kiss like lightning

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by tinyduckling

Summary

Anxin has been in love with Xinlong for months. Xinlong is drowning in responsibilities and has no idea Anxin exists.

When they're forced together by a thunderstorm and a pair of perfectly timed wishes, their lives are thrown into chaos. Nothing will ever be the same.

Notes

Very loosely inspired by that one video of Xinlong introducing himself as Anxin :3

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1: only honest when it rains

Chapter Notes

Chapter title from Neptune by Sleeping at Last

"You're staring again."

Anxin blinks twice, and turns to see Sanghyeon drop into the seat next to him. "What?"

Sanghyeon nods towards the table where the dance team is sitting. "Staring. You know one of these days he's actually going to notice."

Anxin ignores him, returning his focus to his crush. "Does he look stressed to you? More than normal, I mean?"

Xinlong always looks a little stressed, except when he's onstage. When he's dancing he shines like a star, with a brilliant smile and an endless well of energy. The rest of the time he's quiet and reserved- he rarely talks, rarely smiles, and generally looks…exhausted.

Today feels different. Anxin can't put his finger on why, but Xinlong looks even more tired than usual, even less engaged in conversation. He's been quietly observing Xinlong for months- he *knows* something is wrong.

"I dunno," Sanghyeon says. "You could always ask."

Anxin shoots him a look. "No way."

"Or I could ask for you."

"Don't you *dare*," Anxin hisses. It's bad enough he has the crush in the first place. They've never even so much as said *hi*- if Xinlong finds out that Anxin's been practically *stalking* him, that'd be it. End of the line. He might just die of embarrassment on the spot.

Sanghyeon rolls his eyes. "I can't wait for the day you finally talk to him."

"Who, Xinlong?" asks Leo, appearing behind his shoulder. "Yeah, that's never gonna happen." He grins at Anxin, who scowls back.

"I will," he says. "Eventually."

"Sure," says Leo, barely even pretending to believe it.

"Keep telling yourself that," Sanghyeon says.

Anxin pouts. “You’re both so mean to me.”

Xinlong would never be mean to him. He’s kind to everyone- a little distant maybe, but *kind*. Anxin glances over, biting his lip. That’s part of what has him worried. It seems like Xinlong’s always looking out for others, but is anyone taking care of *him?*

“Does he look stressed to you?” he asks again, this time directed at Leo. “He keeps checking his pulse, and he’s not really talking at all. Not even to Arno.”

Arno is the dance team captain, and Xinlong’s best friend. Anxin’s *also* never spoken to him.

“I wouldn’t know,” says Leo. “You could ask.”

“Hyung, come on,” Anxin grumbles, slumping in his seat. “What would I even *say?* “Hi, we’ve never spoken but I’ve been watching you like a creep and I’m worried you might be overworking yourself”?”

“Don’t say that,” says Leo.

“*Please* say that,” says Sanghyeon at the same time.

Anxin rolls his eyes. “You guys are no help.”

Leo shrugs apologetically, and Anxin turns his attention back to Xinlong. Most of the dance team is chattering away, but Xinlong- sat on the edge, like always- is quiet. He jiggles his leg gently under the table, glancing occasionally at his surroundings before looking back down at his hands. He just looks…*stressed*. That’s really the only word for it.

Maybe I could *ask*.

Anxin dismisses the thought the moment it appears. It’s a stupid idea.

As he’s watching, a pair of strangers pass by the other table. One of them- not watching where he’s going- bumps Xinlong’s arm, pushing him into Arno and stumbling a few steps. Xinlong turns, and while Anxin’s too far away to hear the words, he can read the apology on his lips.

Why are you apologizing? he thinks with a frown. *That wasn’t your fault at all.*

Xinlong is always like that. Apologizing for things he didn’t do, making himself small so as not to get in anyone’s way. He *shouldn’t*, though. He shouldn’t have to.

Like so many people, Anxin was first drawn to him by his dance but it’s Xinlong’s personality that he really fell in love with. He always comes off so composed, so careful. *Aloof*, Anxin’s heard it called, or *pretentious*- but those people don’t know what they’re talking about.

Xinlong’s been dancing his entire life. He could’ve made a whole career out of it- and kind of did, when he was younger. It’s that mini-celebrity status that has everyone reading him wrong, Anxin’s sure of it. Of *course* you’d expect the former child prodigy to have some sort

of superiority complex- but Xinlong *doesn't*. Despite his background, he works harder than anyone else and asks for nothing in return. He's the most selfless, caring person Anxin can imagine.

Even if he never danced again, Xinlong would still be perfect.

"…Anxin. Earth to Anxin! Hyung, I think we lost him."

"What do you want," Anxin mumbles, refusing to take his eyes off of Xinlong.

"Are you seriously just going to keep watching him all day?" Sanghyeon asks. "Because if the answer is *yes*, I'm heading over there right now to put you out of your misery."

"Absolutely not!" Anxin jerks his attention back to the table, where Sanghyeon meets his eyes, grins, and slowly starts to stand.

"Sanghyeon, don't you *dare,*" Anxin hisses, grabbing at his arm. His friend, if Anxin can even *call* him that right now, dodges- and has the audacity to *laugh*. Anxin leaps after him, chasing him around the table to drag him back into his seat. "I'll kill you- I swear, I'm gonna kill you-"

"Children, please," Leo says, barely looking up from his phone. "You're tearing this family apart."

Anxin whirls on him, pointing an accusing finger at Sanghyeon. "Tell that to him! He's trying to ruin my life!"

Sanghyeon laughs again, but finally sits back down. "You're always so dramatic. Dad's not gonna get mad at me, I'm his favorite."

Anxin scoffs. "You wish."

Leo rolls his eyes, but doesn't hide his smile. "I promise I hate both of you equally."

"Hyung- what do you mean you hate me?" Sanghyeon whines, giving Leo his saddest, wettest look.

"Gonna have to try harder than that, puppy," Leo says with a grin. "That trick doesn't work on me anymore."

