her the real reason, too steeped in the fear of rejection. He isn't strong enough for that yet, isn't anywhere near ready to crack his chest open and let her look inside to see the kind of man her boy *isn't*. And so, for now, he keeps the truth of his colours folded away in the places she cannot reach.

The anger still comes, though. His mother clacks her tongue in that vexed, sharp manner that still makes him cringe even now he's an adult and towers over her.

"Don't be ridiculous. You call that girl and tell her you made a mistake, you tell her you're sorry and *you fix it*. You hear me? You fix it!"

Her voice is thick with disappointment, waves of it rolling down the phone line into his ears, lodging in the back of his throat to cut off his air supply. The message *who cares what you want* is unvoiced, but somehow all the louder for it.

There's a part of Hosu that cowers, a little boy deep inside him who wants to do whatever it takes to make his eomma proud and happy again. But the bigger part of him, the part that's been working hard to grow up, to grow strong, and to accept himself, that part screams in outrage at her response. That part beats its fists on the inside of his ribcage and demands to know where her love for her son is, why she's not asking him if he's okay, why she's getting angry when she should be supporting him.

He squares his shoulders where he sits, determined. His hand is white knuckled around his phone as, for the first time in his life, Hosu stands up to his mother.

"No, eomma."

She misses a beat.

"What?"

"I said no."

He forces his voice to stay calm, steady, hoping the waver in it doesn't translate across the airwaves.

"Kim Hosu, how dare you talk to your mother..."

"This is not up for discussion, eomma. My relationship with Iseul is my business, not yours. We've decided to go our separate ways and we won't be getting back together. There is nothing to fix."

She sputters a little, and he softens slightly, sighs softly down the phone line.

"I know you liked her, eomma, and I'm sorry you'll not have her for a daughter in law, but that's the way it is."

She's silent for a moment. When she speaks again, there's steel in her voice.

"I'm very disappointed in you, Hosu. Your father won't be pleased. I trust you'll see reason once you've had a chance to think about this."

Hosu's heart clinches, the little boy in him curling up in horror at his mother's words, but he holds himself upright, spine ramrod straight, and borrows some of his mother's steel.

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"I'm sorry to disappoint, eomma. I've done nothing but think about this. Iseul and I aren't right for each other. I hope someday you'll see that."

He hangs up the phone, then, unable to keep himself together any longer, and burrows deep into the cushions of Jiyeong and Seongmin's couch, muffling the sound of his cries.

Within seconds his friends surround him and wrap him up, two sets of arms holding him tight, keeping his pieces from falling too far apart, soothing and grounding.

Jiyeong's soft mantra of *you're okay, you're okay, you did great* echoes around his skull long after the tears dry up.

*

Telling Harin doesn't go as expected. A part of him is nervous she will hate him for hurting her friend, and it fills him with an abject fear that he's about to get a tongue lashing. He puts off calling her for days until Jiyeong tells him to get to it before Iseul does.

"This is your story, hyung, she deserves to hear it from you and not your ex. Man up and call her."

He texts her instead, asking to meet him for a walk by the river. She's already waiting for him when he gets there and accepts the coffee he offers her in apology for being late, wrapping her fingers gratefully around it to ward off the early morning chill.

His nerves make him antsy. He's unpracticed at this conversation and unsure where to start, and it makes him hedge, makes him suck on his words to taste them over and over while he considers their value, silence forming a bubble in the air between them.

Harin breaks it with a sharp elbow to his side.

"Spit it out, Su-ah."

He jumps a little, shocked out of his stupor.

"W-what?"

"You ask me here, buy me coffee and now you're all quiet and nervous. Something's up. Out with it, it's just me, you know you can tell me anything."

And he does, logically he knows that Harin won't judge him, will always support him, but finding the words for this big thing that he's so very well versed in hiding even from himself is still hard, still new, still very, very awkward.

But he has to, and so he breathes, pulls in all the air he can fit into his shaky lungs, and tries.

"Okay, so. I...I need to tell you something. But...shit, okay, this is hard."

But this is Harin, Harin who knows him, who knows how to help him feel stronger, so she grabs his hand and tangles their fingers together, squeezing gently.

"It's okay, Su-ah. Whatever it is, it's okay."

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He smiles, watery, but it's enough, the touch and the reassurance, it bleeds strength into him through his fingertips and this time when he breathes in, he finds the words he needs.

"I broke things off with Iseul."

It's silent for a moment, two.

"Okay. Why's that?"

Her tone is careful, neutral, and her fingers are still gripping his in a strong, bolstering hold. His breath is shaky.

"I broke it off because I can't be with her. I can't be with her because.... because I'm gay, Rinie."

The words are out, and they're terrifying, and he braces himself for outrage, for Harin to let go of his fingers, for her to yell at him, to be angry at him for lying to her, for lying to Iseul, for lying to everyone.

But it doesn't come. Her fingers stay linked with his, and her voice is soft when she speaks.

"Oh Su-ah."

He looks at her, and she looks back, eyes gentle, sad, and he blinks, swallows.

"You been carrying that all this time?"

He shrugs, not yet willing to admit to the level of self-delusion he went to all these years.

"I guess? I've mostly just been figuring it out lately."

She hums, thoughtful.

"How did Iseul take it?"

Hosu grimaces.

"About how you'd think. She didn't believe me at first. Got there in the end, but it was hard."

"Yeah, it would be. You okay?"

He nods, firmly this time.

"Yeah, I am. I feel better. Lighter."

She hums again.

"Yeah, that I can believe. That's a lot to carry. How'd your folks take it?"

"I only told them we broke up, not why. You know what they're like."

"Yeah, fair enough, I guess. They'll find out eventually though, Su-ah."

"Yeah, I know. I'll tell them, I just need some time. It won't be pretty."

"Hmm, no, I don't suppose it will be. So, what now, then?"

He swings their arms between them as they walk, back and forth, her boot heels clacking on the pavers of the path along the river.

"I'm moving to Seoul, Rin."

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She stops, then, staring at him, eyes wide.

“Shut up!”

He stares back, unsure.

“Um. No?”

She slaps his arm with her free hand.

“Shut up!! You are not!”

“I...yeah, I am?”

“Dammit, Su-ah, take me with you!!”

It comes out on an exaggerated whine, and he laughs.

“What, in my suitcase?”

“Yes! Why not? I’m tiny, I’ll fit!”

She groans as he laughs.

“Ugh! I want to go so bad! Seoul is so amazing and you’re going to live there, what the hell!”

“You can come visit when I get settled in, Rinie. Stay as long as you want!”

“Ugh, don’t tempt me, Su-ah. I’ll never leave!”

He lets go of her fingers and wraps an arm around her shoulders, tight enough that she squishes up and makes a face.

“Fine by me. You can be my roomie!”

“Ugh, thanks but no thanks, you’re newly single and newly gay, you’ll have so much sex and I’m going to spend all my time sexiled!”

Hosu squawks in outrage and drops his arm from her shoulders, heat flushing the back of his neck.

“Oh my god Rinie, don’t!! I will *not*!”

But Harin just grins and grabs his hand again.

“You better. I’ll need to live vicariously through you because I’m going to die an old maid and never have sex ever again.”

And even with the low discomfort that still wells up reflexively in his belly at the mere mention of sex, this feels nice, this openness, the newly empty space in his chest where he carried all his secrets for so many years. The knowledge that Harin *knows* now, and that it’s *okay*, that she loves him the same she always did, is buoying, and Hosu feels a little giddy.

She nudges him, then, pulling him out of his thoughts.

“Speaking of living vicariously...are you going to tell me what made you finally figure it out?”

Hosu chokes on air, and he can feel his cheeks flush *redredred*.

“I...what? No!”

Harin shrugs.

Our Gentle Sin - a novel by Tara Lemana

"I mean, I won't judge, you know that, right? But you can't blame me for being curious. You don't just wake up one day and decide you're gay, something must've happened, right?"

Hosu stares.

"You're the worst. You know that, right?"

She grins, wide and toothy and full of mischief.

"I do. Now spill!"

"Ugh, fine."

It takes him a minute, to organise the thoughts in his head. Harin doesn't push, the veneer of cheekiness exchanged for an open, gentle look.

"I...I kissed someone. A guy. And it was amazing, and I hadn't felt like that since...in a long time."

"In a long time? So...you had felt like that before? With a guy?"

He takes a deep breath, sucks a lungful of air between his teeth, pushing down the reflexive urge to hide, to swallow his secrets, and nods instead.

It's time.

"Yeah. Once. Before I met you, when I was about fifteen."

He looks at her, briefly, then looks away, eyes distant, sifting through long-buried memories.

"His name was Duri. He was.... he was amazing, God, so beautiful, so smart, gentle. He was the first person ever to really see me, you know? He saw all of me and loved me anyway. Loved me more, even. God, I was so in love with him, Rinie. I didn't know it at first, so freaking clueless. Boys aren't supposed to like boys, all that shit."

He laughs, bitter, and she squeezes his hand.

"He was my best friend, and then he was more. My first love. My only love, really, I guess. I mean, I loved Iseul, but not like that, never like that. He was all I could think about, everything I wanted, everything I saw when I thought about the future. He meant everything to me."

It's early, still, and the quiet hangs around the river like a fog, still and grey. It dampens the sounds of their footsteps as Hosu falls silent for a minute, two.

Harin stays mute, letting the gentle pressure of her fingers speak for her.

"His family moved around a lot for his dad's work, always at short notice. He'd lived almost everywhere by the time they moved here, and we met. We told ourselves it wouldn't happen this time, that he'd be able to stay, I guess, but of course it wasn't like that. They were here for less than a year when one day they just told him they were moving again. To Seoul. Just like that."

He swallows, trying to dislodge the tightness in his throat.

"I blamed him. He was just a kid, same as me, but I blamed him anyway. I thought he could stay if he really wanted to. His parents were really nice, I thought if he told them he wanted to stay they would just stay."

He laughs, but it's brittle, harsh.

"So stupid. He was just a kid, he couldn't have done shit. I hurt him so much, Rinie. I told him to leave me alone. Refused to talk to him, refused to listen. I pushed him away. I loved him more than I

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loved anyone else, ever, and I pushed him away because I couldn't deal with the hurt. And then I figured that the reason it hurt was because my dad was right, and being gay is a sin, that we were wrong to be together. So I decided I'd stop being gay. I just – decided I wasn't, decided I wouldn't be, anymore, that I'd be the perfect son they always wanted, straight, tough, manly, and they'd be proud of me."

His chest hurts, and he bites back a sob. Harin stops and pulls him into a wordless hug, and he sags, leans into her small, familiar form and clings to her like his life depends on it. He buries his face in her neck, hunched over to fit, and keeps talking, his voice barely more than a whisper now.

"I nearly did it, too, Rinie. They were kind of proud of me for a while there. They liked Iseul, she made a great daughter-in-law."

Harin stays quiet, just rubs his back while he breathes in her familiar, comforting scent. When his neck begins to hurt from standing bent over, he straightens up. She takes his hand again and leads him to a nearby seat.

They sit, and Harin continues to be his anchor, holding his fingers in hers, warm and dry and soothing, thumb rubbing at the back of his hand.

"You were just a kid, too, Su-ah, you get that, right? You were hurting, you didn't understand, and you lashed out. Kids do that, Su-ah. We're all idiots at that age."

He nods and wipes at his eyes.

"Yeah. I wish I could take it back, though. Wish I could tell him how sorry I am. I denied him, denied everything we had, the best part of my life, the best person I ever knew. I just threw it all away. He was here for another week after he told me, you know? We could've had that week together, could've had more time. Could've said goodbye properly, maybe made a plan to meet up. We could've kept in touch after he moved. Who knows what we might've been? Instead, we both ended up with nothing."

Harin sighs.

"I'm sorry, Su-ah. I wish it could've been different for you."

He nods, staring at their interlinked fingers.

"Do you still love him?"

Hosu shrugs.

"I don't know, Rinie. I haven't seen him in so long, and I spent all that time trying to deny he ever existed. I will probably always love him on some level, but I have no idea how I'd feel if I saw him again. He probably hates me, anyway."

She clacks her tongue.

"I doubt that, Su-ah. Even if he did back then, I doubt he still does now. It sounds like you guys really had something special."

Hosu sits, memories swirling around his skull in the quiet. When Harin speaks again, her voice is soft and warm as it siphons the morning chill from the air between them.

"Is that why you're moving to Seoul? Are you going to try and find him?"

He shakes his head, smiling a little, sadness tugging at the corners of his eyes.

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"No. They would have moved on from Seoul a long time ago, they moved constantly. I doubt he lives there now, he might not even be in the country anymore, for all I know. He was a really talented musician even back then, he's probably some big shot producer or something somewhere now."

"So why Seoul, then?"

Hosu shrugs.

"Been thinking about it for a while. I want to get out of Gwangju, get a fresh start. I wanted it before, thought Iseul and I would go together, but now I need it even more, you know? Go somewhere new, not bump into Iseul all the time, or my parents, or their friends, not have to listen to the gossip once word gets out of why we split."

Harin squeezes his hand.

"Fair enough. Fresh starts are good for the soul. You'll have to try not to miss me too much, I guess."

She grins as she says it, and he smiles, grateful.

"I'll try."

There's a question twisting in Hosu's mind, one that's been tucked deep inside him for nearly a decade now, and he decides to finally ask it.

"Did you know, Rinie?"

Harin looks startled when he looks up.

"Know?"

"Yeah. I kind of...there were times I almost told you. So many times, I thought you already knew, or suspected."

Harin looks pensive, head tilted, face soft and thoughtful.

"I didn't know. But I suspected. There were moments, like with that boy who liked you at school..."

"Hyungwon," Hosu supplies with a smile. She smiles back.

"Yeah, that's him. You were so flustered. I suspected then. But we told each other everything, so I figured either I was wrong, or you maybe weren't ready to share."

Hosu winces.

"I'm sorry I never told you."

Harin shrugs.

"I get it. It was a big thing. It still is. You don't owe anyone your secrets, Su-ah, not even me. You get to choose what you share. I'm grateful you're choosing to share with me now."

It's quiet again, then, for a while. Hosu stares out over the water.

"I never stopped being confused, you know? I told myself I wasn't, told myself all sorts of things to rationalise it, ridiculous stuff. I had all these crushes over the years, on men, while I was with Iseul. Never did anything about them," he looks at Harin, anxious to make sure she knows he wouldn't do *that*, wouldn't have had affairs, "never touched anyone else but Iseul, but still."

Harin hesitates, seemingly looking for the right words.

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“Su-ah. You know it’s not that awful to crush on other people while you’re with someone, right? I mean, it happens. Relationships are work, and attractions happen, it’s normal. It doesn’t make it cheating. You didn’t act on those attractions; you didn’t cheat on her.”

Hosu smiles, a little sad.

“I know. I didn’t do more than talk to those guys, barely knew them. They were just flirtations. But they were signs, Rinie, and I ignored them. I mean, not totally, I kind of figured out that maybe I was bi, after a while, but I never allowed the thought that I might be gay, just so determined not to be, I guess. I stayed with Iseul for so much longer than I should have and ended up hurting her so much more than I might have if I’d figured it out sooner.”

“Hmm. I guess. What about the kiss though? Tell me about that, how did that happen?”

Hosu grimaces.

“Jiyeong and Seongmin’s bachelor weekend. Too many drinks. Jiyeong’s extremely hot cousin from Busan. We were talking, and then suddenly we were making out. In front of everyone.”

Harin’s eyebrows climb up higher and higher as he talks.

“Wow. What was that like?”

Hosu’s face feels like it’s on fire, and he hides behind his hands, groaning.

“Oh god. It was so hot. I kind of never wanted to stop. And then we did, and suddenly it was mortifying. And then there was a lot of guilt.”

“Yeah, that I believe. I assume Jiyeong was there for you afterwards? That would have been a lot to process.”

Hosu lets his hands drop to his lap and nods, eyes fixed on the ground.

“Yeah, he was, once we sobered up. He was really great. Kind of like you’re being right now, actually.”

Harin grins widely at that.

“You have great taste in friends, Su-ah.”

He returns the grin then, finally making eye contact.

“I do, don’t I?”

She hums, then stands, pulling him up with her.

“Come on, friend. We’re going for breakfast. Your shout.”

Hosu squawks.

“My shout? I’m the one who’s about to be unemployed and moving cities!”

She lets out a put-upon sigh.

“Fine. My shout. But you reserve me a couch at your new place in Seoul.”

Hosu grins as he lets her pull him up the path, back towards the shops.

“Deal. I’ll even throw in a blanket.”

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As Harin squawks and swats his arm and he lets himself be dragged along in light banter, Hosu feels warm with gratitude for the unconditional love and friendship his oldest friend has given him all these years.

He finds himself hoping that she will end up coming to stay with him in Seoul, maybe even join him to make her life there, keep their threads tied firmly and embark on a new adventure together.

But whether she does or not, for the first time ever, Hosu feels secure in the knowledge that she knows all of him, all of his secrets, all that he is, and loves him anyway.

He's never felt more at peace.

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Seoul, May 2016

"That was really great, Seoyeon-ssi, well done."

Duri smiles widely at the shy young girl as she steps out of the vocal booth.

"You nailed those runs that time, I think we've got that part sorted. Let me show you how to add them to the track."

He turns to face his computer, clicking and narrating as he takes her through the process step by step. She sits quietly beside him, watching with rapt attention.

"Do you think you've got that?", Duri asks with a sidelong glance at her face. Seoyeon is wide-eyed and open mouthed as she gives a little nod, and he suppresses a grin. The girl is raw and unpolished, but undoubtedly talented. The red thread of her anger at her parents runs through her lyrics and her voice as she sings her self-penned songs, and it cuts at something deep inside Duri every time he hears it.

He watches her work on a copy of the track for a while, giving pointers and suggestions here and there. When their time is up, Seoyeon quietly shoulders her backpack and smiles a small smile.

"Thank you seonsaengnim," she says with a bow, and then she's gone.

The door closes behind her and Duri turns away to start packing up his bag when the door opens behind him.

"Hyung?"

"Hey Jun-ah."

Duri greets him with a smile.

"You look tired. You sleeping alright?"

Minjun drops down on the small couch with a groan, rubbing at his face as he collapses.

"Seojun hyung had Eunji over last night. She's so *loud*, hyung."

Duri's shoulders shake as he laughs.

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“Ouch. What’s that, the third time this week?”

“Fourth. I’m dying, hyung. Please save me. Dump your rich boyfriend for me and come live with me again?”

“Sorry, man, you’re on your own.”

Minjun’s hands drop to his lap, defeated. The dark shadows below his eyes are deeper than Duri has seen them outside of exam season, and a small curl of worry swoops in his belly.

“It’s fine, I’ll be fine. Hey, maybe I should travel? I hear Canada is nice this time of year!”

Duri’s grin is wide and soft around the edges.

“You could. Or you could, you know, talk to him?”

“Right. Right! Because, you know, that sounds like fun! I love telling my flatmate he needs to *entertain* his girlfriend more quietly, it’s my favourite thing to do, really. Have you ever been to France, hyung? It’s spring there now, it’ll be really pretty, and my French is pretty decent!”

Duri flicks out a leg and kicks the sole of Minjun’s foot.

“Yah. Don’t be a coward, talk to him. Or else I will, and then he’ll know that you’ve been complaining.”

Minjun’s wide-eyed look of betrayal has Duri biting his cheek to suppress his laughter.

“You wouldn’t! Hyung!”

“I would. Man up, Jun-ah.”

Minjun makes a face.

“Gross. Did you seriously just tell me to *man up*, hyung? You, of all people, and *here*, of all places? In this sacred, toxic masculinity-free zone?”

Duri shrugs lightly.

“Fine. Buck up then. Step up. I don’t care. Just talk to him and get some sleep.”

Minjun huffs.

“Fine.”

He eyes Duri, and there’s hesitation in the silence. Duri rolls his eyes.

“What?”

It’s Minjun’s turn to shrug, feigning nonchalance.

“Nothing. Just – how are you doing?”

Duri sniffs. His eyes cut away from Minjun, sliding off to the side.

“I’m fine. Good,” he amends, “I’m good.”

A heartbeat, two, silence speaking loudly into the space between them.

“Yeah?”

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“Yeah.”

“Did you guys sort things?”

Another shrug, a nod, eyes still off, away, traitorous.

“Yeah. We’re fine. It’s just, you know. He’s stressed. I’m stressed.”

It’s the truth. Things are fine. They’re fine. For the most part, they’re great. They sleep late on weekends, they laugh together, have meals together, spend hours tangled between the sheets together.

Duri’s tried very hard to find a better balance between work, the centre, and his life with Juwon, and for the most part, Juwon has managed not to pressure him again.

Until last week, when things boiled over once more, and again Duri found himself defending his need to be independent. He’s starting to feel like a broken record at this point, and it feels like a splinter deep under the skin, festering where he can’t get at it.

It stings, the knowledge that despite all the conversations they’ve had, despite knowing Duri’s stance on this, Juwon still won’t let go of the idea, still thinks nothing of the idea of Duri being beholden to him for every cent of his income.

He doesn’t know what to do with that, what to say when nothing he’s said so far has changed Juwon’s mind, and it just makes him more determined to stay where he is, to hold onto that independence.

But they’re okay. Things are okay. Duri knows that Juwon’s intentions are good, that his heart is in the right place, wanting life to be easier for them, wanting more time with Duri. He appreciates it, treasures being wanted, even if Juwon’s failure to really *hear* him on this hurts.

Minjun hums.

“Right.”

Eye contact, then.

“We are, Jun-ah!”

Minjun holds his hands up, fingers splayed wide, defensive.

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You were thinking it.”

His friend sighs and leans forward onto his knees, elbows wide.

“I just want you to be happy, hyung. Are you happy?”

And that’s the question, isn’t it? Is he happy?

The overwhelming feeling is that he *should be* happy. He has everything he could possibly want: he’s found his life’s purpose and is fulfilling it, he has love, he has a home and friends he adores and who adore him. He has it all.

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There is no reason for the void in his chest, no reason for the moments of nothingness that find him when his guard is down. He can't escape them, he can't explain them, and so he deflects, rolling his eyes and turning away.

"I'll be happy when you go home to get some sleep and let me get this shit done, Jun-ah."

Minjun is silent then, for the space of several breaths, and Duri pretends to busy himself with Soo-Ah's recording until he hears his friend sigh.

"Okay then, hyung. I'll head home. I'll see you tomorrow."

"See you tomorrow. Don't forget to talk to Seo-hyung."

"Sure I will. See ya later."

The quiet click of the door follows the gentle press of Minjun's fingers on Duri's shoulder as he leaves.

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Seoul, July 2016

"Su-ah!"

Hosu hitches his bag up higher from where it's sagged down his side and cranes his neck to search the crowds of people for the source of the familiar voice.

His sister stands not far away, waving, and he grins and waves back as he walks towards her, scooping her up in a hug when he reaches her. She laughs, reaching up to ruffle his hair like he's still her baby brother, as if he isn't a foot taller than her now.

"Look at you, squirt! You look good!"

He ducks his head, smiling, a little shy. His hair is a bright auburn, a drastic change he's still a little unsure about, and his clothes are louder, more colourful than he's ever felt brave enough to wear. It's a little scary, to wear his heart on the outside like this, to forego his armour of black clothing and wear what he likes.

Jiyeong and Seongmin have held his hands through all of it, through his panic over *queer coding*, through his fear that the whole world would know he was gay if he wore a pink jumper, through his guilt over not being masculine enough if he wore something soft because he liked the feel of it. Their steady, calm reminders that clothes have no gender, that he can be whomever he wants to be regardless of what he likes to wear, have seeped in slowly through the cracks in his shell, until they filled him with a brittle confidence that *it's okay* to wear what he likes and be who he likes.

And so he stands in Seoul Airport in a bright striped t-shirt and shorts with a denim vest over the top, both wrists sporting the colourful plastic bracelets he's always had a secret passion for but never felt brave enough to actually wear.

"Thanks sis. You too. Thanks for coming to pick me up."

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She returns his smile with a matching one of her own and links his arm with his.

“Come on, let’s go get your bags.”

The drive back to Dawon and Heechul’s place is slow, city traffic heavy and congested, swirling around them in a constant stream. Hosu listens to Dawon chattering happily about work, their weekend plans and the pups they have their eyes on, smiling at the warmth that sits just under his skin as he watches her while she talks.

His mind drifts a little, tiredness blurring the edges of it, and he doesn’t notice right away when she stops talking. The lull sits quietly between them for a while as she drives, and Hosu lets his thoughts meander over the past few months, the big changes in his life, the changes still to come. It’s a little daunting, starting a new life in a place as big and intimidating as Seoul, and he’s grateful to his sister for agreeing to let him stay until he gets on his feet.

He looks across and smiles at her profile as she focuses on the road.

“Thanks for letting me stay, nuna, I really appreciate it.”

A quick look, an answering smile.

“Don’t mention it, squirt. It’s good to see you.”

It’s quiet again, for a bit, but Hosu can feel the questions swirling under the surface of it, boiling away. He appreciates Dawon for not prying, not asking about the whys and hows of his sudden breakup with Iseul and his move to Seoul. But the feeling of those questions squirming just out of reach is a little much, making his skin crawl, and he wants them out in the open, wants everything out in the open.

“I’m gay.”

He blurts it out, a sudden, sharp rush of syllables stumbling forth, surprising even to himself. He dashes a quick look at Dawon, but her eyes are still on the road, unreadable, and it makes him nervous.

“I mean, in case you were wondering why I broke up with Iseul. That’s why. I’m gay.”

She’s quiet for a heartbeat, two, three.

“I know, squirt.”

Of all the reactions Hosu might have expected, that isn’t one of them, and he gapes at her.

“Wait. You know? How?”

She shrugs, throws him a quick smile.

“Duri.”

Hosu blinks.

“What?”

“I was around when Duri was around, remember? I saw how you were with him. You were so obvious, so completely in love. I’d have to have been an idiot not to see it.”

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Hosu's throat feels tight. All this time, he thought no one knew about him, about Duri, about the things he kept hidden in the box. How did he manage to hide it all from himself and yet be so completely transparent to his sister?

"So...you knew? All this time? And you never said anything?"

She casts him a sideways look again, a small frown.

"What would I say? *Don't marry her, you're gay?* Not my place to tell you how you feel, Su-ah. Besides, for all I knew, you might've been bi and in love with her. Although," she sounds thoughtful, "I didn't think you were. You didn't look at her the way you looked at Duri."

Hosu stares out at the traffic milling around them.

"Do you think mum and dad knew?"

Dawon snorts.

"God, no. They're far too preoccupied with their expectations of how our lives will turn out to consider any deviations from The Plan."

She says it with dramatic emphasis on the last two words, and Hosu smiles a little, despite the wan feeling in his stomach. Her voice is soft when she speaks again.

"So you haven't told them?"

He shakes his head.

"Just told them we split up. Said we wanted different things. Mum wasn't happy."

Dawon hums.

"I bet."

Hosu picks at the edge of his t-shirt, playing with a loose thread. His stomach feels hollow.

"I'm scared to tell them, nuna. They're going to hate me."

"They're not, Su-ah. They won't like it, but there's nothing they can do about it, okay? You are who you are. They are just going to have to get used to it."

"What if...what if they disown me, nuna?"

She reaches across, grabs his hand and squeezes.

"I don't think they will, squirt. But if they do, you'll still have me. You'll always have me."

Hosu returns the squeeze, grateful for the anchor in the turmoil of his thoughts.

She answers his small smile with one of her own, and Hosu feels a little stronger.

Our Gentle Sin - a novel by Tara Lemana

Seoul, November 2016

There's a strange incongruity that comes with finding yourself, in that in your search for who you are, you try on many personas that aren't you at all.

Or so it is for Hosu.

He spends three months sleeping in Dawon and Heechul's spare room. In October, he lands a job as an office manager for a small recruitment firm. It's a role he is grossly overqualified for, and the offer surprises him when it comes.

The job lacks any kind of challenge after the first week of finding his feet in a new environment with unfamiliar systems. But Hosu's naturally sunny personality shines, his shyness fading to the background under the knowledge that he is *good* at this. His organizational flair transforms the office within weeks as he tweaks and changes things until the place runs like a well-oiled machine. His boss sings his praises and begs him never to leave her, even if she also frequently laments the waste of his talents in a role as limiting as this one.

It's a solid start amidst all the newness that his life in Seoul throws at him.

Most importantly for Hosu, the steady salary means he's able to move out of Dawon's spare room and get his own apartment.

For the first time ever, Hosu lives alone.

It's a strange experience after living all his life with other people in his space – first his family, then Jiyeong, then Iseul. Hosu both loves and hates it.

He loves the freedom to push the furniture back and dance whenever the urge strikes him.

He hates not having anyone to dance with.

He loves not having anyone complain about how he chooses to use his space, where he puts his furniture, where he sleeps, where he has his meals.

He hates coming home to no one, sleeping with no one, sharing his meals with no one.

He loves not having other people mess up his haven with dirty dishes and towels, make up pottles or clothing, shoes or other clutter.

He hates how tidy the place is all the time, the way the tidiness reminds him that a home is meant to be shared.

He loves not having art on the walls he doesn't like, or silky sheet sets on his bed that feel too cold and slip off the bed so he wakes up uncovered in the middle of the night.

He hates not having anyone to talk to about the art on his walls, or tangle with among the sheets.

Making all of his own choices is both liberating and terrifying.

He agonises over what art and sheet sets he *does* like and ends up settling on a hodge podge of colourful art prints by a wide range of artists. There is no theme, unless *all the colours* can be considered a theme; he simply picks what draws him, whether it's a portrait photograph of a woman

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in a colourful tango dress or a wildly flamboyant landscape painting that shows nature in a riot of colour never encountered in any real-life scenario.

He loves it all and wants it all.

The sheet sets are easier. He decides he loves the feel of brushed cotton against his skin and buys four sets in different colours with matching duvet covers.

He buys cheap Ikea couches and over time, collects throws and cushions to make them feel more like his own. He buys plants that breathe life into his spaces.

Slowly but surely, Hosu's apartment starts to feel a little bit like home, even if it's still too quiet, too tidy, too empty.

Spending nights alone proves hazardous, as the thoughts in his head prove far too loud to be ignored. His father's words echo over and over, and the old fear of not being *man enough* proves hard to shake. Being alone is hard, in those moments, when all of him cries out for a hand to hold, a shoulder to burrow into, someone to tell him he's *okay*, just the way he is.

Hosu walks a strange tightrope between trying to let go of all the toxic masculinity his father imprinted on his bones and the soft, colourful version of himself that sits somewhere below that, at the beating core of him, trying to find its way out.

Some part of him wants to rebel against the softness, wants to prove to the world he can be both gay *and* a Real Man. Another part of him (a part that speaks to him in Jiyeong's voice) reminds him constantly that he gets to decide what it means to be a Real Man, that it's up to him.

It's the first part of him that decides that what he really needs is to just *put himself out there*, to experience being a single gay man, to *explore*, to hook up with a stranger and shake off the old, repressed Hosu once and for all.

But *putting yourself out there* is easier said than done when you're new in town and the only people you know are your married sister and her husband and a handful of new work colleagues with whom you have not yet reached *want to go to a gay club this weekend* levels of comfort.

And sure, Hosu makes friends more easily these days, has grown in his confidence with age, but he still hasn't quite figured out how to *be out* to the world in general. He wrestles with the idea that he has to announce anything at all, that he has to *tell people* when the supposed straight version of himself never had to do that. It feels awfully private and really none of anyone's business, yet he feels like he's somehow still *hiding* if he doesn't announce his sexuality to people he meets. It feels like a secret, and he's done keeping secrets, but figuring out who's worthy of knowing all of him feels daunting.

It's the middle of November before Hosu finds the time and head space to look for a dance studio. Getting back to dancing in earnest feels like one of the most important things in finding himself, another thing on the list of *key components of Kim Hosu* that he has neglected in favour of being what his father considers a Real Man.

He knows the studio as soon as he walks in the door. There is a feeling that hangs in the air, an exuberance, a jitteriness that comes only from excitement, from passion, from joy. It makes him feel giddy and tingly all over, skin electric, feet twitching with the urge to move.

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He feels like he's vibrating out of his skin as he approaches the young girl at the counter. Her polite customer service smile widens into something crinkly-eyed and genuine at the sight of Hosu's excited grin.

"Hi, can I help you?"

"Hey, yeah, hi! I just moved here and I'm looking for somewhere to take hip hop classes."

"Sure! What level are you looking for?"

"Advanced, preferably."

She frowns a little, pouts in a way Hosu thinks must be unconscious, slender fingers tucking a lock of hair behind her left ear, a small jewel dangling and catching the light below the dainty lobe.

"Oh. Hm. Well, we don't have an advanced class right now, one of our senior teachers left last year and we haven't been able to replace him, so we're short-staffed. We have intermediate classes though, if you'd like to check those out?"

Hosu deflates a little, sags, then nods. All he really wants is to get back into dance, the itch under his skin a daily reminder of his *need* for it, and intermediate classes are better than nothing.

"Yes please, that'll be okay."

She smiles, nodding, hair bouncing on her shoulders as she does.

"We've got, wait, I think, hold on..." she *tap-tap-taps* on her keyboard, fingers flying, then smiles, wide and delighted as she looks at Hosu.

"There's a class in studio four right now, would you like to come and have a look?"

"Really? Okay, yeah, yes please!"

She's still nodding and smiling, pleased, and Hosu suppresses a grin as she turns and gestures for him to follow her petite frame away from the foyer.

"Sehun seonsaengnim is the teacher. He used to teach Advanced as well, but without another Senior teacher there's just not enough staff to manage all the classes. We have far more enrolments for the Intermediate than the Advanced, so Sehun-ssi had to prioritise those. Hopefully we'll find another teacher soon and you'll be able to move to Advanced with Sehun-ssi!"

She leads him down a brightly lit hallway with doors and windows on both sides, bass pounding in his ears and under his feet, the heaviness of it vibrating his sternum in a way that makes him feel at home. Hosu can see groups of students move through the windows on either side, and his bones itch to move. He feels a little giddy, a little floaty, and the excitement tugs at him, pulls him forward.

They reach a door marked with a large 4, and the girl stops, one small hand on the door handle as she looks through the window, the other up to wave, drawing the teacher's attention. The man at the front of the class is a few years older than Hosu, a carbon copy of every other dance teacher Hosu's ever had, young and fit, dressed in sweats and worn-in runners, his olive-green t-shirt a few sizes too big and his too-long bangs sweaty and trailing in his eyes.

His eyes catch on Hosu and the girl outside the window and he smiles, waves them in.

The girl turns to Hosu, then, gestures for him to go in, nodding encouragingly when he hesitates.

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“Go on, it’s okay! You can watch from the sidelines or join in when you’re ready.”

Hosu looks between her and the instructor, uncertain, a flare of his old shyness cold against his spine.

“Are you sure? I wouldn’t want to interrupt; I can just watch from out here.”

She shakes her head, and her hair bounces again.

“Really, just go in, it’s how we do things here. *Sehun-ssi* likes people to *do*, not just *watch*.”

Hosu goes in, feet light, body at rest, intent on sitting by the side, watching and acclimatising. The door clicks closed behind him, muted under the bass-heavy hip-hop track, and the instructor grins widely, welcoming. He extends a graceful hand and points to a free space in amidst his students, the message clear: *join in*.

Hosu isn’t *worried* per se, isn’t anxious about participating, the moves are familiar and easy enough, but there’s hesitancy bred from the unexpectedness of it all. It’s a little daunting, the thought of *falling into* a new place like this, of just *doing* without *watching*, without *thought*.

He’s hesitant, but *Sehun-ssi* doesn’t allow it, sweeps it away with a smile and a smattering of brusque words.

“Come on, we don’t bite, just have a go!”

Hosu can do little but to tell himself now is as good a time as any to jump back in, and he fills his lungs with all the courage he can muster, suppressing the wave of anxiety low in his belly as he steps into the fray.

It doesn’t take long for the nerves to ease, for his body to take over and *do*. It’s an easy enough routine for a dancer of his level, even if it’s been a while since he was part of a crew. He picks it up quickly, feet stepping, joints popping, exhilaration flowing through his veins as his body flows through the movements.

The hour-long class is over all too soon, and Hosu relishes the heat and the sweat, the looseness of his body, the burning in his lungs that tells him he’s out of practice. He can’t stop grinning.

Students start to file out of the room, but Hosu drinks his water and hangs back, keen to introduce himself to the teacher before the next class. *Sehun* finds him before he can, approaching Hosu while drying his face and neck with a small towel.

“Hi! Welcome to the studio!”

His grin is wide and infectious, and Hosu returns it and bows.

“Thank you *Sehun seonsaengnim*, I’m Kim Hosu.”

“*Hosu-ssi*, call me *Sehun-ssi*. It’s nice to meet you,” *Sehun* says, returning the bow.

“How long have you been dancing? You did well today, a little too well for an Intermediate class, I’d say.”

Hosu dips his head, cheeks heating under the praise.

“Um, oh, thank you, *seonsaengnim*. I, um, a while, since my teens. I came in looking for an Advanced class but the girl at reception said you don’t have one right now.”

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Sehun nods, folding his towel and sitting on the edge of the table along the wall, at ease, fingers playing with the edge of the towel in his lap.

“Yeah. Bit of a shame, that. Not enough teachers. How come you haven’t been in before?”

“I just moved here from Gwangju.”

“Gwangju? Oh wow, big change! How are you liking it so far?”

Hosu smiles, tucks his hands in his pockets.

“It’s good. Bit different, getting used to a place as big as Seoul, but I like it.”

Sehun snorts at that, and it’s startling. His grin is disarming, a little crooked, one of his front teeth protruding just a touch, and it makes Hosu suddenly aware the teacher isn’t that much older than him.

“No kidding. I moved here from Daegu myself ten years ago. Took me ages to adjust! At least I had family here though. You move here alone?”

Hosu nods.

“Yeah. Though my sister lives here.”

“Ah. That’s good. It’s good to have a connection to a place when you’re settling in. So, what did you think of the class today? Think you’ll be back?”

Hosu’s grin is wide, the buzz from dancing still alive in his chest.

“Yeah, I loved it. I like your studio, too, the vibe is really good.”

Sehun looks pleased at that.

“Yeah? That’s good, I’m glad to hear that. I’m just sorry we can’t offer you advanced classes right now, you’re clearly way further ahead than our intermediate classes cater for. I wish I had extra hours in the day, or another teacher to hand over some classes to.”

Hosu isn’t sure what comes over him when he opens his mouth and says a very un-Hosu-like thing.

“Would you...I mean...I could help?”

Sehun quirks an eyebrow at him.

“Help?”

The nerves are back, squeezing Hosu’s stomach, but this is *dance*, one of the few things he knows for certain he’s good at, the one thing he’s passionate about and would love to do every minute of every day if he could, so he swallows hard and pushes through the fear.

“Yeah! I mean, I don’t think I could teach an Advanced class, but I could maybe teach beginners or intermediate? And then you’d be free to teach Advanced!”

Sehun looks stunned.

“Seriously? You’d be interested in teaching?”

Hosu nods so hard it makes Sehun smile.

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“Yes! If you’ll have me!”

“I can definitely use a teacher, that’s for sure. Have you taught before?”

And no, Hosu hasn’t, not really, but he’s *certain* he could do it. He bites his lip, shakes his head.

“Not officially, no. But I was dance leader of my college troupe, so I had to take them through routines often, help them when they got stuck. I filled in for our instructor a few times. And I’m good at organising and bossing people around, I manage an office as my day job.”

Sehun laughs at that, squeaky and breathless.

“Okay. I think at the very least we can do a trial. From what I saw over the past hour, you have the skill and the dance experience, and teaching you can learn. So how about this: you come and shadow me at a couple of classes, and then I shadow you. If you do well, you can take over those classes from me. We just ease you in.”

Hosu nods frantically, heart racing. He can’t believe this is happening, that somehow, he’s here, in this studio, a chance to do what he aches to do offered up by a stranger.

“That sounds really great, Sehun-ssi, thank you so much!”

Sehun waves him off.

“If this works out, I’ll be the one thanking you, Hosu-ssi. What’s your availability like?”

Hosu frowns, thinking of the way his day job stretches itself across so many of his hours.

“Right now, I’m working full time, so just weekends and evenings.”

Sehun nods.

“Okay. That’ll work while you’re here on a trial basis. If it works out, how much work do you think you’d be looking for?”

“Seriously? I’d do anything just to be able to dance all day. I’d quit my day job to come work here if you could offer me full-time.”

Sehun looks delighted at that.

“For real? Okay, that’s excellent. I need all the help I can get, so let’s go sort some details and go from there.”

Hosu leaves the studio later that night with a solemn promise to email through his CV so Sehun can check in with his references and make sure he’s a diligent worker. That part seems easy, and he feels a little high as he walks the ten minutes to the subway.

Even though nothing is set in stone, he has a chance, a real chance at doing what he loves, and Hosu feels on cloud nine.

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Early December hits, and it's the kind of miserable, bitter cold that sits on eyelids like a permanent ache and lives inside lungs until they rattle. The snow arrives early like an unwelcome relative come to stay, and Hosu is grateful his apartment is warm and cozy, even if it's a little lonely.

Dinners with Dawon and Heechul are a regular feature of his life, and since picking up regular classes at the studio his circle of friends is steadily growing, but no one he's met in Seoul has yet had time to become enmeshed in his life enough to help him drive out the loneliness that nips at his heels some days. Sehun has become a friend, as has Eunkyung, another teacher, but deep-rooted connections take time, more time than Hosu has had in Seoul so far.

When Jiyeong calls him to tell him he and Seongmin are coming to visit for a long weekend, Hosu squeals down the phone line and does a little happy dance, much to Jiyeong's glee.

The week leading up to their arrival drags by painfully slowly, but the day finally arrives. Hosu meets his friends at the airport early on a Thursday night, vibrating in his shoes and unable to contain his grin from the moment he wakes up.

When he finally, *finally* spots them, he feels unexpectedly fragile, emotional, and he clings to them both for long minutes in the middle of the airport lounge, eyes wet and cheeks hurting from smiling so much. Their faces mirror his expression when they pull apart, and there's an overwhelming sense of gratitude in Hosu's chest for these two precious people he gets to call his friends.

The drive home is full of excited chatter back and forth, Seongmin shouting out random observations and questions from the backseat at odd moments that lead to complete topic changes time and time again, while Jiyeong laughs in that full-body, uncontrollable way of his. Their conversation is a meandering, nonsense trail that leads seemingly nowhere, and Hosu feels unbearably fond.

They're excited and overawed by the city, and at least once on every block one or the other sees a place they absolutely must visit or somewhere he's dying to live, and Hosu has to squash a quiet hope that maybe they might think of moving here one day.