Sanghyeon's jaw drops- he looks so offended that Anxin can't help but laugh, throwing up a hand in front of his face. *Serves him right.*

"And you act like *I'm* mean to *you*," Sanghyeon complains, opening a bag of chips.

"Cause you are," says Anxin, grinning with hypocrisy. "This is just teasing." He bumps Sanghyeon's shoulder affectionately with his own, then checks the time. "Oh, I gotta go. See you guys later?"

“Only if you can tear your eyes off of *Xinlong*.” Sanghyeon brightens up, leaning in conspiratorially towards Leo. “Hey- you know what? If he’s leaving he can’t stop me from going over there.”

Anxin narrows his eyes, then snatches the chip bag out of Sanghyeon’s hands and darts away, popping one into his mouth.

“Hey, that’s mine!” Sanghyeon calls after him.

“Not anymore!” Anxin sings over his shoulder.

Maybe he shouldn’t be antagonizing his best friend when said best friend is actively threatening to expose Anxin to his crush, but he’s fairly confident Sanghyeon won’t actually do it. And Sanghyeon doesn’t bother to fight back, just pulls a different snack out of his bag. He’s definitely learned to expect Anxin stealing his food. Which he does do kind of a lot. It’s only fair- half the snacks Sanghyeon takes from their apartment are his, anyways.

If only talking to Xinlong were as easy as talking to his friends.

Anxin skips off towards the gym for basketball, casting one last wistful glance towards the dance team.

Eventually.

-

Basketball is *fun*. Anxin’s not really that competitive and neither is their team, but he likes the game and he likes his teammates. Today they’re just playing a practice game, since the season hasn’t started yet. The stakes are low, but right now his team is winning- in no small part due to Anxin. He’s certainly not the best player, but he is *good*.

Then Xinlong walks past the window and Anxin’s mind goes blank.

What is he doing here?

Xinlong *should* be at dance practice with the rest of the team. Every evening during the week, except Fridays and weekends- except when they have a show coming up, then it’s Fridays and Saturdays included. Xinlong never misses it.

But the studio’s on the other side of campus, so what is he doing outside the gym?

Could it have something to do with whatever was stressing him out earlier?

“Anxin!”

He’s pulled out of his thoughts just in time to watch the ball slam into his head. Anxin crumples to the ground as the coach blows the whistle and his teammates rush over.

“Shit, are you okay? I’m so sorry, I really thought you’d catch it.” Geonwoo crouches in front of him, holding up his hands like he wants to help, but isn’t sure how.

“S’fine,” Anxin mumbles, rubbing his head. *Ow*. Geonwoo throws *hard*.

“All right, back up- give him some space,” their coach says, making his way through the crowd of worried players. “Anxin- what happened?”

“Nothing, I just-” he shakes his head, but quickly stops as it makes the floor tilt. “I just got distracted. I’m fine.”

Coach frowns. “What’s the score right now?”

“Uh…” Anxin squints up at the scoreboard, and Coach sighs.

“Okay, you’re done for today.” He pulls Anxin to his feet and points to the nearest student- Geonwoo again. “Can you walk him over to the clinic? Could be a concussion.”

A concussion. Great.

It’s not a long walk and he *does* understand why he’s been given a babysitter, but Geonwoo won’t stop apologizing and by the time they get there it’s really starting to grate on him.

“It’s fine,” Anxin says for the third time as they approach the doors to the clinic. “Stop apologizing. Really, it’s not your fault.”

Geonwoo bites his lip, but *finally* stops. Anxin forces himself to smile past the pounding in his head. “Thanks for walking me. See you tomorrow?”

“Of course,” Geonwoo says. “I hope it’s not too bad. And- feel better soon. Sorry.” He cringes as the last word slips out, offering an apologetic smile. Anxin gives him a friendly pat on the shoulder, and heads inside.

-

The verdict is *yes*, it’s probably a concussion. A mild one, at least.

“Take it easy the next few days,” the doctor tells him. “No sports until your cleared, and come back in if your symptoms get worse. It’s a good idea to have someone check in on you tonight, just in case. You have a roommate, or a friend who could stay over?”

“A roommate,” Anxin says.

“Good. You can sleep normally, but have him check in occasionally tonight and tomorrow morning, just to make sure you’re doing okay.”

Great. Doctor-mandated harassment- Sanghyeon’s going to *love* that.

“Anything else?” he asks with a sigh. He kind of just wants to go home.

“Besides what we’ve already discussed?” The doctor thinks for a moment. “I don’t think so. It’s supposed to storm tonight; some people find the pressure changes to increase pain or nausea, but it’s not universal. Just take it easy and try to get some rest.”

Anxin thanks the doctor and leaves, shooting a text to Sanghyeon explaining the situation as he starts off towards home.

A storm, huh? Anxin's never been a fan of the rain, until very recently. Unsurprisingly, it's because of Xinlong.

Xinlong loves storms. That's something of a secret- well, maybe not a *real* one, but as far as Anxin can tell he's never talked about it publicly. The fact that *he* knows feels like something special- something *personal*. Something he knows about Xinlong that most people don't.

It's rare to see Xinlong smile when he's not dancing. At least not in the same way. None of that manic glee seems to follow him off the stage, and while Anxin's always believed that's a sign of just how much he *loves* dance, he knows there's people who see it as evidence the onstage joy is fake. But fuck those people- they have no idea what they're talking about.

Anxin's seen him smile, and it was absolutely *beautiful*. Two months ago, when campus was still mostly empty from summer break, he got caught in a downpour and was debating whether it was worth waiting out when he spotted Xinlong across the quad. Unlike Anxin, who was hiding from the rain, Xinlong was *embracing* it- arms wide, head tilted up as water poured into his eyes. It was just…beautiful. Like something out of a movie.

Even if Anxin weren't half in love with him already, that sight would've changed everything.