They settle into Hosu's apartment with ease, both exclaiming how much the place *feels like Hosu*, and it does something to Hosu's heart to hear that, makes him feel just a little more *settled*.

They sit down with Thai takeaways and wine, and Hosu's heart feels full watching the way they fit together on his couch, the way they somehow manage to eat and drink with tangled limbs and tangled sentences, unfettered and blissful.

"So what do you guys want to do while you're here?"

Jiyeong hums around a mouthful of curry and rice, lips and eyes shiny as Seongmin reaches over and with a wordless smile, wipes a little sauce off his chin, then brings his thumb to his own mouth to suck it off.

They're so enmeshed, so unselfconsciously part of each other, and Hosu feels a little wistful.

"Honestly, we're only here for a few days this time so we mostly just want to spend whatever time we can with you. Do you have work?"

Jiyeong seems unaware of Seongmin's touch to his chin or the way his own fingers keep finding his husband's leg, and Hosu can't suppress a smile.

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"Only on Saturday morning. I managed to get tomorrow off, but I've only been at the studio a few weeks so I didn't want to ask for time off just yet and leave them hanging. I have classes until 2 on Saturday, then I'm free the rest of the weekend."

They nod in unison, twin heads bobbing as Jiyeong answers.

"Course. We can maybe come check out the studio and then go explore a bit. And maybe we could go out on Saturday night?"

Hosu sips his wine and smiles.

"Yeah, that'd be cool, I haven't been out a lot yet, it'll be nice to go dancing with you guys again!"

Seongmin grins.

"Shit, yeah, that'd be awesome, hyung! We can be your wingmen!"

Hosu groans and rolls his eyes so hard it hurts.

"Don't. Just. Ugh, you two are awful. There will be no winging. No winging of any sort."

Seongmin elbows him.

"Come on, hyung, why not? You're young, hot, single, and in dire need of some action."

Hosu cringes. His months in Seoul have been great, full of growth, full of learning himself and finding pieces of himself that he didn't know he was missing. But that one piece, that part where *sharing himself* with someone else starts, that part is still missing. *Putting himself out there* is something he hasn't figured out how to do yet, a bit of learning that's still ahead of him.

He feels a bit mopey about it, and it stains his movements as he shoves Seongmin in the leg and huffs.

"Seriously, can you not?"

Seongmin shrugs easily, grins.

"It's true though. This time is all about exploring, isn't it?"

Hosu's fingers are twitching, his lungs stuttering as he sighs.

"It's just not that easy, you know? I don't really know that many people, and they're all work colleagues. I'm not going to sleep with anyone I work with, and I don't really feel comfortable hooking up with a random stranger in a bar in front of work colleagues either. And dating apps are just...just no."

Seongmin hums around a mouthful of food, nodding as if he knows exactly what Hosu means, even though Hosu is sure he couldn't possibly.

"You know," says Jiyeong, eyes locked firmly on his chopsticks, studious as he picks out a piece of chicken from his bowl, "Yujun moved to Seoul."

Hosu freezes and blinks up at Jiyeong.

"He...he did? He's here?"

Jiyeong nods, a sly grin tugging at the corners of his mouth. Seongmin looks positively smug.

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“Yeah. About three months ago.”

“Oh.”

“Yep,” Jiyeong says, and it’s hyperbolically light, “I’m sure he’d love to come along for a night out.”

Hosu blinks, swallows, blinks and tries to make his voice come out evenly, unaffected.

“Um. Okay, yeah. It’d be nice to see him again.”

Seongmin snorts at that, and Jiyeong bites his lips to stop from grinning. Hosu kicks Seongmin’s shin, and both his friends stifle giggles.

Hosu’s cheeks feel like they’re on fire as he aggressively stabs his chopsticks into his bowl.

“Shut up.”

Jiyeong falls off the couch laughing, and Hosu feels warm all the way down to his toes.

*

It’s surreal, sitting at a gay bar with Jiyeong and Seongmin, waiting for Yujun to join them.

Hosu’s eyes keep catching on things that still trip a treacherous wire inside him, send a brief, misplaced *boys don’t* message zinging through his insides with a spike of adrenaline before he catches himself and thinks *yes, they do*, before the clandestine feeling turns to excitement. There are men paired off on the dance floor, grinding on each other in ways that make Hosu sweat and look away, a couple making out at the bar, and others openly flirting.

There are men in drag and men in leathers, men wearing make-up, bright colours, sparkles. Hosu looks down at his own outfit, his lavender silk shirt, the top three buttons undone, the colour a perfect match to his newly dyed hair, the tight leather pants and black boots. It had felt too daring at home, but *here*, in this setting, it feels drab by comparison, colourless and plain. He’s suddenly glad Jiyeong and Seongmin pushed him out of his comfort zone, glad they encouraged him to *sparkle*. His cheeks feel warm, warm like his belly, and he’s conscious of the taste of a little cherry lip gloss on his lips, aware he looks *pretty*, aware he’s drawing attention.

He plays absently with the silver chain around his neck, liking the way the small pendant clicks against the rings on his fingers, Jiyeong’s rings, fine and delicate but still, *still*, so much more jewellery than he’s ever dared to wear.

He’s nervous and excited, and there’s a fluttering underneath his breastbone.

“Yunie! You’re here!”

Jiyeong jumps up suddenly, running to meet Yujun as he approaches from among the crowd, smiling happily, head ducking in that same familiar way it does when he’s a little shy. He looks far too good, tight black jeans hugging his thighs and a loose button-up shirt with a silver sparkle that catches the light, dazzling. His hair is still a little too long, curling around his ears, artfully messy and Hosu swallows hard.

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Jiyeong hugs his cousin, his small frame dwarfed against Yujun's larger one, before dragging him to their table and depositing him right next to Hosu. Hosu's stomach is doing a weird swooping thing as he stares at Yujun, suddenly *right there*, still so pretty, still so cute.

Both times he's spent time around this man have been electric, charged with *want*, even if the last time nothing happened. This time it could, if they wanted it to, and that's – scary, nerve wracking. Hosu isn't sure what to expect, what *Yujun* is expecting, if anything, doesn't know what the *rules* are for seeing someone you made out with at a party, doesn't know whether Yujun even remembers him.

Yujun does. His grin is wide and genuine, nose wrinkling in that way Hosu remembers liking so much.

"Hyung! Hi!"

Hosu has just enough time to swallow before Yujun is wrapping him up in a hug, gentle and firm all at once, and it's oddly calming.

Hosu *settles*.

His nerves calm, settling into something more even as he hugs Yujun back, his firm warmth anchoring Hosu's touch-starved body and soothing him. He smells warm and good and lovely, and when he leans back, he looks *warm* and *good* and *lovely* too, and Hosu returns his smile.

"Hey Yu. How have you been?"

Yujun's smile widens.

"Good, hyung, I've been good. You? You live here now, right?"

They fall into conversation as if it were an old habit, slipping into it as the soju flows, and Hosu is surprised at how easy it is. Jiyeong and Seongmin disappear into the crowd to dance at some point, but Hosu barely registers them leaving.

Talking to Yujun is *nice*. They have a lot in common, from their extroverted introvert ways to their love of dance. They laugh a lot, sharing the same sense of humour, and Hosu finds himself hoping they can form a friendship and hang out sometimes even after Jiyeong and Seongmin leave.

The night trickles on, minutes into hours, one drink into the next. Hosu feels happy and relaxed, at ease with Yujun and their conversation, this night, this place. The alcohol is buzzing in his veins, and his tongue is a little loose, his filter slipping the way it tends to do when he's had a few too many drinks. Yujun gets touchier as the drinks keep coming, and Hosu relishes it, soaks it up. Yujun is lovely and he looks so *good*, sweet and sexy with his too-long hair and his sparkly eyes, and Hosu is happy he's here.

"Why'd you move, hyungie?"

Yujun's vowels are a little blurry, and Hosu giggles.

"Cause I'm gay, Yu!" he announces happily, clapping Yujun on the thigh.

Yujun frowns and pouts, and his lips are pretty. Hosu wants to boop his nose, so he does, and Yujun wrinkles it.

"Are – are people not allowed to be gay in Gwangju?"

Hosu shakes his head, full of conviction.

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"Nope. Not allowed. Girlfriends and parents don't like it."

Yujun nods then, understanding.

"Ah. No, they don't. So no more girlfriend?"

Hosu grins.

"Nope." He pops the p sharply, and Yujun watches his lips with wide eyes. Hosu leans in closer and whisper-shouts in his best conspiratorial manner.

"She didn't like me being gay."

He laughs at his own joke, and Yujun grins.

"I like you being gay, hyung."

Hosu snorts at that, too warm and drunk to be embarrassed. He boops Yujun's nose again, but his hand slips and his fingers end up on Yujun's pretty lips, and they're soft, so he leaves them there, just for a second, two, three, before dropping his hand.

"I like it too, Yunie," he says, and smiles when he realises it's true, his insides warm and gooey.

Yujun's answering smile is soft, all stars and crinkly eyes.

"How about you, why'd you move?"

Yujun looks a little shy, suddenly, eyes dropping to his hands.

"Ah. I um, I ran away."

Hosu stares, wide-eyed.

"You ran away?"

Yujun hums and nods. And Hosu thinks he understands, sort of, the feeling of wanting to run away from something is not so unfamiliar.

"Yeah. A boy. I ran away from a boy. I um...I love him, but he doesn't love me back."

Hosu is sure he feels his heart crack at that. Yujun is sweet and kind and beautiful, not to mention sexy as hell; how could anyone not love him?

He says as much, and Yujun's smile is sad.

"That's what happens when you fall for a straight boy. It sucks."

Yujun looks so sad, and Hosu feels stricken. He tangles their fingers together in his lap as Yujun watches.

"I'm sorry, Yu."

Yujun sighs, shrugs, grimaces.

"It's alright, hyung. It happens. That's why I'm here, I need to figure out how to forget, you know?"

And Hosu can only hope forgetting comes more easily for Yujun than it did for him, but he smiles bravely and nods. He wants to make Yujun feel better, wipe the sadness off his pretty face and see that smile again, so he stands and tugs him up by their linked fingers.

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“Come on, Yu-ah. Let’s dance.”

Yujun smiles, then, and comes, lets Hosu drag him onto the dance floor and pull him in close, chest to chest.

Dancing with Yujun is something else. He moves easily, fluidly, and it’s thrilling for Hosu to have someone to dance with who loves it the way he does. And watching Yujun move, watching his skin flush and glow as his body heats up, feeling the warmth of him close as they grind on each other, shameless in this place where no one cares what they do, Hosu feels that same heat flare up in his belly again. Yujun’s eyes are on him, dark and heavy, and his hair hangs in damp curls across his forehead, chest and forearms bare and slick as he moves, dark shadowed tattoos crawling under the bar’s lights that stain him prettily in shades of cerulean and carmine.

Hosu can’t look away.

He can’t help it when his hands find Yujun’s waist and pull him closer still, greedy for contact, lurching forward when Yujun grabs him by the hips, letting himself be pulled in flush, pelvis to pelvis, the contact electric. His lungs are heaving, the stuttering *ba-da-bump* of his heart erratic up against his ribcage, both of them breathing the same overheated air.

Then Yujun bridges the gap, pretty lips parted, round nose brushing Hosu’s cheek as he leans in, gentle and sure. He presses closer, closer, closer, until all the air disappears from between them and Hosu’s breath hitches as he feels the sweet silk of Yujun’s mouth against his lips.

Hosu’s heart is racing as Yujun’s tongue slides into his mouth, soft and wet, the taste of him sharp and sweet like the soju lingering on Hosu’s own tongue. His kisses are eager and delectable, and Hosu falls into them, a rush of excitement running through him that this is okay now, he can explore this and let it happen and *it’s okay*. Yujun nips his bottom lip and Hosu’s breath hitches, hands flying up to tangle in Yujun’s long hair, fingers tugging experimentally at the strands, earning a heady moan that sends a shiver down Hosu’s spine.

It’s sultry, torrid, uninhibited, every inch of them pressed together on the crowded dance floor, and Hosu is breathless within minutes.

When Yujun pulls back with a soft *hyung* and a question in his eyes, Hosu nods and leads him off the dance floor. They stumble into the bathroom by wordless agreement, locking themselves into a stall between delirious giggles and small kisses. When Yujun presses him against the stall wall and looks him in the eye, wide-eyed and vulnerable, Hosu can’t help but cup his cheek, a gesture too gentle for the heat and the tension of the moment.

“Just for tonight, Yu. Let hyung help you forget.”

And when Yujun surges forward, Hosu catches him.

It’s so much, so thrilling, so delicious, and Hosu lets it happen, welcomes it. He knows what this is, and Yujun knows it too. This is for right now, just tonight, it’s about *forgetting*, for Yujun, and about *exploration* for Hosu. They fall into it, the kisses and the touches, the slide of slick skin and wet mouths, the salt of sweat and sweetness of pleasure without pretense.

For Hosu, it’s remembering, too, relearning the depths of feeling his body holds, as well as the mechanics of touching a body so like his own.

It’s awkward, standing up in such a cramped place, trying to be quiet. They catch each other’s moans in hungry mouths, licking the echoes of them off each other’s lips while below, eager hands stroke

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and flick just right to draw out new sounds to spill between them. It's hapless fingers stumbling over too-tight closures on pants not made for easy access while standing, bringing forth breathless giggles that mix with their heedless moans, too loud for a public bathroom. It's eager and heated, fun and messy, overwhelming and so good all at once.

Hosu relishes the feel of it, the taste of it, the unbridled, electric feeling that buzzes under his skin as Yujun touches him, as he tastes the younger man's mouth, his skin, the moans he breathes onto Hosu's tongue.

It's messy once it's over, too, once Yujun's face is buried in Hosu's shoulder while he catches his breath as Hosu smiles into his hair, chest still heaving, one hand on Yujun's broad back and one held awkwardly between them, sticky and wet.

Hosu thinks it might get awkward in other ways now, too, but then Yujun grins up at him and impishly croaks *thanks hyung*, and Hosu snorts, and they both laugh, and Hosu thinks they'll be just fine.

Yujun takes his hand after they finish putting themselves back together, links their fingers and smiles at Hosu, kissing his cheek gently.

"You good, hyung?"

And Hosu nods, his smile broad and heart shaped.

"Yeah, Yunie. I'm good."

And they are. They rejoin the others, talking and laughing as before, and Hosu feels light and content even as they're teased for their twin smiles, messy hair and the tell-tale pink flush high on their cheekbones.

*

They meet up frequently once Jiyeong and Seongmin go home, for coffee or drinks, occasionally a movie, their disjointed, heated beginning easily flowing into a firm friendship that spills over into *something else* once or twice, when the need is high.

In January, Hosu travels home to Gwangju for Seollal with lead in his shoes, dreading the questions and recriminations he expects to get from his parents. He shares a ride with Dawon and Heechul, who spend much of the drive alternating between distracting him and reassuring him.

In the end, it's not as bad as he feared. Dawon sticks to him like glue, sweeping him away for a walk anytime he looks stressed and running interference whenever their parents start badgering him about Iseul or her potential *replacement*. A small part of him wants to spill all his secrets, wants to tear his chest open and tell them the truth of who their son is, has always been, will always be.

But a bigger part of him knows he isn't ready yet, that he needs to fill his skin out more fully before he tackles a battle that big, knows that that conversation isn't going to go the way he would desperately love for it to go. He knows it won't end in loving acceptance, in hugs and forgiveness, knows that his parents' reaction is going to hurt, going to tear at all those fragile parts of him, and he needs to be stronger, braver, ready.

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And so, he holds his secrets close to his chest, keeps his spine straight when his mother mentions Iseul, and is grateful for Dawon's unfailing support and well-timed distractions.

The two-day trip is over quickly, and it's with a sigh of relief that he returns to his own apartment.

He's just showered and is sprawled on his couch in sweatpants and a t-shirt when he gets a text from Yujun. It's uncharacteristically short, his tone and phrasing the way it only gets when he's stressed, the written syllables somehow more clipped and broken than normal.

Yu

hyung

can I come over

pls

Me

course Yu

u ok?

Yu

not rly

cu in 30

Me

Kk

Hosu frowns, worry nipping at the inside of his ribcage, knowing Yujun went home to Busan for Seollal and was due to fly home tonight, wondering what might have happened.

When the knock comes on his door barely half an hour later, he hurries to open it.

Yujun looks broken and fragile, standing in front of Hosu's apartment, eyes shiny and hands shaky. He falls into Hosu, clinging to him with a harrowed *please hyung* as Hosu wraps his arms around the younger man's shoulders.

Hosu's gentle *what do you need, Yunie* is met with a fractured *just help me forget, please, hyung*, and that's all it takes.

Later, much later, Yujun tells him the story in halting sentences while tucked into Hosu's side, naked and spent, lays out the sadness of seeing the boy he loves in love with someone else, someone *not Yujun* but devastatingly *male*. Hosu holds him through it, reminds him his value doesn't diminish

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based on someone else's inability to see it, presses all the things he sees that are *good* and *wonderful* about Yujun into the boy's skin with gentle brushes of his hands along his back and shoulder as he listens and cries silently.

And so it goes. Their friendship grows stronger as they shore each other up, sometimes slipping into something more when one or other needs to forget or decompress. Yujun becomes a central figure in Hosu's life, his closest friend in Seoul, and his sometime comfort in skin and heat when memories or insecurities crowd him into dark corners in his mind.

He introduces Hosu to his Seojun-hyung, a work-friend-turned-surrogate-father who adopted Yujun as soon as he learned the boy knew no one in Seoul. It doesn't take him long after meeting Hosu to put his number in Hosu's phone under *Seoul dad*, and Hosu can't help but suspect Yujun's told him a little about his fractured relationship with his own father.

The knowledge sits warm and tight at the back of his throat.

It's a freezing cold Friday night in February, and Hosu is out for drinks with Yujun, Seojun and his girlfriend Eunji when Yujun asks Seojun about his new flat.

"How's it working out, hyung? Is your flat mate nice?"

Seojun swallows a mouthful of his beer while nodding enthusiastically.

"Minjunie's great! He's ridiculously smart, like, professor-smart, but he's also like, a sweet kid and phenomenally clumsy and awkward. As in, I had to ban him from cooking the first week after he started a kitchen fire *twice*."

They laugh, and Seojun continues, animated.

"He's pretty cool though. Did I tell you he runs a rainbow youth centre here in Seoul?"

"Seriously? That's awesome!" Yujun exclaims, and Seojun nods.

"Yeah! And he's not even gay! Straight as they come, but his best friend is gay and it was his idea, and Jun-ah wanted to help, so they started it together and have been running it for, like, two years! And he's still studying, too!"

Hosu is impressed.

"He sounds like a really good guy, hyung. Where is this centre? I'd love to check it out, see if they need volunteers or something."

Seojun hums affirmatively.

"They do, they always need volunteers. I'll text you the address, Su-ah, you can drop by anytime, they're open twenty-four seven."

The conversation drifts off onto other things from there, but the centre sticks in the back of Hosu's mind like a beacon, calling his name every time there's a lull in the noise around him, and he makes a mental note to visit it as soon as possible.

Our Gentle Sin - a novel by Tara Lemana

Seoul, March 2017

It's raining again, and Duri's hands are wet and cold where they're stuffed in his coat pockets as he hurries along his usual route to the centre. His hair is sopping wet, trailing into his eyes, and there's a damp trail down his spine where stray drops have followed each other downwards.

Of all the days to forget his umbrella, it had to be today.

It's only 4 pm, but it's nearly dark, the low hanging cloud blocking out any trace of sun, weighing the city down with heavy swathes of gloom.

His phone chimes with a message and he pulls it out of his pocket, shielding it from the worst of the rain with his forearm.

Babe

what time will u b home 2nite

Me

I'll be late

got 6 kids staying and Minho called in sick

have to wait for Bora to come in at 10

Babe

won't wait up then

early meeting 2moro

try 2 get a night at home this week pls

Me

...

I'll try

No further messages arrive, and the exchange leaves him feeling frustrated and a little downhearted.

He turns a corner, shoes squeaking damply in the downpour, shoulders pulling up closer to his ears to try and ward off the errant drips that insist on making their way down his collar.

Our Gentle Sin - a novel by Tara Lemana

The centre rises up in front of him, warmly lit and welcoming, and it feels like coming home. Duri can't help but smile as he walks up the path through the front yard, and not for the first time, thanks his own stubbornness for insisting the place would welcome kids with greenery, not parking spots, which are relegated to the back of the building instead.

The garden with its nooks and crannies gives Duri an overwhelming sense of peace as he walks through it and he thinks it does the same for many of the kids who come here, providing them with calm, quiet places where they can hang out on the grass.

Right now, it's wet and cold, abandoned in favour of warm, dry rooms inside, and Duri passes through on hurried feet, eager to get in the front door and get warm and dry.

He shakes off the rain as he walks in the door, running his hand through his wet hair to push it up off his face, when he notices a man standing at the reception desk, his back turned to the door. Even from behind, Duri can tell he's a lot older than the kids that come to the centre, an adult, not a teen, and he wonders what he's here for. An umbrella is resting against the front of the reception desk, and the man's hair looks soft and dry, a pretty pale lavender.

The desk is unattended, and the stranger seems to be looking a little lost, so Duri clears his throat.

"Can I help you?"

The man turns, and Duri's heart seizes in his chest as the man's friendly smile morphs into wide-eyed, open-mouthed shock.

Kim Hosu is standing in his foyer.

*

Chapter 10

Seoul, March 2017

There are moments in life when all focus narrows to details, when the bigger picture disappears and all that's left is the sound of the rain's cataclysmic pelting against the roof and windows, the sparse *dripdripdrip* of water on the floor below the edges of your coat, the way your breath passes across your chilled lips and warms them on its way out. When the world drops away, constricts to exclude all but the way your hands are still, so still, when you feel like they ought to be shaking, the way your blood thunders in your veins, pounding behind your temples like tomorrow's migraine forecasting itself.

Our Gentle Sin - a novel by Tara Lemana

It's like that now, as Duri stands just metres away from Hosu, frozen on the tile floor as puddles spread around his waterlogged feet. His eyes take in details, too: the sharp inner corners of Hosu's eyes, the twin curves of his cupid's bow with its deep dip between them, the defined cheekbones, all so familiar, all so dear. He notices the changes, such as they are; the jawline, sharper; the posture, more upright; the shoulders, broader; the hair, that pretty, vivid lavender (*lavender!*), the face, older, more mature, more beautiful, somehow. He's taller now, taller than Duri, and he holds himself differently. *You grew up so well*, Duri thinks but doesn't say, *I always knew you would*.

Hosu stares, anchored to the spot, completely unable to move, to think, to form words. A distant part of him thrashes wildly, roars and beats its fists against his rooted form, wills himself to move, screams *this is your chance, talk to him, say you're sorry*, but it's too much, too sudden, and all Hosu can do is *look*.

Duri looks good. The same, in many ways. Same hooded eyes, shapely, sharp and gentle all at once, a little wider now in shock. The same perfect mouth, pink and delicate, too delicate for the voice that rumbles from it when he speaks, too delicate for the harsh bars he used to spit, but perfect all the same, just right for the heart that lies below it.

The same little button nose, small and round with a smattering of light freckles. So much of it the same, and yet.

And yet.

There's more there, now, a hesitance, a determination. Echoes of life, of heartache, of things Hosu has no knowledge of, layered with older things, familiar things, in Duri's eyes.

He's grown into himself, Hosu thinks, not that it should be a surprise, not after all this time. His heart rabbits inside his chest, a skittish thing entirely unprepared for the magnitude of a moment like this. He wants to say something, thinks it should be him who breaks the silence; *it's only fitting, since it's your fault there's silence to break*, his mind whispers. It's terrifying, though, finding the right words after all this time, all these years, words that convey all the things staining his insides, all the things he chewed on for eleven long years, all the things that tripped him up. Those words maybe don't exist, he thinks.

And if he found them, by some magic, spilling them without a script to make sure they are heard *just right*, that may take a different person, someone braver, someone bigger than Hosu. Because after all these years, it's too much to expect Duri to still *know*, to still read him the way he used to, to still care.

It's Duri who breaks the silence, Duri who, as always, finds the way through, pushing out two broken, hushed syllables that fall between them.

"Hobah?"

The sound of his voice, so tender and beloved even after all this time, cracks something inside Hosu, and he swallows hard.

"Hyung? Is it really you?"

It's the sound of the honorific on Hosu's tongue that makes tears well up, unbidden, and Duri has to look away, look down at his shoes, count water droplets while he wills the tears not to fall.

Hosu blanches.

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"I – I mean, oh god, I'm sorry, that's...I shouldn't...I mean, Duri-ssi, I..."

Duri looks up, breath sharp, eyes sharp, and smiles, *smiles*, eyes still shining, shaking his head.

"It's fine, Hobah, you can still call me hyung. I just never thought...I didn't think you ever would, again."

It's said quietly, with more than a little sadness weighing on the words, and Hosu stills.

"Oh."

There's a space then, a heartbeat. The mountain of unsaid things between them makes Hosu feel breathless, the task of knowing what's okay, whether *talking* is something Duri is even willing to do at this point seeming insurmountable. Where does one start to apologise for the kind of hurt Hosu has caused, for the kind of unnecessary, undeserved pain he rained down on a boy who just wanted to love and be loved? How does he even begin to make that right? With a sinking feeling, he realises that he doesn't know if Duri even wants him to try, and so he doesn't.

Instead, he waits, waits for an open end to present itself, a thread to grasp onto to untangle the mess between them that's been eleven years in the making.

Duri seems to shake himself a little, then, like he's waking up. He starts to move again, crossing the foyer, walking around behind the reception desk, taking his coat off as he goes.

"What are you doing here, Hobah?"

His tone is curious, gentle, not accusatory, genuine surprise woven liberally through the layers.

"I moved here about six months ago. I heard about this place from a friend, thought I'd come check it out. You work here?"

Duri smiles, a secret little smile, and Hosu feels a pang of regret for all the things about Duri he isn't privy to.

"You could say that. It's my centre."

Hosu stares, open-mouthed, and Duri's smile widens into that lovely, shy, gummy version Hosu remembers from all those years ago. Hosu's heart lifts at the sight of it.

"Are you serious? Wait! You're the best friend?"

Duri looks confused, a small frown drawing his brows together.

"Best friend?"

"My friend who told me about this place, his flat mate started it with his best friend, I think his name was Moonjung?"

Duri giggles, and the sound is the same, and Hosu's breath stutters in his chest because it was his favourite thing, and it may still be, even now.

"Minjun. Yeah. Your friend must be Seojun."

"Yes!"

Hosu's mouth rushes on faster than his brain can keep up with.

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“That’s really great, hyung. I’m really –,” *proud of you*, his mind supplies, but then he stops. He has no right to that adjective, does he? Because *he wasn’t there*, this isn’t his, it isn’t *theirs*, and so he swallows the word, fills the gap with smaller, less contentious versions, ending somewhat lamely with a thinner, less weighty “yeah, I mean, that’s...it’s amazing.”

He can feel his cheeks heat, embarrassment creeping in, but Duri’s smile is gentle and there’s no anger in his expression as he offers a quiet *thanks, Hobah*.

Hosu looks away, tries to breathe through the flutter in his chest, stops himself from staring at Duri and cataloguing all the signs of the boy he knew, separated from him now by eleven years and a desk overloaded with paperwork. Tries not to dwell on the fact that no one else ever called him *Hobah*, or the way the nickname makes his heart shudder in his chest. There’s a familiar shyness welling up in his ribcage, an awkwardness he thought he might finally have outgrown, a haphazard uncertainty of exactly how to manage this conversation, so completely unexpected and yet so desperately wanted.

His eye catches on droplets of water on the sheaves of paper cluttering the desk and Hosu realises with a start that the water is dripping from Duri’s hair.

“Hyung, you’re...your hair, it’s...you’re soaking wet. You should, maybe...go dry off?”

Duri huffs, annoyed, hand brusquely pushing his hair out of his face. His fingers are pale, cold brushed in shades of white under the skin. Hosu’s eye catches on the familiar shape of them, hands large, fingers long and knobby. He looks away, cheeks flushing.

Looks back, eyes full of something Hosu can’t quite place.

“Yeah, I better. Will you...wait? Please?”

Hosu nods.

“I’ll wait.”

Duri nods, too, turns and walks towards the back of the space, an open doorway leading further into the building. He stops and turns back. There’s something fragile about him when he says *don’t leave, okay?*, and Hosu shakes his head, firm, eager to impress on Duri that there is no chance he’s leaving now.

“I won’t,” is all he says.

Duri disappears, and Hosu is alone. He paces up and down the foyer, nerves buzzing under his skin, a quiet litany of *whatthehellwhatthehell* replaying itself over and over again in his mind, an undercurrent of panic trying to work its way up. He breathes, tries to steady himself.

Duri is here.

Duri is *here*.

Duri is here, real and warm and breathing, he saw Hosu and *smiled*, saw Hosu and didn’t throw him out, saw Hosu and asked him *not to leave*. The warm knowledge of it heats Hosu from the inside while the surprise of it makes him shiver. Of all the things Hosu might have expected in this moment, Duri seeming *pleased* to see him would have been far down the list. The obvious shock, sure; after all, its twin is still roiling violently within his own belly. But the apparent lack of anger or hatred, that is so much more than Hosu could ever have hoped for after how he threw what they had away.

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A gentle hope stirs that maybe, just maybe, he'll get a chance to clear the air, to tell Duri how sorry he is, to make peace.

An insidiously greedy part of him whispers of *more*, of *friendship*, of *Duri back in his life*, but Hosu pushes it away, hard. He had his chance, and he blew it. The best possible thing that could come from this is closure.

He doesn't dare hope for anything beyond that.

*

Duri barely trusts his legs to carry him to his office.

He lets go the second the door shuts behind him, sagging up against the smooth wood and sliding down into a knee cracking crouch, all the air gone from his lungs as his head drops to his hands, breathing wayward, capricious.

Hosu is here.

All those years ago, the last words Hosu had spat at him were *leave me alone*, and Duri had done just that. He'd stayed away, hadn't fought for what they had, hadn't fought for his Hobah, had simply allowed oceans of silent space to drift between them, pull them to different shores where no amount of call and response could ever reconnect them.

And yet, inexplicably, here he is, flesh and bone, lavender hair and a heart-shaped smile and those warm, dark eyes. And all these years later, he's *talking*, talking and *smiling*, not running away, not telling Duri to *leave him alone*. He's here, and he's still Hobah, and it's so much, it's so hard, it hurts in all the ways things can hurt, exquisite and hellish and every shade of agony in between, but Duri wants nothing more than to talk to him, to make things okay again.

Old memories threaten to wash over him, pushing in on the periphery of his thoughts, but he can't, not now, not with Hosu waiting for him. He can't lose himself in the past or he'll drown in it, sink to the bottom of the sludge of sadness and ecstasy, joy and hope and abject misery that is his history with Hosu, so he pushes it down, keeps it at bay.

He breathes deeply, *in...out...in...out*, calming, soothing, settling, forcing down the flush of panic welling up in his gut.

When he feels strong enough, he pushes himself up on shaky legs, squares his shoulders and heads for the small ensuite bathroom. It's the one luxury he and Minjun permitted themselves when building the centre – an ensuite bathroom with doors off both their offices, private to just them, not used by any of the kids, volunteers, or visitors to the centre.

He pulls out a towel and the set of dry clothes he keeps on hand and sets to getting changed.

By the time Duri finally returns to the foyer, a full twenty minutes have passed, and panic is starting to leach into Hosu's chest that maybe Duri changed his mind and left.

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He feels him before he sees him, senses him coming into the space the second he crosses the threshold, as if detected by some long-forgotten sixth sense. When he looks up, Duri looks soft and warm, dressed in sweatpants, trainers, and a hoodie. His hair is dry and fluffy, cheeks and nose pink.

He looks *at home*.

His smile is soft, hesitant like he's not sure Hosu is really here and not some figment of his imagination.

"Hey...sorry it took a while, I...just...yeah."

He looks embarrassed, so Hosu smiles his widest, bravest smile.

"It's fine, hyung, you were soaked, you must've been freezing."

"Yeah. Um. You want to...I could show you around?"

There's something hopeful in Duri's eyes, this time, and the tightness in Hosu's chest loosens a bit. He nods eagerly.

"Yeah, that would be great, I'd love to see!"

He follows Duri, a step behind, listening as Duri explains rooms and points out things he likes. There are photos, handmade notes, and hand-drawn art on many of the walls, memorabilia from kids who called the centre home at some point over the past two years. Duri's shyness vanishes as soon as he starts talking about the centre, the pride and passion loud and colourful in his voice as he narrates. Hosu feels pulled into Duri's orbit just like he did all those years ago, drawn forward, ever closer until he bumps into Duri, once, twice, mumbling apologies with crimson cheeks.

He can't help it, though. Duri in his element is magical, powerful, and Hosu is wide-eyed, captured and in awe.

When Duri shows him the recording studio, his energy shifts, dimming a bit, and Hosu catches it.

"This is great, hyung. Do you...do you still rap?"

"Ah. Um." Shuffling feet, eyes everywhere but on Hosu.

"I...no, I don't. Don't really have time for it now. I did for a while, at university, but, you know, life."

He looks a little forlorn, a little embarrassed again, and Hosu feels a pang of sadness.

"Yeah, I get it. Hard to keep it up."

Duri sniffs, determined, and nods.

"Yeah. It's alright though. I get to teach the kids here."

He cocks his head sideways then, looks at Hosu.

"What about you? You still dance?"

Hosu smiles widely, thrilled that Duri would remember.

"I do. I let it fizzle out a for a while, did the office job and career thing after uni. Just barely kept up practicing at home. But when I moved here, I started going to a studio, and they got me teaching some classes. Just on weekends at first. But they um, they offered me full time. I started officially last week!"

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Hosu's shy excitement is palpable, and Duri feels buoyed. He can't help but smile, the big grin that always makes him a bit self-conscious, the one where his gums show and his eyes crinkle.

"That's really great, Hobah. Hyung is proud of you."

Proud. Hosu flushes, and Duri does too, the smile dropping a little as his own words register. He feels a little sick at how presumptuous he must have sounded, and panic wells up at the back of his throat until he sees Hosu's smile.

"Thanks, hyung, that means a lot."

It's too easy, this, slipping into old dynamics, old behaviour patterns. Duri turns away, relieved, heading down the corridor and into safer territory.

"That's all of it," he says over his shoulder, "let's head to the kitchen and I'll make us some tea."

Minutes later they're stationed at the table in the little kitchen off the centre foyer, door open so Duri can keep an eye out for any walk-ins, hands wrapped around warm mugs of green tea.

Duri's eyes keep catching on Hosu, on all the little things he remembers, and all the things he doesn't, the things that are part of this *new* Hosu, the one who dyes his hair *lavender*. The black painted fingernails, the colourful little bracelets marching up both wrists, the delicate chain around the arch of his neck, all the little touches that the Hosu he remembers would never have dared to wear. Duri can't help but smile across the table.

"You look good, Hobah. I like your hair."

Hosu's smile is shy and blinding, slender fingers darting up to tug at the strands, then flitting back down sheepishly.

"Thanks, hyung. I like it too."

A beat, two, three.

"I can't believe you're here."

Duri feels a little breathless, off kilter.

"Ditto," is all he says, and Hosu huffs a soft laugh.

They're quiet as they drink, and the weight of all the *things* piled up between them presses in. Duri vacillates between wanting to talk and being *afraid to*, afraid of spooking Hosu, afraid of starting a conversation as taxing as this one in this place, here, while he's working. His mind argues against itself, and while it does, Hosu finds his voice.

He looks up from his drink, cold nerves mixing with steely determination in his belly, and grips his mug tight as he looks Duri straight in the eye.

"Hyung, I want to tell you I'm sorry."

All the air is sucked out of Duri's lungs. *Hosu is sorry?*

"I...I know I hurt you so much, and I can't really ever make that up to you. I wish I...well, I wish a lot of things. I can't go back and change it, or I would. I never should have pushed you away, I was scared and sad and stupid, I blamed you for something that wasn't your fault. You didn't deserve it, and I'm so, so sorry I hurt you."

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Duri's words are trapped behind his teeth, his airless lungs incapable of pushing them out as his mind tries to make sense of what Hosu is saying.

Hosu grimaces down at his hands.

"I know I don't deserve for you to forgive me, hyung, but I just...I always hoped I'd see you again so I could tell you that I know, I know it wasn't your fault, I know I was wrong for blaming you, and I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. I didn't know I'd see you here, I swear I didn't, but I'm so glad I did, I'm so glad, because I got to see you and I got to tell you. And I know you might not want to see me again, and that's okay, I get that, but I'm so glad to know you're doing well, that you have this place and...yeah."

The words tumble out head over heels, in a rush, and when Hosu's voice cracks, so does Duri's resolve. He lays one hand on Hosu's wrist to still him. The bones still feel the same under his fingers, delicate like a bird's.

"Hobah, look at me."

Duri feels cracked open, split apart, all his insides poured all over the table between them, yet somehow, his voice sounds steady. When Hosu looks up, his eyes shimmer.

"I don't blame you. I never did. I blame myself. I never should have..." he sighs, frustrated.

"I knew we would leave eventually, Hobah, and I let us get close anyway. I should've...I should've been a better hyung, protected you better, kept you from getting hurt. I'm so sorry you got hurt, Hobah. I never wanted that to happen."

Duri stops, registering Hosu's expression. He's frowning; why is he frowning?

"You think you should've stopped us from getting close?"

Duri sighs, runs a hand through his hair, shrugs.

"I...maybe? I just, maybe if I hadn't...you know...then you would've been okay?"

Hosu's frown deepens.

"Hadn't what, hyung? Become my friend? Fallen in love with me?"

Duri grimaces, and the back of his neck heats up.

"Yeah, Hobah. Fallen in love with you. I shouldn't have."

Hurt flashes in Hosu's eyes.

"So you regret it?"

And that is so very far from the truth, Duri feels sick at the implication. His free hand shoots back across the table, clamping onto Hosu's wrist again, tightly this time.

"Oh god no, Hobah, that's not what I meant. I just. Look. I could never regret you. Us. All the good things. But I regret that you got hurt. I wish I could've stopped that from happening, you know? Maybe if I hadn't let us get that close, maybe if we had just stayed friends, then you wouldn't have gotten hurt."

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After all the years he spent denying what he had with Duri, Hosu feels fiercely protective of it now that he's finally embraced it, and it's that protectiveness that fills him when he speaks. He's frowning, and he pouts a little as he speaks, and in any other circumstances it would be *cute*.

"Hyung. You were the best thing that ever happened to me. Hurt or not. If we hadn't gotten together, if we'd stayed friends, I would have been hopelessly in love with my best friend for months, and then I would've lost him anyway. Either way, I was going to get hurt. At least the way things went down, I got to have that time with you. I'll never regret that, as long as I live, no matter...no matter what."

The lump in the back of Duri's throat is almost too big to breathe around. He feels so raw, so painfully vulnerable, and wasn't that how it always was with Hosu? Duri never did stand a chance.

"You mean that? You don't regret it?"

Hosu's head shake is emphatic.

"Never, hyung. I only regret how I acted when I knew I was going to lose you."

Pieces shift inside Duri, years of feelings, thoughts, memories realigning themselves around this different perspective. It's overwhelming, and it's all he can do to not lose his tenuous control, to stay calm.

He shuts his eyes, allowing himself a fortifying breath or two.

To Hosu's credit he stays quiet, and Duri feels a warm, slender hand fit itself over his and squeeze gently.

When he opens his eyes, Hosu is watching him, and he looks calmer, more settled, as if the breaths Duri took soothed him by proxy.

Duri nods to himself.

"Okay. But I meant what I said about not blaming you. There's nothing to forgive, but if you need forgiveness from me, you have it."

It's Hosu's turn to draw his own shaky breath and close his eyes before looking at Duri and smiling wider.

"Okay. Thank you."

And with that, the jagged, most hazardous part of meeting again is over, and a tentative, tiffany bridge is formed.

Hosu sips his tea, then smiles up at Duri.

"I'm really glad I ran into you here, hyung. Nearly gave me a heart attack, I won't lie, but I'm really glad."

Duri smiles his gummiest smile, and Hosu's heart feels so full.

"Me too, Hobah. You know, we nearly crossed paths once before. I actually came back to Gwangju once, for work."

"You did?"

"Yeah. About eighteen months ago."

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"Oh wow. I still lived there then."

There's something on the tip of his tongue, a question that's been at the back of his mind since his Gwangju visit all those months ago. His eyes dart to Hosu's hand for the thousandth time since they sat down and find nothing but bare skin.

He has no right to broach the topic, and the fact he even cares at all puts him on thin ice, but he needs to know, has to know, so he throws caution to the wind.

"I um, I actually ran into someone who knew you, while I was there. A boy we went to school with, Hyung-something."

Hosu looks confused.

"Oh. Yeah?"

"Yeah. He um. He asked about you, whether we still kept in touch. Asked me if we were a couple at school, would you believe."

Hosu looks shocked.

"Shit, seriously?"

"Yeah. I wasn't sure what you'd want me to say, so I said no, just in case, you know."

He watches Hosu closely as he sees it, and the relief that flashes across his face is unmistakable. It hurts Duri's heart just a little.

"That's...um. Thanks. That was probably for the best at that point."

At that point. What does that mean? It would be okay to tell now? But what changed, then, between then and now?

He nods as if he understands.

"He...when I told him no, he didn't question it because he um, he said he'd heard you were engaged? To a woman."

He feels a little sick asking the question, knows it's none of his business, and yet.

The ache to know outweighs everything else.

Hosu looks pained.

"Ah. Um. Yeah. I was."

"Was?"

"Yeah. We're not together anymore."

"Oh. I'm um. Sorry?"

Hosu laughs at that.

"Is that a question, hyung?"

Duri has the good grace to blush.

"Shit, no, I'm sorry, of course I am. Break ups suck."

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Hosu shrugs.

“Yeah, they do. This one...it was kind of inevitable. Iseul was great, but um. I’m gay, so that was never going to work. We split just before I moved here.”

There’s a maelstrom of feelings that wells up in Duri at that. Loudest is a sense of pride at Hosu’s honest, sure statement, his embracing of who he is, despite where he came from, despite what he must have had to go through.

He doesn’t voice the sentiment out loud, not yet. It seems a little too much right now, too soon.

“I’m sorry, Hobah,” he says instead, “that can’t have been easy.”

Hosu shrugs, eyes on the table, and there’s a flash of the same self-conscious young boy Duri remembers.

“It sucked. Hurting someone you care about is horrible.”

And that’s a feeling Duri is all too familiar with.

“Yeah, it is.”

Hosu looks up at that and offers a small smile. Duri returns it.

“I’m doing okay though, you know? And she is too, I think. I’m happy being single for now. Focusing on dance, on figuring myself out.”

And that’s familiar too, reminding Duri of the period after Subin, when he spent his time focused on healing himself before leaping into another relationship. It was the right thing for him, and hopefully, it’ll help Hosu too.

“That’s really good to hear, Hobah, I’m glad.”

“What about you though, hyung? Are you seeing anyone?”

Something cold drops in Duri’s belly. All the time he’s spent talking to Hosu, he’s managed to forget about Juwon.

Heat flushes the back of his neck, and his skin prickles. He nods stiffly.

“Um yeah, I am. His name is Juwon. He’s...he’s great.”

It’s lame, he’s lame, but he doesn’t want to talk to Hosu about Juwon. He wants to talk to Hosu about Hosu, about old times, to relive what they had and rebuild some kind of connection.

Hosu watches Duri go stiff and awkward and regrets the question. He’d known someone like Duri couldn’t possibly be single, that he was too amazing, too wonderful to not be *attached*, but still, there’s a rush of hot disappointment.

He swallows it down and offers the most genuine smile he can.

“That’s...great, hyung. I’m happy for you.”

Hosu can almost see the spectre of Juwon sitting in between them, and a disapproving voice at the back of his mind tells him that he has no business talking so openly to his ex, an ex who now belongs with someone else. But Duri was his friend first, and Hosu wasn’t ready to lose him, and if there’s a chance of maybe rekindling the friendship then surely there’s nothing wrong with that?

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And so, he squashes down that hateful voice and leans into the feeling, the connection that still seems to be there, all these years later. He smiles at Duri and watches Duri's face bloom in an answering smile.

"So. Tell me about how you came to open this place."

They slip easily back into comfortable territory from there. Duri relays the story of meeting Baekhyun, of saving him from bullies, flushing under Hosu's awed exclamations of *hyung, such a badass* in a way so eerily reminiscent of their early friendship days. Hosu in turn fills Duri in on the highlights of his life after High School, carefully navigating around just the lighter layers, avoiding more deeply personal talk for now. There's already been so much of that tonight, he thinks, they can talk more about those things next time, if there is a next time.

Duri seems to be on the same page, keeping the conversation lighter for now. They find their groove easily, banter and jokes slipping in like they don't have an eleven-year gap to contend with.

When Hosu's phone rings, he answers it without leaving the table or moving away, and Duri feels unreasonably pleased to realise the level of comfort they've been able to restore so easily after all this time.

"Yu? Shit, wait, that's tonight? No, I – I ran into an old friend, we got talking, I lost track of time...yeah, okay, I'll see you there."

He hangs up. Duri feels a pang of disappointment, but he smiles through it.

"Got somewhere to be?"

Hosu grimaces.

"Yeah. My friend Yujun got a new job. We're going out for dinner as a group to celebrate."

He looks at Duri then, hesitant.

"I um...I don't suppose...would you maybe want to come?"

Duri stares. Of all the ways he expected tonight to go, this wasn't one of them.

"I...um..."

Hosu flushes, rubbing at the back of his neck, looking embarrassed.

"Of course not, sorry, that was...totally inappropriate."

Duri grabs Hosu's free hand where it lies on the table, quick to want to reassure. It's automatic in the way of muscle memory, how he knows that when Hosu needs soothing, he needs touch. Giving it to him isn't so much a decision as it is reflex, much like breathing.

The simple touch sends a warmth radiating outward along Hosu's skin.

"Hey, no, it's fine, Hobah. I would've loved to, but I have to be here until ten tonight. Another time though?"

Hosu nods, relieved by Duri's words as much as soothed by the warm fingers closed around his palm.

"Yeah, yeah, of course. Can I...can I maybe have your number, hyung? So we can keep in touch?"

And there isn't a single cell in Duri's body that wants to say no to that.

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Goodbye is hopeful, this time. Hosu leaves with Duri's number saved in his phone and a promise to hang out soon. There's a moment of awkwardness when he automatically leans in to hug Duri, then stops when he second guesses himself and wonders if it's inappropriate, leaving him weirdly close and yet not embracing.

Duri simply huffs and tugs him all the way in for a hug paired with a gruff *don't make it weird Hobah*, and that's that.

After he leaves, Duri sits at the kitchen table and sinks into himself, memories replaying in his mind. His insides feel tossed around, a raw mess with so many loose ends, so many colours, so many things to process, he doesn't know where to start.

He sits there, eyes on the tabletop, heart in his mouth, and remembers. All the moments, all the ways Hosu loved him, all the ways he showed it. The way he walked right into Duri's heart as if his hard-won defenses didn't even exist. The way he *saw* Duri, even when Duri tried so hard to hide. The way he always knew exactly what to do, what to say, to open Duri up and leave him *raw* and *vulnerable* and *so loved*.

And today, for all Duri's healing, for all his *letting go*, Hosu just walked right back in all over again, like the past eleven years hadn't happened. And he chose a time to do it when Duri isn't free, when he's *with someone*, someone he loves, someone who loves him, someone with whom he's built a life.

It's a foregone conclusion that Duri doesn't have the self-preservation to say no to Hosu being his friend, to a chance at partway undoing his biggest regret. He won't turn down a second chance at having Hosu in his life, even if it's not in the way he once hoped it would be.

He suppresses the voice at the back of his mind that whispers he's on very, very thin ice trying to be *just friends* with the boy who stole his heart and never gave it back, determined that he, Im Duri, is perfectly capable of controlling his emotions.

Hosu sits in the back of the cab taking him to the restaurant where he's meeting his friends and can't stop smiling the entire way there.

He saw Duri. He talked to Duri, made his peace with Duri. And once some of the debris between them had been cleared, laced through what was left behind was a familiar warmth, a gossamer connection, still thin and partially hidden amidst all the *things yet to be talked about*, but there, nonetheless.

It's more than Hosu had ever dared hope for.

Something warm has nestled in his belly, and despite everything, despite all that still stands between them, all the years, all the hurt, despite Duri's *Juwon*, the taste of hope is too sweet to ignore.

He fires off a text before entering the restaurant, a short but genuine *I'm so glad we talked*.

Duri's simple *me too* ensures Hosu's smile doesn't fade for the rest of the night.

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Sleep doesn't find Duri that night. He waits until the sky is already greying outside his bedroom window, tossing and turning, limbs as restless as his mind, as Juwon sleeps beside him.

Thoughts of Hosu, memories of Hosu, little details and big, sweeping emotions crowd the slumber out beyond his reach.

In the end, he gives up, rising with the sun to go make coffee, bleary-eyed and overwhelmed.

Juwon finds him staring out the window, both hands curled around his coffee mug, bare feet pale with cold against the wooden window seat. He yawns and runs his hands through his sleep-mussed hair, dropping down on the seat at Duri's feet.

"Hey. Did you sleep?"

Duri shakes his head.

"Couldn't."

Juwon frowns.

"You alright?"

Duri stares into his mug, then nods slowly.

"I think so. I just...you remember I told you about my ex? The one in Gwangju?"

"Yeah?"

"He just – he walked into the centre last night. Out of nowhere. Nearly gave me a heart attack."

"Shit, really?"

"Yeah."

Juwon waits, quiet, as Duri finds his words. He shuffles closer, deliberately putting his bare thigh over top of Duri's feet, cold toes tucking up against the warm, soft skin. It's a sweet, familiar gesture, habitual, and it warms Duri in more ways than one.

"It was...a lot. Brought up a lot of old stuff, seeing him there, out of nowhere. But it was also good, you know? We talked, cleared the air. Felt like – putting some stuff to rest. Closure."

Juwon hums, wraps his hands around Duri's cold ankles, warming the skin there.

"That sounds positive?"

Duri's smile is small, but there.

"Yeah, it was. Just a lot all at once. I think I have a bit more processing to do."

"Fair enough. Do you think you'll see each other again?"

"Yeah, I think so. I'd like to, anyway. We were friends first, you know? One of the things that was hardest about us breaking up was losing my best friend."

Juwon rubs Duri's ankle, soothing, warm.

"Yeah, I can imagine that. Well, maybe this is your chance to get that friendship back then? If you think you can both manage that?"

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"I hope so."

Juwon hums again, dropping a kiss on Duri's knee.

"Me too, babe. Now, come on, your feet are freezing. You should go back to bed and try to get some sleep. I'll go get us some breakfast. You want bagels?"

"Hm, please."

Duri finally drifts back off to sleep once he crawls back into bed, soothed by Juwon's warm understanding.

*

It's Saturday, and Duri has a rare day off, time all his own for once. Juwon is working a shift at the centre, leaving with his morning coffee in a travel mug and a kiss to Duri's forehead as he lay curled up in his nest of blankets.

His only plan for the day is to sleep, eat and sleep some more. He's still buried in the soft, woolen swirl of the bed covers, body loose and warm, when a notification pops up on his phone with a perky *ding*.

His heart lurches when he sees the name *Hobah* appear on his screen, and he taps on it with a tremble at the back of his throat.

Hobah

hey hyung

you busy today?

Me

hey hobah

no

why?

Hobah

can I buy you a coffee?

A giddy swoop wells up in Duri's stomach and he squishes it down forcefully. It's coffee, coffee with a friend, just catching up. That's all it is and all it ever will be.

Still, he taps out his answer with a goofy smile on his face.

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Me

sure

Hobah

I'm free after 2

meet me at the brown cow at 3?

Me

Kk

Duri drops his phone on the bed and groans, pressing the heels of his hands against his eye sockets until it hurts. Nerves roil in his belly, stirring nausea that wells up at the back of his throat.

What if it's awkward? What if the air they cleared didn't *stay cleared*, and they can't get along? What if they have nothing to talk about, nothing to say to each other?

Part of him knows that won't be the case, knows that they'd never run out of things to say, knows that the feeling of ease that was there at the end of their conversation the other night won't have evaporated over the intervening days. But still, the nerves sit heavy and viscous in his belly.

Get your head on straight, idiot, the voice in his head grumbles as he sits up, legs swinging over the side of the bed, body curling up reflexively as the cold air touches the bare skin of his legs and torso.

The four hours until he's set to meet Hosu somehow both drag on and fly past too quickly. He showers, dresses, berates himself for agonising over what to wear, has lunch, drinks his coffee, cleans up, paces, drinks more coffee, and then suddenly it's 2:30 and he has to leave.

His phone buzzes as he walks down the road, and he fishes it out of his pocket.

Babe

should be home around 7

want me to pick up dinner?

Me

sure

Babe

Thai?

Me

sounds good

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Babe

Kk

what are u up to

Me

just omw to meet Hosu for coffee

Babe

oh wow

nervous?

Duri smiles, a small curl of his mouth. Trust Juwon to see straight through him.

Me

little bit, yeah

it'll be fine

Babe

it will

have fun ok?

Me

I will

thx babe

Babe

love you

see you tonight

Me

:-*

He pockets his phone with a smile. Something eases inside him with Juwon's easy acceptance towards his reconnection with Hosu, silencing the voice in the back of his head that whispers it's not okay for him to try and be friends with his ex, to try and reconnect in a platonic way. He reminds

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himself that plenty of exes are friends, that Juwon himself is friends with his exes, it's neither weird nor wrong.

As he turns the corner, he spots Hosu standing outside the Brown Cow café, looking the opposite way down the road, two takeaway cups held in front of him. Duri stops without meaning to, feet grinding to a halt as he stares at Hosu. He looks good, dressed in black jeans and black boots, a fluffy blue jumper peeking out from underneath the black coat he's wearing, lavender hair styled mostly off his face and a backpack over his shoulder.

He turns then, and his face breaks out in a wide smile when his eyes find Duri, body turning to face him, eager. It eases the flash of embarrassment in Duri at having been caught staring, and he returns the smile, warm all over.

"Hyung!" Hosu grins, thrusting his left hand out towards Duri.

"Hey Hobah. What," Duri says as he takes the cup, "what's this?"

"I thought maybe we could walk? Like old times?"

There's pink high on Hosu's cheeks, and Duri isn't sure if it's the cold. He takes a sip to cover his smile as he falls in beside Hosu, walking along the footpath.

"Americano. How'd you know?"

Hosu looks at him, smile and eyes soft. *Just an educated guess*, he says, and Duri flushes fuchsia.

They walk for a while, wrapped up in easy chat about their days, their plans for the coming week. Duri pays no attention to where they're going, following Hosu's lead as they talk. It's nice, the city around them is busy and vibrant, but it feels as though they're walking in their own bubble, warm and soothing against the cold and noise around them.

When Duri next looks up, he's surprised to see where they are.

"Cheonggyecheon?" he says, staring at Hosu with wide eyes. Hosu's smile is a little hesitant, maybe, a little unsure.

"Yeah, I um...I thought you might like to walk along the water. It's um, it's no Namhansanseong, but...yeah."

Namhansanseong. The place Duri had taken Hosu on his surprise birthday outing, all those years ago, when they were best friends. In hindsight, a day when Duri was already very much in love with his best friend and had gone out of his way to plan a spectacular date for him.

It's not a date. Duri knows it's not. But it *feels* like one, is the thing, with the way they're both dressed nicely, the way Hosu looks nervous and Duri *feels* it, and now this, this symbolic gesture of Hosu choosing a specific place for them to walk, a place that's in some ways reminiscent of that day at Namhansanseong. Hosu *planned* something for them, however small, and Duri has to keep his head together and not sink into the symbolism and the meaning of it all.

They're friends, that's all it is.

He swallows.

"That's...that's really cool, Hobah."

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He's rewarded with the slow widening of Hosu's brittle, hesitant smile into something that lights up the world around him, and Duri feels that same old satisfaction at having made Hosu smile, all mixed in with the nerves making his belly roil.

Hosu is nervous, too. Navigating this tentative reconnection with Duri is still new, tricky. He had thought about today, wanting to do something to show Duri how much he appreciated this second chance at friendship, and Cheonggyecheon seemed like a lovely symbolic gesture, a somewhat replication of a day that was significant to them in their friendship, rather than in their dating period.

He hadn't missed the shock on Duri's face when he realised the connection, and for a moment, Hosu had panicked that he'd messed up, that Duri didn't like it, that maybe this was too date-like for two friends having coffee, but then Duri had looked...awed. Touched. Like this meant something to him, too, and Hosu thinks that maybe this wasn't such a bad idea.

It's busy, much busier than Namhansanseong was, all those years ago, but to walk among greenery in the middle of the city at all feels miraculous. It's not as green yet as it will be later in the year, this early in spring, but it still feels luxurious. They amble along slowly, eyes dragging along murals as they go.

It's peaceful, despite the families surrounding them, and they chat about the smaller things in life, the art they see, the people. Hosu tries to guess the different plant types growing along the river, speculating wildly about Venus fly traps that feast on unsuspecting tourists, and revels in Duri's quiet, gummy laughter and the faint pink flush on his cheeks that never quite seems to leave.

The crowds are starting to thin as the end of the afternoon approaches, families leaving to go home for dinner, leaving just the two of them and a few other stragglers dotting the banks of the stream.

Hosu starts to feel a little hungry, and with the hunger, the nerves well up again. His hand is white knuckled around the strap of his backpack, part two of his surprise tucked inside, and it feels heavier by the minute.

He stops as they approach a partly shaded patch of grass under some trees, watching as Duri walks a few more steps, then turns to look back at him.

"Hobah?"

He looks so relaxed, hands in his pockets, a small, barely-there smile on his face, and Hosu feels so utterly grateful to be here in this moment. He swallows hard and clears his throat, cheeks burning.

"I um...I thought maybe we could sit? It's nice here."

Duri looks at the grass berm, then back at Hosu, a little unsure. Hosu looks nervous again, and he doesn't know why, why sitting on the grass would be so nerve wracking, and it makes him feel a little nervous, too.

"Okay, sure."

Hosu nods, resolute, and with a *great, let's sit*, leads Duri to a shady spot on the grass. When Duri goes to sit, though, Hosu stops him with a hand on his arm and a *wait, hyung, let me*, and swings his backpack off his shoulder.

Duri watches with wide eyes as Hosu pulls a blue blanket out of the backpack (*blue like the sky, blue like forget-me-nots, blue like the blanket all those years ago*) and spreads it on the grass, then drops down to his knees to unload small containers of food onto the blanket.

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I thought we might get hungry, he says, by way of explanation, but his cheeks are on fire and his eyes won't meet Duri's.

Duri's stomach is in knots and the back of his neck is cold and shivery. This is their date, their date from all those years ago, replicated in a new setting, by Hosu. Duri wants to laugh, to cry, to hug Hosu, to tell him this is too much, to hold his hand, to tell him this is not okay, to tell him this is perfect, to wrap him up and never let him go again, *to never let him go again*. It's so much, too much, not enough. It's everything.

Hosu finishes laying out all the food containers, hands shaking, teeth biting down onto his bottom lip. Duri hasn't said a word, and Hosu is afraid to look at him, scared to see what his face is doing, scared this was too much, scared he's just ruined everything by being *too much*.

When he finally dares to look up at Duri, it just makes things worse. He looks shocked, eyes wide and shiny, face pale, mouth slack, speechless.

"Hyung?"

His voice sounds horribly small, and he winces at the sound of it, embarrassed. He watches as Duri seems to shake himself, shiver-like, then drops down to sit on the blanket. His eyes drop down at his hands and he swallows. Hosu feels a little sick.

"Is...is this okay? Hyung? I just...I wanted to do something nice for you, I'm sorry if it's...if it's too much, I...shit, I'm sorry, hyung, I thought you'd like it, I didn't mean....I can, um, I can pack it up and we can...we can call it a day if you want, I'm sorry..."

"No, it's fine, Hobah. It's...it's really nice, actually. I'm just..."

Eye contact, then, and his waterline shimmers, and Hosu wills his body not to surge forward, forces his hands to stay still, fingers twitching, the desire to lean in and hug Duri compelling. Duri sees it anyway, eyes widening and the corners of his mouth twitching up into a smile, small and a little crooked, long fingers wrapping around Hosu's trembling ones.

"It's just so thoughtful, I'm...overwhelmed." The words ease out quietly between them. "I can't believe you did this, I...thank you. Really. Thank you."

He squeezes Hosu's hand, then lets it go, and Hosu's fingers ache, cold without the contact. He grabs the nearest container and opens it, just for something to do, something to busy his hands so they don't overstep and try to take more than they should, greedy as they are with the need for touch.

He holds out the container of gimbap to Duri with a smile that feels a little wobbly on his face.

"Let's eat then, hyung."

They eat quietly, the significance of the moment sobering, subduing them both into softer tones and fewer words, interspersed with glances and gentle smiles. It's nice, Duri thinks, so gentle and sweet, and the warmth in his chest feels like it's leeching into his limbs.

It's a strange experience to look up and see Hosu's fifteen-year-old self, overlaid on the twenty-six-year-old man sitting cross-legged across from him, as happens time and time again in small, wayward flashes. Strange, but welcome, too, a bridge to the past, to something treasured mightily and never quite relinquished. It makes Duri feel a little breathless, and his smile never quite stops tugging at the corners of his mouth.

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And Hosu...Hosu feels all of his fifteen-year-old self, too, the same fluttery sensation under his sternum, butterflies brushing all of his edges, and it's so lovely, he wants to sink and sink and sink. Duri is both different and the same. Older, more weathered in some ways, but still soft and sharp all at once, still protective and fierce, lovely and real and so, so pretty.

Hosu feels shy and warm all over, giddy and flushed under Duri's attention, powerless to stop the slide he's on. He tries to suppress the smiles, the starry eyes he knows he must be making, but it doesn't work, he falls into Duri and all his *Duriness* so easily. He catches himself watching Duri's lips as he talks, and his cheeks heat up violently, eyes darting down and away, only to catch on Duri's strong hands, his long fingers, the memories of the way those hands touched him suddenly intruding and making him choke on his rice ball.

He looks away, tries to will his heart to slow, willing it to calm, because Duri isn't *his*, not anymore, not ever. He knows if he lets himself sink, he'll keep sinking, he'll drown in Duri.

He swallows hard, tries to force down the wave of feelings hammering against his breastbone. *Stop it*, he tells himself as he fishes out another piece of gimbap, eager for reasons not to have to look at Duri.

The touch of Duri's fingertips is feather light on the back of his hand, and he starts, eyes meeting Duri's.

"Hobah? You okay?"

He blushes, feeling caught, but Duri's voice is gentle. He nods, small.

"Yeah. It's just...lots of memories, you know?"

Duri's smile is barely there, fragile.

"Yeah. Me too."

They fall silent, then, each lost in their own thoughts. Twilight stains the sky in darker shades of indigo every minute, and around them the city's lights begin to come on. The soft cocoon of almost-darkness lends a sense of privacy, the early evening hour providing that quiet lull between afternoon family strolls and the evening couple crowds. They sit side by side on the blanket, looking out at the water, a hush hanging over them like fog.

Hosu drifts around in the memories of that time, the days around when they split, the hurt he caused, the hurt he felt. It still feels unfinished, like he got off too lightly, like it won't really be settled unless it's talked about and processed properly. He still feels like he has something to atone for, and as he looks at Duri, he thinks that maybe atonement might be found in holding space, in *listening*.

And so he steels himself and asks the question that's haunted him for years.

"What was it like for you, hyung?"

Duri looks at him. There's a determined look on his face that's new, different from the Hosu from all those years ago, and Duri swallows. He finds himself wanting to reach out and take Hosu's hand again, feel the soft skin under his fingertips.

He doesn't. Instead, he shakes his head.

"Don't, Hobah."

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"I need to know, hyung. I want us to talk about it, all of it. Get it all out, clear the air."

"We don't need to do that, Hobah. We're okay, yeah?"

"Yeah, we are. But I'm done hiding from things, hyung. I'm done not talking about stuff when it matters. I know I hurt you, and I know you don't blame me, and you forgive me, and that's – that's amazing. But I want to get to know you again, really get to know you, and that means not hiding from anything, even if it's hard. So I'd really like to know what it was like for you."

Duri looks at him, eyes searching, for a long time. Hosu doesn't flinch, doesn't look away.

Duri seems to find what he's looking for, and he sighs and looks back out at the water.

"It was hard, Hobah. Really, really hard."

Hosu sits on the grass and holds space for Duri, listens the way he should have done all those years ago.

"It wasn't pretty. I was a mess. Just kind of locked myself in my room for months. Didn't go to school. My parents were freaking out." A breathless, humourless chuckle.

"I felt really awful about leaving you. So guilty. Felt so horrible that I'd hurt you, that I'd lost you. I wanted to call you so many times, but you asked me not to, so I didn't. I never deleted your number, but I didn't call. I sometimes wondered, you know, years later, if I should have. If you might have picked up, if maybe we could've sorted things out a long time ago." A shrug, back and shoulders rounded, fingers buried in the lush, trimmed grass.

"I never did, though."

Hosu's eyes sting, but he keeps quiet. This is what he asked for, to be allowed to hold space for Duri for this clearing of what still stands between them.

"I was lost for a long time. Eomma managed to get through to me eventually. She asked me about you. Told me outright that she knew we were together, and that she was sorry. She didn't judge me, just accepted me, and that helped. So, I kind of came out to her without needing to actually come out."

Hosu nods silently, ignoring the slight sting of the reminder that he still hasn't come out to his own parents.

"I finally started going back to school the next school year. Got held back a year because I'd missed so much. I met Minjun-ah." He looks over at Hosu, a small smile curling around the corners of his mouth. "You'll love him, Hobah. He's the best person. Awkward and geeky but so, so *good*, you know?"

Hosu smiles.

"I'm glad, hyung."

"Me too. Not sure where I would've ended up without him, you know? We just kind of stuck together after that and looked after each other. He's been there for me through everything."

Duri is quiet for a bit, and Hosu waits.

"I met Subin while I was at uni. He was really lovely, we got on really well, had a lot of fun and he was really sweet. Hot, too. But I just – I wasn't over you. And once I realised that he looked a little

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like you I kind of – freaked out, felt like I was using him like some kind of substitute, and I broke it off.”

A rush of hot and cold washes over Hosu’s insides. The knowledge that Duri had still been thinking about him years after they split hits him like a freight train, sending a shudder through him. He’s suddenly flooded with guilt for causing Duri that much pain, but it’s mixed with elation that he meant that much to him. It’s a strange, confusing mix, and Hosu tries to swallow it down, to just sit and listen.

“After that I was on my own for a while, just kind of trying to work through things, trying to process. Then Jun-ah and I came up with the centre idea, and I met Juwon.”

Hosu waits, but Duri seems to have finished, so he speaks up, quietly.

“How did you meet him?”

Duri looks down at his hands, following the line of the veins running along the back with his eyes. There’s a resistance in him to talk about his relationship with Juwon, a sense of misplaced shame that he’s in a relationship with the man who funds his life’s work. He knows how it looks, how an outsider might perceive it, and he doesn’t want Hosu to look at him like he’s a gold digger.

“Ah. He um. We met when Minjun and I were looking for investors for the centre.”

Hosu blinks. Duri seems stiff and awkward suddenly, like he’s reluctant to talk about Juwon. And Hosu doesn’t particularly want to hear a lot about the man who gets to call Duri his own, but some masochistic part of him is curious, so he pushes, just a little.

“So – he’s involved in the centre? As an investor?”

Duri nods.

“Yeah. And a volunteer.” A sideways glance, and there’s something fierce about Duri’s eyes. “Don’t look at me like that. I have a paid job; I earn my own way.”

Hosu frowns.

“I’m not looking at you any kind of way, hyung. It’s none of my business. I was just interested in finding out more about your life now. I’m not judging.”

Duri flushes, embarrassment hot on the back of his neck. He reaches out, squeezes Hosu’s hand.

“Sorry. I’m kind of defensive about it.”

Hosu shrugs, squeezes Duri’s hand in return.

“I get it. But seriously, no judgment. I think it’s awesome, you’ve done so well with the centre, and I’m glad he supports it.”

Duri’s smile is gummy and genuine. Hosu feels stupidly proud to be the cause of it.

“Thanks, Hobah. That means a lot.”

Hosu blushes.

“Thank you for telling me. Thank you for letting me listen to you this time around.”

Duri says nothing, just huffs quietly, ears pink.

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It's quiet then, for a minute, before Duri looks over and gently nudges Hosu on the leg.

"Your turn. Tell me."

Hosu winces.

"It was pretty bad, hyung, I've kind of been messed up for a long time. You sure you want to hear?"

Duri nods.

"I showed you mine. It's only fair."

"Okay. But don't say I didn't warn you."

It's scary, this part, Hosu finds. Letting himself be seen by the person who stole his heart all those years ago and broke it. But he's been brave before, he can do it again.

"You remember what my parents were like, right?" A nod. "Okay. So. When we split, I kind of – lost the plot, I guess. I thought that us not working out meant we were wrong to be together, that my dad was right about all the shit he said, that being gay was wrong, a sin, all that bull. So I just kind of...buried it. Decided I wasn't going to be gay anymore."

He takes a shaky breath in, watery eyes focused stubbornly on the stream in front of them. Duri's *oh, Hobah* threatens to break him, so he doesn't look, can't look, just bites his lip and watches the water.

"Yeah. Stupid. Anyway, so I just buried it all. Felt really shitty for a long time, but I met Harin, and she helped. She's my Minjun, I guess. Her and Jiyeong. They helped me a lot."

He sniffs. His hands in his lap are shaky, and he links his fingers together to stop the tremble, watching them bunched up in his lap.

"I um...we, Harin and me, we went to uni together. Jiyeong was my roommate. I didn't really date anyone, was really confused. Girls just didn't really interest me, and boys weren't an option, you know? But Jiyeong is bi, and he started dating Seongmin, and I was around them all the time and not around my dad so much, so I guess they kind of slowly helped me figure out that it's okay not to be straight. I took a long time to catch on, though."

The last words come out on a chuckle, a breathless thing full of tears, and Duri reaches over and takes one of Hosu's hands, squeezes it gently before holding it loosely on Hosu's thigh.

Hosu stares down at their linked fingers, tears crystalline on his lashes. He's quiet for minutes, just focusing on his breathing, not trusting his voice to obey him.

Eventually he continues.

"I met Iseul in my last year of uni. She was really cool, we hit it off right away. We became friends, and I guess I grew to love her, and I confused that for something else. My parents were so happy when I introduced her, and it just seemed perfect, you know? She was great, we were good friends, I cared about her a lot, and they adored her. Match made in heaven."

The sarcastic tone isn't lost on Duri, and he squeezes Hosu's hand again, swallowing the sour taste of anger at the back of his throat at the kind of messed up parenting that would push Hosu into hiding from himself like that.

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“We were together for four years. Got engaged and everything. But I um. I was still confused. Kept just...being attracted to guys. Crushes. Didn’t do anything about them, but they were – just, they were there, you know? And um. I remembered. You. Us. Everything. Tried not to, but it kept coming up, all the memories. And I was with her, and it wasn’t the same, and it was just. Really confusing.”

Duri aches. Hosu looks so much stronger, so much *bigger* in himself than he used to. He’s not the same sad, small boy anymore. But in this moment, there’s shades of that same boy, pushing his way out, begging to be heard.

He wraps his other hand around Hosu’s, cradling warm, slender fingers in between his palms, and Hosu looks at him, eyes watery and smile small and grateful.

“In the end it all just came crashing down. Met a sexy boy and kissed him, and finally figured myself out. Stopped lying to myself. Told Iseul the next day and ended it. Moved here to start over.”

It’s out, then, all of it, all of the fear and the fragile rawness of the last eleven years, all of the ugly self-deception he did, all of his shame. It’s too hard to look at Duri, so he doesn’t, stares at their interlinked hands instead, drawing strength from the touch and the fact that Duri hasn’t pulled his hands away.

Duri’s voice, when it comes, is gentle.

“I’m so sorry, Hobah, that sounds so hard. I’m sorry you didn’t feel safe to just be yourself.”

Hosu bites his lip, wiping his eyes with his free hand.

“Stop it, hyung, you’ll make me cry.”

Duri shrugs.

“I won’t tell. You’re safe now.”

He swallows the *hyung’s got you* that almost slips out, habitual, but the way Hosu looks up at him, all wide eyed and full of raw emotion, he thinks maybe he heard it anyway.

“Thanks.”

It’s full dark now, and the city around them has come alive with streetlights and neons. It’s getting colder, too, and as the minutes stretch on and the cold sets in deeper and deeper, Hosu begins to shiver, the seat of his jeans dewy from the grass and the early evening damp setting in. Duri feels the same creeping cold leeching into his own bones, and his knees ache from sitting still too long.

Eventually, he lets Hosu’s hand go with a soft pat, then reaches out to start closing containers and pack them into Hosu’s backpack.

“Come on, Hobah, you’re cold. Let’s pack up and walk, we’ll need to head home soon.”

The loss of Duri’s warm fingers around his hand is borderline painful, and Hosu swallows hard, nodding as if he wouldn’t give anything right now just to stay in this little bubble.

Once the containers are packed, they stand, and Duri carefully folds the blue blanket, tucking it into Hosu’s backpack with a reverence that makes Hosu’s chest feel tight. He zips the bag and shoulders it, avoiding Hosu’s eyes as he does.

They walk back the way they came, slowly, trying to tease the minutes into hours as they go.

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The banter is easier now, most of the awkwardness dissipated, a new, gentle understanding settling between them with the voicing of all the things that followed their breakup all those years ago.

Hosu finds himself hovering around Duri like a bee around a flower, wanting to stay close, fingers twitching anytime they brush together. He feels like a live wire, arcing, leaning closer without meaning to, like the air around Duri is the only place where he can breathe. Recognising the pull makes him feel both anxious and deliriously happy, the knowledge that *Duri isn't his* a stark, painful spectre in his periphery, something he desperately tries to ignore for the sake of *feeling this*.

He knows he can't have Duri, knows that's not what this is, but he's powerless to back away, powerless to stop the pull and shut down everything that's bubbling up inside him. After all the years of repressing this part of himself, all the years of denying himself the chance to feel like this, this overwhelming rush, this arc under his skin, the flutters in his belly and at the back of his throat, the thought of giving it up is a horror he cannot fathom. He clings on stubbornly, determined he can keep his feelings to himself, just enjoy his crush like he did with all the men he harboured crushes on over the years, sink into the feeling without *acting* on it.

The fact that this is so much more than a fleeting, superficial crush is something he shuts his eyes to, an inconvenient truth he refuses to acknowledge for now.

Duri, too, feels the pull, the breathlessness that comes with having Hosu close, feels the way his chest opens up when they make eye contact and the way his smile (the embarrassing gummy one he only lets out with people he feels really safe with) seems to be permanently in place. He feels the ache in his throat from holding back the things he once would have said without a second thought, the things he now *shouldn't* say because he can't, because Hosu isn't *his* and Duri is Juwon's.

It's difficult, but Duri can handle it. He can keep things separate, can set boundaries and stick to them. What he has with Hosu can be limited to what's appropriate within the bounds of friendship and no more. They can have this, the outings, the time spent together, the laughs shared, the platonic touches. It's more than Duri ever thought he'd have again.

It's enough.

It has to be.

When they reach the café where they met earlier in the day, Duri turns to Hosu and finds pretty, almond-shaped eyes and a wide smile already waiting for him. His heart hurts at the sight.

"This was really nice, Hobah, thank you."

Hosu nods, smiling shyly. Pinks well up on his cheekbones as he takes the backpack from Duri's outstretched hand, warm skin brushing warm skin.

"I'm glad you had fun, hyung. Maybe we can do it again sometime?"

Duri is nodding before he's even thought it through.

He never could say no to Hosu.

"I'd love that, Hobah. But next time, you let hyung treat you."

"Alright, then. I'm going to head home. I'll see you later?"

He leans in for a hug, and it still feels a little awkward, a little uncertain, but Duri pulls him close, holds him tight.

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Hosu's frame sags as he relaxes. Duri feels warm against him, strong and solid. He smells good, familiar, and it feels like coming home. Hosu buries his face in Duri's neck for a second, just a moment, soaks up the feel and the smell of him. He thinks he feels Duri's breath hitch as the tip of his nose brushes the sensitive skin of Duri's neck, but he ignores it and gently pulls away while he still can, while his brain is still online enough to make somewhat lucid decisions.

Duri's cheeks are a soft pink as Hosu pulls away.

"Night, hyung."

"Night, Hobah. See you soon."

And with that, Hosu turns and walks away, leaving Duri alone, flustered and shivery on the pavement outside the Brown Cow café.

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The walk home is sobering.

Away from the magnetic pull Duri has over him, the reality of the situation hits Hosu anew.

Duri *isn't his, can't be his*. Duri has a *Juwon*, someone waiting for him at home, someone he loves and who loves him. For all they used to have, for all they still fit together, for all that Hosu feels like Duri still slides into his spaces and fills them seamlessly, at the end of the day it can't happen.

Hosu feels unhinged, slipping and sliding down a perilous slope that leads him right back to that point where Duri left him eleven years ago and it's as exhilarating and terrifying as it is unstoppable.

He should walk away.

He should protect himself, arm his heart, bow out now before he gets in too deep. But the temptation to stay, to try to be friends and take what he can get is strong, too strong. Hosu is greedy for it, for the heady high of deep and true connection, a bond that sprung to life effortlessly and apparently never disappeared. All these years it lay dormant, buried under grief and diversions, but unscathed, unaltered, perfect and profound, undeniable.

His mind won't let go of *Duri* and the situation; it clings on throughout his walk, his arrival home, it badgers him endlessly during his shower and while he gets dressed. His thought loop is endless, and he can't break free of it, can't get himself out to put it aside and worry about it another day.

In the end, he turns to Yujun for help.

Me

Yu-ah

Yu

hyung

you alright?

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Me

I dunno

Yu

want me to come over

Me

please

just need to talk

Yu

kay

be there in 20 mins

Yujun lets himself into Hosu's apartment twenty-two minutes later, lining his shoes up neatly by the front door and padding quietly over to the couch where Hosu's curled up around a large, pink star fish pillow. Yujun drops down on the couch beside him, bare feet tucked up onto the couch, long limbs and body curling into an impossibly small ball.

It makes Hosu smile a little, seeing his friend so at home in his house, on his couch. He looks soft and young, hair fluffy, hands hidden in the oversized sleeves of his grey hoodie, feet bare and tanned under his too-big, soft sweatpants.

"Hey Yunie. Thanks for coming."

"s Alright, hyung. What's up?"

Hosu grimaces.

"I'm an idiot, Yu-ah."

Yujun looks affronted, dark brows drawing down, pouting subconsciously.

"Don't say that. What happened?"

"I just...I feel like I may have messed up, am probably still messing up, and I don't know if I can stop myself. Or if I even want to."

The frown deepens.

"Okay, I need a little context here."

"I...okay. You remember I told you about my ex? Not Iseul, the boy I was with when I was like, fifteen?"

"Yeah, of course, what about him?"

"He's here."

Yujun's eyes go wide at that.

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"Wait, what?"

"Yeah. He owns the rainbow centre, together with Seo-hyung's roommate. I walked in there to ask about volunteering, and he was there."

"Holy shit!"

"Yeah."

"What...what was that like? That must've been a shock?"

"Yeah, it was. But it was also really good, you know? After the initial shock. I thought he'd hate me, but he doesn't. We talked things through, I apologised, he did too. We kind of – worked things out, I guess. It ended up being really nice."

Yujun's mouth is slack as he stares at Hosu.

"Shit. That's...that's awesome, hyung!"

Hosu smiles, but it's pained.

"Yeah, it was."

"But?"

"Hah. Well. We talked a lot that day, and it was just really nice. And he gave me his number. So I texted him today, asked him out for coffee. We went down to Cheonggyecheong. Walked and had a picnic."

"Whoa. Hyung. You took him on a date?"

Hosu buries his head in his hands, nodding behind his hands.

"You did! You took him on a date! Oh my god! Are you dating your ex?"

Hosu groans, voice still muffled in the palms of his hands, and shakes his head.

"No."

"Are you sure about that?"

Hosu drops his hands and looks at Yujun, at his raised eyebrow, the small smirk, his face the picture of amused skepticism.

"He has a boyfriend."

Yujun blanches.

"Oh. Shit."

"Yeah. Shit."

"So, wait. He agreed to go on a date with you even though he has a boyfriend?"

Yujun looks affronted again, and Hosu smiles at his friend's protectiveness.

"I didn't ask him on a date, Yu-ah, it's okay. I just asked him if I could buy him a coffee. I knew he had a boyfriend, and I didn't really – I didn't actually mean for it to be a date, but then while we were there, I realised I'd pulled out all the stops to turn it into one without meaning to. I planned this

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whole thing. I just wanted to do something nice for him, I still felt awful about what I did to him all those years ago. So I thought...back then, before we got together, he took me out for my birthday. Took me to Namhansanseong. We spent the whole day there, just us, and had a picnic, and it was really nice. It wasn't meant to be a date, we weren't together then, but in hindsight I guess it was. Anyway, it was just really nice, and I thought it would be nice to kind of – replicate that day here? As like, an apology? So – Cheonggyecheon, walking and a picnic.”

“Hyung...” Yujun looks at him, eyes full of soft reproach. “You took him on a date, hyung. That was a bloody date!”

Hosu buries his head in his hands again.

“I know, I know, I said I messed up!”

Yujun's tone is gentle when he answers, syllables tilted with tender care.

“You also said you weren't sure if you wanted to stop yourself. Do you still love him?”

Hosu doesn't answer, so Yujun reaches up to pull his hands away from his face.

“Hyung. Do you?”

“I think so, Yu-ah. I...no one ever made me feel like he does. Being around him, it's like the past eleven years never happened, like we're right back there. Only I still remember what it was like, all the horrible years, trying to be someone I'm not, what it was like not feeling like that with anyone else. And now it's right there in front of me, *he* is right there in front of me, it's all right there and it feels just the same, you know?”

Yujun's thumb rubs over the back of Hosu's hand. There's sadness in the gesture and it leaks into his voice when he speaks.

“I know. Does he feel the same though?”

Hosu shrugs.

“I don't know. And I don't, I don't want to be responsible for messing up his relationship, either. But shit, Yu-ah, it just feels like – like we weren't meant to be separated, like we're supposed to be together, like this was all a big mistake, and I can't just walk away and not see him again! I can't let it happen again!”

Yujun nods quietly.

“What will you do?”

Hosu curls in on himself, the gesture betraying the turmoil in his belly.

“Nothing. What the hell can I do? He's not available. I'm not going to try and win him over, but I'm not walking away either. I just found him, I'm not losing him again. I'm just going to be there, be his friend, and not tell him how I feel.”

There's an overwhelming sadness in Yujun's eyes.

“Hyung...”

“I can't, Yu-ah. I can't tell him. And I can't lose him again. Being his friend is already so much more than I thought I'd ever have, it'll just have to be enough.”

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“And if it isn’t?”

“It has to be.”

Yujun eyes the stubborn set of Hosu’s jaw, the tense lines of his body, the way he’s curled up into himself, and lets it go.

“Okay, hyung.” Softer, then. “What do you need?”

“I just...can you just...just hug me some, Yunie? I don’t want to do anything else, just need...just that. Please.”

Yujun pulls him close, wordless, manhandles him until they’re stretched on the couch with Yujun’s arms wrapped tightly around Hosu’s narrower frame. Hosu feels safe, this way, the world held at bay.

He drifts off to sleep to the sound of Yujun’s peaceful breathing.

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Chapter 11

It happens in surges.

After years of silence, the words begin to pour out of Duri and onto the pages of his many neglected notebooks in fits and starts.

The first surge hits him as he unlocks their front door after his not-date with Hosu, a string of words that tugs on a strand in his memory with a whispered *rememberrememberremember*. His breath catches in his throat when the words register, and he hurries, feet stumbling over each other as he rushes to get his shoes off and scrambles to find the nearest notebook before the words fade back into mindless obscurity.

He catches them.

For the first time in years, he manages to grasp the syllables and scratch them onto paper in his messy hand, smudging the ink onto his skin in ecstatic, joyous shades of indigo. Eyes wide, brow furrowed, mouth slack, tongue pushed to the back of his teeth as he pours the whorl of emotions out of his chest and onto the page in spidery characters that dance their inky dance as he acknowledges their presence.

He writes until he runs out of words.

A fully formed song sits in front of him, beginning to end, full of raw feeling, an outpouring of memory. He rereads it, heart thundering against his ribs.

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They aren't the most refined lyrics he ever wrote, not by a long shot. There are places where the cadence is off, places where a phrase sounds awkward, stilted. But the emotion leaps off the pages and grabs him by the throat, blistering and honest.

It's a retelling of a first love, his first love, the awkwardness that grows into something warm and real and unrestrained, sweet with firsts and the taste of honey. First smiles, first touches, first kisses. The first verse is deceptive, syrup and cotton candy, sweet peaches and ripe strawberries. The first chorus is soft, still, but it hints at things to come, the depth of feeling, the thickness of meaning between the sweet and the sour.