Then a flash of lightning lit up the sky and Xinlong *laughed*, the wild grin on his face shining even brighter. And that's the exact moment Anxin knew he was done for.

He's never mentioned it to anyone, not even Leo. (He obviously couldn't tell Sanghyeon, that's just *asking* to be made fun of.) It was just a magical little moment, shared only with Xinlong. Even if Xinlong didn't know he was there.

Ever since then, storms have felt…special. He still doesn't like the rain, but as silly as it sounds, watching the sky makes him feel closer to Xinlong.

Hopefully the storm doesn't make his symptoms worse. He wants it to be something happy- his day's been going bad enough already.

-

Xinlong's day isn't going any better- not that he'd ever think to compare.

Apparently he's failing one of his classes. Or, not *failing*, but *underperforming.* That's how his advisor put it when he met with her that afternoon.

"It seems like you might be stretched a little thin," she said. "I told you the overload was a risk- remember, your scholarship requires you to keep your GPA above a 3.0."

Three point oh. That shouldn't be that hard. It's not like he *can't* do it- the class he's *failing* is early childhood psychology, and he *is* doing the work. Usually. Just not always on time. It's not like he can drop the class either, not without risking the major. So he'll deal with it- he always does.

“If you’re not willing to drop any of your classes,” she said with the tone of someone who thinks he really ought to do just that, “then you have to learn to prioritize. You’re an excellent dancer, but being gifted at one thing doesn’t mean the rest of your responsibilities will just handle themselves.”

I know that, he thought, but didn’t say aloud. Of course he knows. He’s been dancing his whole life- if being good at dance made everything easy, his *whole life* would’ve been easy. Instead dance only made it harder.

But the look his advisor gave him was not that of someone who’d understand, so he just nodded and thanked her for the advice.

The timing of the meeting meant missing the first half of dance practice, which only makes it worse. Xinlong usually tries to be there *early*, so it doesn’t cause a scene when he arrives, but-

“Look guys, our choreography genius is here,” one of his teammates announces as he walks through the door, and Xinlong forces a smile, pretending not to hear the insult underneath.

“Longlong!” Arno cheers- and at least from him, the joy is definitely real. “You’re just in time. We’re about to do a run- you want to watch through once before joining?”

Xinlong shrugs, and nods. He doubts they’ve added anything he couldn’t pick up on the fly, but people already think he’s arrogant and he doesn’t want to seem full of himself. He takes a seat at the front, stretching out his legs as Arno starts the music.

“Let me know if anything looks off,” Arno adds.

Xinlong nods again, cursing internally. Giving notes *sucks*- everyone always seems to take his advice in the worst way possible. But he does have the eyes for it, so it’s far from an uncommon ask.

Sure enough, Xinlong catalogs a dozen mistakes in the first ten seconds alone, though none of them really seem big enough to mention. The rest of the run is similar- but to be fair, the choreo is relatively new. A girl at the back stumbles over her feet halfway through the piece and shoots him a look that *dares* him to say something. Xinlong quickly averts his eyes.

It’s not like he *would*. She obviously knows she messed up, so calling her out in front of everyone would just be *cruel*.

Three long minutes pass, and the music finally comes to a stop.

“Thoughts?” Arno says, turning to him.

Xinlong shrugs. “Looked good to me.” It’s not a lie- the dance is still rough around the edges, but there’s plenty of time to iron it out. No major problems. Nothing worth fighting about.

“Wow, high praise,” someone mumbles.

Xinlong watches the tiniest flicker of annoyance dance across Arno's face. He keeps his own carefully still.

"Great," Arno says, and claps his hands. "Let's take five then. Water break."

Xinlong's almost positive it was called for him. He still needs to finish stretching before he'll be ready to join, and sure enough, the moment the group disperses Arno drops to the floor next to him.

"You good?" he asks under his breath, pretending to adjust his laces. "You seem a little off."

Xinlong shrugs. "Fine."

"Meeting go okay?"

He shrugs again. "Well enough. It's fine."

"You sure?" Arno fixes him with a look, the one that says *you're not as good an actor as you think*, and Xinlong shakes his head, flashing another fake smile.

"Hao-ge, I'm fine. Really," he lies. "I'm just tired."

Arno snorts. "Maybe tonight, try sleeping for once." He punches Xinlong lightly on the shoulder but thankfully leaves it at that.

Maybe, Xinlong thinks, leaning forward to stretch his lower back. *But not likely*. He's got about forty pages of reading for tomorrow that he hasn't started, plus a two-page reflection to write when he's done. He'll be lucky to be in bed by three.

The rest of practice goes…fine. He's in his head, making careless mistakes, though fortunately none of them are big enough to be a problem. And no one says anything, aside from a teasing "hey superstar, you feeling alright?" when he turns the wrong way and nearly crashes into his neighbor.

Still. He feels guilty. Mistakes are a part of learning, he knows that, but he's *supposed* to be better than this.

As usual, Xinlong stays after. He's not always the first to arrive, but he *is* always the last to leave. The solo time helps him to decompress, to make sense of the world, to remind him that he *does* still love dancing.

Arno hovers at the door after everyone else has left. "You sure you're okay?"

Xinlong smiles again, resisting the urge to roll his eyes. It's a real smile this time- it is nice that Arno cares. "Yeah," he says. "Don't worry, I'm fine."

"You know you don't have to be," Arno reminds him. "If things aren't going well, or you wanna talk-"

"Hao-ge…" Xinlong sighs. "Thanks, but it's really nothing. It's just been a long day."

Arno purses his lips. “If you say so,” he says, sounding skeptical. “Promise you’ll go to bed at a reasonable hour?”

“I’ll try my best.”

That’s at least enough to get Arno to leave, and Xinlong is *finally* alone. He exhales loudly, lying back and letting the silence sink into his skin before turning on the music and getting to work.

It used to be easier.

Dance is Xinlong’s first and greatest love. No matter how much he’s struggling, the opportunity to lose himself in the music and the movement never fails to fix what’s wrong, even if only briefly. He loves being a dancer. He loves to dance. He *does*.