Then the second verse, less sweet, words that evoke the taste of *want*, the sweep of hands in private places, the tang of sweat and the weight of breath on shared air.

The bridge, raw and painful, the tearing of a good thing into something that's broken, something that's lamed and humbled, something with bitterness laced in fissures inside the sweetness.

The last chorus and verse ram home the breaking and the pain, the hurt and the anguish, before the last lines hint at hope, at peace, at reconnection.

It's a long journey for a single song to travel, a lot of feeling and story to pack into a mere four minutes.

He writes with anxious fingers, hands flying, careful not to linger on the words, afraid of what they might stir if he does, then shuts the notebook with fire in his cheeks and tucks it back into his sock drawer with jittery, restless hands.

All through dinner with Juwon, words and phrases drop in and out of his awareness, like glow worms seen in his periphery, bright spots of light that dash and flit and distract. Duri flits too, the itch of inspiration under his skin a long-forgotten feeling, pushing his body up and out of its seat to dash out of the room time and time again with the urgent need to grasp the words that keep coming and press them onto paper with his shaking hands. Juwon laughs at him, nonplussed, the second time Duri jumps up in the middle of a story and breathes a stuttered *berightbackwaitwaitwait* to disappear into the bedroom and catch his glow worms.

He stumbles ruddy cheeked and embarrassed through an explanation in the face of Juwon's raised eyebrows the third time it happens, awkward in his awareness that this is a part of him Juwon doesn't really understand, hasn't ever seen. Juwon's smile is indulgent, his suggestion Duri keep the notebook handy while they eat so he can jot his ideas down without getting up aimed at keeping interruptions to a minimum, and Duri feels twice as awkward writing his slippery words down on the page with an audience, so the book stays closed.

The dam is broken, though, and the words and phrases don't stop coming.

Juwon doesn't ask him about Hosu until hours later, after the dishes are done and the wine drunk, after they've showered and slipped in between white cotton sheets, legs bare and luxurious against the soft fabric. Juwon is curled around him, the big spoon in their drawer, nose nuzzling into the crook of Duri's neck, knees tucked against the backs of Duri's legs.

Duri wriggles tighter, closer, seeking warmth even in the apartment's centrally heated air.

"How was your coffee date today?"

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Duri freezes, Juwon's word choice a little too evocative, a little too bold.

"My what?"

Juwon's chuckle is dry and soft, warm against the back of Duri's neck.

"Coffee with your ex? Don't tell me you forgot already?"

"Oh. Um, no," Duri's heart is racing, a flustered *thudthudthud* that echoes in his skull, and suddenly he can't breathe, Juwon's arms around him suffocating. He turns onto his back, presses his heartbeat into the mattress in the hopes it might go unnoticed, staring up at the ceiling as his lungs expand, greedy for oxygen.

Juwon nuzzles into his shoulder instead, forearm adjusting to sit across Duri's abdomen, fingertips drawing soft circles on the sharp hipbone protruding above the waistband of Duri's boxers. The skin is warm, dry, his hands calloused and scarred from years of tinkering with appliances and pulling them apart.

"It was good. Nice. We just – had coffee. Went for a walk. Talked a lot, caught up, you know."

Juwon hums agreeably, lips brushing a soft kiss onto the pale skin of Duri's shoulder.

"Sounds nice. You glad you went?"

Duri nods quietly, eyes tracing the familiar shadow play on the bedroom ceiling.

"'s good."

The words are low and slurred, drifting on the edge of sleep. Juwon mumbles something that sounds like *invite him over* before his breathing pattern tells Duri that he's asleep.

Duri lies awake, mind turning over moments of the day, stubbornly replaying every second, every look, every word. Hosu's story, Hosu's laughter. The walk, the reconnection, the open sharing of more than a decade's worth of pain and healing. The honesty, the sadness, the forgiveness. Hosu's eyes, Hosu's smile, Hosu's hands.

Duri's fingers trail up and down the skin of Juwon's arm thoughtlessly as his mind catches on remembered touches, then halt when he realises, a confused sort of guilt twisting in his belly, thoughts skittering away from that danger zone with an unspoken *out-of-bounds*.

There's desperation in it, in the way he sets himself parameters for what's *out-of-bounds*. He can have this, they can have this, he's sure of it, he wants it, needs it, wishes it. This can be platonic, it can be *friendship*, he just needs to give himself clear boundaries and stay within them. It's not too hard, it's possible, it can be done.

He'll model his friendship with Hosu on the one he has with Minjun, filled with kindness and laughter and mutual support, a life-long bond that has never been anything but platonic. He will set himself the same boundaries, follow the same rules. Their old relationship does not need to interfere, it can stay in the past and they can move forward in a new way, a way that's warm and friendly and fulfilling in a different way.

When Duri finally drifts off, his dreams are filled with Hosu's smile.

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It becomes a habit.

Hosu starts to volunteer at the Centre after hours here and there. They slip into each other's lunch breaks, generous hours full of hysterical laughter and quiet conversation over coffee and street food. There are long text conversations, fully of silly selfies and anecdotes, exchanges that are equally likely to be frivolous and lighthearted or deep and poignant.

They slot together like they always did, edges softened now with understanding and maturity, mutual respect and life experience.

Duri feels his chest opening, feels like his lungs inflate fully for the first time in years. His writing is a torrent now, a flood, song after song pouring out of him and into his notebooks. He begins to record his songs, hesitantly at first, then full of fire, one raw unfiltered track coming together after another at the tiny Centre studio.

He doesn't do anything with them. Not at first. Tells no one about his recordings, afraid to upset the delicate balance that has allowed him to tap into his inspiration again. Afraid, also, to admit to himself who the muse is who has him writing again, afraid to face why that is.

Hosu's presence in his life makes him feel like the last of his wounds have finally healed over, like there is finally peace.

He clings to it, turning a willful blind eye to the fluttering in his belly when he looks at Hosu and finds him already looking back, his face soft and open and dotting. He tells himself that the way he finds any excuse to touch Hosu is merely him being a supportive friend, giving Hosu the grounding touch he needs. He swears to himself that his reluctance to part ways with Hosu anytime they spend time together is perfectly normal in a strictly platonic friendship.

He pretends he doesn't notice when Hosu holds their farewell hugs a little longer each time.

Pretends not to notice when Hosu turns his face into Duri's neck sometimes and nuzzles there.

Pretends not to like it.

The weeks trickle by, and Duri finds a way to walk the tightrope between friendship with Hosu and his relationship with Juwon. It's hard, but he manages, keeping to a strict code for his behaviour with Hosu that keeps his conscience clear, despite his muddled feelings.

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And then, it's a Saturday in the middle of May. The air should be mild, the time of year when spring steals kisses from summer, eager but still chaste, the sweat and heat of summer still a ways off.

It's different though, this year. There's none of the usual rain, and the heat that shouldn't be announcing itself for weeks yet is already oppressive, bleeding into what should be cool evenings with an arrogance that steals the breath away.

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Duri is in his office at the Centre, the shorts and short sleeved t-shirt that were a necessity outside feeling more like a grave mistake in the air-conditioned space, goosebumps raised on every inch of bare, pale skin.

“Hyung?”

Hosu’s smile is wide as he sticks his head in the door.

“Hmm?”

“It’s four o’clock, time to sign off!”

Duri blinks, mind slow to return to the real world after four hours of consolidating Centre accounts.

“Oh. Um.”

Hosu laughs, and the joyful sound makes the fluttering in Duri’s belly start up again. He watches, eyes wide, as Hosu steps inside and offers Duri his hand, then hauls him up and out of his ergonomic office chair.

“Come on, hyung. You’re coming with me and we’re going to go get some food and some of that smoky sludge that passes for fresh air around here.”

Hosu’s smile is warm and genuine, eyes crinkling at the corners, and Duri is endeared, staring soft-eyed at his friend. The return smile is a stealth one, slipping in quietly without Duri’s knowledge or consent, somehow finding its way onto his face so that when he becomes aware of it, it’s already settled into his skin and musculature in a way that feels permanent.

He turns away, pink flushing the back of his neck, mumbling something about bossy dongsaengs, and Hosu laughs again, loud and exuberant behind Duri’s back. And suddenly, there are arms around his waist, a chin on his shoulder, and Hosu’s body pressed close behind him.

Duri stops breathing.

“Come on, hyung! I’ll make it worth your while, take you somewhere new!”

Duri squirms in Hosu’s grip, grumbling, pretending to be uncomfortable, and the arms loosen.

“Fine, you pest. Step back so I can get my stuff together.”

Hosu giggles, unaffected, stepping back as requested, arms falling from Duri’s waist, chin slipping off his shoulder. Duri feels cold, bereft.

“Alright, ahjussi, hurry up and get your walker.”

Duri swats backwards blindly, faux outrage laid on thick in the sharp *yah, brat* he spits, but there’s no real bite to it, the edges too soft for Hosu to do anything but giggle.

Hosu is giddy as they leave the Centre, bouncy on his feet, chattering away as they walk, seemingly unaffected by the heat that has attached itself to Duri’s skin in a sheen of sweat. His enthusiasm and cheerfulness are endearing though, and Duri finds himself content to just listen to his sparkling monologue, smiling at the playful energy that seems to have Hosu in its grip.

They pass a street vendor, the scent of sweetness and spice alluring as it hovers around them, and Hosu grabs Duri’s arm, pulling him along as he veers off.

“Let’s get hotteok, hyung! I’ve been craving it all week!”

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The sweet treat is perfect, hot and saccharine, making Duri's tongue curl in his mouth as the sugar melts. Hosu groans openly at the taste of it, and Duri looks away, shivery, cheeks suddenly aflame.

The hotteok leaves their hands sticky, their faces too, and they laugh at each other as they try to lick the stickiness off lips and fingertips. Duri grimaces and scolds Hosu when he brings their still-sticky, licked fingers together to hold hands, but Hosu can only grin smugly when, for all his protests, Duri doesn't let go.

They make their way out of the area the Centre is in and into one Duri isn't familiar with. Everywhere he looks, there's a mix of shops and apartment blocks, an odd hodgepodge of commercial and residential places occupying the same space in a way that somehow manages to feel harmonious.

Hosu leads him through the streets in a way that tells Duri he is used to the area, the way he doesn't seem to need to look where he's going, the path to wherever they're going seeming to be locked into his muscle memory. Duri looks around, curious, but something in the way Hosu moves makes him hold his tongue on his curiosity, stops him from asking.

When Hosu pulls him into an apartment building, the stairwell is familiar in the way that all stairwells are, reminiscent of those from Gwangju and their time together, and Duri's eyes go wide, an involuntary squeak escaping him at the sudden and illogical thought that Hosu has brought him here for *that*, that next he'll be pulled under a stairwell and kissed until his lungs give out and his legs dissolve. Hosu looks at him strangely, then smiles excitedly and tugs Duri towards the stairs.

"Come on, hyung, not much further!"

And then they're climbing, and Duri has a good excuse for the racing of his heart and the redness of his face, and he grumbles some nonsensical protest about Hosu tricking him into doing a *workout*, just to keep up appearances.

The door they stop in front of on the third floor is nondescript, a plain light grey like the walls around it, a seamless sea of boredom as far as the eye can see. Hosu's giddiness seems amplified, tinged with nerves as he bites his lip and rocks from heel to toe and back again, eyes on Duri.

"What, Hobah? Where did you bring me? What great wonders lie behind this door that you dragged me up a thousand flights of stairs to get there?"

Hosu scoffs, cheeks endearingly pink.

"A thousand? We're on the third floor, hyung, that's *six* flights of stairs, not a thousand!"

Duri sighs dramatically.

"Potato, potahto, Hobah, I'm dead either way. Come on, don't keep hyung in suspense any longer, show me what's behind door number," a quick look up, at the shiny number plate announcing itself in copper, "315."

He expects Hosu to knock, then, raising his eyebrows as he pulls a set of keys from his pocket instead and unlocks the door with a flourish, eyes twinkling and fingers nimble as they turn the key. Hosu steps inside, toeing off his shoes just in the entrance way and lining them up tidily before looking back at Duri, still standing stiffly on the doorstep.

"What are you waiting for, hyung? Come on in!"

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Duri steps in on hesitant feet. The entranceway is brightly lit and just as brightly decorated, a large painting in a riot of colours hanging on the right wall opposite the coat rack, pride of place above a sideboard housing a collection of knick knacks with no particular theme – a painted wooden elephant, a vintage tin wind up music box shaped like a carousel and painted in bright colours, a green glass bowl shaped like an apple in which Hosu drops his keys, a set of blue ceramic candle holders shaped like the three wise monkeys, several pot plants, and a bowl of brightly painted stones.

There's a comfortable-looking chair in the corner, an Aztec-looking throw rug draped over it, apparently meant for visitors to have somewhere to sit and take their shoes off. On the wall opposite it are three smaller prints, each one a different landscape painted in thick palette knife strokes by an artist Duri has never heard of, who clearly favours using every possible colour of the rainbow in his work.

The space *screams* Hosu, and it suddenly dawns on Duri where they are. He turns to his friend, eyes wide.

"Hobah, are we...is this your place?"

Hosu's nod is a thing full of excitement and nerves.

"Yeah, hyung. I just...I realised we always go places, but you've never even been to my home, and that's just kind of weird? I mean, we're friends, and my friends are welcome at my house, so...yeah. I thought maybe we could hang out here today."

Duri isn't sure why this feels like such a Thing. Maybe it's just because in two months of reconnection, neither has set foot in the other one's home, so now it's become a Thing. Maybe it's because Hosu turned it into a Thing by making it a surprise destination, giving it the flavour of a date. Or maybe it's just because it's *Hobah* and everything feels like a Thing.

In any case, it does, it feels overwhelming, it feels like a Thing, something warm in Duri's chest and on his cheeks, and he can't help the smile that breaks out, or the narrow feeling in his throat, the way swallowing is suddenly harder.

"That's...really nice, Hobah. I, um, I can't wait to see the rest of it!"

Hosu looks pleased, bouncing up and down on his toes, excitement shivery in all of his limbs, and Duri's face feels tight from smiling so much, all gums and teeth and stuttering heartbeat. He toes his shoes off, the back of his neck colouring when Hosu bends down to pick them up and place them gently next to his own on the shoe rack *as if they belong there*.

Before Duri has a chance to breathe, Hosu's hand is wrapping itself around his own again, warm, slender fingers, narrow palm enveloped by Duri's larger one, solid and reassuring despite the thinness of his bones under Duri's touch.

"Come on, then, hyung, let me show you around!"

Handholding isn't necessary for this. Truthfully, it makes things like walking through narrow doorways decidedly more difficult than they need to be, but Hosu clings to Duri's hand all the way around the small apartment.

Everywhere Duri looks, he sees Hosu's personality beaming back at him. The apartment is a riot of colour against a calm backdrop, the walls painted a muted teal blue that contrasts with bright paintings, a hodgepodge of solid coloured furniture with throws and pillows in bright yellows, pinks,

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oranges, and lime greens. It's somehow just the right amount of cosy and dizzying, calm spots featuring to anchor the eye when the kaleidoscope of shades gets too overwhelming. There are plants dotted around, and more of the random, eclectic selection of knick knacks on shelves and surfaces.

Duri quietly takes in the very *Hosu-ness* of Hosu's home, the mix of calm and exuberance, the eye for detail and the determination to bring together things that others might say *don't go together*. It somehow feels like a very *Hosu* thing to do, a stubborn thing, a thing that speaks loudly of the Hosu Duri has been learning these past few months. This Hosu, the one who spent years denying himself, whose confidence and owning of himself is so hard-won, *this one* will no longer budge on things that make him happy, Duri has learned. *This* Hosu feels the fear and does it anyway, has learned that it's worth it to push through and get to the other side of the hard stuff to the person you're meant to be.

Duri's eyes trail over all the little details, the balance of all the things brought together to say *home*. Hosu's home feels calm, despite the wildness of the colour, it feels settled and soothing, and Duri can imagine Hosu being happy here, sitting at the small breakfast bar to eat his dinner, falling asleep on the couch, head resting on a throw pillow, one of the many blankets piled on to keep him warm. He can imagine him getting up in the morning, hair mussed and eyes only half open, standing barefoot in the kitchen, making coffee in his sweatpants and an old sleep t-shirt.

Hosu is bright-eyed as he leads Duri from one small space to another, voice spinning a gentle kind of web around Duri as he points out his favourite things, not seeming to mind Duri's quietude as he takes everything in.

Hosu's bedroom is last, the only space more subdued in colour, blues and greens and soft, soft energy. Stepping into the space feels a little stuttered, a little bit like maybe Duri shouldn't be here, but Hosu simply walks into the room and tugs him along as if he belongs there.

Standing in the middle of the room, Hosu suddenly drops Duri's hand and calls, *oh look look look hyung*. He skips over to his bedside table, all bouncy energy, full of excitement, incongruent in the calm of the blue bedroom, and Duri looks. A large, soft pink crystal sits on the bedside table, sparkly in the sunlight still pouring in through the small bedroom window, and Duri is nonplussed. Hosu fumbles off to the side of the table, fingers nimble and practiced, and suddenly a soft orange glow lights up the crystal, the *crystal lamp*, Duri thinks, awed.

"It's a salt lamp! Isn't it pretty?"

"That's...that's very pretty, Hobah."

Hosu glows brighter than the salt lamp, and it spreads to Duri's chest, *warmwarmwarm*, fondness like a wave washing over him.

Hosu smiles, and it's soft, like all the overwhelm Duri is feeling might be written all over his face, and maybe it is.

"Come on, hyung. Coffee?"

"Please, Hobah."

It's said on a small huff, corners of his mouth curling up, and Duri lets himself be dragged back out to the kitchen.

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“Sit,” Hosu directs, waving loosely at the two bar stools by the island, so Duri does. Hosu stays close, the coffee maker right there, and Duri watches as he makes coffee and talks in monologue, the same way he always does when he senses Duri is feeling overwhelmed.

It’s funny, really, the way they do this, the way they’ve always done this. Hosu absorbs Duri’s overwhelm by filling the space with his soft chatter and allowing Duri his quiet, in the same way Duri calms Hosu’s overwhelm by holding his hand or hugging him. They siphon off each other’s overflow and help the other rebalance.

There’s a domestic sort of simplicity about the moment, a calm that seeps into the mind and eases out the stresses and uncertainties of life, and Duri drinks it in, lets it push the questions and doubts to the back of his mind.

When the coffees are ready, Hosu carries them to the couch, Duri following behind in socked feet. They sit, sipping quietly, the smell of hotteok still lingering on the skin of their fingers and the calm of Hosu’s apartment wrapping around them, soft and quiet. Hosu sits sideways, facing Duri, knees up and feet tucked against his backside, balancing his mug on his knees in between sips, while Duri buries his socked toes in the long fibres of Hosu’s soft white tufted rug.

When the coffees are finished, Hosu collects their mugs and takes them to the kitchen. His eyes are wide and sparkly when he gets back, and the bounce is back in his step.

“Hyung, I have an idea!”

“What, Hobah?”

“Just – just wait!”

He bounces over to a sideboard against the wall, grabs a strange looking silvery box and pops it on the coffee table. When he flicks a switch on the side, the box turns on the cast colourful spinning light patterns on the ceiling and walls. Grinning at Duri, he closes the curtains, then pushes the coffee table to the side, freeing up the rug below it, and drops down to lie on his back on the soft fabric, legs comfortably propped up on the couch. He pats the space beside him.

“Come on, hyung! Lie down!”

Duri shrugs and drops down to mimic Hosu’s pose, watching the pretty lightshow taking place all over Hosu’s living room, all over Hosu, soft golden skin brushed liberally with purples and greens and breathless, breathless blues.

Duri stares, eyes caught on the colours playing on Hosu’s face, free to look for stolen moments while Hosu taps away on his phone, attention hooked on the screen, fingers moving quickly until suddenly the room fills with the opening chords of Epik High’s 2014 album *Shoebox*, the one Duri listened to on repeat for months when it first came out. He looks up then, smile wide and heart shaped, eyes snagging on Duri’s, and Duri looks away, caught - in the act, in the music, in the moment.

It’s so similar, this, lying here, so akin to all those afternoons they spent lazing around on Duri’s bed just like this, strands of *Map of The Human Soul* swirling between them, it feels like a puzzle piece fitting back into place, like something in Duri’s chest that he didn’t realise was still tangled has suddenly slipped loose. Breathing is suddenly a little easier.

Duri relaxes into the thick rug and watches the lightshow with sleepy eyes.

“I love this album.”

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Duri hums.

“Yeah. It’s great.”

“You know, I heard they’re releasing a new album later this year?”

“Seriously? Ah, that’s awesome. They just keep getting better.”

“Hm, yeah. I still love their old stuff though.”

Their old stuff. Like *Map Of The Human Soul*, the album Duri hasn’t been able to listen to since eleven years ago, for fear of sinking too deeply into the memories, for fear of remembering Hosu and all of the threads that tied them together.

And maybe Hosu is thinking along the same line, because his voice comes out hesitant and small when he speaks again.

“Hyung?”

“Hm?”

“When you used to rap and record your tracks, what name did you use?”

When Duri looks across at Hosu, he finds him already looking back, changing splashes of pink and blue playing across his features.

“Why?”

A shrug, at odds with the cracked thinness of Hosu’s voice, like the answer is important to Hosu but he doesn’t want to say so, is afraid to be seen to care.

“No reason, I was just wondering. We talked about it so much, I guess I’m just curious.”

Duri turns back to face the ceiling, hoping the pink colour casts will hide the heat he can feel creeping up to his cheeks.

“D-Day.”

There’s silence for a breath, two.

“Seriously? Hyung, for real?”

The veneer of casualness is gone, and Hosu’s voice is full again, syllables round and lush, excitement thick in their edges, and Duri feels so warm. He smiles up at the ceiling.

“Yeah, Hobah.”

“You used it! You used the name we...the name I...”

“I used the name you came up with, Hobah. It was a good name.”

“Shit. Oh my god, that’s so cool. You’re so cool, I can’t believe you used it!”

Duri risks a glance across, and wishes he hadn’t, because Hosu looks like art, all sparkly eyed, skin coloured pink and blue, highlights caressing the slopes of his brow, his nose, his cheekbone and that perfect Cupid’s bow.

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He shrugs again, all his words stuck behind his teeth, tongue thick and heavy in his mouth, immobile, and turns back to face the ceiling.

The song finishes and the next track starts up.

Hosu turns back to the ceiling, too. Fingers twitch beside Duri's, the contact brief, and Duri shivers.

"Do you think you'll ever go back to it? Rapping?"

It's voiced softly, hesitantly, like Hosu isn't sure the question will be welcomed, like he's worried its edges might be too sharp.

Duri thinks of the new tracks sitting at the studio, recorded for no one to hear, all the lyrics new, written since Hosu came back into his life, and the urge to repay Hosu for the inspiration suddenly loosens his tongue.

"I, um. I kind of have been already. I started writing again."

When he looks back across at Hosu, his friend's eyes are wide, delighted, shiny, and there's a lump in Duri's throat that's hard to dislodge.

"You have?"

"Yeah, Hobah. Just a bit, recently."

A tentative touch to his wrist, then, before warm, slender fingers curl loosely around his own.

"That's so awesome, hyung, I'm so happy for you! I know you must have missed it so much!"

Missing seems like a word too light for how it felt not to write, too thin and flimsy to describe the hole that carved itself into Duri's centre when he lost his art and his passion. It felt twin to the hole that Hosu left behind all those years ago, a dark void that nothing seemed to ever fill.

The lump in his throat feels thicker.

"Yeah," he says around it, in barely-there syllables, "I did."

It passes like that, quiet talk under a ceiling undulating in blues and pinks, music leaching memories from places deep below the surface, places that haven't been accessed for years. They sink into it, reminiscing about the days of their earlier friendship, the music, the laughter, the arcade games, the junk food.

It's fun, reliving happy memories, and the laughter bounces between them, filling emptiness wherever it finds it, contentedness curling in its wake.

"You remember the time you ate so much ramyeon you threw up on the sidewalk and that dog ate it?"

Hosu groans, laughter making his spine curl and his limbs unwieldy.

"Oh god, don't remind me, that was so gross!"

Duri's eyes are watering from laughing so hard, and his cheeks feel like they're going to fall off.

"And then you rinsed your mouth with sprite and tried to kiss me."

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"Get out, I did not!"

Hosu's cheeks are pink, whether from laughing too hard or from embarrassment Duri isn't sure, and he wipes his eyes, still grinning big.

"Did too."

"Alright, I did. But you let me!"

"Touché. I guess I did."

There's a pause then, the laughter suddenly petering out as the air between them shifts and tension seeps in.

"You were always such a soft touch, hyung."

Duri huffs.

"Was not. You were just a whiny brat, had to shut you up somehow."

Hosu's brow arches, sharp with skepticism. Duri turns his face back up to watch the ceiling in favour of seeing the amusement on Hosu's face.

"So you kissed me to shut me up."

Duri sniffs to hide the rapid *thudthudthud* in his chest.

"Yep. Worked, too."

Hosu scoffs.

"Sure, hyung."

It's quiet again then, and the air feels charged now, heavy in a way that presses on Duri's lungs, making breathing hard. He sees Hosu in his periphery, turning back to look up at the ceiling.

The fingers wrapped around his own squeeze a little tighter.

"You remember that time that guy nearly caught us in the stairwell?"

Duri does remember, and the breath stalls in his throat. He *remembers*, hands under his t-shirt, fingers brushing across his nipples, his breathing heavy and laboured, Hosu's no better. Hosu's hair brushing against his cheek, the scent of him all around Duri, his mouth and tongue everywhere, on his mouth, on his neck, then suddenly, on his stomach as Hosu dropped to his knees. Soft, dark hair between Duri's fingers as Hosu worked at his belt, curls of excitement and delirium winding their way around each other in Duri's belly as he watched Hosu undo the button on his jeans.

Then suddenly, the street door opening, a loud male voice, talking on a phone. Panic flooding his senses, Hosu pressing him deeper into the recess below the stairs, a hand coming up to cover Duri's mouth, firm. A look over Hosu's shoulder to see an older man in a suit, no more than six feet away, standing still, turned away from them as he yelled into his phone about something Duri couldn't understand through the buzzing in his ears.

The man hanging up and swearing into what he must have thought was an empty stairwell before making his way up the stairs.

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Breathing again, Hosu slumped against him, arousal replaced by relief and lingering fright. The quiet rebuttoning and rebuckling of Duri's pants, the shell-shocked, giggly walk home.

He feels it all again, relives it as it replays in his memory. It's a memory he probably shouldn't have allowed in, one he should have stayed away from, but it's too late now, it's there, the sensations inscribed on his skin and in his belly.

"Yeah, I remember."

It brings with it other memories, too, of all the other times under that stairwell or ones like it, times when a stranger didn't walk in, times when hands got to keep wandering, when mouths got to keep kissing and tongues got to keep tasting, when arousal got to keep building until it spilled over into hands, mouths, or boxers, when delirium got to find its conclusion.

And those memories, Duri definitely should have kept tucked away, because those are *out of bounds*, and he swallows hard, tries to push them back down and keep them contained.

And maybe Hosu is thinking the same thing, because he swallows audibly, murmuring a soft *yeah, me too* before squeezing Duri's fingers.

He lets go of Duri's hand, then, sitting up, laughter thin and forced as he gets up off the ground and ends the moment, moving out of their bubble and back into real life.

Duri swallows around the lump in his throat and follows Hosu's lead.

*

Walks with Hosu become one of Duri's favourite things.

There's something about it, watching the world go by with Hosu by his side, talking and laughing, a quiet, calm togetherness. It's peaceful and breeds contentment in Duri's chest.

They'll walk beside the river, hands twitching between their bodies, brushing time and time again until sooner or later, one of them will crack and link fingers. The other will smile, pink-cheeked, and there will be a pause, a breath where shy smiles are passed back and forth, before the world resumes and they walk, pretending they're not holding hands.

Duri is slipping.

He feels it, little by little. He tries not to, tries to cling to his perch on the tightrope he's chosen, tries to hold on and not fall into Hosu. It's harder and harder to cling to his denial, harder and harder not to sink into the bright, beautiful smiles Hosu sends his way, harder and harder not to lean into him, to touch his face, to kiss him.

He never does. But just the *wanting* of it, just the *craving*, puts him on thin ice. He knows this, knows he shouldn't, knows he needs to find a way to stop himself. But the *how* of it is where he gets lost: how can he stop himself from wanting something? How does he douse the *yearning* that burns in him, the craving that makes him lose his place in sentences when he catches sight of Hosu's smile, his lips, his hands?

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Duri doesn't know. He can only stop himself from *having*, from *taking*, from *giving in* to the pull. But he can't change the desire itself. It's there, whether he likes it or not.

Worse, perhaps, are the butterflies. They're stubborn, always there whenever he thinks about Hosu, whenever Hosu is near. The fluttering against the walls of his stomach and rib cage should be nice, exciting, heady. And in moments where Duri *forgets*, it is. It's blissful.

In other moments, it's riddled with guilt, sour and stinging. Butterflies are hard to deny, hard to excuse, hard to forget.

They find a small park on their route. It's tucked away between buildings, hidden. There's not much to it, just a small patch of green with a single set of swings. It becomes a favourite place to direct their walks to on sunny days. They'll sit on the swings and eat their lunch, then lie back on the grass and stare up at the sky.

It's those moments that Duri treasures most.

It's also those moments when the ice is thinnest.

Hosu's warmth directly beside him on the grass is a beacon. He revels in it, greedily soaks it in.

When Hosu links their fingers together and sweeps his thumb over Duri's palm in small, gentle circles, Duri says nothing.

When Hosu rolls onto his side, trails the fingers of his free hand up and down the sensitive skin on the inside of Duri's forearm so it sends goosebumps racing along his entire body, Duri says nothing.

When Hosu presses his face to Duri's shoulder and sighs a soft, contented sigh, his breath warm on the exposed skin below Duri's t-shirt sleeve, Duri says nothing.

He clings to Hosu's hand, squeezing it tight just to feel Hosu squeeze it back, and lets himself sink into it for a little while.

They talk. Endlessly, about everything and anything. Duri marvels at how they never run out of things to talk about. It's something he forgot to treasure, something that characterised their relationship all those years ago that Duri somehow forgot the importance of. It's old, but it's new, because *they're* new. They're whole, complete adults, grown into themselves separately, with their own new ways of seeing things, their own experiences shaping who they are today.

It makes discovering each other's perspectives anew exciting and fresh, a constant marvel, a series of small revelations that sinks in under their skins with a small *ah!*

Sometimes, in quiet moments on the grass, when Hosu drifts off to sleep against Duri's shoulder or they sink into their own thoughts while keeping each other company, Duri forgets to police his own thoughts and lets them drift where they will. Invariably, they hover around Hosu, around all the things that overlap between the boy from all those years ago and the man today.

The boy from years ago, so open and honest and vulnerable. He's still like that now, Duri finds, but maybe not with everyone. Maybe just with some people. Maybe just with him.

He feels Hosu's fingertips on his skin and remembers all the ways he touched him *back then*, the shy brushes of fingers on fingers, on forearms, on cheeks, the full body hugs that Duri pretended badly not to like, the clinging way he had when he felt unsettled or stressed. The Hosu of today is both

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different and the same; less clingy, more confident, more comfortable in his skin. He holds back, aware of the different boundaries between them, but he's still just as touchy, just as warm.

With heated cheeks, Duri remembers too, all the ways Hosu *touched* him, the exuberant, inexperienced, hesitant, gentle brush of fingertips against the bare skin of Duri's thighs, his belly, his hips, and all the secret places where no one else had touched him yet, before Hosu. It's an illicit thrill, to remember, to think about those moments with Hosu slumbering beside him on the grass, peaceful and unaware.

His thoughts stray to wondering what would be different today, how Hosu's newfound confidence would change *those* touches. Hosu moves against his shoulder, and electricity runs down Duri's arm, heat trailing in its wake, and Duri yanks his thoughts away forcefully, back into safer territory, away from things that aren't his place to think about.

The walk back to the Centre is always a little sad. Neither wants their time together to end, and there's a sobering that occurs in Duri as the magic of their little bubble fades away and the Centre materialises in front of them. Reminders of Juwon are everywhere, and Duri shrinks a little, guilt sitting heavily on his shoulders for the confusion in his heart.

He soothes himself with the thought that he isn't cheating, he's figuring out his feelings, but he hasn't acted on them. Not really, not in any irreversible, irrevocable ways.

But reality looms large in his periphery, and it terrifies him.

Duri is falling, and there's nothing he can do to stop it.

*

Duri uploads *First Love* to his SoundCloud without fanfare, slamming his laptop shut with a loud and tremulous *thwap* as soon as the upload finishes, eyes narrowed, lip bitten, staring balefully.

His phone rings obnoxiously in the silence of his office, the space before a mere breath, seconds filled with nerves and shaky excitement, the dorky photo of Minjun asleep on the Centre couch with his mouth open flashing insistently at him from his desk.

There's sweat on his palms, hastily rubbed on his jeans before he swipes to answer.

"Jun-ah?"

"Hyung! Why do I have a SoundCloud notification from you? Have you been hacked?"

The tips of his ears burn.

"Um, no, Jun-ah. I recorded something."

"You *what*? Are you serious right now? You're writing again?"

A grin, stealthy in the way it finds its way onto his face, pulling cheeks and lips hard enough to reveal gums and small, straight teeth.

"Yeah, I am."

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“Oh my god, hyung, that’s amazing, what the hell! You didn’t tell me? Why didn’t you – no, you know what, it doesn’t matter, I’m just happy, I’m going to go listen right now!”

“You don’t...that’s not...don’t...”

“*Right now, hyung!*”

Dead air, then, and a roiling in his belly. The minutes tick by without word, and Duri busies himself working on Centre finances, pretending he isn’t waiting to hear from Minjun, pretending his friend’s opinion doesn’t matter, but the nerves making his skin crawl say otherwise.

When his phone dings, Duri nearly jumps out of his skin.

Jun-ah

!!!!!!!

!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

wth hyung

WHATTHEHELL

Me

?

what

Jun-ah

hyung

it’s

idk what to say

I’m speechless

you broke me

Me

.....

is that bad?

Jun-ah

what?

no, wtf hyung, no that’s not bad?!?!

its amazing

you’re amazing

don’t move

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we're celebrating

Me
oh
really?

Jun-ah

yes really

don't move

Giddiness and embarrassment mix in equal amounts in Duri's belly. He can't help the grin that stretches his face, or the way his ears burn with Minjun's praise.

Minjun comes stumbling into Duri's office the way he always does, falling through the doorway like he's tripped over his shoelaces just outside the door, hands full of a six pack of beer and a box of chicken.

He drops his arm load on the coffee table and crosses the office in three long strides, wrapping Duri wordlessly in an awkward, long-limbed hug. Duri huffs, pushes halfheartedly at his friend's chest with a *watch it, Jun-ah, I can't breathe*, but the gentle upward curl at the corners of his mouth gives him away.

"So," says Minjun around a mouth full of chicken minutes later, "tell me about the song."

Duri's shrug is unconvincing even to himself.

"I um. I guess I got – inspired?"

Minjun's stare is deadpan.

"No shit, hyung. But, um. The song. It's about a first love."

"Yeah, Jun-ah. That's why it's called *First Love*."

"Yeah. So. First love. Your first love, right?"

The back of Duri's neck prickles, heat bleeding into his cheeks. He reaches into the box for another piece of chicken, studying it with great care.

"It might be."

Minjun snorts.

"Don't give me that, hyung. I know the story. That's your story. What I want to know is, why now? What has you writing about him now, all these years later?"

Duri busies himself with his chicken, putting the bare bones on his plate, taking a napkin and fastidiously wiping his hands and mouth while avoiding eye contact like his life depends on it. It feels like it might.

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Minjun's eyes bore into his skull.

"Hyung. Come on, you know you can talk to me. Did something happen?"

Minjun's voice is so gentle that Duri involuntarily looks up, makes eye contact with his friend. All he sees is gentle concern, his best friend's care and knowing. And it's been hard, trying to carry everything alone, his mixed-up feelings, tangled up emotions about Hosu and Juwon, his desire to do right by both and balance that with doing right by himself. It's exhausting, confusing, and so very, very lonely, and Minjun is right there, and he *cares*.

Duri sighs.

"Yeah, it kind of did, Jun-ah."

He sits, stares at his hands, tries to corral his thoughts into something resembling order. Then he steels himself, looks Minjun in the eye.

"He's here."

Minjun frowns.

"Who's here?"

"Hosu. He's in Seoul."

The shock on Minjun's face when the meaning of Duri's words dawns on him is loud.

"Wait, what? You saw him?"

"Yeah. Been seeing quite a bit of him, actually. He's...um. He's one of the new volunteers."

Minjun stares, wide-eyed and open-mouthed.

"Holy shit! Have you...have you talked to him?"

Duri nods.

"Yeah. He walked in one day and I was here. We ended up sitting down and talking about everything. It was actually really good; I think we both needed closure."

Minjun shifts in his seat, leaning back with an incredulous look on his face.

"Whoa."

Duri's smile is small but genuine.

"Yeah. It's been...it's been good. We've been hanging out some, getting on really well. We kind of – I guess we're friends?"

"Wow. What's that like?"

Duri sighs, because that's where it gets needly and complicated.

"Honestly? It's really confusing."

He balls up his napkin and throws it on the coffee table.

"It's...it's amazing having him back in my life, even just as my friend, you know? I feel like that healed something that I could never heal on my own, knowing that he's okay, that we're okay. And just...we

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still click like we did then. We were best friends before everything else, and losing my best friend really hurt, you know?"

Minjun watches Duri quietly.

"But?" he prompts when Duri stops talking.

"But I don't know, Jun-ah! It's all just so confusing! I still...I mean, I'm constantly watching my boundaries, so I don't step over them, constantly reminding myself that we're just friends and that's all. It's not like I'm not attracted to him anymore, you know? He's still Hobah, we didn't split because we didn't love each other, we split because we were forced to. And now...he's here. I'm here. We've reconnected. But I'm with Juwon now."

Minjun nods quietly, body shifting forward to lean towards Duri, elbows on his knees.

"Hyung...do you still love him?"

There's pressure behind Duri's eyes, and he pushes the heels of his hands against them as he leans back into the couch.

"I don't know, Jun-ah. Maybe?"

"Do you still love Juwon?"

"I...yes?"

Duri's hands drop to his sides and he stares up at the ceiling, avoiding his friend's gentle, concerned eyes a safer option right now, less likely to cause him to fall apart.

"Is that a question?" Minjun presses.

Frustration ekes into Duri's voice as he answers, eyes firmly locked on the blandness of his office ceiling.

"I don't know, Jun, I'm mixed up, alright? I might love them both? But I can't have them both. And there's so much else. Juwon...he trusts me. I don't want to break that trust. He knows I see Hosu, he's so supportive of us being friends. It makes me feel like a piece of shit that I *feel things* when I see him. I didn't mean to, I swear, I didn't even know he was going to be here. And I thought I was over him. But the...the *feeling things*, it wasn't ever not there, you know? From the moment he walked in, it was there. I've been trying so hard to ignore it, to stamp it out, but it's there anyway. And that makes me feel like shit, because of Juwon. And Hosu...he's a heart on his sleeve kind of guy. He wasn't always like that, not back then, he used to hide himself. But he's grown up, he's confident now and he knows what he wants. And he's trying to hide it, I can see that, he's trying to pretend, for me, to make it seem like he doesn't feel anything when he sees me but he's a terrible actor and a terrible liar, and I feel awful for putting him in that situation, for making him feel things he has to hide, things he can't act on. I feel like I'm putting him back in the closet he just came out of, Jun-ah."

Duri drops chin to his chest and looks at Minjun, a tightness in his throat that's pushing downwards into his ribcage.

"I don't know what to do. What am I supposed to do?"

Minjun is quiet for what seems like an eternity, before sighing.

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"I don't know, hyung. I think...I think if you're sure you can't have them both, you might not have any option but to choose. If you could guarantee no one else would be hurt by anything you do, what would you do?"

"It's not that simple, Jun-ah."

"No, it's not," agrees Minjun, "but let's pretend, hyung, just for a minute. What if it was?"

The answer sits heavily in Duri's belly, sour in its implications. Voicing it is too hard, too painful, cutting across duty and propriety the way it does, too *selfish* and *undeserved*, guilt tightening the band around his chest until breathing becomes a struggle.

Duri's answer is a whisper.

"I don't know."

Minjun nods, as if he was expecting that answer.

"Maybe think about it."

He changes the subject then, pulling Duri back into safer territory, asking him about what other songs he's working on. The band around Duri's chest stays in place, but the vise around his throat eases a little as they talk.

Eventually, Minjun has to go. As he opens Duri's office door, he turns, expression thoughtful.

"Hyung?"

"Yeah?"

"One last thing. I know this is hard, and not what you asked for. But for what it's worth, you deserve to be happy. You're allowed to put yourself first. And I think it's pretty telling that having Hosu back in your life has given you back your passion for music. You light up when you talk about him, the same way you light up when you talk about music. I think you should think about what that means."

And with that, he turns and leaves, leaving Duri breathless on the couch.

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Hosu isn't doing so well.

He is deeply and wholly in love, and deeply and fully aware of it. He falls a little more every day, with every little thing that makes up *Duri*, every look, every smile, every touch, every word, until he's saturated with it, drowning in it. Every single cell in his body is soaked with it, every part of him is fully awake to the knowledge that this is it for him, Duri is all there is, and all there ever will be. When they're together, he feels swept away in the full, unbridled joy of it, the heady excitement that he found his person and *it's Duri*, again, still, maybe, definitely. It's electric and wonderful, and often embarrassing when Duri catches Hosu making starry eyes at him, but the way he just smiles softly fills Hosu with *hope* that curls in sweet tendrils on his tongue and makes him feel like he's floating.

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It's not until he's alone and the comedown hits, or some reminder of Juwon intrudes on his rose-coloured world, that Hosu is forced to remember that he is *alone* in this, that Duri loves someone else now and will never be Hosu's again.

It hurts, it burns and it tears at Hosu's insides, and there are moments when despair drags him down, when he tries to wash it away with soju or cry it out on Yujun's shoulder.

Hosu hits a particularly low point in June, when early summer heat hangs heavy over the city in swathes of sweat and chagrin. Hosu is working a late shift at the Centre after his last class of the day, and it's a day when he's tired and a little drawn already, when the desire to crawl into Duri's lap and go to sleep pulls at him harshly and he has to consciously hold himself back from acting on it.