So why is is so *hard?*

Expectation, that’s why. It’s not something to do for *himself* anymore; it’s a constant fight to prove that he deserves the attention. Never mind that he doesn’t want it. He’s *He Xinlong*- former child prodigy, dancer of a generation. Isn’t it a shame he’s choosing not to do it professionally? Isn’t he strange, to give up such a gift?

Maybe it’s burnout. Maybe he’s lazy. Maybe he’s ungrateful for the opportunities he’s been given, and thinks he can skate by forever off his childhood success. Everyone has an *opinion*, these days.

Maybe he’s just *tired*.

He stays at the studio later than he means to, which is a bad sign for his sleep prospects. He does briefly consider skipping the reading, but he’s already behind and his advisor’s words come back to haunt him.

You have to learn to prioritize, she’d said, and what she meant was *stop prioritizing dance*.

But he *can’t*. Dance is the one thing he has that makes him feel *alive*. He can juggle all of it- he has to.

The reading takes hours, and by the time he’s finished he’s not sure he understands more than half of it. Xinlong sighs, rubbing his temples. It’s nearly two am and he still has to write the reflection. Going to bed now would be giving up- what’s the point of staying up this late with nothing to show for it? He can do this.

He can do it.

Fortunately, he’s way too tired to care about writing *well*- words on the page is good enough. That makes it marginally faster, though he keeps having to course correct when his mind wanders off.

Around fifteen minutes later, a loud crash of thunder pulls him out of his thoughts. Right- it was supposed to storm tonight.

Xinlong pauses in his writing, looking out the window to watch the rain. He's always loved thunderstorms, ever since he was little. Lightning especially. It's just so…*free*.

A beautiful bolt of lightning streaks across the sky, followed by another crash of thunder, and a tired smile crawls its way onto Xinlong's face.

It must be nice, he thinks, *being a storm.* No expectations, no pressure, just the endless freedom to dance through the sky, painting your patterns in the clouds. It's a silly thought, but one he's had before. One he's sure he'll have again.

Xinlong sighs, eyelids growing heavy. Why does no one else seem to struggle this much? Plenty of people do course overloads, plenty of people have extracurriculars. Sure, he's got a few extra expectations from his history with dance, but it's not like it's anything unreasonable. Nothing he shouldn't be able to manage.

The lightning strikes again.

Xinlong sets his glasses down on the desk, rubbing his eyes. His mind drifts back to earlier, before the meeting. His teammates, chattering away in conversation he's never quite felt welcome to join. Laughing and joking- and not just his teammates, *everyone*. Like those kids across the quad, chasing each other around a table- one of them practically tackling the other as he cackled about something Xinlong was too far to hear. They were bright, loud, *happy*. Not a single thought towards someone *judging* them.

He sighs again, resting his head on his arms. One last thought wanders through his conscious mind before he's falling into the depths of sleep:

I wish I could be that carefree.

-

At the same time, on the other side of campus, the same crash of thunder rattles the windows of Anxin's dorm room and he jerks awake, groaning at the pain that swirls in his head.

Stupid concussion, he thinks. *Stupid thunder. Stupid storm.*

Storm.

Anxin's eyes fly open just in time to see the next streak of lightning. He sighs- then quickly claps his hands over his ears to block out most of the thunder.

Xinlong loves storms. Is he watching this one right now?

He shouldn't be. According to Anxin's clock it's past two am, and they have the same early class tomorrow. He really ought to be asleep.

Still, he might be awake. Anxin kind of hopes he is. The thought of both of them watching the storm together at the same time… it's kind of romantic, isn't it?

God, he's so *pathetic.*

Anxin sighs, turning on his side to get more comfortable while keeping his eyes on the window. The memory of Xinlong's manic grin as he lifted his face to the sky lingers in his head. It's a different smile than the one he wears when he's dancing- both seem genuine, but this one felt more…free.

Xinlong moves like he carries the weight of the world on his shoulders- and what Anxin would *give* to share the burden. So far that storm is the only thing he's seen lift even a fraction of it away.

Maybe I'll talk to him tomorrow, he thinks. It's probably just the concussion talking, but he at least pretends to let himself consider it. He could just…start a conversation, when stats is over. Small talk. *How's your day going? Did you see the storm last night? I think you're really great- would you maybe wanna grab a coffee?*

He won't do it. He never does. It's just a stupid after-midnight plan, born out of wishful thinking and a little bit of head trauma.

Lightning flashes, and Anxin sighs again. The pain from his abrupt wake-up is fading and he feels himself drifting off to the memory of Xinlong watching the storm.

In the exact same moment as Xinlong makes *his* wish, one final waking thought flickers through Anxin's mind:

I wish I knew how to make him smile like that.

-

Thunder crashes. As it does, both boys' eyes fall shut, their minds slipping off into slumber.

And outside, the storm rages on.

Outside, the storm listens.

-

Waking up *hurts*. Anxin could swear he remembers crawling into bed last night, but it seems he must've passed out on his desk instead. Which has now left him with the *worst* crick in his neck. He groans, blinking his eyes open- and frowns.

Everything is *blurry*.

He blinks again, waiting for his vision to clear.

It doesn't.

Okay, he thinks. *Don't panic. Maybe it's the concussion?*

"Sanghyeon?" he calls, sitting up straight. Something about his *voice* sounds wrong- deeper than normal, even with his nerves pitching it up. He trails his hands along the edge of the desk, and one of them lands on an object that feels suspiciously like a pair of *glasses*.

He doesn't *wear* glasses.

Nevertheless, that's what they are. And to make things even *more* confusing, putting them on finally brings the world into focus. Anxin looks around with growing horror.

This isn't his room.

Gone is the chipped white paint of his dorm room walls, plastered over with crooked posters and assorted sticky notes. Gone are the neat little shelves of folders and textbooks carefully arranged atop his dresser, and the basketball shaped lamp Sanghyeon gifted him as a joke. This room is dark and cluttered, all blacks and reds, with papers and piles of half-folded laundry scattered across every surface. He's absolutely certain he's never been here before in his life.

Please be the concussion.

"Sanghyeon?" he calls again- louder this time- and closes his eyes against the rising fear in his chest. Maybe Sanghyeon just didn't hear him. Surely he's about to come bursting in to tell Anxin he's hallucinating.

No one answers.

Anxin swallows, squinting one eye open again. The same unfamiliar space stares back at him.

"Okay," he says out loud. The voice still isn't *his*, but it *is* familiar in a way he can't quite place. "Okay. This is bad."

He waits several seconds for something to refute him.

Nothing happens. Anxin nods, takes a deep breath, and stands. Another deep breath gets him over to the door. Hand on the doorknob, he hesitates- but there's no sound from the other side to clue him in on what he might find, so he steels his nerves and gently pushes it open.

The sight that greets him is definitely *not* the suite he shares with Sanghyeon. That's honestly probably a good thing, at this point. *Everything* changing is somehow less scary than if it were just his room. And his voice. And his eyesight. And…

Well, at least his head doesn't hurt anymore.

He swallows again, stepping through the doorway. The apartment is small, and it doesn't look like anyone else lives here- not that *he* lives here. He spots what must be a bathroom opposite where he's standing and rushes in, turning on the sink and splashing cold water on his face.

Please be a dream, he thinks, trying to keep his breath steady. *Please be some sort of horribly vivid dream.*

Anxin looks up, meeting his eyes in the mirror, and his heart stops. The reflection that stares back at him- *his* reflection, apparently, from the way it's now grabbing at its face with an expression of dawning horror- isn't *his*.

It's *He Xinlong*.

Chapter 2: someone else's eyes

Chapter Notes

Chapter title from Nine by Sleeping at Last

The first thing Xinlong notices when he wakes up is that he can see. He must've fallen asleep with his contacts in again, which would explain why his head hurts. He *also* must've stayed up even later than he thought, because he has no memory of ever actually getting into bed.

Except- wait. He *does* remember taking his contacts out, and he's definitely not wearing his glasses. Xinlong frowns, sitting up- and the *second* thing he notices is that his body feels… *off*. His limbs are slightly too long and his weight centered differently, almost like he's a completely different person.

One that can *see*.

The third thing he notices is he's not in his room.

Maybe he's dreaming? If so, it's an alarmingly vivid dream.

Before he can theorize any further, he's jerked out of his thoughts by a pounding at the door.

"Anxin-hyung!" someone calls from the other side. "Are you awake yet?"

Who the hell is Anxin?

Xinlong looks down at his hands, which are definitely not *his* hands.

Am I Anxin?

"Who- who is it?" Xinlong calls. His voice doesn't sound like him either, though at this point that's almost to be expected.

"Me, obviously," is the only response he gets as the door opens and someone he's definitely never seen before barges in like it's no big deal.

Xinlong squeaks in surprise, pulling the covers up over his chest- his *bare* chest, since apparently *Anxin* doesn't wear a shirt to sleep- and the stranger rolls his eyes.

"Like I haven't seen you naked before," he says- which is the opposite of reassuring. "How's your head?"

"Um. Fine?" Xinlong asks.

The- roommate? Boyfriend? Friend with *benefits?* Xinlong has to hope it's *friend* at best- fixes him with a look. "You sure? If you die on my watch Leo-hyung will never forgive me."

"I'm not gonna die," Xinlong retorts. Which is probably true, even if none of this makes any sense. He's just- he's *dreaming*, that's all. Can you even die in a dream? He's pretty sure he'd wake up first.

"If you say so," the stranger says with a grin, sitting on the foot of the bed. He's less intimidating when he's not fully upright- the guy is *tall*- and he certainly has a nice smile.

"So are you going to class today?" he asks, tilting his head to one side. It's *cute*- the motion kind of makes him look like a puppy.

"Oh," Xinlong says, processing the question. *What class?* He'd normally have statistics first thing, but who knows what class *Anxin* has? Or if *class* even means the same thing in dream world? But either way… "I probably should."

"Really?" Puppy-guy's face scrunches up with confusion. "I thought for sure you'd jump at the chance to get out of it."

Xinlong stares at him blankly. *What chance?* The fact that he doesn't know who or where he is?

Is it that obvious?

"…Because of the concussion?" Puppy-guy adds eventually, raising an eyebrow.

"Oh, right," says Xinlong. A concussion- that explains the headache, and the comment about him dying. So he has a concussion. Okay.

Wait. Does that mean that maybe this *isn't* a dream? What if everything else was a dream, or a concussion induced hallucination? Can that happen- hallucinating a whole different life?

No, he thinks. *That's insane. I'll wake up soon.*

The stranger is still studying him, like he wants more of an answer, so Xinlong shrugs. "I don't know. I feel fine, so I should go. I don't want to miss anything important."

"You don't want to miss anything important," Puppy-guy echoes, narrowing his eyes.

Yes? Xinlong nods, trying to hide his racing heart. *Is that not normal? Is* this *going to be how I get found out?*

It's not, thankfully. Something seems to click in Puppy-guy's head and he leans back with a knowing grin. *"Right,"* he says, nodding slowly. "Of course. Missing something *important*- we couldn't have that."

Xinlong frowns. "Why are you saying it like that?"

"Like what?" If anything the grin gets only wider.

Like there's something you know that I don't. Xinlong doesn't say that out loud- that could describe any number of things, and he has a feeling this specific one is something Anxin really *should* understand- but he does narrows his eyes.

All he gets in return is another innocent head-tilt. "I just know how much you *love* statistics," Puppy-guy adds. "You should probably get ready if you don't want to be late!"

And with that, he's skipping out of the room, leaving Xinlong more confused than ever.

-

Roommate.