His shift starts out in a way that's become both routine and treasured, a shared cup of tea with Duri at the table in the Centre's small kitchen, feet tangled under the table in a way that has Hosu's heart racing faster than it should while his brain desperately works to remind him that it means nothing, the space is just small and *that's all*.

It's a moment in Hosu's day that he looks forward to, this simple routine, sharing warmth and comfort with Duri, to be allowed to look at him across a table and pretend, even just to himself, that it means more, that they're not just two friends. It's self-destructive, he knows that, but it's all he has. And Duri's smiles and his shy looks are sustaining, they're the life force feeding Hosu's adoration, a gentle tendril of hope that maybe one day he could have more, they could be more.

When someone comes into the Centre's front door and the chime sounds, interrupting their conversation, it's Duri who stands, waving Hosu off with a soft *finish your tea, hyung'll get it*.

He rounds the table and walks through the kitchen door into the foyer then, his customer service smile already in place. Hosu sips his tea as he half-listens out for Duri to greet the newcomer, expecting it to be another teen runaway.

Duri's surprised *oh hey, what are you doing here* piques his interest first, followed by the rumble of a deep voice that's as unfamiliar to Hosu as it is clearly familiar to Duri. There's an amused sounding *thought you might need this, you left it at home* followed by a sheepish *oh, yeah, thanks* from Duri, and suddenly Hosu's stomach drops because that could only be one person.

The voice is closer now, clearly heading for the kitchen with an *I'll just put it in the fridge*, and before Hosu can move or even stand, there's a man standing beside him, looking down on him with a friendly smile.

This is Juwon. *Duri's* Juwon. Tall, broad-shouldered, square-jawed, and unfairly handsome, like a prince out of some Disney fairytale. Hosu feels woefully inadequate suddenly, insecurity rearing its head in a way it hasn't done in a long time as he stares up at Juwon with wide, terrified eyes.

After three months of managing to avoid meeting the man who belongs with Duri, the man who gets to call Duri *home*, a part of Hosu has managed to settle into a kind of equilibrium, a gentle delusion that this could just go on indefinitely, that this is all *fine*. He's managed to trick himself into forgetting that Juwon is real, that he exists at all, finding a delicate balance that allows him to turn a blind eye to the fact that the man he loves belongs with someone else.

His carefully crafted self-delusion comes crashing down around him as he looks up at Juwon and the man smiles his blinding smile and extends a large, powerful-looking hand to Hosu.

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"Hi," he says, in that same deep, resonant voice, "we haven't met before, you must be new! I'm Juwon!"

There's a cold rush of something unpleasant flooding Hosu's body and pebbling his skin as he stares at Juwon's hand.

He swallows hard as he grasps the man's hand and returns his bow, awkwardly rising while he does so.

"Hi, it's nice to meet you, Juwon-ssi, I'm...I'm Hosu."

Recognition flares in Juwon's face, and his eyes widen.

"Oh, shit, really? No way! You're Hosu? I've heard so much about you, it's so cool to meet you!"

Juwon's smile is unbearably genuine and wide, and guilt washes over Hosu in a cold wave. He smiles, but it feels thin and awkward on his face.

"I...thank you, Juwon-ssi, that's very kind of you. I've heard a lot about you, too!"

Juwon waves him off.

"Please, no need to be so formal, you're Duri's friend, which makes you mine! I think I'm your hyung, right? I'm 1989, same as Duri."

Hosu swallows hard.

"Y-yeah. I'm 1990."

Juwon's nod is warm, enthusiastic.

"That's what I thought! Call me hyung, then, Hosu-ah!"

He claps Hosu on the shoulder with a wide grin and turns away, moving over to the fridge and opening the door to rummage around. Behind his back, Hosu looks across at Duri, standing awkwardly in the kitchen doorway, hands in his pockets, eyes darting from Hosu's face to Juwon's back. He looks pale and desperately uncomfortable, and Hosu looks away, down at the tabletop, discomfort sour at the back of his throat.

"I can't stay, I just popped in to drop off Duri's dinner, he left it behind. Speaking of dinner, you should come over sometime!"

The casual invite is called backwards over his shoulder as he moves things around in the fridge to make space for the Tupperware container in his hand. Hosu stares hard at the table, a wave of guilt and nausea making its way from his stomach into his throat, closing it off and stealing the breath that carries his words, so he stands mute, fingers splayed on the kitchen table like an anchor.

Duri clears his throat in the silence, steps into the kitchen with an air of faux casualness to fill the empty air with words to hide Hosu's quiet.

"Thanks babe, that's awesome, I would starve without you!"

Babe.

What little air remains in the kitchen is sucked out when Duri speaks, and Hosu feels like he's suffocating, the tightness in his chest overwhelming. His feet move without his conscious direction, pushing him towards the door. He has to get out of here, has to leave, to be anywhere but here, in

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this tiny piece of inner-city purgatory, where he has to watch Duri interact with the man he calls his home.

He's already halfway to the door when he remembers to call out a hurried *really nice to meet you, Juwon-ssi, I have to run*. He sees Duri turn to watch him, catches his surprised look and Juwon's *nice to meet you too, Hosu-ah, and it's hyung, remember* before he rounds the corner and runs across the foyer and out the front door.

He swallows the bile sitting at the back of his throat and suppresses the violent urge to vomit as he jogs down the street. His shift only just started, so Duri will *know*. He'll know Hosu is being *weird*, that he's upset, and he might even guess why.

Hosu feels like a despicable person, the worst of the worst, a would-be homewrecker in love with his all-but-married best friend like some selfish, heartless thief. Juwon is *nice*, he's *kind* and *genuine*, the kind of guy who smiles widely at his partner's ex-boyfriend and sees a friend, someone to invite over for dinner. Juwon is a *good guy* and Hosu – Hosu is not.

His phone buzzes in his pocket, but Hosu ignores it. Talking to Duri right now is too much, there's too much rawness in him right now, and the fear that he'll come right out and say all the things that are tearing at his insides is real. Telling Duri how he feels means forcing a choice with no good outcome: either Duri chooses Juwon and Hosu loses the small piece of Duri he has right now, or Duri chooses Hosu and Hosu becomes a home wrecker.

Either way, Hosu loses.

And so, he ignores his phone and walks, dazed, looking for something, anything, to dull the sharp pain below his breastbone, to lift the weight pressing in on his sternum and shrinking his chest until his lungs feel stunted and useless.

He feels dull, shrunken, filled to the brim with blues and greys that spill over and out into the streets around him as he walks, infecting everything with his despair and loneliness. His feet carry him blindly along streets and alleys until he finds himself on the doorstep of one of his few safe spaces in the whole grey, lonely city, with no idea how he got there.

"Hyung?"

Yujun's voice is soft, his eyes concerned as he takes in Hosu's taut posture and the misery seeping from his pores where he stands on the garishly coloured Welcome mat left behind by his apartment's previous tenant. Hosu stands mute, eyes locked unseeing on Yujun's chest.

Fingers wrap around Hosu's wrist with a soft *oh, hyung*, and he feels himself be pulled inside, strong arms wrapping around his narrow shoulders. He buries his face in Yujun's neck, breathing in the comforting scent of his friend, something warm and fresh and soothing.

"What do you need, hyung?"

Hosu's voice is small and broken.

"Make me forget, Yunie. Can you just...make me forget for a bit?"

Yujun leans back, gentle, hands coming up to hold Hosu's face as he looks closely, eyes full of concern and caring.

"Are you sure that's what you want, hyung?"

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Hosu nods, because he does, he does want to forget, just for a little while, to pretend that he's not in love and heartbroken, that it's not hopeless, that he's in love with Yujun and Yujun is in love with him, that life is simple and they're together and happy and everything is good.

He wants to forget that Duri holds his heart and always has, always will.

And so he nods, a little quickly, a little eagerly, and presses forward, eyes closing as he leans into Yujun's space and claims his mouth, pink and sweet and lovely.

Yujun's hands are warm wrapped around his face, and the way he tastes and feels against Hosu's lips is safe, familiar, nice, a balm on Hosu's sore heart, a dash of pink in amongst all of his blues. The way he tilts his head a little and kisses Hosu back, licks gently along his bottom lip before sucking it into his mouth is familiar, too, something Hosu likes, something that usually makes his breath hitch, especially when Yujun's teeth nip into the flesh just a little.

Yujun's body feels good against him, too, solid and warm along the length of him, and Hosu thinks this is good, this will work, it will help him get some distance, forget about Duri for a while, forget about Duri's smile, his eyes, those broad shoulders and large hands, erase the memories of all the ways those hands touched him, erase the taste of Duri's lips and the sound of his breathing.

"Hyung?"

Hosu opens his eyes, reluctant, because Yujun's mouth is gone, there is space in front of him, and when he looks, it's Yujun's sad, worried face he sees. Yujun's hands are still on his face, and his thumbs rub softly under Hosu's eyes, back and forth, a careful, gentle rhythm.

"Why'd you stop, Yunie?"

"Hyung...you're *crying*."

He notices then, the cold below his lashes, the dampness on Yujun's thumbs, the hitch in his breathing that borders on a sob, not lust or arousal but pure heartbreak.

Yujun's smile is small and sad.

"I don't think this is right, I don't think this is what you want."

Hosu slumps, then, shame and sadness wrapping around him, head forced down onto Yujun's shoulder, wet lashes and cheeks buried against the warm skin of his friend's neck. The arms around him simply pull tighter, a soothing, steady hand rubbing between his shoulder blades, anchoring him.

"I'm...I'm sorry."

The sob breaks through then, finally, muffled against Yujun's shoulder.

"Sssh, it's okay, I've got you."

When the dam inside Hosu releases, he cries until Yujun's shirt is damp against his skin, until his eyes hurt and the tightness in his chest and throat has eased some, until his voice is cracked and hoarse and his body feels empty, barren.

Later, sprawled on Yujun's couch, cuddled close, Yujun gently and hesitantly voices the suggestion that maybe Hosu needs to protect himself and create some distance before he gets hurt.

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"It's too late for that, Yunie, I'm already hurting," is Hosu's whispered reply to the space between Yujun's chest and his chin, and that's the last thing said about it. Yujun's response is a gentle squeeze and a kiss to Hosu's hair.

Hosu doesn't answer Duri's worried texts until he wakes up the next morning, making up a blatant lie about getting an SOS text from Yujun during the brief seconds Duri was in the foyer with Juwon, his heart hurting at the way Duri's reply of *okay, if you're sure* is slow in coming, the three typing dots appearing and disappearing over and over again for over five minutes before the four word message finally pops up, the lie that much louder for not being voiced.

When he sees Duri at the Centre, there's a fracture between them, an unspoken secret, something painful that Hosu hasn't shared that is loud in the air around them. Duri knows it's there but caught between his self-imposed boundaries of platonic friendship and his suspicions of what it might be, doesn't push. It's loud between them though, this unspoken secret of Hosu's yearning, they both know it's there, now, it's blatant, and the tension it creates leaches into everything. It simmers below the surface, in lingering looks and held breaths, always there, always drawing them together, always magnetising hands to skin, magnifying the pull that was there from the beginning a thousandfold.

When Hosu lets himself spiral into thinking about why Duri hasn't brought it up, why he hasn't acknowledged the open secret of Hosu's feelings, it hurts, it cuts deeply in a way that terrifies him. Duri was never one to let an unspoken secret fester, never one to let Hosu mope for too long, always patient but skilled at drawing out the thing that needed to be talked about.

Duri not pushing, not pulling Hosu's secret out of him in his quiet, undemanding way, that's foreign and un-Durilike, it's wrong, and all the more painful for it. Hosu wants him to ask as much as he doesn't want to answer, wants Duri to know as much as he doesn't want to tell him, wants Duri to choose him as much as he doesn't want to break up a happy home.

But in the moments when Hosu looks, really *looks* at Duri, in the moments when Duri is unguarded, the way he feels about Hosu slips out silently, not in words but in heartbeats, in breaths, in touches, in quiet admonitions to *eat something Hobah, let hyung get it Hobah*, and a million other small ways that shout *Iloveyouloveyouloveyou*.

It's never voiced, always kept at bay, unspoken and as such, laced with doubt in Hosu's lonelier moments.

It takes time, a week, two, but slowly Hosu manages to find his equilibrium again, that place of quiet delusion where Juwon is merely a shadow, a distant and irrelevant presence that has no real bearing on his friendship with Duri, not someone but *something*, something that can be discounted and ignored.

There are moments when reality bursts his bubble loudly, when Duri's phone dings and Juwon's contact name flashes intrusively on the screen. Duri's eyes invariably dash to Hosu's, sad and full of a misplaced guilt, and Hosu will gather all his pieces and smile, and it will feel crooked and surreal on his face as he says *don't mind me*, only to watch Duri swipe the notification away before squeezing Hosu's hand with a wordless show of support.

It's a scary place to be, this no-mans-land of impossible hope, but the moments he gets Duri all to himself are so precious to Hosu that he stays, he stays and hopes and dreams, he cries and laughs and takes what he can get and hope that somehow, by some miracle, it will be enough.

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Going for drinks with Hosu after the end of their shifts was probably a mistake.

It shouldn't have been, really. It should have been fine to have drinks with *a friend*, it's something *friends do*.

But a few drinks led to a few more. And as each drink was knocked back, more and more inhibitions faded into nothingness. Personal space shrunk and then vanished, until they were pressed together in the dark bar, holding hands and giggling about things Duri can't remember. Suddenly his hands wouldn't stop drifting upwards to push Hosu's bangs out of his eyes, or adjust Hosu's clothes, or straighten the delicate chain around Hosu's neck.

And Hosu, Hosu wouldn't stop giggling and falling over, warm body slumping into Duri's lap each time, solid and comforting.

And now they're here, sitting in the back of the taxi with Hosu's fingers tangled with his own, thighs pressed together and Hosu's face buried against the skin of his neck while Duri tries desperately to control his breathing.

Hosu's gentle breathing and the occasional soft pecks to the sensitive skin below his ear feel wonderful beyond anything Duri has felt in a long time, sending shivers down his spine as he buries his nose and lips in Hosu's soft hair.

Somewhere at the back of Duri's mind there's a tiny whisper, a sober little voice that tells him this is a step too far, that this crosses the boundary between platonic and romantic. But that little whisper is drowned out by a louder voice, the part of him that is intent on having this and keeping it, the part of him that's greedy and desperate to keep walking his tightrope. *It's just a little skinship*, that part insists, overriding the whispers that tell him it's more, suffocating the thread of self-awareness that tries to stop him from deluding himself.

The kisses to his neck become more insistent, more frequent, and Duri can't breathe, the pull of the warm body pressing into him is too strong, too delicious. He loses himself a little in the sensations, faded as he is from the drinks and Hosu's scent all around him. The world doesn't seem to extend beyond the two of them, not anymore, it's made up of just Duri and Hosu and all the sensations between them, touch and scent and the tiny breathless sounds Hosu makes from time to time.

Duri can't help the way he rubs his cheek on Hosu's hair, or the way his breath hitches when Hosu untangles their fingers to trail gentle fingertips up and down Duri's wrist and the palm of his hand, sending goosebumps racing up Duri's arm and down his back.

It's so little, but it's *Hobah*, so it's *so much*. Duri is overwhelmed with it, spellbound, captured, unable to move. There's no oxygen in the car and Duri is lightheaded, thinks he'll pass out soon.

There's a sudden, unexpected, barely-there scrape of teeth against his skin, and Duri suppresses a moan. Hosu squeezes his hand in response, and Duri becomes aware of how fast he's breathing, how fast they are both breathing.

"Is....is this okay, hyung?"

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Hosu's voice is soft, a little hoarse, the ends of his syllables a little blurry with alcohol, and Duri can't find his voice at all, at first. He just nods against Hosu's hair, the scent of it sweet and heady, throat smokey when he finally manages to force out a rough *yeah, Hobah, it's okay*.

It's so much more than *okay*. It's delicious and intoxicating, this bubble they find themselves in. Duri wants to stay here, to drink this in and never come up for air, just sink into Hosu and let him fill his lungs, let him pour himself into his veins and all of his cells until Duri is *full*.

The outside world has disappeared completely. Nothing else exists but the two of them, right now, right here, this moment, toeing lines that seem to get nudged further and further over constantly. Reality is suspended, or constricted, maybe, shrunken down to just Duri and Hosu, fingertips and lips, breath and soft, gentle touches, nothing and everything all at once.

It's so intense, Duri has to hold himself back from just taking what he wants, from leaning in and kissing Hosu, from diving in, come what may. He fights the impulse, physically holds himself back until his entire body is tense, aching with the need to let go.

And then suddenly, it's over. The taxi pulls up to Hosu's flat, and their bubble pops. The driver flicks on the inside light, and Duri blinks blearily in the sudden brightness. Hosu sits up, his warmth disappearing and leaving Duri's skin cold and shivery as he pulls away. His cheeks are ruddy with alcohol and something else, lips pink and shiny. Duri doesn't realise he's staring at them until he sees Hosu's eyes drop down to his own mouth before he leans in and presses a soft, closed-mouthed kiss to Duri's lips.

The kiss is over before it begins, Hosu smiling as he pulls away with a soft *night, hyung* as he hands the driver two folded notes of cash and climbs out of the car, shutting the door behind him.

The drive over to Duri and Juwon's apartment is sobering. The alcohol burns off a little more with each passing minute, and as it does, Duri becomes more and more aware of what he almost let happen, what he *did* let happen. The uncomfortable tightness in his pants is evidence enough that what happened was very much *not* platonic, at least not for Duri, and therefore, very much *not okay*.

He groans and buries his face in his hands. What the hell kind of mess is he getting himself into?

He isn't a cheater. That isn't what he does, that isn't who he is. He loves Juwon, he's committed to the relationship they've built, the life they've made. He'd never hurt Juwon, not intentionally, and he's not ready for whatever this is, not ready to reassess the kind of person he is, not ready to examine what this means about him, about them, about Juwon, and Hosu, and all of their futures.

Minjun's words ring in his head. *You're allowed to be happy, hyung. You're allowed to put yourself first*. But how can he do that? Does he really want to risk everything he has with Juwon for what could turn out to be a passing fling, closure, getting Hosu out of his system once and for all?

He doesn't. He won't risk it for that, not even with Hosu. And yet, he can't walk away from Hosu. Losing Hosu again isn't an option Duri is willing to entertain, no matter how distressing it is, this pull in two different directions. He couldn't bear it, not now, not after everything, not when they've finally reconnected,

Not when talking to Hosu is so healing, not when there's joy bubbling in his chest just being with Hosu, not when holding Hosu's hand when he's stressed and watching him settle makes Duri feel like he's where he belongs.

Walking away is not an option.

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So. It just can't happen again. What happened tonight only just barely skirted across the line; nothing has really happened yet, it's not irredeemable. Duri can still pull it back, to keep things as they are.

He just has to keep his head around Hosu, to not drink, to keep his eye on the boundaries he's set for himself, and everything will be fine.

Everything will be fine.

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Chapter 12

Hosu wakes in the morning with a sour taste in his mouth and lead in his belly.

With the alcohol worn off, the full weight of his behaviour the night before slams square into him, a viscous mix of dread and giddiness, guilt, and disbelief. Images loop in his head, endless flashes of his hand in Duri's, Duri's pink cheeks and wide, starry-eyed smiles, Duri reaching out to fix Hosu's shirt, his hair, his chain. Sensations, too, crowd in on him, stirring in his skin, his mouth, his gut. The feel of Duri's warm skin against his lips, the salt of it on his tongue and teeth when he lost himself and nipped at it. The moan that slipped out of Duri when he did, unbridled and unintended, like Duri, too, lost himself a little.

The way Duri shivered against him when Hosu painted delicate fingertip trails up and down the sensitive skin of his forearm. The feel of Duri's fingers in his hair, on the back of his neck, against his palm.

It's strange, the way the guilt mixes with giddiness, the way he feels both at the same time when the memories wash over him. It's a tangle of threads in his chest, knotted and frayed, the bright, happy yellow shot through with heavy, dull greys and blacks.

The giddiness is lovely, butterflies and excitement of what felt like *reciprocation*, new but also old love blooming in his chest, the feeling that maybe he wasn't alone in this. It stirs giggles that force their way out of his chest in bubbles as he lies on his bed with his face buried in his pillow, body vibrating and smile difficult to suppress, energy buzzing under his skin, trying to force its way out in jerky movements.

But the guilt. The guilt is heavy, sour, worms its way in thick tendrils from his stomach into his ribcage, sweeps away the giddiness as it forces itself into his throat and out of his mouth in sour, heavy breaths that hurt to exhale.

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The dread of what happens from here weighs his bones down, makes gravity pull at him like it means for him to lie down and never get up again. And the disbelief in the way he lost himself, in the way Duri responded, like he'd just been waiting for Hosu to push the boundaries, to lean in and take what he wanted, that's a bright red thread that winds its own haphazard way amongst the tangle, sharp and jarring.

It's a lot. It makes him anxious in a way he hasn't been for years, jittery with it, hands shaky and chest tight.

When his phone vibrates on his bedside table, the dread and giddiness surge in equal measure, anticipation that it will be Duri both terrifying and butterfly-inducing.

The message isn't from Duri.

Jiyeong

what's up hyung

Me

nothing much

you?

Jiyeong

can I call?

feel like we haven't talked in ages

Me

yeah

His screen lights up immediately, and Hosu swipes to accept the video chat.

"Hey Yeongie."

"Damn, hyung, you look like shit!"

Hosu huffs, avoids the little square in the corner of his phone screen that shows him Jiyeong is right.

"Wow, thanks, man."

"Welcome. You hung over?"

"Hmm. Went out for drinks last night."

"Yeah? Good night?"

Hosu blinks.

"Um. That's a simple question with a surprisingly complicated answer."

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Jiyeong's eyebrows shoot up.

"Oh? How so?"

Hosu groans, rubs his hand across his eyes.

"I don't even know where to start."

There's a pause, then, and when Hosu looks back at the screen, Jiyeong looks soft, concerned.

"Are you alright, hyung?"

"I don't really know. Life's just kind of...messy, at the moment."

"Want to talk about it?"

And yeah, Hosu does. Jiyeong has always been the friend who was able to see right through to the heart of things and help him make sense of them, the one with the unwavering support when things got tough.

"Yeah, okay. It's just...I'm in over my head, and I don't know what to do."

Jiyeong shifts on his pillow, settling, a sliver of Seongmin's sleeping face beside him, hair long and tousled. He looks the same as always, comfortable and relaxed, *at home*, and it's soothing, the thought that his friends at least are okay.

"What happened?"

"Okay. You remember I told you about Duri?"

"Course I do. That's a pretty important part of your life, I wouldn't forget about that."

"Hmm. Well, he's here. We met up. We're working together, and he's amazing, and I'm...I'm in trouble."

Jiyeong stares, wide-eyed.

"Wait, hold up. Your ex, the one who broke your heart when you were fifteen, he's there? And you've been seeing him? You're dating?"

Hosu's head shake is miserable.

"No, we're not dating. He has a boyfriend. We're friends. Except I went and fell in love with him, and I feel like shit about it, and I don't know what to do."

"Oh hyung."

"Yeah. I suck."

Jiyeong clacks his tongue, vexed.

"You do not suck! Don't say that!"

There's movement beside him, slow, Seongmin's sleepy voice croaking out *who sucks*. Jiyeong turns away from the phone to speak to him, tone soft, soothing.

"No one sucks, baby. It's Hosu-hyung, he thinks he sucks. Tell him he doesn't."

Our Gentle Sin - a novel by Tara Lemana

Seongmin lifts his head dopyly off the pillow, eyes still closed, mouth working lethargically around nothing.

“Hey hyung. You don’t suck.”

“Thanks, Seong. Go back to sleep.”

“Kay.”

He nods, rolling over, bare back and shoulder pressed against Jiyeong’s arm.

“You don’t suck, hyung,” Jiyeong reiterates, gentle.

“I’m in love with someone who isn’t available, Yeong. I should walk away and never see him again, but I don’t. I’ve met his partner, he’s a good guy. He’s nice, kind. He loves Duri. I like him. But if I got a chance to take Duri away from him, I’d take it, in a heartbeat. So, I do, I suck.”

“Stop it, hyung. You can’t help how you feel. You don’t suck for falling in love with someone. And the fact you’re already feeling guilty about possibly breaking up a relationship before you’ve even done so, also shows that you do not suck. Have you actually done anything about it? Does Duri know how you feel?”

Hosu’s throat feels tight, and breath is hard to come by. He swallows around the barbs lodged in his trachea.

“Yeah, he does. I mean, I haven’t told him, but I’m really not great at trying to hide it. And something kind of happened last night that – well, if he didn’t know before, he definitely knows now.”

Jiyeong hums.

“What happened?”

“I...we went out for drinks. Just the two of us. We’ve been hanging out a lot, going on walks, grabbing coffee during lunch breaks, that kind of thing. So it didn’t seem like anything unusual, but it was probably not the smartest thing. You know how I get when I drink.”

“Yeah. You have no filter when you’re drunk. And you get even more touchy than usual and stop giving a damn about things you probably shouldn’t stop giving a damn about.”

“Bingo.”

“So what did you do?”

“What do you think? I got touchy. Really touchy. Held his hand, hung all over him. Kissed his neck a lot.”

Jiyeong grimaces, sucks air in through his teeth with a hiss.

“You kissed him?”

“Yeah. His neck. A lot.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah.”

“What did he do?”

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"That's just it; he let me. And he liked it."

"He liked it?"

"Yeah. Not hard to tell whether someone is into you kissing them, you know? He liked it."

"Damn, hyung."

"Yeah."

"Okay. So you kissed him on the neck."

"A lot."

"A lot. You kissed him on the neck a lot. You were all over him and held his hand. Anything else?"

"I might have kissed him on the mouth when I left."

"Kissed him on the mouth when you left. Okay. That's it?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. So you got drunk, got touchy. Showed your hand, by the sounds. But so did he. He liked it. What about when you're both sober? What is he like with you then? I mean, was it just some drunken flirty horniness or is there more there all the time?"

"He's exactly the same with me as he was when we were dating. Exactly the same, minus, you know, the sex. He's touchy with me. He's never touchy, but he always was with me, and he still is. He's always smiling at me, and he blushes constantly. He lets me hold his hand. And he...he's always doing things for me. And with me. Hyung stuff. Just always taking care of me. He makes me feel like I'm the most important person in the world, you know? And when he's with me, if his boyfriend calls, he won't take the call."

Jiyeong's eyebrows shoot all the way up at that.

"Seriously?"

Hosu sighs.

"Yeah. But he's never said anything. We've never talked about how we feel now. It's off limits, because it should be, because he's not available. We don't talk about it, so I don't know, maybe I'm reading too much into it, you know? When we're together I feel so sure that he feels the same way about me, but then when we're not I don't know anymore, I doubt everything. And even if he does, I can't have him, you know? He's with someone."

"Yeah, he is, hyung. And it's not right for you to go in and break them up."

"I know, man, I know that."

"I know you know. But you didn't let me finish. It's not right for you to go in and break them up. But it's also not right for him to be with someone if he loves someone else. That's not fair on any of you. All three of you deserve to be happy, hyung. And if the situation stays as it is, none of you will be."

Hosu's throat feels tight, and when he swallows, it hurts.

"So what do I do?"

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“You talk to him, hyung, and then you wait. This isn’t yours to solve, it’s his. He’s the one with the conflict. His relationship is his responsibility, not yours. Tell him how you feel, so you can be sure he knows, so there’s no room for him to doubt, and then back off, give him time to figure out how *he* feels, and what to do about it.”

Even though Hosu is sure Duri already knows how he feels, the thought of actually putting *words* to his feelings, opening his chest up and spilling all the raw edges of all the painful, exhilarating, precious emotion swirling in his chest is terrifying. It must show on his face, because Jiyeong’s voice is soft when he speaks again.

“You can do it, hyung. I know it’s scary, but he already knows, right?”

Hosu’s biggest fear claws at his chest, trying to work itself out. His voice is small, whispery when he speaks.

“What if he hates me, Yeong-ah? What if I tell him and he tells me to bugger off?”

“I doubt that’ll happen, hyung. Even if he’s not in love with you, he clearly cares a lot about you. But if he does turn you down, then Seong and I have your back, yeah? You’ll come stay with us for a bit while you lick your wounds and we love on you until you feel better, and then you get out there and go be your amazing self. But either way, you’ll know. You won’t be pining after someone you can’t have.”

It all sounds reasonable, it really does. But the fear of losing Duri is sharp, jagged edges of it cutting at Hosu, stinging behind his eyes.

“I don’t know. I don’t...I don’t want to lose him.”

“I know, hyung. And you don’t have to do anything right away. Or ever. It’s up to you. But at some point it’s going to get too painful to watch him with someone else, and to feel like he knows how you feel and is just ignoring it. At some point, you’re going to feel like doing nothing is more painful than doing something. That’s when you’ll be ready to bite the bullet.”

Hosu snorts despite himself.

“Geez, great choice of metaphor, dude. Total confidence booster.”

Jiyeong laughs.

“That’s me, hyung. I’m your one-man pep squad.”

They talk for a while longer, the conversation drifting from Hosu and Duri to Jiyeong and Seongmin, to their new puppy and Seongmin’s new job. The weight in Hosu’s chest settles in place, strands of brightness still running through it despite its gravity. And with the echo of Jiyeong’s words still reverberating off the inside of his skull, there’s relief there too, inspired by the reminder that he’s not alone, that he has people in his corner willing to help him through whatever happens.

When the time comes for Hosu to get up and get ready for work, Jiyeong hugs a half-awake Seongmin to his chest and says softly:

“Just remember, hyung. The fact that you fell in love with someone who isn’t available really sucks. But you don’t suck. You can’t help who you fall for, hyung, it’s not your fault.”

Seongmin hums, eyes half open.

Our Gentle Sin - a novel by Tara Lemana

“Plus being in love is really, really nice, right, hyung? When you’re not busy stressing about it?”

Hosu smiles.

“Yeah, Seong, it is.”

Jiyeong kisses his husband’s hair, smiling fondly.

“Yeah, it is.”

They say goodbye and sign off, and Hosu feels a little less burdened.

*

In practice, talking to Duri is infinitely harder than Hosu hoped it would be.

He tries, he really does. But the words get stuck behind his teeth when he opens his mouth, the fear giving them barbs that hook into his tongue and won’t let go.

He’ll sit with Duri and stare at all the little things he loves so much, the delicate features, the small mouth, the freckles like a miniature sandstorm across the bridge of Duri’s nose and dusky pink cheeks, the sharp eyes with all the depth to them, the broad shoulders and large hands, the thoughtful way he speaks, the gumminess of his smile. He stares and gets lost, then gets fearful, afraid of the world of hurt awaiting him if he has to say goodbye to all those things, and paralysis strikes.

Days go by, then a week, then two, and Hosu still hasn’t found a way to tell Duri how he feels. The fear that he’s wrong, that Duri doesn’t feel the same, that maybe his insides stir with fondness because of what they *used to have*, not what they have now, is enough to halt Hosu’s tongue and render him mute, to keep him locked in fear and doubt, clutching their friendship close to his chest.

The maelstrom of preoccupied thoughts in his head does nothing to help his spiral, sending him down the rabbit hole time and time again, until little by little, Hosu convinces himself that he’s imagined Duri returning his feelings, and the right thing to do is to try and distance himself, to try and protect both of them from the hurt that will inevitably come from him pursuing some kind of future with Duri.

And so, he tries. He starts turning Duri’s invitations down sometimes. Not all the time, because it’s Duri, Duri who is his friend and whom he doesn’t want to hurt, but sometimes. He hopes that maybe Duri won’t notice, but the sudden distance is palpable, the pause before a rejection loud, and Duri is sensitive, he *notices*.

Hosu holds back on the touching, too, keeps his hands by his side, twitchy with the urge to reach out. CURLS INTO HIMSELF, shielding himself as best he can from all the things he adores about Duri, and tries so hard to suppress the way Duri makes him feel.

The shift is tangible for both of them. Duri, blind to Hosu’s thinking and his reasons for withdrawing, is distraught. Where before, there was nothing but warmth and obvious adoration, there is a barrier, now, a strict sense of boundaries that wasn’t there before. Boundaries that should be a relief, boundaries that Duri should have had in place all along, boundaries that make their friendship *strictly platonic*.

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Boundaries that are appropriate, but that break Duri's heart.

The distance between them feels like a gulf, a yawning abyss that hurts Duri to his core, tears at his chest. His fingers ache to hold Hosu's hand, his body pulls towards Hosu subconsciously, like the tide pulling towards the moon. He catches himself staring, time and time again, eyes drawn to Hosu's mouth, Hosu's slender fingers, Hosu's clavicles, Hosu's soft hair, an ache in his bones to reach out and *touch*, to press kisses to the skin, to hold Hosu close and mumble sweet words in his pretty ears to make him blushy and shy.

Little by little, the truth that he is irrevocably and wholly in love with Hosu sinks into Duri's bones.

It weighs heavy, this delayed and somewhat unwelcome realisation. He wishes the situation was different, less tangled, wishes that the timing was better.

But it isn't.

The moment it finally sinks in fully for Duri is a small one, nondescript, not earth shattering like it ought to be.

They're sitting at the table in the small Centre kitchen, hands wrapped around mugs of hot tea. Duri looks up from his tea to see Hosu already looking back at him with soft eyes and a softer smile, and a desperate, aching need wells up in Duri.

I want to kiss him. I want to kiss him, and hold him, and never let him go.

The power of it takes his breath away, and all thought is wiped from his mind. He's not sure how he gets through the rest of their afternoon tea break, doesn't remember it when it's over. Hosu seems to notice Duri's silence, picking up the slack seamlessly in the way he does, with only the odd worried glance.

When Hosu gets up to get back to work, Duri mumbles something about a meeting and leaves the Centre, heart thumping a heavy rhythm in his throat as he walks blindly down streets, turning corners without looking until he finds himself down by the river.

He finds a bench under a tree and sits, marinating in his feelings and realisations. The weight of them sinks into his bones, terrifying and exhilarating. He sits there by the water and lets it all wash over him, all the memories, all the happiness and all the sadness, all the newness and the oldness tangled together below his ribs, all the things they shared both then and now.

The thought that he's let himself slip this far into falling for Hosu while maybe, just maybe, he was wrong about how Hosu felt about him has him shaken to his core. It feels irreversible, the falling, the slipping into Hosu, and Duri doesn't know how to pull himself back out, doesn't want to lose Juwon for nothing but heartbreak and unrequited love.

It's a selfish thought, but one he can't help. If he has to lose someone as wonderful as Juwon, he needs it to be for a good reason, something real, something precious, not for nothing but heartache and regret.

The ache settles in under his breastbone and Duri carries it with him when he finally goes home, long after evening has settled over Seoul.

Our Gentle Sin - a novel by Tara Lemana

Hosu is in the Centre kitchen washing up his bowl and mug when voices approach and Duri walks in, a tall, dimpled man in his wake. He's smiling his wide, gummy smile as they enter, listening to the tall guy telling a story, hands gesturing wildly.

Hosu's breath catches at the sight of Duri, and his cheeks heat as butterflies take over. For all his broad shoulders, Duri looks small beside his companion, whose broad chest seems to be testing the limits of the shirt he's wearing.

When Duri spots Hosu, he falters, the wide smile shrinking, turning soft, maybe, sad, perhaps. It hurts Hosu's heart to see him dejected, and he returns Duri's smile.

"Hey Hobah."

"Hey, hyung."

The man behind Duri has stopped talking and is watching their exchange in silence. Hosu looks between him and Duri, waiting for Duri to introduce them, but Duri seems to be frozen in place. It's awkward, the way the silence stretches, and Hosu bites his lip, feeling nerves roil in his belly.

Suddenly, the man with Duri seems to decide enough is enough, and he steps forward, smile wide and genuine. He has kind eyes, sharp and golden, and his hair is dyed a sandy blonde. He's long everywhere, long arms, long legs, long fingers, imposing in his size and yet somehow, utterly unthreatening, with his dimpled smile and stumbly, slightly awkward demeanour.

He wipes a hand on the leg of his jeans before holding it out for Hosu to shake. It makes Hosu hesitate a little before grasping it, but when he does, the skin is warm and dry in a way that suggests the wipe was habitual and not because his hands were actually sweaty.

"Hi! I don't think we've met! I'm So Minjun, I'm one of the Centre's owners. You must be one of the volunteers I haven't met yet!"

Heat prickles at the back of Hosu's neck. His cheeks feel bright red, and his smile feels fake as he plasters it on.

"Er, yes, hi Minjun-ssi, I'm Kim Hosu."

Hosu sees the exact moment when the pieces slot together in Minjun's mind, sees the way his eyes widen fractionally, and his mouth drops open just a little. There's a quick glance at Duri, who looks back at Minjun, and Hosu knows, knows that Minjun *knows*, everything, who he is, what he was to Duri, maybe even what he *is* to Duri, whatever that may be. His golden eyes soften, and he smiles.

"Ah, Hosu-ssi, it's nice to finally meet you, I've heard a lot about you. Hyung thinks the world of you."

"Jun-ah!"

Duri backhands Minjun half-heartedly on the chest as he speaks, and his cheeks flush pink. Hosu feels warmth wash through him at the sight and chastises himself inwardly for his desperation for any sign that Duri still cares about him.

Minjun grins, dimples deep and endearing, and Hosu can't help but smile back.

Our Gentle Sin - a novel by Tara Lemana

"It's only the truth, hyung. Hosu-ssi, hyung and I are going out for drinks, and you're coming with us!"

Hosu blanches. He's managed to avoid drinking around Duri since that night, and it's kept him fairly well out of trouble so far.

"Um, I don't know if..." he protests weakly, at the same time that Duri says "Jun-ah, don't be bossy, Hobah might have other plans!"

There's a moment then, where Hosu looks at Duri and feels a pang of sadness that Duri might not want him to come, but then Duri turns to him, those sharp eyes find Hosu's, and he looks soft, so soft, and so hopeful.

"Are you busy, Hobah? We'd love for you to come if not."

And Hosu is powerless in the face of all that *hopefulness*, in the face of the pink on Duri's cheeks and the way he pouts a little without realising it, the way his eyes are wide, glittering, and full of *something*.

"I'm not busy, hyung, I'd...I'd love to come."

The smile Duri graces him with and the shy way his eyes drop down to the ground have Hosu's stomach swooping wildly, fingers twitchy on the tabletop and his heartbeat a breathless flutter in the hollow of his chest.

Minjun claps his hands once, loudly, and both Hosu and Duri start.

"Great! Let's go then!"

And that's that. Hosu feels a little rudderless, off-balance, suddenly thrust into this daunting situation, drinks with the unrequited love of his life and the love's best friend, who may or may not know everything about him and who may or may not hate him as a result.

To Minjun's credit, he shows no sign of disliking Hosu. He's warm and friendly, asking questions about his work, how he came to be in Seoul, how he's liking the Centre, steering clear of topics that might pry into anything too personal or uncomfortable. He doesn't seem to notice the way Hosu and Duri are a little off, a little stilted with each other, picking up the slack.

The bar they find themselves in is nondescript, brown, wood finish everywhere, cosy. Their table is a corner one, tucked a little out of the way, and Hosu leans back into the padded seat. Duri sits beside him, a little further away than he would have before that night in the taxi, but their knees still brush under the table.

Minjun takes a seat opposite them, grimacing at the way the wooden chair creaks when he sits down gingerly, extra care in his movements, like a man who is used to breaking things without meaning to.

The conversation flows more easily as their first beers dwindle. Hosu isn't tipsy yet, but the alcohol is just enough to take the edge off his nervousness, allowing him to relax a little and hold his own in the conversation. Duri, too, is talking a little more freely now, and it's nice.

Hosu catches Duri smiling at him sometimes, soft and open, and every time he feels the way his ears colour. He thinks Minjun notices, too, sharp eyes always looking between Hosu and Duri whenever Hosu looks up, but he says nothing.

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When Hosu drains the last of his beer, Duri stands.

“Hyung’s got this round,” he announces, and heads off to the bar before Minjun or Hosu can say anything.

There’s silence, at first. Hosu plays with his empty glass, afraid to look up at Minjun and find him looking back.

“You need to tell him, Hosu-ah.”

The colour drains from Hosu’s face, and he looks up at Minjun, shocked.

“Wh-what?”

Minjun’s expression is gentle.

“You need to tell him.”

Hosu feels sick, nausea roiling in his belly in heavy waves. Is he really that obvious? Still, he tries for denial, but it sounds feeble even to his own ears.

“I...tell him what?”

Minjun just smiles softly.

“Tell him you love him.”

Hosu blinks and stares, speechless, and Minjun sighs.

“Look. It’s none of my business, but I see how you look at him. I don’t want to break his confidence, or embarrass you, and I can’t say too much without betraying his trust, but I’ll say this. Go home tonight and have a listen to his SoundCloud.”

“His SoundCloud?”

Minjun nods.

“Yeah. You know the name?”

“D-Day?”

Minjun smiles, nodding.

“That’s the one. Go listen. I think you’ll find it...enlightening. And maybe it’ll give you what you need to do the big brave thing and tell him how you feel.”

It’s the last thing Hosu expected. For Minjun to encourage his feelings for Duri, for him to tell him he should *tell Duri* rather than do the honourable thing and walk away, is something Hosu would never have imagined in a million years. It doesn’t make sense.

“Shouldn’t you be telling me to back off or something?”

Minjun laughs, dimples on full display.

“Maybe. But maybe not. Look, I’ve known hyung a very long time. He’s like a brother to me, I’d do anything for him. I’ve seen him go through relationships, I’ve seen him be miserable and I’ve seen him doing pretty well.”

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Minjun pauses, seems to consider his words. He looks Hosu in the eye then, expression intense, intense enough to make Hosu feel a little nervous all over again.

“I’ve never, in all the years I’ve known him, seen him look at anyone the way he looks at you. Ever. And he’s...different since you’ve been around. Lighter. Happier. You’re good for him. So just...find his SoundCloud. Then be brave. Talk to him.”

The words are heavy in the air, and before Hosu has the chance to grasp them, to really take them in and come up with some response, anything at all, Minjun’s gaze cuts away to somewhere behind Hosu’s shoulder and with a *hyung, let me help* he stands up. Hosu looks up to find Duri coming up behind him, hands full of drinks, drops of condensation glittering on his pale fingertips, and a searching look on his face.

Hosu smiles, feeling warm in the wake of Minjun’s unexpected encouragement, and watches as Duri’s eyes light up and he returns the smile with a beautiful one of his own.

Hosu is made of butterflies.

*

Hosu is in the back of a taxi home when he searches SoundCloud and finds Duri’s profile.

There are three older tracks, dated during what would have been Duri’s university days, then a long gap, followed by eight songs, all posted after March of this year.

After their reunion.

The darkness in the back of the taxi plays with the city lights as the car moves along Seoul’s streets, slashes of colour cutting through the deep indigo of night and painting Hosu’s skin in swathes of blue, purple and gold.

Hosu sits staring at the profile for long minutes, colours swirling in his chest and belly, nerves and hope, disbelief and guilt for everything he’s feeling that deep down he still believes he has no right to feel.

Amongst the titles, one stands out immediately, its name a beacon to Hosu’s eye. A song called First Love, uploaded some weeks after Hosu walked into the Centre on that fateful day in early March. Putting his air pods in, Hosu presses play with his heart in his mouth, a wild and uncontrollable tremble in his fingers as he closes his eyes and leans back into the unfamiliar car seat.

The opening of the song is simple, clean. Ocean waves with a piano chord overlaid, layers of sound that evoke emotion, evoke memory. Almost immediately, the low rumble of Duri’s voice fills his ears, stripped back and haunting.

Half a verse in, Hosu knows what this song is, and tears spring to his eyes.

It’s their story. Their love story from all those years ago, in all its haunting beauty and painful depth. He listens as Duri paints a picture of a deep connection, a true love thwarted by fate, then torn apart as the song reaches its heart wrenching crescendo. In the final chords, there is an unmistakable sense of hope, of looking forward.

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The tears stream down Hosu's face as he listens to the song. The impact of what they had and lost is there, laid bare for all the world to hear, raw and unvarnished. Hearing it, their story, *his* story, told in Duri's voice, unfiltered, brings it all back. The taxi driver calls out a concerned *are you alright, man* that Hosu brushes off with a wave and a nod through the flood of tears.

Clicking on the next song takes all he has left. It's the most recent song uploaded, a track titled *Burn the World*. It's an aggressive rap song with a slow beat and a melodic hook sung by someone whose voice Hosu doesn't recognise, and it seems to be about having an almost perfect life and wanting to burn it all for that one technicolour dream. It could be about anyone or anything, except for the one throwaway line hidden amidst the vocals that whispers about *the one who got away*, and Hosu knows, he *knows*, that this is about him, about *them*, about Duri being willing to give up everything he has to be with Hosu.

It's exhilarating, terrifying, all his hopes and fears confirmed, maybe, probably, and he feels overwhelmed and paralysed. It feels too vast to fit inside him, pushing at his ribcage, the bones cracking painfully. He needs to break it up, slice it into pieces and let someone else take some of it, to sit with him and listen to the stories Duri tells and tell him if he's reading into them, to tell him if the syllables stuttering inside his chest and causing all this pressure are really the syllables he thinks they are.

His hand is shaking when he picks up his phone, and he wraps the fingers of his other hand around it in a pointless effort to steady it.

Me

Yu-ah

can you meet me at home?

need you

pls

Yu

omw

be there in 20

Me

thx Yu

The taxi drops Hosu outside his building. It's started raining, the drops fat and warm on Hosu's skin as he makes his way towards his doorstep, and he's drenched in seconds. It's a pleasant kind of soaking, the summer heat dissipating in a gentle way so unlike the harshness of his building's air conditioning, and Hosu stops in the middle of the footpath to spread his arms and tilt his face up to the sky, revelling in the unseasonal downpour, relishing the way it feels like it's washing him clean right down to his bones.

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It's a welcome feeling that lifts some of the weight off his shoulders and makes his chest feel a little wider, a little looser. He licks raindrops off his lips and teeth as they land.

This is how Yujun finds him when he arrives ten minutes later, standing in the rain, soaked to the bone, unmoving. He drags Hosu bodily up into his building, shaking his head and mumbling about his hyung finally having lost his marbles.

Once inside Hosu's flat, Yujun simply takes his hand and leads him to the bathroom, flicking the switch and bathing the room in soft, warm light. He lets go of Hosu's wet fingers to reach into the shower and turn the water on.

"Shower, hyung. Warm up. I'm going to go get you dry clothes."

The smile he sends Hosu's way is gentle, encouraging. He reaches out and squeezes Hosu's arm briefly.

"We'll talk after, promise. Have to get you dry first, okay?"

Hosu nods dumbly.

"Kay."

With that, Yujun steps out of the bathroom, socked feet silent as he steps into the carpeted hallway. The door clicks softly shut behind him.

Hosu strips mechanically, dropping his wet clothes in the hamper and stepping into the shower. His head is swimming with Duri, with the songs he listened to, the words Duri put out into the world in his own voice, words he wrote with his own hands. Words of love and pain, of yearning and heartache, words that have Hosu's name spelled out in between the lines, between the syllables, written in Duri's heavy drawl, curved around Duri's tongue. And through it all, there's the spiked harshness of the *maybes*, the doubts, the *what ifs*.

And that is why he needs Yujun. To listen without bias, without hope, without a filter that says *please love me back*.

When Hosu comes into the living room, Yujun is sitting on the couch, a mug of hot tea between his palms, another on the coffee table in front of him. He looks relaxed, at home, and not for the first time, Hosu is grateful for Yujun's steady presence in his life.

He drops down on the couch, picking up the mug of tea and sipping it gratefully.

"Thanks Yu-ah. For coming. And, you know, the tea."

Yujun grins.

"Anytime, hyung. You know how I love tea."

He sobers, then, grin fading around the edges, wide eyes taking on a worried cast.

"Are you okay? What happened?"

Hosu smiles, but it's small, nervous.

"I need you to listen to something for me, Yu, and tell me what you think it means."

Yujun looks confused.

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"I mean, sure? What do you need me to listen to?"

"Duri's music. He's uploaded some songs to SoundCloud these past few months, and I just listened to some of them and...I don't want to colour your perception, I need your unbiased opinion. Will you listen for me?"

Yujun shrugs, nodding.

"Sure."

Hosu grabs his phone, bringing up the D-Day SoundCloud profile and connecting to the Bluetooth speaker sitting on the wall unit a few feet away.

He clicks on First Love, hitting play and dropping his phone on the couch beside him. A tangle of nerves sits heavily in his belly, curling and squirming, sending thick tentacles up into his throat. He watches Yujun as he listens to the opening chords. When Duri's low rumble kicks in, Yujun's eyebrows shoot up, but he bites his lip and keeps listening.

He listens attentively, shades of gentle surprise colouring his expression as the notes of the song ring through the small apartment.

When the last chords of the song fade out, he turns to Hosu.

"Oh my god, hyung!"

"What do you think?"

"What do I think? Holy crap is what I think! Are you kidding me?"

"I need you to be a bit more specific, Yu-ah."

"Fine. I'll be specific. That song is about you. That's your story, your *love* story, the way you told it to me, in his words. Which, by the way, wow. He's incredibly talented."

Hosu nods. The tentacles in his throat turn into butterflies, fluttering, but the weight in his belly remains.

"I want you to listen to another one then."

"Okay, hyung. Hit me."

Hosu plays Burn the World next. As the song progresses, Yujun's eyes grow wider and wider, mouth growing slack in obvious surprise as he darts wide-eyed, shocked looks at Hosu.

When the song finishes, he stares at Hosu, looking impressed.

"Damn, hyung!"

"What, Yu-ah?"

"Oh, come on! *Let's rewind time, back to the beginning, back to the days that left me in ruins, I'll burn this whole damn perfect world to ashes just for one more day with you? You know that's about you!*"

The butterflies in Hosu's throat flutter wildly, and he can't breathe.

"You think?" he chokes out through a mouthful of butterfly wings.

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“Uh, yeah, hyung. He’s not being subtle about it.”

All Hosu can do is stare. This is what he wanted, what he hoped for, exactly what he wanted to hear. He should be ecstatic, ebullient, happier than he’s ever been. And part of him is. Part of him is vibrating with excitement, desperate to call Duri and confess, to ask Duri to be with him, to run to his apartment and throw himself at Duri’s feet.

But another part of him is heartbroken. The guilt of wrecking Duri’s relationship weighs heavy, no matter what Jiyeong and Minjun say. He never wanted to be that person, the one who tore two people apart, who pushed their way in where they didn’t belong.

The guilt and ecstasy war inside him, and it must show on his face, because suddenly Yujun’s fingers wrap around Hosu’s palm.

“Hyung? Are you okay?”

Hosu swallows.

“I don’t know, Yu-ah.”

“Isn’t this...isn’t this what you wanted?”

“It is, yeah.”

“So...why do you look so sad?”

Tears well up, and Hosu wipes them away with his free hand.

“Cause it’s wrong, Yu. I never wanted to be this guy.”

“What guy?”

“The homewrecker guy.”

“The...hyung. Come on. Is that what you think you are?”

Hosu nods.

“Yeah. What else would you call this?”

Yujun hums but doesn’t answer the question. Instead, he holds up his hand.

“Gimme your phone, hyung.”

“What? Why?”

“We’re going to listen to the rest of his tracks. Then we’ll decide what kind of *guy* you really are. Gimme.”

Hosu unlocks his phone and hands it over. Yujun scans Duri’s track list, and his eyebrows shoot up again.

“Hyung, did you notice the dates on these songs?”

“I mean...yeah? Most of them are new?”

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“Yeah. Most of them. As in, he uploaded all of three songs when he started this profile, back in 2010. Then nothing for seven years. Then you meet again in, what? February? March? This year. And he’s uploaded *eight* songs since then, hyung. Eight! In four months!”

Hosu feels heat leach into his cheeks.

“Yeah. He was blocked. He told me he’d started writing again a little while ago.”

Yujun rolls his eyes.

“Yeah. Gee. I wonder why that could be.”

He scans the track list again, picking a song at random and hitting play.

The next half hour is a blur. Yujun plays all six of Duri’s recent songs that they haven’t yet heard. In them, Duri paints a picture of love. Love fading into something less, something blunt and lacking sparkle. Love that didn’t last the distance, that started strong but fizzled quickly. And love that’s endured for years, burning brightly, then lying dormant before flaring again.

He tells a story of love that tastes like honey and smells like fresh cut grass, love that feels like rain on overheated skin and sounds like joy and peace all wrapped up together. He weaves a tapestry full of colour, gentle pinks and vibrant blues, soft greens and variegated, exuberant yellows, elegant purples and strong, powerful reds.

He speaks of being powerless to stop smiling, of yearning for his fingertips to touch warm skin, of aching for the taste and scent of the person he loves who is always just out of reach, forbidden. He talks of guilt and anguish, of love and loss, of desire and being fully and wholly alive.

When the last chords ring out, Hosu has cried all the tears he has to cry, sitting quietly beside Yujun on the sofa.

“Hyung.”

Yujun’s fingers squeeze Hosu’s hand, and he looks across at his friend, eyes sore and swollen from all the crying he’s done.

Yujun’s voice is soft.

“You’re no homewrecker, Hosu-hyung. You’re his *home*.”

Hosu finds out he has tears left to cry after all.

*

Walking into the Centre for his shift the next day is surreal.

Hosu feels *loaded*, like all the secrets of the universe are stacked up below his ribs, secrets he can’t tell anyone, secrets he shouldn’t know about, secrets not meant for him. Duri didn’t exactly hide his SoundCloud profile from Hosu, but neither did he invite him to listen, so having done so feels a little like he trespassed, like he found Duri’s diary and read it without his knowledge. He feels ashamed and a little dirty, and it’s hard to know where to go from here.

Talk to him, Minjun and Jiyeong had said.

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You're his home, Yujun had told him.

But none of them are *here*, it's just Hosu, and Duri, and a lot of unsaid things between them, a lot of heavy air and heavier feelings, and Hosu is terrified.

Every shift, he promises himself to ask Duri out for a walk so he can talk to him, spill his confession in rambling syllables between them.

And every shift, he tries. Sometimes, Duri can't go for a walk, and Hosu is left to try again another day.

Sometimes, they walk, and Hosu is too afraid to open his mouth and let the words fall out.

Days pass, and Hosu still hasn't found the courage to put his cards on the table and tell Duri exactly how he feels. The nervous rolling in his belly is a permanent fixture now, never settling completely, and he spends much of his day feeling slightly nauseous.

He hovers around Duri, finds himself being clingy in the way he was when they first reconnected. Gone is the forced distance, and in its place are once again the starry-eyed looks and blushed cheeks of someone hopelessly in love.

For his part, Duri seems surprised at first, then smiley and pink cheeked once Hosu's clinginess doesn't diminish as the days go on.

Hosu doesn't mean to hover, doesn't mean to cling. He never did. But listening to Duri's songs has swept away any resistance he'd managed to build up against the hold Duri has over him, any chance of avoiding being swept into Duri's orbit.

And so, he hovers, with quiet touches and smiles, sometimes with cheerful chatter, enjoying just being near Duri, undemanding but *there*.

It's a Thursday when Juwon pops into the Centre and unwittingly puts Hosu on the spot.

"Hosu-ah! Just the man I wanted to see!"

Hosu, in his chair behind the reception desk, is caught off guard, staring wide-eyed at Juwon, who is grinning at him from over the counter, large hands splayed against the pale wood.

"Um...me, Juwon-ssi?"

Juwon chuckles.

"Yes, you! And what do I have to do to get you to call me hyung, hmm? I'm starting to think you don't like me!"

Hosu blinks. His skin prickles with nervousness, all the *secrets* he carries underneath his ribs pushing up until they choke him, and his voice cracks when he stutters a hasty reply.

"Um, no, I'm, I'm so sorry, I'm just, it's just..."

His stammering trails off when Juwon laughs and taps out a staccato rhythm on the counter with his long fingers.

"Joking, man, it's alright! I know we don't know each other very well yet so it might feel a bit awkward. Which is why we're going to change that! Do you have plans for Saturday night?"

"Um...I don't...I don't think so?"

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“Excellent. You do now! You’re coming around to our place for dinner. Seven pm, don’t be late. Any allergies I need to be aware of? Any special dietary requests?”

Dread washes over Hosu, burning his nerve endings and making his heart race. Dinner with Hosu and Duri. Watching Hosu and Duri interact, watching them be cosy and domestic at home together, touching, smiling, sharing inside jokes and history, seeing their lives entwine in a way he’s managed to pretend didn’t exist for the most part. It’s the absolute worst possible thing Hosu can imagine having to endure, and he’d rather die.

But Juwon is right there, and the word *no* feels like it isn’t an option, with the way Juwon has assumed his acceptance of the invite as implicit from the start. Shell shocked, Hosu just shakes his head.

“Excellent!” grins Juwon, once again drumming a sudden rat-tat-tada-tat rhythm on the counter, “It’s a date! Seven sharp, don’t forget! I’ll have Duri text you the address. See you then!”

And before Hosu can formulate a response, let alone an excuse to decline the invitation, Juwon is gone, disappearing down the hallway to the back of the Centre and Duri’s office.

*

Duri feels sick.

It’s mortifying, the thought of having dinner with Hosu and Juwon together, at the same time, with no barriers, nothing to stop him from spilling all his confused, tender feelings all over the dinner table. Having to somehow navigate an evening with them without giving himself away feels like an impossible task. It’s hard enough to hide how he feels from Hosu alone, and he’s pretty sure he’s done an awful job at it, that Hosu *knows*.

But to hide it from Juwon seems like a battle lost before it’s even started. How is he meant to hide the way he can’t help but blush around Hosu? The way he goes all soft and moon-eyed like a lovesick teenager whenever Hosu gets excited, or shy, or does just about anything? The way Duri feels shut out and insecure when Hosu is distant, or the way he blooms when Hosu hovers around him, holds his hand, smiles that pretty smile.

But stopping the evening from going ahead is harder than it sounds. How can he cancel the invitation without hurting Hosu’s feelings, and raising questions from Juwon? Sure, he could tell Juwon that Hosu can’t make it, but that doesn’t solve the problem of Hosu feeling hurt at being uninvited, and all it would do is postpone the inevitable, since Juwon would undoubtedly just reschedule. And if Juwon ever found out Duri had cancelled the dinner and told both him and Hosu a different excuse, there would be some pretty tough questions to answer.

So cancelling isn’t an option. He’s going to have to sit through this dinner and try his hardest not to let on how he’s feeling. Because as much as Duri knows he needs to figure out what he wants and do right by both of the men he loves, he isn’t ready yet, not by a long shot. It still feels too hard to tackle, too big, too risky.

Duri needs more time.

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Hosu *can't do this*.

He's standing outside Duri and Juwon's door, a bottle of wine in his hand and his heart in his teeth.

This dinner is a mistake. Hosu knows it, knows there is no way Juwon won't *know* after tonight, that there's no possible way for him to hide how he feels while watching Duri and Juwon together.

And yet, he's here. Because of Juwon, yes, but also because of Duri. Because the last thing he wants to do is hurt Duri's feelings by turning down a dinner invite, especially now, when he's stopped running, stopped trying to put distance between them. It would feel like betrayal, like a backwards step, and Hosu is done with that.

So, he's here. Terrified, but here, nonetheless. Convinced this is going to be hell and it will end badly for all of them, but forging ahead all the same.

Come what may, Hosu takes a deep breath and knocks on the apartment door.

*

The apartment is beautiful in a somewhat sterile, impersonal way.

Everywhere Hosu looks, there are sleek black surfaces offset by marble and glossy white, with chrome accents throughout. It's opulent, looking more like a five-star hotel than a home. The white leather couch is enormous, the grey, black and gold-accented throw cushions large and fluffy. It looks too nice to sit on, and Hosu swallows nervously as he takes in the space.

"Come on in, Hosu-ah!" bellows Juwon from the open-plan kitchen. Duri smiles softly as he takes the bottle of wine from Hosu. He looks uncomfortable and out of place in his black t-shirt and black jeans, the rips on the knees accentuating not just the knobiness of the joints, but the wrongness of his fit in this apartment, too.

"Thanks," he mumbles, and Hosu returns his smile, fingers twitching from the effort of not grabbing Duri's hand for anchorage.

Duri leads Hosu into the kitchen, where he rummages around in a drawer until he finds a corkscrew, since Hosu, not being much of a wine drinker, grabbed a cork-stoppered bottle in a vain hope that the higher-priced cork would equal quality.

Juwon smiles widely from his perch at the kitchen counter, alternately stirring a large pot of spicy-smelling stew and chopping up vegetables with a deft hand.

"How was your day?" he asks.

Hosu had spent his day changing his mind every five minutes about going, having frantic conversations with Jiyeong over the phone followed by Yujun in person, before agonising for two hours about what to wear and backing out of going multiple times at the last minute.

He can't tell Juwon that, though, so he settles for *it was busy, hyung, how was yours?*

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The *hyung* tastes bitter on his tongue, and Hosu swallows, eyes the bottle of wine that Duri has opened and set out to breathe before pouring, wishing it would breathe faster and he could have something to fill his mouth with that wasn't awkward words to hide forbidden secrets.

Juwon is a great host. He's relaxed and friendly, filling the quiet with cheerful banter that Duri supplements here and there. Hosu tries to participate but struggles to do more than answer Juwon's questions, never quite finding his equilibrium enough to add much of his own.

His eye keeps catching on Duri and everything Duri touches, everything he does, the way he breathes, moves, smiles, talks.

Duri's knobby fingers wrapped around a knife handle as he takes over the vegetable chopping from Juwon.

Duri's hands as he pours the wine, fingers brushing Hosu's as he hands him his glass, eyes boring into Hosu's over the wine as Juwon chats in the background.

Duri's shoulder under Juwon's hand as he reaches out and squeezes it in a familiar gesture, long fingers wrapping around and pulling at Duri's t-shirt, unnoticed by all but Hosu, who can't look away from the pale of Duri's skin where it stretches over his clavicle.

Duri's wide smile when Juwon tells a hilarious story about one of Minjun's disasters in the Centre's early days, the way he argues loudly in defense of his best friend before cutting his eyes to Hosu and colouring a soft, pretty pink when he finds Hosu already watching him.

It's horrible, wonderful, terrifying, awful, and Hosu's heart is racing in his chest, the mix of butterflies in his throat and lead in his belly threatening to make him sick. Every time Juwon and Duri touch, whether consciously or not, Hosu feels it like a stab in his ribcage, a sickening mix of jealousy, sadness and guilt. The casual way Juwon will brush fingertips over Duri's forearm to get his attention or reach over to brush away flour on Duri's shirt, tuck his hair behind his ear or straighten Duri's earring is so familiar, so thoughtless, it screams louder than anything else that Duri *belongs with Juwon*, and Hosu's knees feel like they might buckle if he has to endure this much longer.

He looks away, desperate to see something other than the carelessly heartbreaking display of *togetherness* that's playing out in front of him, makes a show of walking over to look at a painting on the living room wall.

"Ah, Hosu-ah, you haven't seen the apartment, have you? Yeobo, why don't you show him around?"

Yeobo.

Hosu bites his lip, shoulders tense as the endearment lands and makes its vicious way along his skin, scraping him raw with its tenderness.

"Um, sure. Hobah?"

Hosu does his best to plaster on a smile before turning to face Duri.

"Sounds great, hyung, let's go!"

The apartment is ridiculously large for two people. Hosu stares as Duri leads him down the hallway, opening door after door, cheeks pink and head ducking.

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He's ashamed of it, Hosu realises when Duri opens the door to the third bedroom, mumbling something about it being a guest room. Duri looks out of place and uncomfortable in every space they step into, hands in his pockets and unease dragging heavily on his frame.

"It's very nice, hyung," Hosu tries, a pathetic effort to get Duri to relax, but all he does is shrug, and Hosu doesn't have the stomach for more enthusiasm, can't bring himself to fake any more than he is already doing. He watches Duri as he leads the way further down the hallway, eyes glued to Duri's shoulder, his back, his bare forearms, his hands, and clenches his own hands into fists, aching with the need to reach out and *touch*, to grab Duri's hand, but afraid to do so *here*, in this space, *Juwon's* space.

Duri hesitates at the last door, hand on the doorhandle, eyes on Hosu, and Hosu understands. He smiles bravely, stupidly, nodding slightly as Duri opens the door and leads them into the master bedroom.

The room is large, the bed comfortable looking. It's tidy, like the rest of the apartment, only there is more of Duri and Juwon in here. The room smells like them, their respective scents mingled with the scent of fresh linen and shower gel. Duri picks up a damp towel off the bed and tosses it in the hamper, murmuring a *sorry, showered before you came*.

Hosu doesn't hear him. He stands in the middle of the room, frozen, eyes locked on the bed, images playing out in his head. He wants to move, to run, but his body won't listen. He's locked in his own personal slice of hell.

He sees Duri on the bed, Juwon bent over him, landing kisses on his face, neck, chest, the contrast of soft lips and coarse skin creating a trail of sensation along Duri's body that pulls sighs and whimpers from Duri's lips, sounds that Hosu *knows*, sounds he remembers still, to this day.

A flash and then it's Duri and Juwon, side by side, fingers tangled, bodies bare, sharing kisses and soft conversation, the room swathed in midnight blues as moonlight carves the lines of their bodies out of the night.

Another flash and it's Duri on his side, Juwon wrapped around his back, bare skin touching everywhere, legs entwined, fast asleep.

The images keep coming. The arch of Duri's neck, bared for Juwon's long fingers to wrap around it. The dimples at the base of Duri's spine, the ones Hosu used to trace with his own hands, but framed with Juwon's larger ones as he holds onto Duri's narrow hips, fingertips dimpling the skin in front of his sharp hipbones. Duri's hands tearing away at Juwon's clothes, twisting at the sheets, grabbing frantically at Juwon's skin, leaving marks.

It's an onslaught, and Hosu is powerless to stop it. He just stands there as his imagination rolls over him, using what he knows of Duri between the sheets and overlaying it cruelly with what he's seen of Juwon and Duri together.

The hopelessness and *wrongness* of his love for Duri comes crashing in on him all over again, the weight of it overwhelming, crushing him until his knees shake and his breath falters. It reaches into Hosu's chest, tears right through it, squeezes his insides in a tight fist until his heart spasms and his stomach lurches violently.

He doesn't remember moving, but suddenly he's standing by the bed, fingertips trailing along the neatly tucked sheets. His chest feels tight, so tight, it's hard to breathe, too hard, and it feels like the room is getting smaller, like the walls are pushing in on him. He feels dizzy, swaying on his feet.

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“Hobah? Hey, hey, shit, you alright?”

Duri is by his side, then, hands on his shoulders, and Hosu realises he’s shaking, knees knocking against the covers of the bed in front of him, tears streaming down his cheeks.

“I can’t do this.”

It comes out on a whisper, too quiet, too soft, and Duri doesn’t catch it, though maybe he *feels* it, by the way his hands squeeze a little tighter around Hosu’s shoulders.

“Hobah...”

Duri’s voice is soft, hesitant.

“I can’t, hyung. I can’t be here.”

He turns, then, forcing Duri to step back to give him room. The hopelessness is thick on Hosu’s tongue, leaching out into his syllables, dulling them and making them slip together in awkward ways.

He stares at Duri’s collar bones, bare above the neckline of his t-shirt.

“Hobah, please.”

Hosu looks up at Duri, then. He’s standing just steps away, close enough to touch, still, hands clenched together at his waist, tugging at his fingernails, a nervous habit he had even when they first met all those years ago.

“Can you manage without me, hyung?”

Hosu’s voice sounds shaky in his own ears, but it doesn’t break. Duri’s eyes widen.

“What?”

“The Centre. Do you have enough volunteers to manage without me?”

This isn’t how it was meant to go, not what Hosu planned. He was going to *confess* to Duri, to tell him how he felt. But here, in this room, where the ghost of Duri and Juwon’s love lingers in the air and settles on the skin, it’s impossible to remember why that seemed like a good idea, why he thought that that’s what Duri would want. All Hosu knows is he can’t stay, can’t be around Duri if he can’t have him, can’t watch him with Juwon.

He has to go.

Duri stares at him with wide eyes.

“Hobah, what? What are you talking about? Why would we...why would you...what do you mean?”

He looks scared, and it registers on some level, but most of Hosu is hurting too much to pay attention. He swallows hard around the lump in his throat. His voice comes out sounding as fragile as he feels, cracked and broken and wet with tears.

“Because I can’t do it anymore, I can’t watch you with him. I love you, hyung, I know you know that! And I tried, I really tried to just be your friend, but it hurts, you know? It hurts so much to love you and not have you, to know you go home to him, home to *this*! I know I have no right, and I’m so incredibly sorry, but I can’t help it. So I need to go!”

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Duri stares at him, mute, hands wringing at his waist, the rest of him frozen. There's so much conflict waging inside him, so much confusion, curling in tight coils around his insides, choking them off. He watches, horrified, stares as Hosu wipes harshly at his cheeks, then moves past him, body taut and tense as he steps towards the door. He turns back to Duri, and there's something pleading in his eyes, but he says nothing, just looks.

Duri can't find his voice. He wants to tell Hosu to stop, to wait, but the words die a bitter death on his tongue. How can he ask him to stay, to be with him, when he's not free? How can he do that to Hosu?

Minjun's voice rings in the back of Duri's mind. *You deserve to be happy, hyung. You're allowed to put yourself first.*

Hosu draws a shaky breath, mouth pressed into a thin line. He nods, small and tight, as if confirming something, eyes wet.

"Bye, hyung."

And then he's moving towards the door, and Duri's heart is breaking all over again.

Hosu is leaving. Duri just got him back and now he's going to lose him again, forever this time.

It's unbearable, and Duri can't let it happen again, can't stand by and watch him walk away.

"Hobah, please."

His voice does crack, the edges of it raw and sharp, the syllables strained. Hosu's step falters, but he keeps moving.

"Please, Hobah."

There's something desperate in Duri's tone, and Hosu does stop, this time. Turns.

"What, hyung?"

The hopelessness in his posture registers suddenly. It's unfamiliar, something Duri hasn't seen on Hosu before, and it's painful to watch. There's an ache in his chest, and his vision is blurry.

"Please don't go. Please don't."

"Why, hyung? Why would you want me to stay? What's here for me?"

The tears breach Duri's waterline, and he looks down at his hands.

"Me, Hobah. I'm here."

His voice is so soft Hosu almost doesn't hear it.

"You're not mine, hyung. You'll never be mine. Why would you want me to stay and watch you be someone else's when you know it *hurts*?"

Duri bites his lip, nodding down at his hands, still clenched *tighttighttight*. Hosu is right, and the taste of it is metallic on the back of Duri's tongue. It's not fair to ask him to be here, to stay, to *wait*. Wait for what? What does Duri have to offer him? His friendship? He already has that, and it's clearly not nearly enough.

You deserve to be happy. You're allowed to put yourself first.

Our Gentle Sin - a novel by Tara Lemana

Duri looks up and locks eyes with Hosu, tears wet on his cheeks. When he speaks, his voice is steady.

“You’re right, Hobah. It’s not fair to ask you. But I’m asking anyway. Please stay. Give me some time to figure things out. You know I love you too. You have to know that. But I need time. Please can you give me that?”

Hosu stares at him for a long time, trying to find the strength to give the answer he already knows he’s going to give.

Because if he leaves now, he loses Duri for sure, and all the hurt will have been pointless, a meaningless reopening of an old wound that he’ll spend the rest of his life trying to find ways to close again.

But if he stays, Duri’s words mean there’s a chance that he might not lose him. That maybe, just maybe, Duri will choose him, will be with him, and even though the thought makes him feel despicable, wrong, it’s too late, it’s far too late to walk away from this and prevent the hurt that’s already certain to be felt by all involved.

And if he stays and Duri doesn’t choose him? Then he’s no worse off than he is today, standing here, the pieces of his heart barely holding together within the confines of his ramshackle chest.

So he inhales, sucks all the courage he can into himself, fills each one of his cells with it.

Nods.

“Okay, hyung. Okay.”

Duri watches, eyes wide in disbelief as he processes Hosu’s words. Hosu walks towards him then, stops in front of him, just inches between them, and slowly drops his head on Duri’s shoulder. Breathes out, a long, shaky exhale, full of overwhelm.

Duri untangles his fingers and places a hand on the back of Hosu’s neck, palm to the gentle slope, the small bumps of the top of Hosu’s spine gentle undulations under his skin. The other hand drops, finds Hosu’s hand blindly, links their fingers and squeezes tightly, desperately.

“Thank you.”

It’s said in the merest whisper, close to Hosu’s ear, breath fanning across the skin, stirring goosebumps where it touches.

Duri hesitates, afraid to be greedy, to take too much, promise too much, but it’s Hosu, his *Hobah*, so he presses a soft kiss to the skin in the crook of Hosu’s neck.

The tension leaks out of Hosu gradually, slowly, the gentle touch soothing, grounding. He feels held, cared for, loved, standing here, in this close half-embrace with Duri, sharing each other’s air. He turns his face into the crook of Duri’s neck, breathes him in. The fingers of his free hand find Duri’s hip, pulling him closer still, his warmth bleeding into Hosu everywhere they touch.

It’s intimate. The tip of Hosu’s nose brushes Duri’s neck, *soft*, and Hosu wants to melt, to dissolve into Duri and disappear. Duri stands, holding Hosu close, shaken and overwhelmed, a lump in his throat and every part of him aching to cling onto Hosu and never let go.

The sounds of Juwon’s cheerful whistling drift down the hallway from the kitchen and burst the intimacy of their shared bubble. Hosu pulls away, reluctant. He looks at Duri, takes him in, the

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watery shine in his eyes, the small freckles across his nose, the pout in his lips, and for just one second, Hosu lets himself be selfish, lets himself *take*.

He leans in, slow, breath stalling in his throat, and kisses Duri. It's gentle, so soft, so familiar. He sucks Duri's bottom lip into his mouth, tastes the salt of Duri's tears as he swipes the tip of his tongue along the length of it. Duri clings tightly onto his arms, afraid to let go, and Hosu catches Duri's soft sob in his mouth, swallowing it down before pulling away again.

It hurts, all of it. The confession, the implications, the kiss, the pulling away. Duri's tears, Hosu's tears. It's excruciating.

"I'll go, okay? This is...I can't..."

Duri nods.

"Yeah. You go. I'll figure out what to tell him."

Hosu nods. Squeezes Duri's hands one last time, then lets go and turns to leave.

Duri watches him go, listens as his footsteps move down the hallway and the front door clicks quietly behind him. There's silence, then, and Duri drops heavily to the floor, back against the foot of the bed, knees pulled up and arms wrapped tightly around his belly. There's a deep, sharp ache in the depths of his stomach, and he can't stop the tears from flowing, head leaned back onto the bed.

He hears the door open softly, hears Juwon's soft *Yeobo?* followed by the warmth of a body taking its place beside him on the floor as Juwon sits down. The tears won't stop flowing, and Duri reaches up to angrily wipe them away.

"Duri?"

Juwon's voice is soft. It makes Duri's stomach convulse inside him and a sob escapes him.

"Did Hosu leave?"

Duri can't speak, the words getting stuck behind the lump in his throat, so he nods, the tears trailing down the sides of his cheeks and pooling in his ears.

"Okay."

It's silent then, for long minutes, as they sit there, side by side, Duri huddled on the floor, tears streaming down his face, Juwon a silent presence beside him. He doesn't reach out and touch Duri, and that's different, not like him.

"Duri?"

Juwon's tone is hesitant, this time, and Duri knows what's coming.

"You still love him, don't you?"

It's said with such tenderness, such kindness, such total lack of anger or hatred, it feels like a punch to the gut, and Duri swallows a sob, fighting for control. It takes everything he has not to crumble, to hold himself together, to be honest and forthright and face the consequences.

When he finally manages to speak, his voice sounds hoarse.

"All my life."

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He feels, more than he sees, Juwon's nod. There's a pause before he speaks again.

"And me? D'you still love me?"

Duri takes a shaky breath, wiping at the tears streaming down his cheeks. He nods.

"I do."

The pause is longer, this time.

"But you love him more, don't you? Differently?"

And that's the truth of it, the part that Duri's been struggling to accept. He does love Juwon, of course he does. But it's a gentle love, a love that ebbs and flows, a love that is just *okay*, that fills Duri up halfway, that sits just under the skin and leaves him always searching for something deeper, something more.

His love for Hosu is different. It burns fiercely, like it always did, lives in his bones and keeps him solid, warm, and *alive*. It makes Duri feel *full* and *complete* in a way he hasn't for a long time, filling all of his fissures and all of his empty spaces with deep connection, love and a sense of belonging. It feels like coming home.

The nod he gives Juwon is hidden behind his hands, but Juwon sees it anyway.

*

Chapter 13

It takes forty-five minutes and a shower for Duri to be calm enough to sit down and talk to Juwon properly.

He walks into the living room to find him on the couch with a mug of tea, staring into the brown liquid like it holds all the answers. The room is shadowed, morose, greys and blues hanging heavily among the circles of golden light cast by the few lights Juwon has left on. The scents of the dinner Juwon cooked, the meal that was never eaten, forgotten about amidst the swirl of emotions, hangs in the air, but the kitchen is bare and clean, the food cleared away into the fridge like evidence removed from a crime scene.

Duri stops, hesitant, socked feet shuffling on the hard floor, unsure whether he's still welcome in this space, too aware of the weight of what hangs between them. Juwon looks up, smile tight and tired, sadness pulling at its edges, staining the lines of his face in a way that makes Duri's insides ache even as relief flutters in his chest at the absence of visible anger.

"Come on, I won't bite."

He shuffles forward, then, a little relieved, a little apprehensive, his own weight dragging him down onto the couch next to his partner, the white leather huffing in protest as he lands, eyes firmly locked onto his hands with their messed-up cuticles.

"I'm so sorry, Juwon. I really thought we could just be friends. I really tried to just let it be that."

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“Did anything happen?”

“Like...no, Juwon. Nothing like that. He’s touchy. Cuddly. Always has been, still is. So we’re – touchy. Holding hands, that kind of thing. He kissed my neck once when he was drunk. That’s all.”

It’s quiet in the apartment, eerie, the kind of thick silence that doesn’t *make sense* in an apartment in the middle of a city as large as Seoul, the elevation combined with the double-glazed windows effectively cutting out all traffic noise before it reaches them, nothing but the gentle hum of the air conditioning intruding on the hush.

It’s the kind of quiet that presses heavily in on the ribcage and bows the neck, pressure too great for simple words to dispel.

“It never got physical, Juwon. I wouldn’t do that. But...”

“But?”

Duri bites the inside of his cheek, shame heavy in his gut.

“It’s emotional. That’s worse, isn’t it?”

Juwon’s nod is small, his voice smaller.

“Yeah, Du-ah, it is.”

Words fail Duri then. His cuticles sting, and he rubs them absently with his opposite hand.

“Tell me what happened.”

Duri shrinks a little, shrugs, diminished.

“Nothing. Everything. I think...I knew I had to be careful from the start. There was just...I don’t know, you’re friends with all your exes so I figured it could be done, you know? But with Hosu...there was just so much unfinished business. So I was really conscious of boundaries from the start. He was, too. Always respectful of you, always very aware that I was with you. Even in what we talked about. I mean, we only talked about our previous relationship to hash things out, never about a future or an *us* in the present tense, you know? Never, still haven’t. There’s him and there’s me, but never an *us*. I thought that as long as we kept the boundaries clear and kept it all platonic, we’d be safe, we could just be friends.”

He looks at Juwon, only to find him looking back.

“I guess that didn’t work though?”

Duri curls into himself, shame and pain mixing in his belly.

“No, I guess not. But I didn’t want to see it. Didn’t want to lose you, or him. Thought if I could just keep things the same, things could stay the same, I could be with you and have him as my best friend and it would work. So I just.... pretended. Not just to you. To me, too. And to him. I just denied I was feeling anything beyond friendship.”

Juwon hums.

“But he...he was in love with me, and I knew it. I could see it. He didn’t tell me, but he’s rubbish at hiding it. So...I knew, and I tried to stay friends anyway. Just kept right on denying everything, refusing to look at it, pretty much right up until he was standing in our bedroom telling me he loved

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me and that he was sorry, that he had to leave. Leave the Centre, leave me. And then I couldn't deny it anymore."

Juwon swallows. Nods, slow. The air conditioner hums.

"You're rubbish at hiding it too, you know. I didn't realise what I was seeing when you talked about him before, but it was really obvious when he was here tonight. He looks at you like you hung the stars, and you look at him like the sun shines out of his ass."

Duri winces.

"I'm so sorry, Juwon. I swear I wasn't deliberately hiding anything from you, I was just figuring myself out. I would have gotten there eventually."

Juwon shrugs.

"It doesn't matter, it wouldn't have been any easier finding out a different way. The end result is the same. You love someone else."

The tears well up again, burning harshly at the back of Duri's eyes, and he nods, the taste of guilt sour on his tongue.

Juwon rubs a hand over his face.

"Look, Du. I think...maybe if you loved us both the same, we could figure it out. But you don't. You love him more. You'll always love him more, and what we have will never live up to what you have with him. It will always fall short. And I deserve better than that. I deserve to have what you have with him. I deserve someone who looks at me the way you look at each other."

It hurts, but Duri can't deny it. There's no malice in Juwon's words, just simple truth, spoken plainly, and all Duri can do is nod again.

"So I think...I think we can't fix this. We can't fix us. You can't help how you feel, and I'm not about to sit here and try to convince you to love me more if the past three years haven't been enough to get you there."

The lump in Duri's throat feels like concrete.

"So that's it then?"

It's Juwon's turn to nod. He swallows hard, eyes sad and shiny, lashes glittery with tears Duri didn't see him shed.

"Yeah. I think it is, don't you?"

Duri sucks his lips between his teeth and bites them. His nod is small, resigned.

"I guess so."

Duri can't bear to look at Juwon, afraid the ache in his belly will force its way out and the guilt will spill everywhere, stain everything. He sits, hands twisting, Juwon mere inches away.

"Duri?"

The *yeah* he breathes is wobbly, a little askew.

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"I just...look, this really sucks, and I'm hurt, and sad, and I feel like shit. But...I know you didn't mean for any of this to happen, alright? And honestly, I don't think it's possible to stop yourself from falling in love with a person if they're meant for you anyway. I think...I think that this stuff happens for a reason. What we had...we had some good times, and I love you a lot. But if we're not meant to last forever, if what you have with him makes you happier, then maybe that means there's something better out there for me too. Someone who can make me as happy as he makes you. So I...I just, I don't hate you. I'd like to be friends, down the track."

Duri's throat feels tight, too tight, and swallowing hurts. It's more than he can do to respond in words, so he just nods, body tight and curled in on itself.

Juwon reaches out and squeezes Duri's hand, his smile sad and small, and the touch soothes more than his words could have done.

"I'm going to head to bed. Will you be okay?"

Duri nods again, clears his throat to try and force words past the tightness.

"Y-yeah. I'll sleep in the spare room tonight if that's okay? Text Jun in the morning?"

"Okay."

Juwon stands and walks quietly out of the room, footsteps fading down the hallway, leaving Duri with only the air conditioner for company, sitting alone in a lonely pool of light cast by the floor lamp next to the sofa.

The bedroom door clicks shut, and all of the air rushes out of Duri's lungs and he deflates against the couch cushions like his strings have been cut, all the strength disappearing from his frame.

He's never felt more drained in all his life.

*

The thing about guilt is that it's an anchor.

It weighs you down, drags you under until it seems you'll never come up again, until you feel like you're one with the ocean floor, merging with the sand and the muck, staring up at the faint glow of light above the surface of the water.

The split with Juwon is deeply painful, but there is a relief there, too, born from the release of the guilt that's been weighing Duri down for some time. There's a lightness to his frame that hasn't been there for months, a space and freedom in his breathing that makes him feel a little giddy even as he processes the sadness of the end of his relationship with Juwon.

It's a strange place to be, this weird juxtaposition of emotions, the happy and the sad, the light and the heavy.

The morning after everything changes, Duri knocks on Minjun's door feeling antsy, rudderless, a little mopey, unsure of exactly how he's supposed to feel in this moment, confused about the swirl of colours whirling inside him, blues and greens and yellows and bright, bright oranges, deep violets and indigos and that one luminous thread of pure, radiant gold.

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Minjun opens the door and pulls him into a wordless hug, large hands patting Duri's shoulder blades as he enfolds Duri's small frame in his larger one. He takes Duri's bag, then, leaving his friend to toe off his shoes, slip on the house slippers they still keep for Duri, and follow him into the kitchen.

The apartment still looks the same, cosy, just the odd trace of Seojun reminding Duri that he no longer lives here. It still feels like home, more than the fancy apartment he shared with Juwon ever did, and being here feels uncomplicated, easy.

Duri watches as Minjun makes two mugs of coffee, a small part of him on alert, ready to intervene should Minjun knock something over, then gratefully wrapping cold fingers around the mug handed to him once they're ready.

"So," says Minjun, once the first sips have bittered their tongues.

Duri nods vaguely at his coffee.

"So."

"Do you want to tell me what happened?"

Duri heaves a sigh, elbows propped up on the breakfast bench, the melamine unforgiving against his bony joints.

"Hobah came over for dinner."