Puppy-guy is Anxin's roommate, which is probably enough on its own to explain the *seen you naked* comment. His real name is Chung Sanghyeon- on his way out Xinlong spots the decorated nametags on their bedroom doors. It seems safe to assume they're also *friends*. Sanghyeon certainly seems to act like it.

Anxin's first class of the day is the same as his- or what his used to be? He's not completely sure yet whether *Xinlong* even exists in this world. None of this makes any sense, and he's a little scared to question it any more than he already has. For now he's choosing to treat it as a game, seeing what he can figure out along the way. Anxin's phone unlocks with a fingerprint, so Xinlong doesn't have to guess at a passcode, and he starts a list on the notes app to keep track of the details he's gathered so far.

Unfortunately, past the surface level stuff it's all a big mystery.

Anxin is nineteen years old according to his ID (and born on Christmas, which is a fun little detail). He's Chinese too, a little taller and thinner than Xinlong remembers being last night, and really *pretty*. Xinlong studied him carefully in the mirror after Sanghyeon left him alone, trying to convince himself this really was happening, and even first thing in the morning, confused and concussed, Anxin looks like he belongs on the cover of a magazine. He's got a small face, big eyes, and, to make him stand out even more, one tooth that sticks out slightly like a little fang. It's…*cute*.

(This definitely isn't someone he knows. If they'd ever met, Xinlong's sure he'd remember.)

Anxin's not a dancer. Xinlong's always been very present in his body and while Anxin is clearly in shape, the build is all wrong for what he's used to. By the time he gets to class he no longer feels like a newborn fawn stumbling around on too-long limbs, but it's still *off*.

Anxin's handwriting is messy and his notes are all over the place. At least his notebooks are labeled, so Xinlong knows he's got the right one, but the contents are painfully hard to follow. Xinlong's notes were always meticulously detailed- it's the only way he can get the material to stick. Especially for something like statistics, which is all about numbers. He had a whole system with color-coded highlighters, to keep them from moving around when he wasn't looking.

(Maybe Anxin never had that problem. If not, then lucky him.)

At least for the time being…that's pretty much all he's got.

As much as he'd love to have *more* information, it is already a little weird how much he's been able to glean. Everything is getting a bit too *real*- dreams are usually fuzzier, less coherent. Aside from being in the body and life of a stranger, everything so far has been entirely normal.

And aren't you not supposed to be able to read? he thinks to himself as the lecture begins. He's pretty sure he heard that somewhere, but he can't remember if he's ever tried.

So maybe it *is* the concussion. Maybe this is what's real, and everything else was a dream. That still sounds way too out there, but the longer this goes on the harder it is to dismiss. Concussions can cause memory loss, right? Is it really so much of a stretch that they could cause full memory *replacement?*

Or it could be a lucid dream. He doesn't know nearly enough about the topic to say.

Would it be so bad, being Anxin? It seems *easier*, at least, aside from not knowing who he is. As far as he can tell *Anxin's* not failing his classes. His roommate was kind of terrifying at first, but that's probably just cause Xinlong was panicking. In retrospect, Sanghyeon seemed perfectly nice. And sure, Anxin's not a dancer- but he *could* be. If Xinlong is stuck here for a while, he can make do.

(It's not like he has a choice anyways. If there's an obvious way out of this, he hasn't found it yet.)

So it's decided: he'll be Anxin for now, at least until he figures out what's going on, and hope he wakes up soon. He *also* hopes he remembers the dream when he does- it could be fun to see if he can figure out where all of this came from.

Stats class is just like he remembered, so at least the broader world isn't significantly different. Just him. That could be a point in favor of the dream theory, although really who's to say? He does notice there's no *Xinlong* here- the seat he normally occupies is conspicuously empty- but the professor doesn't take attendance and no one points it out, so it's unclear whether he's actually *missing*.

Xinlong resists the urge to look himself up on Anxin's phone. That would probably tell him a lot, but he's not sure yet if he actually wants to know. If He Xinlong *doesn't* exist in this bizarre alternate reality, does that mean he made all his memories up? Or that all of this is what's made up? It doesn't seem like it'll actually *answer* any of his questions, just create new ones. And if he *does*…

If he does exist in this world, then where the hell is he?

-

The answer to that is *skipping class,* for the very first time in Xinlong's life. Going is way too much of a risk- it's the one class they share, and if Anxin's right about them switching bodies…

That absolutely cannot be the way he's finally introduced to his crush. He needs to figure out how to fix this, and *fast.* Which is why he's on the wrong side of campus, pacing outside *Leo's* classroom and wishing he would hurry up and come out.

(Why does he think Leo will know what to do? He doesn't, honestly, but he's barely holding it together as is and he needs *someone* to understand.)

Xinlong's so much more *noticeable* than he is. His mini-celebrity status makes him stick out, even when he's not doing anything. Even with his face hidden behind a mask, the hood of Xinlong's jacket pulled down over his forehead, Anxin can't shake the feeling that everyone is *looking* at him, clocking all the ways he doesn't fit.

If he doesn't get them back where they belong *today*, he might absolutely ruin Xinlong's life.

After an agonizing twenty minutes of waiting- he got there early to make sure he could catch Leo *alone*- the doors finally open and the students pour out. Anxin scans each face, frantically searching for his friend and- *there.*

He grabs Leo's wrist to stop him, jerking his attention off the phone in his hand. "I need to talk to you."

Leo startles, blinking in surprise. "Oh, um…"

"Now. It's important." Without letting go, Anxin turns on his heel and storms down the hall, searching for an empty room.

"Okay?" Leo says, allowing himself to be dragged along. "Is…everything okay?"

Anxin barks out a humorless laugh.

"Okay," Leo says again, when he doesn't otherwise respond. "Are you looking for anything in particular, or…?"

"Somewhere to talk in private," Anxin says, turning the corner. This part of the building seems mostly empty, and- there, at the end of the hall, there's a classroom that's been unoccupied long enough for the automatic lights to turn off. That should be safe for now. He drags Leo inside, finally letting him go to shut the door behind them.

"So…it's Xinlong, right?" Leo says.

Anxin grunts, doing a quick check of the room to make sure they really are alone. Just to be safe- it's not like there's anywhere to hide. Satisfied, he nods- then turns to Leo, pulling down the mask. "Hyung, I need your help."

Leo looks taken aback- it must be the honorific. Because, of course, he and *Xinlong* have never spoken.

Anxin sighs. "Hyung, it's me. Anxin."

The shock on his friend's face would be absolutely *hilarious* if he didn't need Leo on board *pronto* so they can get started on actually solving the problem. His eyes bug out and his jaw drops, like something out of a cartoon. "I'm sorry," he says, "*what?"*

"I'm Anxin," Anxin repeats. "I don't know what's going on but when I went to bed last night I was me and this morning I woke up like *this*, and now I think I'm freaking out? No, I'm definitely freaking out- you have to help me, I don't know what to do!"

Now that he's saying it out loud, the insanity of the situation finally hits. Anxin starts pacing back and forth, panic bleeding into his voice as he gestures wildly with his hands. "I don't know what's going on and I don't know how to fix it, but I *have* to fix it soon or it's going to ruin *everything*. I'm- I'm *freaking out*, hyung, what do I *do?* How does something like this even *happen?"*

"Okay, first-" Leo holds up his hands, stepping forward to stop Anxin in his tracks- "breathe?"

Infuriating as it is, it's a good suggestion. Anxin closes his eyes and takes a long, deep breath. When he opens them again, Leo is watching him carefully. But then he *grins*.

"I gotta say, this is pretty far to go for a prank. How'd he manage to rope you into it?"

"Hyung!" Anxin whines, stamping his foot. "It's not- I'm *serious*. This is really, *really* bad!" He starts pacing again, running a frantic hand through his hair and trying *not* to think about how soft it is. "I woke up in his *house*, in his *room.* I'm *wearing his clothes* right now- they smell like him, you know? I don't think I've ever been close enough to know what he smells like before- do you understand how hard it is not to obsess over that? This is the closest I've ever *been* to him by far- it's like a dream come true except it's really a fucking *nightmare*."

He swallows, shifting Xinlong's glasses up to rub at his eyes. "And if *I'm* him, then where is *he?* Because if he's *me* right now- that *can't* happen. That would be- it'd be the *end of the world.* Hyung-" he stops pacing, turning to grab Leo by the shoulders. "If he's me, Sanghyeon's gonna tell him *everything*. Probably by accident! And then what if Xinlong thinks I did this on purpose, that I'm some kind of- some kind of creepy magical *stalker?!* I'm gonna have to use the bathroom eventually you know, which means I'm going to *see his dick*- what if he thinks that was like, the *entire point?* This is the worst thing that's ever happened to me- why are you *laughing?"*

"Oh my god," Leo cackles. "This is *insane*. How long have you two been working on it? You sound *just* like him."

"I *am* him," Anxin insists, voice cracking on a whine. He takes a deep breath, then looks directly into Leo's eyes, letting every drop of fear and sincerity pour out of his own. "Hyung, please- you can ask me anything- anything at all. What do I need to say to make you believe me?"

"Huh." Leo tilts his head, studying him, then grins again. "You sure about that?"

"I have never been more sure of anything in my life."

“What happened with Professor Baek, on the first day of last semester?”

Anxin freezes, jerking back. “I- you promised not to talk about that.”

Leo raises an eyebrow, still grinning. “You said *anything*. If you want me to believe you’re Anxin, then you should know *all* his embarrassing secrets.”

“Yeah, but-” *But you’re bringing up something I’d almost managed to forget.*

“It’s okay if you don’t know,” Leo reassures him, eyes twinkling like he’s already won. “I wouldn’t expect him to have told you.”

Anxin sighs, letting his shoulders drop. He wouldn’t- which is why it has to be something like this. “Fine,” he says. “I was running late to class and when I turned a corner I ran right into him- like, full head-on collision, papers flying everywhere- and then I tried to apologize but I panicked and accidentally told him I didn’t speak Korean.”

There’s a pause, then Leo asks, “Is that all?”

Anxin narrows his eyes. That *has* to be enough to convince him by now- and come to think of it, Leo’s grin *is* fading. Slowly. “No,” he grumbles. “Two hours later we both ended up in his class, and I thought I was safe and maybe he didn’t recognize me, but when I introduced myself he complimented me on *how quickly I learned the language*. And then I had to sit through the rest of the semester knowing he remembered the whole thing.” He scowls, glaring at Leo. “You’re right that I wouldn’t have told Xinlong, you know. The only reason I told *you* is cause you thought he was making assumptions about me being a foreigner and tried to report him to admin for being racist.”

“Wow,” Leo says, staring at him. “Maybe you really are Anxin.”

“I *told* you,” Anxin says, slumping to the floor in front of the chalkboard.

Leo studies him for a moment. “Okay. So, what do you want me to do about it?”

“Help?” Anxin says. “This is bad. Like, really bad, and I have no idea how to fix it-”

“And you’re sure he’s you right now?” Leo interrupts before he can get too far into another spiral.

“I-” Anxin pauses. “Well, no. I’ve been avoiding him- me- whatever, just in case. But probably, right? I mean, that would make the most sense?”

“Dude, none of this makes sense.”

Anxin groans, flopping onto his back. “I hate you.”

Leo sighs. “Well, if you ask me, I think the first step is to confirm whether he *is* you, and maybe loop him in on the whole situation.”

"*Absolutely not."* Anxin shoots upright. "I can't talk to him! Not like this, are you crazy? Did you forget the part about *creepy magical stalkers?"*

Leo leans back, holding up his hands, and Anxin forces himself to relax. "Sorry," he says through gritted teeth. "I just- I *can't*. You know that. I don't know what to do, but- not *that*."

Leo sighs again, sitting on one of the desks. "Okay, then- how about you just tell me what happened."