Minjun raises an eyebrow at that, and Duri huffs a breathless kind of chuckle.

"I know, believe me, not my idea. Anyway. He came over. Juwon cooked. And it was fine at first, we were all just standing around talking, then Juwon said to show him the apartment. So I did. And then...we're standing in the bedroom, and he's staring at the bed, and he...I don't know what happened. He just looked really upset suddenly, like he was going to be sick. And next thing I know, he's telling me he can't do this, he can't be here and watch me with Juwon. He..."

Duri pauses, swallows hard, a rush of emotion filling his chest, thick and overwhelming, the fog of it seeping from his chest cavity down into his belly and up into his throat.

"He told me he loved me and it was too hard to watch, and that he had to go. Leave the centre, leave me."

"Oh shit."

"Yeah. I was standing there, Jun-ah, and I just felt like...I was losing him all over again, and suddenly nothing else mattered. No one else mattered. Just him. I couldn't lose him again."

"So what did you do?"

"I asked him to stay. I told him...I told him I felt the same, but I needed time, that I had to figure myself out, and I asked him to stay and wait for me. And he...he said he would. And then he kissed me, and he left."

"Shit."

"Yeah."

"And Juwon?"

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“He came in after Hobah left. And he knew. Asked me if I loved Hobah, I said yes. Asked me if I loved him, I said yes. Then he asked me if I loved Hobah more.”

Duri pauses. This is the part that had been hardest to admit to himself, and harder still to say out loud, the words crackling at the back of his throat, slashing harshly at the delicate tissue of his tongue, crashing mindlessly against his teeth.

“I said yes.”

It comes out small, quiet, a little shameful. Minjun doesn't comment, just waits for Duri to gather his threads and continue.

“After that...we talked. He asked what happened, I told him everything. Told him how sorry I was. He...he wasn't angry, was the thing. I think I would've been pissed, you know, if someone did that to me. Went and fell in love with someone else. But Juwon...he wasn't. He said you can't stop yourself from falling. Said that if I'd loved them both the same, we might've had a chance, but that because I love Hobah more, our relationship would always be second best, and he deserved better than that. And then he called it off.”

Minjun hums.

“Well, he's not wrong.”

“No.”

“Still sucks though, eh?”

“Yeah.”

“So now what?”

Duri rubs a hand across his face, swiping at the skin, rough. He's tired of everything, tired of stress, tired of being sad, tired of feeling guilty.

“I'd really just like to switch off for today, Jun-ah. Forget about everything for a while.”

Minjun grins, all teeth and dimples and crinkly golden dragon eyes.

“Well, then. Want to get drunk and eat greasy junk food and watch movies with me?”

Duri's return smile is relieved and genuine, gums out, no holds barred.

“Hell yeah, let's do it.”

“Sweet. You want pizza or chicken for breakfast?”

“How about both? Hyung'll pay. You order, I'll be right back.”

With that, he wanders into the spare room, his safe haven for now. He shuts the door behind himself softly and drops down onto the single bed, neatly made, a row of green and blue throw pillows lined up along the wall on one side, a touch of consideration for *aesthetics* that almost certainly had to have come from Seojun, considering Minjun's tendency to mismatch colours and focus on function over looks.

Duri unlocks his phone and taps on Hosu's contact, staring briefly at the contact picture, a widely smiling selfie he'd texted Duri just last week, one that makes something catch at the back of Duri's throat, Hosu's straight teeth flashing in his most exuberant grin, hair messy and skin glowy after

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dancing for hours. It's Hosu at his happiest, and every time Duri sees it, the butterflies kick up in his belly.

Hosu answers on the first ring.

"Hyung?"

"Hey, Hobah."

"Are you alright?"

"I'm fine, Hobah. I'm...I'm at Jun-ah's."

A pause.

"What? Why are you there?"

Duri sighs.

"Juwon and I broke up last night. I'm staying here for now."

"Oh shit...I'm sorry, hyung. I...shit..."

"It's okay, Hobah, it's not your fault. It was me, my doing. It was always going to come to this, I think, once we...once you and I met again."

There's a pause, a flustered breathing, before Hosu's small *really?*

"Yeah, really. You were always the one that got away, you know?"

A sharp intake of breath, a small *oh* on the other end of the line.

"You were mine, too."

Duri smiles, giddy even though this isn't news, that Hosu stood in front of him not twenty-four hours ago and confessed to loving him.

"Can I come see you, Hobah? Maybe...maybe tomorrow? So we can talk?"

"Yeah, yes please, hyung. I finish work at four, so maybe at five thirty?"

"Okay. Five thirty. Good. That's – that's great."

He's being awkward now, all his syllables askew and crooked with a weird mix of giddiness, nerves, relief, sadness and the last vestiges of guilt. Hosu's giggle is breathy down the phone, wobbly with his own emotion, and it sparks an answering snort in Duri.

"I'm sorry, I'm being weird. I'm...it's been kind of a wild twenty-four hours."

"It's okay, I know. Are you sure you're alright?"

"Yeah. Just...really tired. Relieved, too. And a lot of other things, I think. Got some processing to do still."

"Yeah, that's fair. It's a lot."

"Yeah, it is. Let's talk tomorrow, okay, Hobah? Let things settle for a little bit?"

"Yeah, 'course."

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“Okay. Um, Hobah?”

“Yeah?”

Words tumble through Duri’s head, *I love you, be with me, come over and hold me and never let me go*, but it’s all too much, too soon, so what he says instead is a quiet *thank you and I’ll see you tomorrow?* There’s a gentle softness in Hosu’s *see you tomorrow, hyung* that makes Duri feel seen and heard, and something loosens in his chest.

He ends the call with a smile teasing at the corners of his mouth.

*

Hosu is a bundle of nervous energy all throughout the next day. He pours himself into his dance classes, making his students work twice as hard until they are pouring with sweat and collapsing in heaps on the studio floor, begging for a break.

It doesn’t really help. Even when his legs are shaky and weak, the nervous energy still makes his fingers twitch, makes him talk too fast, words rushed, like letting his syllables slip out rapid-fire will make five thirty arrive more quickly.

The nerves had kicked in as soon as he saw Duri’s name pop up on his phone display the day before, amping up during their conversation, leaving him pacing his apartment after the call ended. He’d poured himself into cleaning his already clean apartment, then, the need to *move, to do something*, overriding everything else.

The day had dragged on from there, interminably slow until Hosu had called on Yujun to distract him and his friend had dragged Hosu out for a run, insisting that the pure torture of running would burn off all his excess energy and focus his mind elsewhere.

It had worked, for a while, and had probably been the reason Hosu had slept at all later that night rather than lying awake, burning with *what ifs*. But with the dawn came the same nervous energy, and it’s proving harder and harder to shift.

He doesn’t know what to expect, is the thing. Duri may have said he loves him, but it was a confession forced on him by circumstances, by the threat of Hosu leaving, dragged out of him before he was ready. And Hosu isn’t sure, doesn’t think it’s fair to hold Duri to words said under pressure. So the shape this conversation with Duri will take is uncertain, and it leaves him feeling vulnerable and on edge.

By the time Duri knocks on Hosu’s door, he’s vibrating out of his skin in his sparkly clean apartment, freshly showered and legs still wobbly from overuse.

Duri looks equally nervous, hands buried deep in his jeans pockets as he stands on Hosu’s doorstep, biting his bottom lip the way he does when he’s trying not to bite his fingernails. He looks good, like he made an effort, hair styled, earrings catching the light as it falls through Hosu’s open doorway. He looks dressed to impress, like he’s going on a date, fitted tee tucked into his jeans, burgundy jacket and boots stylish in a way Hosu hasn’t seen him wear often.

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There's a pink flush high on his cheeks, and his hands flex at his sides, *openclosedopenclosed*, betraying the depth of his jitters.

It's oddly soothing, to see him like this, nervous and all prettied up, like knowing they're both just as anxious as each other halves the stress.

"Hyung."

Hosu's voice sounds alien to his own ears, croaky and tight, and his smile feels shaky.

"Hey Hobah."

Duri smiles, too, and it's soft, like his eyes, and some of Hosu's jitteriness leaks out.

He steps aside to make way for Duri with a small *come in*, inhaling shakily as Duri steps past him into the small foyer and turns away to toe off his boots and place them beside Hosu's dress shoes on the shoe rack.

Hosu shuts the door and just stands there waiting, throat tight with anticipation, waiting for Duri to turn back, to speak, to break the tension.

And then Duri does turn, eyes lifting to Hosu's, and time freezes, drags out, lengthens into something interminable as Hosu stands and stares at the man he's loved since he was fifteen, the person he wants to spend the rest of his life with. He gets distracted so easily, watching Duri, captured by all the familiar little details about him, the precise shade of brown of his irises, the exact curve of his eyes, his nose, his Cupid's bow, the glint of his earring drawing the eye to the sharp line of his jaw, the tiny freckles where they decorate his skin like stars in the sky. He stares in awe, catalogues all the little details, sees the way Duri swallows, catches the twitch of his fingers by his sides, sees the pink tip of his tongue as it wets his lips in a nervous gesture.

It's Duri who breaks the moment, the eye contact, who drops his eyes resolutely to Hosu's sternum and shuffles forward, closer, into Hosu's space, slowly, allowing Hosu the chance to stop him, perhaps.

As if Hosu would.

Hosu lets him, watches him come closer, anticipates the moment Duri touches him, all his nerve endings alight. When Duri tangles their fingers together, it's hesitant, and Hosu squeezes, holds on tight, grateful for the lifeline.

Duri tucks himself up against Hosu's front, face buried in Hosu's neck, and Hosu's breath rushes out of him. The warmth of Duri, the solid shape of him pressed all along his body, the gentle touch of his breath fanning against the skin of his throat, it all feels like *coming home*.

They stand like that for minutes, hours, years maybe, Hosu isn't sure, he isn't counting as he drinks in the feel, the solidity, the *scent* of Duri, so close. It's rare for them to be reversed like this, Duri tucking into Hosu rather than the other way around, Duri always the hyung, always the protector despite his smaller form, and Hosu relishes the feel of it, feels his chest swell with gratitude as he pours love and care and calm into Duri through every place they touch.

The tension bleeds from them both as the minutes pass, until it's gone, until all that's left is calm and connection. All that really needs to be said is said in those moments, in the press of fingers, of limbs, in the lean of Hosu's head onto Duri's, the brush of Duri's eyelashes on the skin of Hosu's neck, in the kiss Hosu presses to Duri's temple.

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When they separate, it's to walk quietly into the living room, the fingers of one hand still tangled, reluctant to break the connection entirely.

Hosu leads Duri straight to the couch, dropping down and pulling Duri with him by their linked fingers until they're knee to knee, facing each other. Hosu knows they need to talk, but knowing where to start is another thing. He settles, for now, on a simple *are you okay, hyung?*

Duri nods, slow, thoughtful.

"Yeah, Hobah. Better now."

"Do you want to tell me what happened?"

A shrug.

"He came into the room after you left, and he already knew. He said...said he could tell by the way I looked at you, the way you looked at me."

"Shit. I knew it was a bad idea to come to dinner, I'm sorry. I should've stayed away."

Duri shakes his head.

"No, Hobah, you shouldn't have. We couldn't keep going the way we were, something had to give. It might've been better if I'd had the courage to face it head on and tell him without him having to see it for himself, but it was going to happen either way. I hate that he got hurt, I feel like shit about that, but dragging it out longer wouldn't have made it better."

"I guess that's true."

Duri shakes their linked fingers, and Hosu smiles.

"I'm so glad it's out, Hobah. So relieved."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Trying to hide from it all was so exhausting."

Hosu hums. He watches Duri's hands as he runs his thumb over the knuckles, up and down. It's meditative, soothing. It keeps him grounded enough to ask the question that's been on his mind since Duri called the previous day.

"So what happens now, hyung?"

There's a small huff of breath and a squeeze of Duri's fingers around Hosu's smaller hands.

"Now...I was hoping you might agree to go on a date with me, Hobah."

Hosu's heart does a little *rabbitrabbit* thing in his chest, and he can't stop himself from smiling as he looks up at Duri.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. If, you know, you still want to."

There's a sting behind his eyes, and Hosu swallows hard, determined not to spoil the moment with tears.

"I uh...yeah."

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Duri grins, eyes crinkling at the corners.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Cool.”

Hosu squeezes Duri’s fingers again as he leans sideways into the back of the couch.

“Yeah. Cool.”

They sit like that, quiet for a little while. Hosu keeps playing with Duri’s fingers as Duri watches on. Minutes pass before Duri speaks again.

“Hobah? Is it okay if...do you mind if we take things slow? I want to date you, be with you, but...”

Hosu watches as Duri pauses, hesitates, and he smiles, gentle.

“But you just got out of a relationship, and you don’t want to rush things.”

Duri nods, wordless.

“Of course we can, hyung. I think that’s probably smart.”

“Yeah? You don’t mind?”

And that’s a silly, silly question, and it makes Hosu feel horribly, awfully fond. He smiles, squeezes Duri’s fingers again.

“As of two days ago I thought I was going to have to watch you live the rest of your life with someone else, hyung. Dating you is already so much more than I ever thought I could have, I don’t care how slow we take it. We could date and just hold hands forever and I’d still be ecstatic.”

Duri laughs from deep in his chest, rumbly, all teeth and gums.

“Really? Cause I was kind of hoping to have mind-blowing sex with you at some point, I won’t lie.”

It may have been years since Hosu couldn’t talk about sex without feeling horribly self-conscious, but he still flushes at Duri’s brash statement, burying his face in the couch with a groan.

“Hyung! You can’t just say things like that if you want us to go slow!”

Duri’s laugh is contagious, the way it rolls out between them, and Hosu can’t contain a giggle.

“Sorry, sorry, I’ll behave.”

He sobers, then, tugging at Hosu’s hands to make him look up.

“Hey, but seriously. I really want to do this properly. I want to take you on actual dates, to hold your hand without worrying that I’m crossing a line, or that someone might see. I want to talk to you about anything we want without stressing whether it’s appropriately platonic. I want to kiss you, and hold you, and all the other stuff too. Okay?”

And yeah, that sounds really, really lovely, and Hosu smiles up at Duri with a swell of butterflies in his belly.

“I’d like that a lot.”

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Duri grins.

“Good. Want to watch a movie and cuddle?”

Hosu leans back and eyes Duri with an expression of mock outrage.

“Did you just ask me to Netflix and chill, hyung? After that speech?”

Duri rolls his eyes and calls him a brat, and Hosu laughs, and it all feels easy and familiar.

They watch Call Me by Your Name, curled up on Hosu’s couch, and Hosu drifts off with his head on Duri’s thigh and Duri’s long fingers carding through his hair. When he wakes up, the screen is black, the apartment dark, and Duri is asleep with his head on the back of the couch.

Hosu smiles and goes back to sleep, fingers once again tangled firmly with Duri’s.

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It’s surprisingly easy, the move into Seojun and Minjun’s flat, into the guest room, out of the home that was never really home but was always Juwon’s.

It’s a little sobering, really, how easy it is, how little there is to move. Clothes, notebooks, a few knickknacks. It’s sparse. It’s this, more than anything, that presses the knowledge that his existence in Juwon’s space was always temporary into Duri, into his skin, his flesh, bone deep.

Seojun is the unexpected boon.

In the year since he took Duri’s place in Minjun’s flat, the two have met a handful of times, mostly in passing, Seojun on his way in, Duri on his way out. Fleeting greetings of the formal variety, never progressing to anything more familiar.

It’s different now. Seojun in hyung-mode is a force of nature, weaponised nurture and affection, and Duri, ever the hyung, never the dongsaeng, is bamboozled. Suddenly, there is this tall, loud man in his space, bullying him into resting, into eating meals painstakingly hand-prepared, telling awful jokes, always the one to laugh loudest, squeaky and infectious.

He’s terribly odd and awfully endearing, and Duri finds he doesn’t hate being looked after.

It becomes a Sunday ritual for the two to cook meals, Duri handling most of the food prep, cutting vegetables while Seojun stews and boils and steams. Minjun drifts in and out, too clumsy to be trusted around the kitchen, but present at the kitchen island with a mug of tea or reading a book on the fringes.

It’s nice. It’s been a long time since Duri had a close friend other than Minjun, and Seojun is fast becoming one. It feels good, to have a hyung, someone more senior, and even though they’re not kids anymore, there’s a sense of security in it that Duri has missed.

And Hosu. Hosu slots in like he belongs, like he was always the missing piece, but maybe that’s because he was. He forms his own connections with both Minjun and Seojun in a way that surprises Duri.

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The first time Hosu visits the flat, Minjun welcomes him like an old friend, and from that moment on, that's how it is. The two form an instant bond, their own friendship that's entirely independent of Duri and Hosu's relationship. It makes an odd sense of pride well up in Duri, to see Hosu, once so shy and withdrawn, be this confident, strong person, solid in the knowledge of who he is, of his own worth independent of Duri.

And as for Seojun, Duri's introduction seems to tie the two closer together. While their contact has been sporadic since Yujun first introduced them, Hosu's self-proclaimed *Seoul dad* seems to feel their renewed connection is a sign from the universe and proclaims Hosu his favourite dongsaeng within minutes of Hosu's first visit to the flat.

Hosu is the one who laughs until he cries at Seojun's terrible puns, who shamelessly needles his hyung until he pays for all their drinks, but also the one who brings Seojun hot soup when he's sick or sends him terrible memes to cheer him up when Eunji is away, and happily lets Seojun take him clothes shopping instead.

Hosu is thoughtful and kind, and Seojun has a weakness for thoughtful, kind dongsaengs who allow themselves to be dragged around the city to try on clothes.

And so it goes. Seojun adopts both Duri and Hosu resolutely, and their lives are fuller for having him around.

Dating Hosu is a thing all its own.

They're so careful, still, so aware of their precarious start, of the risks of rolling from one relationship into another. It takes a little while, at first, for the realisation that this is *allowed* now to sink in, for the brief flashes of guilt to fade. They still come, at first, when one or the other reaches out for a hand to hold or to press soft, chaste kisses to cheeks or knuckles, eyes widening in shock before the *oh yeah* moment hits and wide, giddy smiles inevitably follow.

It's so delicate, those first weeks, all sweetness and gentleness, a phase guided by giddiness and a childlike sense of awe at being allowed to have this.

They do many of the same things they did before, coffee dates, walks, movies, drinks with friends. Only now, it's different, it's *known*, overtly so, that they are *together*, that hand holding is allowed, and kisses, too.

This is a new thing, for Duri, to move this slowly, but he feels the rightness of it in his bones. It doesn't matter that they already have a sexual history together, that they already know each other in that way. This is different, it's new even though it's old, it deserves to be nurtured and treated with care. And his chapter with Juwon deserves space to be carefully closed off before another is rushed into.

The *talking*, that isn't new. They do a lot of it, the way they always have, but it's more thoughtful now, careful, deliberate conversations to make sure every facet of what was, what is, and what they would like to be is talked through.

It goes like this, learning each other.

It's slow and careful, exploring all the edges, with honest words and cautious hands.

"Why weren't you happy?" Hosu asks one Saturday during their lunch break, sprawled out on the grass in their favourite spot by the swings, fingers linked between their hips.

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“Because,” Duri says, “I always felt just a little bit *hollow*. Like there was something missing. We were mostly good together, but it always felt like it fell just short of being great, you know? I could never quite figure out what it was, what was missing. I couldn’t write, and I suppose that was part of it, but then again, that may have been a symptom rather than a cause.”

Hosu’s thumb caresses the soft skin on the back of Duri’s hand.

“And now?”

“Now...I’m full, Hobah. I feel like I’m bursting, like there’s so much inside me it’s going to split me open. I can’t stop writing, I’m so full of ideas for the Centre, and you...I’m so happy with you. I feel like...like I got scrambled somewhere along the way, and you helped me unscramble myself. It’s not that I was broken, or incomplete, without you, more like you just helped me figure out where my pieces go.”

Hosu smiles at the rabbit-shaped cloud above them.

“What about your parents?” asks Duri, one Tuesday night as the actors in the K drama they had meant to watch stare at each other in infinite suspense, frozen when Hosu paused the show so they could talk.

“What about them?” asks Hosu.

“Do you want them to know? About you? About us?”

A sigh, heavy. Duri’s hand, large and warm on his thigh.

“I do and I don’t. I’m terrified of how they’ll react. I just...I want their approval so badly, you know? There’s still this part of me that wants them to meet you, to see what I see, how amazing you are. I want them to see us together and realise how great we are together, how happy we are, how wrong they were. I want them to be happy that I’m happy. I want my dad to like you and to say he’s sorry for all the shit he used to say. But I know I won’t get that. Ever. So I can’t figure out whether it’d be better to tell them and just let things play out, knowing at least I will have been honest about who I am, or not tell them and avoid their disapproval.”

Duri hums.

“I get that. If you don’t tell them though, won’t they keep pressuring you to either get a girlfriend or get back with your ex?”

Hosu grimaces.

“Probably, yeah. Which means I can’t really avoid their disappointment, no matter what I do.”

Duri leans in and kisses Hosu’s cheek, then, his broad palm shifting to the back of Hosu’s neck, and Hosu feels anchored.

“Does it bother you?” Hosu asks one night in a taxi on their way home after drinks with their friends.

“Does what bother me?” Duri frowns.

“That Yujun and I used to...you know,” Hosu says, the back of his neck colouring.

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“Used to what, Hobah? Used to screw?”

He smirks as he says it, and Hosu’s ears burn. He smacks Duri’s chest with the back of his hand.

“Don’t be crass, hyung. And yeah, that.”

Duri’s grin is followed by a shrug, light and unconcerned.

“Should it?”

“I don’t know. Does it?”

“No. You chose me, Hobah, and I trust you. And I see how you look at him. It’s not how you look at me. I believe you when you say it was just a friends with benefits thing.”

Hosu kisses Duri’s knuckles with a smile and goes back to staring out the window.

“What about kids?” asks Duri on a Friday over dinner.

“What about them?”

Hosu’s lips and tongue sting with the spice from his buldak, and he sucks air into his mouth in a poor effort to cool it, cheese piled high on top of his meal to dull the heat. Duri wordlessly tops up his glass of water before answering.

“Do you want them?”

Hosu shrugs.

“I don’t really mind one way or another. I’ve never felt any particular urge to be a dad, but also never hated the idea. I think I’ll be happy either way.”

He tilts his head, narrowing his eyes a little as he looks at Duri.

“Do you?”

Duri’s headshake is resolute.

“No, I don’t. I can’t fathom myself as a dad. It’s just never been a thing that’s registered as an option, you know? I’ve known I was gay for longer than I can remember, long before the thought of kids was a thing that was relevant. So it’s just never been something I pictured in my life.”

Hosu hums, thoughtful.

“There’s always adoption, you know. Being gay doesn’t mean you can’t be a dad.”

Duri nods.

“Oh, I know that. But let’s face it, it’s not like gay couples are top of the wait list to be assigned kids in Korea. And it’s expensive. So I guess I just always ruled it out, and now the idea is just weird.”

Hosu swallows his mouthful, eyes watery from the spice.

“Fair enough. Just, you know, tell me if you ever change your mind? Because honestly, I’ll be happy either way.”

Duri smiles, soft and crinkly eyed at the easy implication of *forever* infused in Hosu’s statement.

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“It was Jun-ah, you know.”

They're sitting on the grass at Cheonggyecheon, people watching and drinking coffee, backs against the wall. Hosu's legs are folded, Duri's splayed out on the grass, a graceless V in denim.

He frowns at Hosu's statement.

“What was?”

“He gave me the guts to tell you. That night we went for drinks, the day you first introduced us. I was so scared he'd hate me, and instead he told me to listen to your SoundCloud and to tell you how I felt. Said I was good for you.”

Duri stares.

“Shit, seriously?”

Hosu nods, smiling.

“Yeah. I probably never would've done it if it wasn't for him and Yujunie.”

“Yu? What did he do?”

“He came over when I was freaking out about your songs and listened. Told me I wasn't imagining things. Then talked me out of hating myself.”

It's not the first time Hosu has talked about hating himself for falling for Duri when he was with someone. There's an ache in Duri's chest that flares up every time he mentions it, and he laces their fingers together in a wordless show of support. Hosu squeezes the joints with a small smile.

“I know. I'm working on it.”

Duri lifts their linked hands, kisses Hosu's delicate knuckles, the skin tanned and golden against his own pale fingers.

“Did you like my songs?”, he asks, in lieu of verbal reassurance.

The pink on Hosu's cheeks is pretty.

“Yeah. I loved them.”

Duri smiles and looks away, eyes drifting to the water.

“Good. They were all for you.”

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“I've got a date this Saturday,” Minjun announces. He's staring into his whisky glass as Duri sprawls on the couch in his sweatpants and hoodie, pizza boxes and stray slices of pizza congealing on the coffee table in front of them.

It's a random Tuesday night. Seojun is out with Eunji, and Hosu has a shift at the Centre.

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Duri's eyebrows shoot up. There hasn't been anyone in Minjun's life since Jie-ah, all those years ago, no one who lasted long enough to mention, in any case.

"Oh shit, really?"

Minjun nods, eyes firmly on the empty glass in his hand.

"Yeah. Fourth date."

"No way!"

Duri eyes his friend. There's pink dusted on his cheeks, a shyness in his smile as he avoids eye contact.

Duri stares, grinning widely.

"You like her!"

Minjun's smile broadens and his dimples deepen.

"Yeah. She's...she's really something, hyung."

"Wow, okay! So, tell me about her then!"

"She's...she's smart, you know? She's really smart and just so...hyung, she's amazing. She got a PhD in hydrology. You know what she did with it? She spent three years in Africa on this project that helps get clean drinking water into poor areas. Saw some really horrid stuff while she was there, too."

Minjun is starry eyed and soft, moony, and Duri feels a warmth well up for his best friend.

"She sounds pretty amazing, Jun-ah. What's her name?"

"Sora. Ho Sora." He looks up, then, expression vulnerable.

"I really like her, hyung. I want this to work so bad."

Duri smiles. Nods. Thinks about telling Minjun that it will, of course it will, but then thinks better of it. Empty platitudes don't suit them.

"How'd you meet her?" he asks instead.

"At work. She's lecturing in Hydrology. She knows MoonSeo sunbae and came in to visit him while I was there. I kind of freaked because she's so pretty, and I dropped all my papers and looked like an idiot. But she just – she just smiled, hyung, and helped me pick everything up. She was just so calm, she made me feel calm too. She didn't do that giggling thing that I hate, that vapid flirty thing that girls do that makes me so nervous. She was just steady and calm and gentle and by the time we'd picked up all my stuff I'd stopped stuttering and making a fool of myself, and we were just talking. It was really nice. She made me feel brave enough to ask her on a date."

Duri feels all warm and fuzzy, the alcohol mixing with a quiet joy for his friend, swirling in his belly next to the relief at the resolution of his own situation.

"That's pretty great, Jun-ah."

Minjun nods.

"Yeah."

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“So four dates, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s pretty significant.”

Minjun nods. Swallows hard.

“Yeah. I uh. I might not come home on Saturday night if it goes well.”

Duri grins.

“Alright, Jun-ah.”

It’s quiet then, for a while, both of them lost in their own thoughts. The fridge whirs in the kitchen, a constant accompaniment to the soundtrack of the rom-com still playing, long-forgotten, in the background.

“What’s it like, hyung?”

Duri doesn’t ask what Minjun means.

He doesn’t need to.

“It’s like...like I had all these cracks in me. And these bits that were out of order, muddled up. And I never knew what was meant to go where, how it was all meant to fit together. How to mend the cracks. Til Hobah came along. And then it was just...like, he didn’t even have to *do anything*, Jun-ah. He just had to be there. Be himself. And things just – filled up. Healed. Like...not like I was incomplete before, but like...like I just didn’t know how to put myself together right. Put all my pieces in the right order. And he did. He just...he makes me feel calm, too. Peaceful. Like I don’t have to keep pushing and trying so hard all the time, like it’s *okay* to slow down and rest. Like it’s okay to just be me.”

Minjun watches, thoughtful. Nods.

“Like you’re home.”

He says it quietly, a low rumble, but not a question.

“Yeah.”

*

Juwon keeps his word and stays away from the Centre. Minjun makes sure other volunteers are slotted into his shifts, and he stays in the background as a silent partner.

It makes Duri feel bad, makes him feel like he stole more from Juwon than their relationship, but Minjun reminds him that this was their agreement, the agreement that had been in place since the very start.

Weeks pass, and slowly, little by little, things shift.

There’s a feeling of closure when one late September afternoon, around two months after his split with Juwon, Duri comes across him at the café near the Centre, and all he feels is warmth and

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friendship. There's only warmth in Juwon's smile, too, no trace of malice or anger, and something shifts in Duri's chest. Juwon throws him a small wave, and Duri returns the gesture.

It's not much, a small interaction across a crowded room, no conversation, a tiny thing. But it's enough to feel the closing of their romantic chapter, to sense the absence of guilt or lingering romantic feelings, for Duri, at least.

The dam breaks, after that day. All the things about Hosu he's always found beautiful, all the little features he always stares at, the painful awareness of just how *sexy* Hosu is, are suddenly *right there*, spilling over, clamouring for attention. All the things pushed down, til now, repressed in favour of space to breathe, to process, to end one chapter before beginning the next, are suddenly *loud* and unavoidable.

Closing the door on his time with Juwon opens the door to being fully present with Hosu, and the onslaught is immediate. Duri is suddenly hyper-aware of everything about Hosu that drives him crazy. The way he moves, the way his fingertips trail absently along the skin of Duri's forearm when they watch movies together, the way he presses into Duri's space, the way he wets his lips without realising it, anytime he looks at Duri's mouth.

Every interaction is suddenly torture, and Duri isn't sure how much longer he can last.

Hosu feels it, too, the shift in the air between them. Sees the way Duri looks at him, the dark eyes, the long stares. Knows the pressure he's adding to the equation with every touch, every look, every gesture.

He likes it. Plays on it, teases Duri endlessly, a little in awe of the power he has over him. He revels in the way Duri flushes when he teases and smirks, when he lifts his shirt to *innocently* flash a toned stomach or lets his touches stray into sensitive areas while feigning a complete lack of awareness of the movement of his fingers. He wants to see what it's going to take to make Duri break, *wants* him to break, despite being willing to wait forever if that's what it takes.

In the end, Duri's breaking point comes during a night out drinking and dancing with Minjun, Seojun and Yujun.

It's been three months of dates and hand holding, of cuddling on the couch watching movies, of playing arcade games out of nostalgia and laughing til they cry, of walks and shared coffees. Three months, also, of cab rides shared after one too many drinks, Hosu pressed close, face buried in the skin of Duri's neck, Duri's fists balled up tight and breath quickening. Of tangled fingers, heavy looks, aborted kisses that almost, *almost*, get out of hand.

It's been one month of Hosu's relentless teasing of Duri, too, and a marked rise in the number of cold showers Duri has, trying and failing to expel the heat that lives under his skin, wash it down the drain with the soap and the day's stress and dirt.

Duri has been pressed close to a flirty, sexy Hosu all night, moving the way he does, all sinful body rolls and heavy looks, looking the way he does, all dark eyes and straight teeth and knowing smirks. He's riled up and sweaty and electric from all of Hosu's teasing, and he's *so close*, he's *right there*, all Duri's for the taking, and all that's stopping him is himself, and suddenly he doesn't want to stop anymore.

Hosu's breath hitches when Duri steps right into his space and grabs his shirt, pulling him right in close, toe to toe in the middle of the dancefloor, no longer moving, an island in the middle of an undulating sea of bodies.

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And suddenly, Hosu is being kissed.

It's breathless, sinuous, a deep sweep of tongue and a firm press of slick lips. Hosu melts, a familiar heat searing his bones, burning them to ashes where he stands. It's both just as he remembers it and completely different, the anticipation and years of quiet, dormant longing for something he tried so hard to forget making it so much better, so much *more*.

Duri's fingers are in his hair, tugging and massaging, and Hosu can't feel his legs, has to grab onto Duri's hips to steady himself. He forgets where he is, forgets *who* he is, deaf and blind to all but *this*, Duri, Duri's mouth, his hands, the warmth of him, his hard body pressed along the length of Hosu's, the tingles along Hosu's spine and the fire in every place they touch.

All the kisses they've shared in the past three months suddenly feel like foreplay for this moment, this kiss. There's nothing gentle about it, nothing innocent. There's no soft welcome, no gentle exploration.

It's an onslaught, a searing away of everything that isn't *this, here, now*, all the hurt that's been and gone, all the relationships that didn't work out, all the doubt and fear that swirled around them in the past.

This kiss, it's a forest fire, cleansing, renewing. It burns them both from the inside out.

There's no air, Duri takes it all, voracious as he tastes Hosu, as he licks into his mouth and *claims*, and Hosu is dizzy, breath coming in fast, shallow gasps that Duri swallows.

Hosu's hands wander, fingertips finding the skin on the small of Duri's back, slick with the heat of the club, the dancing, their kiss. The touch anchors him, as it always does, the feel of Duri's skin against his palms enlivening, waking him up. He presses forward, suddenly greedy for more, licking into Duri's mouth, the taste of the moan he finds there sweet and salty on his tongue.

The hand on Hosu's shirt is suddenly under it, roaming over his belly, muscles jumping under the touch, then upwards, *higher*, until a thumb flicks over Hosu's right nipple and Hosu groans into Duri's mouth, electricity radiating outwards from the small bud under Duri's fingertip.

Then, suddenly, Minjun is there, and the bubble bursts.

"Um, hyung? Hosu-ah? You might want to take this elsewhere?"

Reality crashes in, and Hosu flushes, heat washing over his cheeks, his ears, the back of his neck. Duri's eyes on him are still dark and his chest is heaving, but he too is darting glances around the club, pink high on his cheeks.

Hosu grabs Duri's hand, then. Tugs. Smiles at Minjun, cheeks still hot.

"Thanks, Jun-ah. We're going to go. Don't wait up for hyung."

Minjun grins, all teeth and dimples.

"Sure, Su-ah. You guys have fun. Don't do anything I wouldn't do!"

"Oh, trust me, Jun-ah, we'll do *only* things you wouldn't do," Duri shoots back.

Yujun and Seojun's cackles follow them as Hosu drags Duri away through the club and out towards the exit.

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The train ride home feels like a time warp, back to Gwangju, back to two lovesick schoolboys pressed close on faux leather seats, backpacks and jackets on laps to hide linked fingers while nerves danced shivery trails along skin.

There's no backpack now, and Hosu's hand is on Duri's thigh, warm, real, not like the memory that's haunted him for a decade, rather solid, love wrapped in bones and sinew and warm flesh, encased in soft, smooth skin. Duri is still biting his lip to hold back, restrained in public, still a little untethered, because this is still Seoul, South Korea, and there are still too many people on the train, too much judgment in the air.

The longing boiling in his veins cools only slightly by the time they reach Hosu's apartment, just enough to make his breath come a little more gracefully, to make the wait a little less torturous, enough to stop him reaching out and *taking*, but not enough to stop his fingers twitching, greedy but self-aware.

The tumble into Hosu's apartment door is a mess of limbs and laughter, a flurry of fingers tugging at fabric, at other fingers, some long and knobby, others slender, smaller, all of them shuddery with anticipation, unhinged. It's a giggly, trembly affair, stumbling out of shoes, kisses exchanged in flurries, like cherry blossom petals whipped into a frenzy by a recalcitrant spring breeze, swirling, stealing the air from their lungs so everything feels light and floaty.

It's a heady run to Hosu's bedroom, jackets and shirts dropped along the way, laughing all the while, the sound of it caught against teeth, passed back and forth, a breathless echo that reverberates in the chest and sets the heart to racing.

It's a headlong stumble onto Hosu's bed, a tangle of legs, of warm skin on warm skin.

It's bellies and chests fizzing with want.

It's whole galaxies in Hosu's eyes.

It's tears like glitter over smiles.

It's wet lashes that cling to cheeks and salt against the tip of Duri's tongue where it trails along Hosu's neck.

It's a sting on the back of Duri's shoulders where Hosu's nails dig in.

It's a muddle of breathless *I love yous* and *I can't believe you're mines*.

It's not the same, but it's so familiar, the taste of Duri, of Hosu, the scent of them both, the burning under the skin that won't die, that just flares higher with every touch, every shaky breath, every broken moan. The tone of Hosu's voice might be deeper, more resonant, but the way he breathes *hyung* into Duri's mouth is the same, *the same*, and it cracks Duri right open, lays his foundations bare, exposed.

And it's Hosu, just like it always was, just like it always will be, who pours into the cracks, who fills his spaces, all of them, all the parts that Duri could never quite forget, fills them with salt and laughter, with taste and scent, with joy and love and a profound, sonorous peace.

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And Hosu, Hosu smiles. Bare, open, all his bones and all his innermost workings out on display, nothing to hide, all of it for Duri to take and to hold, to keep and to treasure, to tuck under his sternum and carry it there for all eternity.

It's an exploration, discovery of territory once won, then lost, hills and valleys conquered long ago but changed now, different with age, curves where there were straight lines before, muscle and sinew where once softness reigned. Duri's hands travel the lean curve of Hosu's shoulder, the soft dip of his waist, a round cheek to where it fades into the hard-and-soft blend of his muscular thigh.

They linger on the softest parts, the barely-there roundness on the inside of his upper thigh, the hint of fat just below his belly button. It's sparse, softness, on the dancer's frame, and Duri relishes the tiny amounts of it he finds, leans closer to kiss every soft little mound, to suck on it sharply until the blood rushes to the skin, relishing in the marks he leaves as Hosu melts in a jumble of breathless *ah ah aaahs*.

And for all the closeness, for all the grasping touch, for all the kisses, Hosu can't get close enough, aches to press closer, to melt into Duri, skin on skin, hands grabbing, tugging, pulling on every part of Duri he can reach to bring him nearer, desperate and frustrated because it's *never enough*, the litany of *hyungpleasepleasehyung* tumbling on shortened, rushed breaths.

And Duri catches it, catches him, fits them together with a gentle *hush Hobah, hyung's got you,* and in the next breath there's relief because *there it is, there they are*, Duri and Hobah, Hosu and Duri, and everything is right again, all the puzzle pieces in place.

It's slow and connected, then, not the wild and breathless thing they started on the club dancefloor, all the reckless abandon replaced with a deep, aching need to reconnect, to re-tie their threads together in the only way they haven't yet, to claim and be claimed once and for all.

It's hushed and steady, teary and drawn out, building in increments, higher and higher, until the world drops out from underneath them and they're falling, clinging to each other and catching each other's cries to tuck them behind eager teeth.

The come down is not so different than the build-up, neither moving, Duri's right hand tangled with Hosu's left, pulled tight against their chests, the rapid *da dum da dum da dum* of Hosu's heart reverberating through his knuckles. Hosu's legs slip down from around Duri's waist, but there's not far to go as his ankles simply tuck themselves in behind Duri's knees like they belong there.

The hand that strokes the small of Duri's back feels nice, grounding, and the satisfied, languorous way Hosu kisses him is bliss, the taste of him *just right*, like Hosu, like love, like hope.

Like *home*.

The fingers of Duri's left hand find their way into Hosu's hair, trailing, exploring, caressing, and Hosu hums, smiles into their kisses, breath still short, heart still jittery.

They stay there, close, indulgent in the luxury of endless, unhurried kisses, even as the sweat cools and skin begins to pebble, even as Duri's hips slip and they disconnect, giggling into each other's mouths.

Only when Hosu starts to shiver in earnest that Duri pulls away, the urge to look after him stronger than the urge to never move, never stop kissing and just stay in their bubble forever. He's gentle with it, fingertips and words softly reassuring to Hosu's pouted objections, and it's brief.

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Hosu trembles as Duri cleans them with gentle hands and low rumbles of *shhh Hobah hyung's got you and lay still now almost done.*

Hosu doesn't mean to be needy, tries to hold back, but he's overwhelmed, floaty, and he needs Duri to stay close, to keep touching, not to let go.

Duri stays.

They curl up close under the covers, skin to skin, the shivers abating, Hosu's nerves settling into a tender quiet between them, Duri's fingertips trailing mindless paths along Hosu's bare shoulder and upper arm, Hosu's face tucked safely into his chest, breath pebbling Duri's skin as he speaks.

"That...that was a first for me."

Duri frowns, face pressed into Hosu's hair.

"What do you mean? I thought you and Yujun...and your ex?"

Hosu shakes his head, cheek brushing against Duri's skin, damp and sticking.

"Hm, yeah, course. But I never..."

He stops, huffs, a frustrated noise. Duri waits, fingers gentle as he squeezes Hosu's arm. Hosu lifts up, palm pressed to Duri's chest, looks Duri in the eye, jaw set.

"Not the *what*, the *why*. I...I love Yujun, he's my friend. I love him, but not...not like that. That was...just bodies, taking care of each other. Distraction, sometimes, or comfort. And Iseul...well. That was more about what I thought I was supposed to do, what was *expected*. I care about them both, a lot. But this, with you, it's different. I love you, hyung. I love you so much it hurts, and I've never been with someone I loved like that. I've never done this out of love. It's completely different."

There's a tightness in Duri's throat and bubbles in his chest as he looks at the beautiful, gentle person in his arms, this incredible man who's held his heart since they were just boys, and all the love in his body feels like it's bursting out of him, sparking along his skin in electric currents. He can't help the tears that sting behind his eyes, or the smile that comes unbidden, or the blush that rises to his cheeks.

"It is, Hobah, it's completely different. For me, too."

"Really? But you loved Juwon?"

"I did. But not like this, Hobah. Not the way I love you. It's always been you. All my life."

They don't talk anymore, after that. Words dissolve into more kisses, into fingertips trailing shivery heat onto slick skin until the heat burrows down and fans the forest fire razing just below the surface. It's drawn out, this time, playful, heat and need and the fizziness of shared joy bubbling between them.

They drift off to sleep still kissing, and the last conscious thought Duri has as he tugs Hosu closer is that he's never been happier.

He's finally home.

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Epilogue

Seoul, March 2018

Spring slips into Seoul like a lover sneaking into a bedroom window, chest tight with held breaths and fingers shaking where they brush cheeks and cold-chapped lips.

The winter months have been good to Duri and Hosu, the cold full of reasons to cling, to hold close to that which was lost and so unexpectedly, unfathomably, regained.

It's been a season of rediscovery. Of learning and relearning, the old but most especially the new, the unfamiliar ways in which pieces now slot together. It's been a season of stumbling over the quiet and loud ways in which the other loves them, the unexpected moments that make breaths catch in throats and hands still as the realisation dawns, as that soft *oh* finds its way into the spaces long since filled by the other.

Like Christmas, walking into Hosu's apartment to find, of all things, a *Christmas tree* sitting in his living room, a small thing with lights in too many colours and decorations on every available branch. It looks like Christmas vomited all over the tree, and Duri flicks his finger disdainfully at a fat little Santa in a miniature snow globe and stares as it bobs happily.

"What," he asks, tongue swiping the inside of his cheek, "is this?"

Hosu's smile is wide and proud and a little shy across the space between them. He stands at the kitchen island, grinding coffee beans in the small stove top coffee maker he bought just so Duri could have decent coffee at his apartment, fingers long and slender, graceful as they work.

"You like it? I always love how happy the shop displays look this time of year, and I kind of always wanted to get one but Iseul thought they were tacky and *un-Korean*, so we never did. So I thought, this time, I'd get one."

There's a vulnerability to the shrug that moves Hosu's shoulders, and the corresponding warmth welling up in Duri's chest makes it hard to breathe, and harder not to smile. His words are glued to his teeth, and so he lets his body do the talking instead, follows his feet into the kitchen, lets his arms wrap around Hosu's small waist, lets his lips find the warm, smooth skin above the neckline of Hosu's oversized shirt. The weight of him in his arms is solid as he leans back against Duri's chest, hands never stopping their graceful work.

"I love it."

Duri's lips press the words against the slope of Hosu's trapezius, his pulse a soft rhythm against Duri's cheek, a reassuring flutter that bleeds into Duri's skin where they touch. Hosu sighs, contentment staining the breath as it slips out, head dipping back onto Duri's shoulder, hands coming to rest on the forearms wrapped around his waist.

"Yeah? You don't think it's tacky?"

"Oh, it's absolutely the tackiest thing I've ever seen. It's magnificent, I love it."

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Hosu's laugh rattles against Duri's chest, the sound of it shaking something loose in Duri as Hosu swats his forearms.

"Yah! Hyung! Don't insult my tree!"

"I'm not. I love it, Hobah. It's perfect. Loud and colourful, just like you."

And Hosu huffs, but the pink staining his cheeks and the heat welling up against Duri's skin where it presses up against the back of Hosu's neck is telling enough, and Duri squeezes a little tighter as Hosu's hands find the coffee grinder again.

Then there is the way Hosu finds Duri's notebooks, by accident, stumbles across them while looking for a spare pair of socks to keep his feet warm while they watch a movie in Duri's bedroom, on Duri's laptop, the two of them tucked tight together on Duri's bed, the body heat welcome as late snow drifts pile up outside.

He pulls it out, careful, reverent, runs his index finger across the cracked spine, brushes a fingertip along the worn page edges.

He doesn't open it, and after a second, makes to put it back where he found it.

"It's a lyric book."

Hosu's eyes cut across to Duri, wide, mouth a little slack at the unexpected statement, the heart-shaped *o* instantly reminiscent of that *other* Hosu, the one from all those years ago. Duri's eyes cut away, flit everywhere, vulnerable, unused to sharing this part of himself with another, forgetting for a moment that this is his *Hobah*, who's been there from the start, who thought his music was something to admire even when Duri was sixteen and his rap was childlike and unsophisticated. He studies his hands, embarrassment washing his cheeks in a fiery red.

"I um...I keep them around the place. For...you know. When ideas strike."

Hosu watches as Duri's fingers fidget on his lap. He nods, then, slow, and turns to put the notebook back in Duri's sock drawer.

"That's cool, hyung. Good idea."

They say nothing more of it, and it's forgotten, or at least, Duri thinks it is, until two days later, when he reaches into Hosu's pantry for some cinnamon to make French toast, and finds a brand-new notebook on the shelf, the initials IDR clearly marked on the front by way of a neatly printed label.

He finds another, later on, on the bedside table next to his side of Hosu's bed, and another in the drawers allocated to him in Hosu's tallboy, a fourth one in the coffee table drawer. The lump in his throat at Hosu's quiet gesture of support is thick and treacherous, and it doesn't shift until he takes Hosu apart little by little and presses the depth of his love into every inch of Hosu's smooth, caramel skin.

It's in the colours of the nail polish Duri buys for Hosu after he overhears him admiring the rainbow-coloured nails of one of the Centre's young visitors, his smile just a little wistful and the way he gushes over them enough to make Duri stop and watch, breath hitching at the way Hosu brushes delicate fingertips across the colours and exclaims time and again how *pretty* they look.

He trips over his own feet in his rush to get down to the nearest department store, a flush on his cheeks as he asks the assistant for ten different shades, one for each of Hosu's pretty fingernails,

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with an urgency clamouring in his chest because *Hosu wants something*, and Duri can't think of anything else until he gives it to him.

It's in the flutter in his chest as he places the small paper bag in front of Hosu after he clears the dinner dishes that night, the back of his neck warm as he watches Hosu's eyes widen with each small bottle he pulls out of the bag.

"I um...I thought you'd look pretty in these."

He says it a little gruffly, embarrassed at having listened in on Hosu's conversation and rushed out to buy nail polish for him without asking, but excited, too, warm on the inside at the thought of Hosu with a pretty rainbow on his pretty hands.

Hosu's cheeks go a delicate pink as he stares at Duri.

"I...really? You think...I could wear these?"

It's all Duri can do to nod.

"Yeah, Hobah. You have the prettiest hands. It'd look so good."

Hosu's smile is wide, and there are galaxies in his eyes.

"Will you...will you paint them for me, hyung?"

Duri's love is loud in the way he holds Hosu's slender, graceful fingers, biting his lip in concentration as he brushes a different colour onto each of the nails, so determined not to make a mess of this most important task that Hosu has to remind him to breathe several times.

It's in the ways Hosu makes changes in his life, small ones that make Duri feel *welcomed* in quiet, unassuming ways that he learns of by accident, the stovetop coffeemaker and the lyric notebooks just the tip of the iceberg.

There's the new throw that appears on Hosu's couch because the old one isn't quite big enough for the two of them to snuggle under. Duri doesn't miss that it's in his favourite shade of blue, blue like the sky, blue like cornflowers, blue like the blanket they picnicked on all those years ago, or that it's draped deliberately over the seat where Duri likes to sit.

There's the new toothbrush that appears in Hosu's bathroom, and Duri's favourite brand of toothpaste, shampoo and conditioner, all lined up, a quiet but meaningful *welcome home, you're wanted here* that has Duri reaching over to wordlessly take Hosu's hand and bring it up to kiss his knuckles as Hosu giggles, flustered.

There's the way Hosu *remembers*, everything, the smallest details, the movies Duri likes, the artists he admires, the places he says he wants to go, the flowers he likes. The way something he's mentioned only once will reappear days or weeks or even months later, in conversation or in person, a gift of peonies because *you love them, hyung*, tickets to a movie because *I know you've been wanting to see it, hyung*, hands at the ready with arnica cream to massage into Duri's skin after he has a fall that bruises his right knee, because *it's great for bruises, hyung*.

It's in the way Duri never forgets to touch Hosu, in a thousand little ways, never forgets the way it grounds Hosu and fills him up. Holding hands while they walk, playing with Hosu's fingers as they sit and watch a movie, making sure to connect their bodies in multiple places anytime they're together.

Hosu's feet, pulled onto Duri's lap for him to massage or just hold.

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Duri's fingers, threading through Hosu's hair, massaging his scalp.

Duri's strong arms, wrapped around Hosu at night, the big spoon in their little two-spoon drawer, comforting and reassuring.

Duri's hand on Hosu's thigh, shoulder, arm, anywhere he can reach, anytime Hosu feels unsettled, soothing and grounding.

A hundred thousand little touches, each one a drop in Hosu's ocean, keeping him full and whole, ready to face the world and all it throws at them.

Like talking to his mother, finally, about the part of him she doesn't know, the part of him he hopes she'll embrace, against all the odds.

He talks it through with Duri, again and again, over a period of months, the pros and cons of telling his parents the real reason behind his breakup with Iseul. The list of pros is short, dismally so. But they're heavy.

The questions about getting back together with Iseul lasted for months after Hosu moved to Seoul, until finally, they began to be replaced by questions about meeting a *new girl*. His mother is relentless, the constant pressure for him to *settle down and get married already* wearing on Hosu in much the same way it did before.

And Hosu remembers the *before*, remembers the way the pressure undid him, the way it wore him down until he did something that didn't feel right, proposed to Iseul just to please his mother, betrayed himself, and the thought of being pushed into that same corner again makes something wild and feral rear up inside him, makes him want to lash out and push back.

He needs it to stop. He needs her to hear him, to know he isn't *ever* going to marry a *nice girl*, and just *stop*. The little boy in him desperately wants her to embrace him, to tell him she loves him and whomever he loves, but the grown man knows that's a pipe dream, a diaphanous fantasy that will be torn to shreds the moment he puts who he really is into words.

But he still needs it to stop.

He talks to Duri, over and over, lays it all out, his fears, his hopes, his expectations. Duri listens, quiet, supportive, reassuring, his large, warm hands wrapped around some part of Hosu, whichever part of him is able to be still in the moment, feet, hands, a thigh, an ankle.

In the end, the way it happens isn't well-planned or rehearsed.

She calls him, for the second time in a week, to relay the *good news* of her friend's son's engagement, full of thinly veiled recriminations about Hosu's lack of *progress* in finding a *nice girl* to settle down with. Hosu's jaw begins to hurt from the way he's clamping down, and Duri watches him from where he stands in the kitchen, face drawn in tight lines of concern.

And suddenly, it's all too much.

"Enough, eomma."

There's a pause as his words sink in, followed by an indignant spluttering.

"Kim Hosu, you mind your tongue with me," she begins, outraged, but Hosu pushes through the rushing in his head and the throbbing in his veins, pushes his voice out louder so she will hear him over the sound of her own displeasure.

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"No, eomma. I need you to listen to me. I need you to really listen and hear me. I am not going to meet a nice girl and get married. Not now, not ever."

She clacks her tongue, mistaking his meaning for low self-esteem. Hosu feels Duri's eyes on him and wishes he was closer.

"Of course you will, Hosu, don't talk nonsense. You're a good-looking boy, you make good money, you're from a good family. Any girl would be lucky to have you!"

"You're right, eomma, they would be lucky to have me. But they won't have me. Because I don't want a girl, eomma."

She titters, a little, nerves filtering in.

"What rubbish! Why do you say these things, my boy? All boys must get married, it's what's proper. You will find a nice girl and you'll carry on the family name when you *finally* give me grandchildren."

Hosu swallows hard, fists balled, eyes squeezed shut. His jaw aches, teeth grinding viciously. He feels himself faltering, spine bowing under the weight of her expectations, the weight of *duty*, feels the words die on his tongue.

And then suddenly, Duri is there, pressed close, arms wrapped around Hosu's waist, head resting on Hosu's shoulder, and Hosu feels himself lifting, Duri's strength seeping into his skin, his flesh, his bones, through all the places they touch.

His spine straightens, just enough, and he feels a little braver, just brave enough to speak his truth.

"No, eomma, I won't. I'm not going to do any of those things. I'm gay, eomma. I like men, not girls."

The silence is thunderous, and Duri squeezes tighter.

"What did you say?"

Her tone is clipped, harsh.

Hosu swallows around the tight, hard lump in his throat. It hurts.

Still, he pushes through, words a little softer, now.

"I'm gay."

She's silent again, and it's terrifying, too loud, too sharp, and Hosu swallows down the tears that threaten to drown him, tries to talk them away with desperate explanations.

"I know – I know that's not what you want, eomma, and I'm, well, I'm not sorry for being gay, because that's okay, it's okay that I'm gay, I know it is, even if, even if you don't agree, but I'm sorry I can't give you a wedding, or a daughter in law, or grandkids, or...or..."

"You're being ridiculous, Hosu. Stop saying these things."

Her voice is distant, cold, and Hosu whimpers, the small child inside him crying out at his mother's lack of acceptance.

"You need to think about what you're doing and stop being *selfish*. It's not too late, you can still meet a nice girl and *fix this*."

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The tears come, then, the hurt at his mother's harsh response, at the suggestion that Hosu is somehow *broken*, too much. It's all he can do to mumble a shattered *I'm sorry, eomma* before hanging up and ending the call.

Duri holds him through it, every step of the way, lets him pour all his grief and anger out. He catches him, catches all of it, sits and holds space, pressing quiet *I love you I love you I miss you I miss you* into his skin, in words and touch, rubbing Hosu's back, running fingers through his hair or holding his hand as the hurt flows out of him.

Eventually, Hosu feels empty, barren, all the sadness cried out, a kind of numb acceptance taking its place.

None of it is unexpected, however painful it is, and the assimilation of his mother's staunch denial of who Hosu is slips into the facts Hosu holds about his life in much the same way as would the death of a grandparent or being ghosted by a long-time friend who'd hurt him before. It aches, but it's a resigned kind of ache, a yielding kind of hurt.

It's the biggest, scariest thing Hosu has ever done, and it didn't go well, it went terribly, but he's still here. He got through it, because he *knows*.

He knows who he is.

He's Kim Hosu. He loves bright colours and things that don't match. He loves music and animals, he dances like his life depends on it because it really, truly does. He loves pineapple but hates bananas because the texture feels horrible on his tongue. He is an extraordinarily talented salesman but doesn't love it like he does dance. He loves jewellery and dyeing his hair crazy colours, his love languages are touch and acts of service, and he is fiercely loyal. He can be insecure, still, but he likes who he is, loves himself, even, on his good days.

He loves his sister and his friends, he loves his parents, both of them, even with all the hurt between them.

He's Kim Hosu, and he is all of those things and more, and he's also, hopelessly, irrevocably, in love with Im Duri, and stunningly, beautifully, magnificently gay.

He's Kim Hosu, and he's loved, by his sister, by his friends, and most importantly, by Im Duri, who holds him up when his legs give way, who feeds him when he can't feed himself, who reminds him who he is until he remembers.

Im Duri, who is here now, a steady presence by his side, reminding him that even though his parents can't love him how he needs them to, others do, and that's enough.

And so, he picks himself up, and lets Duri help him do it.

He dances, and cries, and laughs, and lets himself be loved on, by Duri, by his sister, by Seojun and Yujun and Minjun. He cries some more when Jiyeong and Seongmin descend on Seoul for a long weekend to come and meet Duri and remind Hosu just how important he is to them, and again when Harin does the same.

He's surrounded, shored up, and it eases the ache, helps it yield some more, until it dulls and the shine of his life eclipses it somewhat.

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And the feeling lasts, even when Jiyeong and Seongmin and Harin go back to their lives in Gwangju, even when life goes back to normal, because Duri never lets him forget, always reminding him with those little touches, those small acts of service, just how loved he is.

It's a big, loud, terrifying thing that rocks his world, only to show him that his world is steady and strong, that *he* is steady and strong, and it brings him and Duri closer together.

And so, the cold months pass, the vehemence of them draining into the soft dampness of early spring sometime in March, and things are good.

Life has settled into calmer waters, Hosu thinks, as he looks around the table at his friends.

It's a Friday night, a rare occasion when their whole Seoul contingent managed to come out for after work drinks, and Hosu feels content.

Duri is pressed close to him, hand loosely wrapped around Hosu's thigh in his usual subconscious way of grounding Hosu even when he doesn't need it, when all of him is solid and present and calm. Duri is caught up in a story Minjun is telling, sharp eyes soft and laughter bright, and Hosu feels full of butterflies.

Sora is beside Minjun, a steady presence for several months now. She's beautiful and bright, with eyes that twinkle and long hair that Minjun will play with without realising it, fingers twirling in it while the other hand gestures animatedly. She's down to earth, which Hosu loves her for. She dresses simply, in jeans and t-shirt, hair caught up in a high ponytail and face natural, makeup free.

She's in deep conversation with Seojun and Eunji on her other side, subconsciously pulling towards Minjun whenever he tugs a little too firmly on the lock of her hair wrapped around his fingers. There's a symbiosis between them. They fit so well, there never seemed to be much of an adjustment period for them as they settled into their new relationship together, and it's been somewhat of a marvel to watch the ease with which Sora has come to fit into all their lives, like she was always there.

Yujun is beside Hosu, relaxing into his seat, eyes on his phone and smile soft. He looks in his own world as he taps away, laughing sometimes, nose scrunching up in that way it does, and it makes Hosu smile in turn. It's only been a few days since Yujun confessed, pink-cheeked and self-conscious, to going on a third and fourth date with someone, and Hosu is hopeful that maybe it heralds something good for him.

The heartbreak Yujun nursed for the first year or so after they met seems to finally have subsided, easing off into a cautious foray into the dating world. It's been six months since he decided to put himself out there, created a profile on a dating app and started going on the occasional date, each of them more disappointing than the last.

This is new. Hosu has never seen Yujun this caught up, this *sparkly*, this giddy and excited. It's nice, and he hopes it lasts, that whomever it is who's prompting the change sticks around.

He leans in, bumps his shoulder into Yujun's, startling the younger man out of his conversation. Pink stains his cheeks, and Hosu grins.

"So, when will we meet him?"

Yujun's eyes go wide, mouth dropping open a little.

"Who?" he blinks.

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Hosu laughs.

“The guy who warranted a third and fourth date. I assume that’s who’s got you blushing at your phone?”

The pink on Yujun’s cheeks deepens.

“I...um. Yeah. I...don’t know?”

Hosu takes pity on him.

“Don’t panic, Yu. It’s just nice, you know? Seeing you like this? You obviously like him.”

Yujun bites his lip, looks down at the table. Nods.

“Yeah, hyung, I do. He’s...he’s really great. He’s fun, and kind, and he makes me feel...just...good, you know?”

Hosu smiles.

“Yeah, I do. That’s really great, I’m glad. You deserve someone like that.”

“Yeah, I know. And things are going well. We’re taking it slow, but it’s nice.”

There’s something in the way that Yujun is still biting his lip that makes alarm bells go off in Hosu’s head.

“Why do I sense a *but* coming?”

Yujun chuckles.

“Because you know me, hyung. It’s nothing bad, it’s just...a little...complicated.”

Hosu frowns. Complicated is rarely good.

“Why? Is he married? Straight?”

Yujun looks up, eyes wide, shocked.

“No, God, no! No, he’s not...either of those things. It’s just...I’ll explain. In a little while. Just...not yet. Let me see where it goes first?”

Hosu feels a little apprehensive at that, protective of his friend, but he nods all the same. Yujun is old enough and wise enough to make his own decisions, bear the consequences, and Hosu will have his back no matter how things turn out.

“Okay, Yu. Just...be careful, okay?”

The smile Yujun gives him is sweet, unreserved, and it settles Hosu’s stomach a little.

“I will, hyung. It’ll be okay, don’t worry.”

They don’t talk about it again, after that, the topic silent between them for a few weeks. Yujun doesn’t mention the man he’s dating, but he still smiles at his phone, and Hosu suspects he’s still around. Hopes so, despite the unease that sits low in his belly at whatever *complications* Yujun is facing with his new flame.

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Clarity arrives late on a Saturday morning, a few weeks later. June has eased into July in a swathe of heat and sweat, summer breathing her oppressive air into every room, every nook and cranny.

Hosu and Duri are spending the morning together at Hosu's apartment, lethargically lounging around on the couch in shorts and t-shirts, drinking iced coffee to ward off the blistering summer heat. Duri is working on some Centre accounts while Hosu is scrolling mindlessly through social media, bored and wishing for something interesting to happen but too hot and bothered to make it happen.

Duri's phone buzzes on the coffee table, the rattle of it loud in Hosu's quiet apartment. Duri picks it up and checks the screen, grunting in surprise as he sees who the message is from. He looks at Hosu, one eyebrow raised.

"What?"

Duri holds up his phone for Hosu to see the screen.

The text is from Yujun.

Yu-ah

hyung

can we talk?

Hosu's eyebrows rise. It's unusual. Duri and Yujun get on well, but they haven't interacted much outside of the group or Hosu, have never hung out by themselves. If Yujun wants to talk to Duri, then there has to be a good reason, something out of the ordinary.

Duri types a quick response.

Duri-hyung

sure, Yu

when?

Yu-ah

are you free now?

Duri-hyung

sure

I'm at Hobah's

you can come here or I can meet you somewhere

if you need to talk to me alone

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Yu-ah

hyung's is fine
he can sit in too
I don't mind
be there in 20 mins

Duri-hyung

kk

cya soon

He tosses his phone on the coffee table.

"He's coming over."

Hosu hums.

"Huh. Okay. Wonder what it's about?"

Duri shrugs.

"I guess we'll know soon enough."

Yujun knocks on the door twenty minutes later. He looks a little nervous as he shuffles in, eyes a little wide and shifty, bottom lip trapped between his teeth as he looks around the apartment, looking a little lost, a lot like he's never been here before.

Hosu rolls his eyes.

"Yu-ah. Sit down, you're making me nervous," he calls from his position at the kitchen counter, where he's making coffees.

Yujun grimaces and nods, padding over to the couch in his socked feet and sinking down on it, a few seats down from Duri on the couch, eyes locked on his hands, clamped together in front of his knees as he leans forward onto his elbows.

Hosu walks in, handing both Duri and Yujun their coffees, black for Duri and sweet and milky for Yujun, sighing at the way Yujun clings to the mug like his life depends on it. He sits in the single armchair across from the couch and waits for Yujun to gather himself together.

"So," Yujun starts, then stops.

"So?" Hosu prompts after a minute of silence.

"The thing is. I...there's this thing I want to talk to you both about, and I kind of don't know how you'll take it, especially Duri-hyung, and I'm really nervous about it."

Duri sighs.

"Yu-ah. Look at hyung."

Yujun looks up, all wide eyes and pink cheeks.

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“Are you here to tell me you’re having an affair with Hobah?”

This prompts an outraged *whatthehellno* from Yujun, and Duri shrugs.

“Then you have nothing to worry about. Come on, spit it out, it can’t be that bad.”

It’s Yujun’s turn to sigh, frame sagging a little after the shock of Duri’s question settles, and Hosu clamps down on a smile, knowing Duri’s question was rhetorical, the shock of it designed to break Yujun out of his panic spiral. It looks like it’s worked, by the way Yujun takes a deep breath and sits up a little bit straighter, spine reinforced with newfound determination, before looking them both in the eye in turn.

“Okay,” he says, and Hosu can see the way he’s gathering all his threads to feel brave, recognises the effort.

“Okay. So the thing is. You guys know I’ve started seeing someone.”

“Mister Four Dates, yeah, we know,” Hosu confirms, while Duri nods.

Yujun smiles a little, eyes sparkly, cheeks flushing a deeper shade of rose.

“Seven,” he says, a quiet sort of pride in the simple word.

“Seven???” Hosu exclaims, and Duri’s eyebrows shoot up. Yujun smiles, and he looks giddy and proud.

“Yeah. I really like him, hyungs.”

“That’s good, Yu-ah,” Duri says. “But you told Hobah it’s complicated. And I assume you’re here to tell us why it’s complicated?”

Yujun nods, teeth sinking into his bottom lip again, the nerves still simmering under his skin.

“Yeah. It’s complicated because...”

He shifts, turning to face Duri square on, shoulders and spine straight, and he looks determined, almost fierce, like he’s bracing himself for impact.

“Hyung, it’s complicated because it’s Juwon. As in, your ex.”

The room is silent as his words land. Hosu watches Duri’s face. He’s blank, impassive, the way he tends to be when he’s processing something.

“I swear I didn’t know at first, hyung. Hosu-hyung never told me your ex’s name, and we didn’t discuss past relationships until our fourth date. It was only when he told me the story of how his last relationship ended and mentioned you by name that I made the connection.”

Duri sits, quiet. Processing. Hosu’s breath stalls in his throat, eyes on Duri, watching closely.

“And you kept dating him after you knew.”

It’s said gently, all the syllables nicely rounded, nothing sharp for Yujun to get hung up on, but there’s still a stutter in his speech when he answers, eyes wide and anxious.

“Y-yeah, I did.”

“So that must mean you really, really like him. Enough to risk dating him even if I wasn’t okay with it.”

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Yujun's eyes drop to the table again, fingers twitching on his lap.

"Yeah."

Duri watches him through narrowed eyes, thoughtful, then nods.

"Okay."

Yujun looks up, sharp, mouth gapped in confusion, shock.

"O-okay?"

"Yeah. Okay. You date who you want, Yu-ah. I'm not with Juwon anymore, nor do I want to be. I don't have an issue with him dating my friend. I don't have an issue with seeing him around. He's a good guy. He deserves to be happy, and so do you. If he makes you happy, then I'm happy."

Yujun's smile blooms, radiant, a kind of giddy ecstasy painted all over his too-young face. Duri's chuckle is small and dry.

"What, Yu? Did you really think I was going to forbid you from seeing my ex? Like I have that right?"

Yujun squirms, then, antsy, all his nerves showing, face stained with hope and blushy excitement.

"I-I mean, I don't know? I didn't want to make you or hyung uncomfortable, didn't know how you'd feel about seeing him around."

"I'll get used to it, Yu."

Hosu feels warm pride welling up in his chest, thick and syrupy, the sweetness of admiration for the person he loves, and a smile tugs at the corners of his mouth.

It's not all that comfortable, the thought of seeing Juwon around, not for him, it makes that old ember of guilt flare up in his chest, but there's determination, too. If Duri can get used to being around Juwon, then so can Hosu, for the sake of Yujun's happiness.

Yujun's eyes are starry, and his smile doesn't fade for the rest of the afternoon.

*

The night Yujun brings Juwon to drinks for the first time, Hosu wants to throw up. Nausea sits thick and sour at the back of his throat, making him quiet and withdrawn, pulling worried looks from Duri and their friends. The guilt he's pushed down for months has wormed its way to the surface with Juwon's reintroduction into their lives, guilt for taking Duri away from Juwon, for coming into Juwon's home and stealing the man he loved, for falling in love with someone who wasn't available, for not walking away when he should have.

He's done well to keep the feeling locked up so far, tries to keep it hidden from Duri, from himself, tucked away behind his breastbone. It was easier when Juwon wasn't part of their everyday lives, was staying away from the Centre, when they had no friends in common. It made it easier to lie to himself, to relish what he and Duri have without lingering on what it cost to have it.

As he looks up at Yujun and Juwon, standing at their table, it's suddenly impossible to ignore, and Hosu's stomach drops, the swooping sensation violent and nauseating.

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Yujun looks nervous, fingers clinging tight to Juwon's hand, pink staining his cheekbones, a wary kind of determination in the way he moves.

"Hey hyungs. This is, um, well, you all know Juwon."

There's a heartbeat's silence as Hosu, Duri and Minjun all stare up at the couple standing by their table.

And then Seojun is on his feet, hand outstretched and grin wide.

"I don't! Nice to meet you, man, Kang Seojun, '88."

Juwon's smile is sincere as he grabs Seojun's hand and shakes it.

"Jung Juwon, '89."

"Excellent!" Seojun exclaims, "that makes me your hyung."

Juwon smiles and nods, and then his eyes are drifting across the others at the table. Minjun stands next, and his smile is warm.

"Hey hyung, how've you been?"

"Been good, Jun-ah, you?"

Hosu's stomach is roiling, and there's cold sweat on the back of his neck. And Duri must know, somehow, must feel the tension radiating off him, because he squeezes Hosu's hand before letting go to stand and step around the table as Juwon turns away from Minjun.

Hosu watches as he steps up to Juwon and Yujun, sees the calm on Duri's face, only the twitch of his fingers betraying the nerves that simmer deep underneath his skin.

There's a moment then, when the two meet face to face, up close for the first time since their split, a moment that seems to stretch long and thin. Yujun stands a little off to the side, eyes wide, mouth a little slack, anxiety radiating off him.

It's Juwon who breaks the silence. The look he gives Duri is warm, tender almost, none of the anger that Hosu feared.

"Hey Du-ah."

And Duri sighs, smiles gently.

"Hey."

There's hesitation, for a beat, two, then Juwon steps forward and wraps Duri up in a hug. It's brief, but it breaks the tension, and Duri's smile widens as he hugs back.

Juwon steps back again, and the air seems a little less heavy.

"How've you been? You look well."

Duri nods.

"I am, I'm really good. How're you doing?"

Juwon's smile looks genuine, and Hosu feels relief that there doesn't seem to be any animosity towards Duri, at least.

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"I'm really good too."

Suddenly, his eyes cut across the circle to Hosu, still seated at the table, and another wave of anxious nausea hits Hosu as they make eye contact. He's so ashamed, still, so guilty, and so afraid of Juwon's reaction, of the things he might want to say to Hosu, the things he might think and feel about this person who hurt him so badly.

It's so much worse than he thought it would be when he imagined it, this moment, coming face to face with Juwon. It's terrifying. He wants to hide, to run away, not to face Juwon, not to have his friends look at them both and know what he did, not to have to listen to anything Juwon might want to say.

But he can't move. He's just sitting there, stuck, pinned to the booth seat by Juwon's eyes on him, sweating in his t-shirt and jeans as he wishes he was anywhere else.

But he's not. He's here, and Juwon is here, and everything and everyone else has somehow disappeared, faded into the background, and Hosu is panicking.

"Hobah."

Duri's voice breaks through Hosu's trance, and suddenly reality contracts, or maybe it expands, because Duri is there, and Yujun, and Minjun and Seojun. And Duri's hand is right in front of him, a lifeline, so Hosu takes it, lets himself be pulled from the booth.

Duri's fingers are strong and warm around his hand as he pulls Hosu to his side.

"You remember Hosu?"

And Juwon, Juwon smiles. It's small, a little sad, but it's not angry, or malicious, or any of the things Hosu imagined.

"Yeah, of course. Hey Hosu-ah."

"H-hey Juwon-ssi."

Juwon huffs at that, head shaking.

"How many times do I need to tell you to call me hyung, huh?"

Hosu knows an olive branch when he sees one, and he swallows hard around the lump in his throat.

"Sorry, hyung," and the words relate to something more than honorifics, mean something deeper.

Juwon's nod and smile are small, but they're there.

"About time."

He holds eye contact with Hosu, then, for a long moment, and it feels to Hosu like a lot is said in those seconds.

And then the moment breaks. Juwon nods and looks away, grins widely, mischievous as he steps back and grabs Yujun's hand, tugs him in close to his side as he looks between Duri and Hosu.

"I'd like you to meet my boyfriend, Yujun."

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Yujun's cheeks burn crimson at that, and he buries his face in Juwon's shoulder as laughter and friendly banter wash over them. Hosu swats Duri when he jokes about Juwon *trading up*, then blushes fiercely when Duri leans over and whispers *don't worry Hobah, so did I* in his ear.

They settle around the table, and the unease dissipates, for the most part, at least for the others, if not for Hosu. Yujun and Juwon are clingy and obviously smitten, and it's nice, it makes something light and fluffy bloom in Hosu's chest to see Yujun be adored by someone, to see him happy.

Duri sticks close to Hosu, leaning close and playing with Hosu's fingers on his lap, once in a while pressing a kiss to his jaw, his hand, his wrist, his shoulder, anywhere he can reach, tactile and even softer than usual. Hosu lets himself sink into it, grateful for the extra affection, the extra reassurance.

Hours later, Duri detaches himself from Hosu's side and stands to buy a round, smile loose and head pleasantly light. He makes his way to the bar, ordering their drinks before leaning on the bar and sinking into his own soft thoughts of Hosu and their plans for the weekend.

He doesn't see Juwon come and stand beside him.

"Come here often?"

Juwon's tone is dry, and Duri laughs.

"That was terrible. Don't tell me that worked on Yujun?"

Juwon smiles, shrugs.

"What can I say, I'm all charm."

Duri chuckles.

"No doubt."

It's quiet then, but not uncomfortable. There's no animosity, just things left unsaid, closure to be had, perhaps.

"You look happy, Du. Are you happy?"

Duri looks up, at Juwon's face, the soft smile he loved so much, once upon a time, the brown eyes that hold no anger, just warmth.

"Yeah, Juwon, I am. I'm really, really happy."

Juwon's smile is a little wan, maybe, but it's there.

"Good. I'm glad."

"What about you? Are you happy?"

Juwon nods, slow, thoughtful.

"I am. I mean, Yujun and me, it's early days. But he's really something, I think we could be really great together. And life...it's been good, you know? I took some time off, did some travelling. Spent some time just figuring myself out. And I wasn't really looking for anything, was going to wait a while longer, but Jiwoo wouldn't shut up until I made a profile on one of those damn dating apps and, well, you know the rest."

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Duri nods. Smiles.

“Yujun.”

“Yeah.”

“So you’re really good?”

Juwon’s smile and nod are warm and reassuring.

“I really am.”

Duri nods again, relieved. He plays with a damp beer coaster on the bar in front of him, eyes sliding away from Juwon and onto his own hands.

“And are we? Good, I mean?”

It’s quiet, for a breath, two, before Juwon responds with a gentle *we are if you want us to be*.

Duri looks up at that. Juwon’s face is as gentle as his voice was, his eyes sincere, and Duri feels a rush of warm affection for this kind, genuine human who was such a central part of his life for so long.

“Course I do, Juwon. You know I never wanted to hurt you. I hate that I did.”

“I know, Du-ah. It’s okay. We’re okay. Some things are just not meant to last forever, you know? You and Hosu...you’ve got something we never had, and you deserve that. And me...I don’t know what’ll happen with Yujun, but I really, really like him. I’m really happy, right now. So maybe this is just what was supposed to happen, you know?”

“Maybe so.”

It feels lighter, then, easier, fewer sharp edges to get caught up on. The bartender brings Duri’s round of drinks, the glasses cold and slippery to the touch. Juwon orders shots, two, just for them, watches as they’re placed in front of them on the bar.

“Toast with me,” he says, as the bartender turns away, “to new beginnings?”

Duri grins, wide, gummy, familiar.

“Sure.”

The shots bite as they go down, tossed back like it’s nothing, like they’re sweet and smooth and not burning, biting, empties slammed on the bar afterwards.

“Now,” says Juwon, and it sounds a little ominous.

“What do I do about Hosu?”

Duri frowns.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, he looks at me like he’s terrified of me. How can we be friends if your boyfriend is scared of me?”

And it’s lighthearted, but the core of it, the heart, is gentle and serious. Juwon cares, he wants things to be okay, wants them to have a shot at being friends, and Duri admires him for it.

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“He’s not scared of you, Juwon. He feels awful. He hasn’t forgiven himself for taking me from you.”

Juwon frowns at that, turning back to look at Hosu across the crowded bar.

“Does he know you’re not a plaything? He didn’t take you away from me, Duri, you went all on your own.”

“Yeah, I know. He just...he’s hard on himself.”

Juwon hums.

“Okay. Alright, I think I know, then. Thank you. Let’s head back, eh?”

And with that, he grabs half of Duri’s drink order and starts back to their table.

Hosu watches Juwon stride towards their table with a sense of foreboding. When Juwon doesn’t sit in his seat across the table but instead drops into Duri’s seat next to Hosu, the nervous flutter in his belly starts up all over again.

“Hey, Su-ah.”

Hosu swallows hard.

“Hey, hyung.”

“I think we need to have a chat, don’t you? Clear the air?”

Hosu feels nauseous. He’s never been good at confrontation, never comfortable with the idea that some people just aren’t going to like him. He knows it’s true, in an abstract sense, but to be faced with it in person is quite another thing. And for someone to not like him for a *good reason*, well, that’s something he never really considered a possibility, not with how hard he works to make everyone around him happy.

He steels himself and nods, anyway.

“Yeah, okay.”

“Great. Let’s go somewhere a little quieter, yeah?”

He stands, and Hosu follows his example, catching Duri’s eye. Duri just smiles, encouraging, calm, and that helps, it calms Hosu’s swirling belly a little.

He follows Juwon through the crowd to the bar’s back entrance and out into the cool night air. It’s quieter out here, a little more hushed, but still relatively busy, couples and small groups strolling, coming and going from the bar’s front entrance around the corner.

Juwon walks up the road a dozen paces, hands in his pockets, not looking to see whether Hosu is following.

Hosu does. When Juwon stops, leaning against the bar’s wall, lit by a streetlamp, Hosu stops, too, stuffing his hands in his pockets for something to do with them, and waits.

“I owe you a thank you.”

Of all the ways Hosu expected this conversation to start, this isn’t one of them. He gapes, confused.

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"Come again?"

Juwon smiles.

"I owe you a thank you," he says again.

"Y-yeah, okay, that's what I thought you said. But, um. Why?"

Juwon sighs.

"You did what I couldn't, Hosu. You made Duri happy. And you gave me a chance to be happy, too."

Hosu stares, stunned, speechless. All his words disappear into thin air, fragments of them slipping through his fingers as he reaches for them. Distantly, he registers a burning in his eyes, a tightness in his throat.

Juwon looks at him, expectant, kindly.

Hosu clears his throat, tries to form words. Manages just the one, kind of, a soft and broken syllable.

"Wh-what?"

Juwon smiles a sad sort of smile.

"I think you heard me. I know you think I hate you, Hosu, but I don't. Duri and I weren't working. We tried, we tried really hard, but something was just always off. He wasn't happy. I wasn't either. You came along and you...you fixed it. I know you didn't do it for me, and you didn't do it in a way I would have chosen, but you fixed it all the same."

Hosu feels lightheaded. He can't believe what he's hearing. All the guilt he's been carrying, all the shame, and Juwon is *thanking him*?

He feels faint, so he leans on the wall a few steps away from Juwon and drops into a crouch.

"What the hell," he croaks.

"Hyung. What? Are you kidding me right now?"

Juwon drops down, too, squatting against the wall.

"I'm not. I'm not gonna lie to you, it hurt like hell. But I got through it, and I'm so much happier now. And so is Duri."

Hosu looks across at him. A wave of outraged disbelief washes through him, and his voice is louder than it probably should be when he responds.

"Hyung! I *stole him* from you! You should *hate me!*"

Juwon doesn't bite. He nods, thoughtful.

"Really. Tell me, Hosu. Have you ever known Im Duri to do anything he didn't want to?"

"No, but..."

"Is he some helpless, powerless maiden under your spell, then?"

"Well, no, but..."

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“Duri is not some helpless victim, dude. He is a grown man who is capable of making his own decisions, and no one, not even you, can make him do something he doesn’t want to do. You didn’t *steal him* from me. *He left me* of his own accord. It was *his* decision, and he is happier for it. Don’t take that away from him.”

Hosu blinks, feeling like all the wind has been taking out of his sails. There’s nothing he can say to that, no counter argument.

Juwon knows it, too.

“So. Thank you for coming along when you did. It sucked, but it’s all been for the best. And now, I’d really like if we could stop tiptoeing around each other and figure out how to be friends, for Yujun’s sake. Because you are his best friend, and I’d really like to not be on bad terms with my boyfriend’s best friend.”

Hosu swallows, still reeling.

“Y-yeah, okay. I’d like that, too. Just. It might just take me a minute to recalibrate, okay?”

“That’s okay. We can take our time. I just needed you to know that we’re okay, if you want us to be. There’s no hard feelings. Awkward ones, maybe, but I don’t hate you or blame you. So we can put this behind us whenever you’re ready.”

Hosu takes a deep breath, two, feels his spine straighten out as the weight of guilt dissolves off his back, and is grateful for it.

He smiles at Juwon, nods.

“I’d like that, hyung. Thank you.”

Juwon’s smile is wide as he stands and offers Hosu a hand up.

“Don’t mention it. Let’s go back to our boys, eh? Before they think we’ve run off together,” he adds with a wink.

Hosu snorts, feeling lighter and a little giddy as he makes his way back to their table at the back of the bar. Duri’s eyes find him immediately, his smile wide and soft, and Hosu feels so, so in love.

He doesn’t think twice before taking Duri’s face in both hands and kissing him deeply, ignoring the chorus of jeers from their friends around the table as he does so.

The bright pink flush on Duri’s cheeks and his shy, gummy smile when Hosu pulls back are so very much worth it.

*

One of Hosu’s favourite things is slipping into bed amidst clean sheets. It’s blissful, the feeling of clean, fresh cotton against the skin, smooth and silky and brand new. Everything feels like *hope*, light and bright and luxurious.

It’s like that, later that night, slipping into bed beside Duri, despite knowing the change is not in the sheets, but in him. It’s Hosu who feels fresh and clean, like he’s had a spring cleanout and all the

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cobwebs and dirt are gone. His chest feels open and spacious, every bone in his body weightless without the lead of guilt pulling it down.

Duri wraps himself around Hosu's frame, eager to stay close, to make sure Hosu is alright, but bright-eyed and smiley at just how alright Hosu is.

Hosu pulls him closer, cheek to chest, butterfly wings tickling his ribcage, kisses slipping from his lips and into Duri's hair unbidden, haphazard and sweet, and Duri laughs softly.

"What's gotten into you tonight, Hobah?"

Hosu's kisses trail from Duri's hair to his forehead as he looks up, down the slope of his nose to the little round end of it, and Duri scrunches his nose up at the mushiness of it all.

"I'm just...just happy, hyung. I'm just so freaking happy."

That brings Duri's smile back out, the gummy one that Hosu loves so much, and he kisses the corners of it.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I love you, hyung."

"I love you too, baby. I'm glad you're happy. I am, too."

Hosu hums, content as he kisses Duri once more, cosy and drowsy in their warm nest.

"Hobah?"

Duri is looking up at him again, all sweet and vulnerable in that way he rarely gets outside of this space, right here, in Hosu's arms when no one else is looking. Hosu loves it, this side of Duri, is grateful he gets to see it.

"Yeah?"

"I spoke to Eomma today."

"You did?"

Duri nods, smiling.

"Yeah. I told her. About us."

Hosu stares. That's a big, huge thing. As supportive as Duri's eomma has been, Duri had been worried how she'd react if she found out he'd left Juwon for someone else and had put off telling her month after month. Hosu feels a little stab of trepidation.

"What'd she say?"

Duri laughs, and the sound settles Hosu's nerves so easily.

"She asked why I'd been hiding you all this time, and when I was bringing you around for dinner."

"Oh my God, really?"

"Yeah. Seems she noticed something wasn't quite right with Juwon and I and had been kind of expecting us to split. And when she heard about you, she got all emotional on me."

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Hosu coos at that.

“She always did like you.”

“I liked her too. Except for, well, you know. When she moved you to Seoul.”

Duri snorts.

“Yeah. She wasn’t my favourite person then, either.”

Duri’s fingertips trail invisible patterns on Hosu’s chest, soft and a little ticklish.

“Want to go this weekend?”

The thought of meeting Duri’s family again after all these years, meeting them as his partner, his love, openly and honestly, stirs a deep warmth and sense of belonging in Hosu, and he swallows around the lump that forms suddenly at the back of his throat.

“Yeah, let’s, I’d love that.”

“Okay. It’s a date.”

And Hosu smiles with all his heart, every part of him happy and at peace, lying here tangled together with the love of his life in sheets that smell of home and happiness.

He sighs, and squeezes Duri a little tighter.

“It’s a date.”

THE END