Anxin shrugs. "I don't know what happened. I told you- I went to sleep as myself, and when I woke up I was him."

"Then tell me what happened last night. Or yesterday, or whatever." Leo starts typing something on his phone- maybe Googling body swaps, like Anxin considered doing earlier. "Was there anything weird, or unusual, that could be related? And I do mean *anything*. Cause I'll be honest, I'm just as stuck as you."

Anxin closes his eyes, putting himself back in the memory of yesterday. "Well, first off- Xinlong did seem like he was more stressed than normal…"

-

Xinlong leaves class without a clue what to do next. He's not sure where Anxin keeps his schedule- he only knew about stats because of Sanghyeon- and he's yet to do too much snooping around. Which probably means *that's* the next step: to find somewhere private and go through Anxin's phone, to really do some sleuthing into who the hell he is. If this dream had him sitting through an entire lecture on conditional probability- a detailed one, too- it might be time to admit it's not actually a dream.

As he's wandering around trying to think of a reasonable place to go do that, Anxin's phone buzzes with a text from *Leo-hyung.*

Leo-hyung. Sanghyeon mentioned a Leo-hyung, now that he thinks about it, who'd apparently kill him if Anxin died. So he's probably a friend. Which (counting his roommate) makes *two* friends now- hey, good for Anxin! That's one more friend than Xinlong had.

Which does call into question the theory about his old life being something Anxin dreamed up. Sure, with Anxin's comparatively normal life it's natural he might fantasize about being a child star. But a washed-up *former* child star with no friends? Why would the fantasy make his life so *sad?*

Unless instead of a fantasy, it's just the concussion. Then he could probably dream up anything.

The text doesn't say much- just a location pin for a building on campus, a room number, and a request to "meet me here asap 🙏". Which, while Xinlong would certainly *like* more information first, at least gives him a more concrete thing to do next.

It really is like he's playing a game, unlocking new quests as he completes the old ones. Step one, go to stats class. Step two, meet Leo-hyung. Step three?

I guess I'll find out when I get there.

He's debating whether and how to respond when he spots a familiar face across the hall: *Arno.*

Xinlong's stomach drops. *Okay. This is fine.*

Except it's *not* fine, because Arno being here makes everything *real*. Sure, just because he hasn't seen anyone he really knows yet doesn't mean they don't exist. Most of his classmates looked vaguely familiar, though he can't say he's ever paid that much attention. If this is a dream, it makes sense for his subconscious to fill in the faces with ones he's seen.

But Arno isn't just *a face he knows*, he's Xinlong's *best friend*. Him being here *changes* things.

It also makes it much more likely that *Xinlong* is out there somewhere too.

Xinlong bites his lip, watching as his only real friend frowns down at his phone. Should he go over? Say hi?

Arno looks *worried*, and not in the way Xinlong's used to. Usually it's hidden behind a smile and veneer of positivity, like he knows that getting too serious will have Xinlong shutting him out. It's always *there*, shining in his eyes, but it's not something that needs to be acknowledged out loud.

This is different. Arno seems genuinely concerned, and Xinlong watches with growing unease as he types something out, then glances up and sweeps his gaze along the hallway.

It passes right over Xinlong. Arno looks straight through him with no sign of recognition, and Xinlong's blood runs cold.

He ducks his head and hurries off before anyone can see the panicked tears poking at the back of his eyes.

Get it together, idiot, he tells himself. *Of course he doesn't recognize you- if he did, you would know who you are. It doesn't have to mean anything. This could still be just a dream.*

He's still clinging to that belief, even as the evidence piles up against it. It's a dream, a very vivid stress dream because he's been running himself into the ground, and tomorrow he'll wake up and can tell Arno all about it.

Anxin's phone buzzes again.

leo-hyung 🦁
please?
its rlly rlly important

Xinlong takes a deep breath, pushing the panic down. Forget Arno for now. He should find out what Leo wants- that's the clear next step. He blinks the tears back, and when he's feeling stable again fires off a simple thumbs up and a "be there soon" before taking off in the direction marked on the ping.

The classroom isn't hard to find, though it's a bit of a trek to get there. The building is on the other side of campus, and the part of it he ends up in looks mostly deserted- at least for right now. Xinlong hurries up to the door, pausing to double-check the room number, and- there's *voices* on the other side.

Voices, *plural*.

He frowns. The text said "meet *me"*, so who else is in there? He can't make out any of the words, but it sounds like at least two people. Which is already one more than he was expecting.

Maybe it's Sanghyeon. Xinlong's stomach flips. The way Sanghyeon was talking this morning, it was like he *knew* something. Does he know Xinlong's an imposter? Did he tell Leo? If so, what are they planning to do about it?

If he continues the metaphor of *playing a game*, this feels like the place for a genre shift. Did he mess up the rules of the dream world enough to turn it into a nightmare? Is he supposed to just keep going like he's told? Or is this whole thing a trap?

Does it even matter? It's not like he has any other options.

He's being silly. He won't know either way unless he opens the door.

Xinlong reaches for the handle, then hesitates. Even if he was invited, they sound like they're in the middle of a conversation- he can't just *barge in*. So he takes a deep breath, steels his nerves, and knocks gently.

The room goes *silent*. Xinlong doesn't dare breathe.

Then the door cracks open and a face appears in the gap, one that splits into a grin as soon as it sees him.

"Oh, good- you're here!" The face- presumably Leo- comes attached to an arm that pulls him into the room before he can finish processing the words.

"Hyung, wait- why- what the hell did you *do?!"* the other person squeals, throwing their hands over their face.

Xinlong opens his mouth to ask a much softer version of the same question, but the words die in his throat as he finally gets confirmation that yes, He Xinlong *does* exist in this universe.

Because Xinlong is currently looking right at him- at *himself*. A version of himself that looks more openly *terrified* than he's let himself show in *years*.

Xinlong's brain…shuts down. None of this makes any sense, and he can only manage to formulate one single thought.

What the hell is going on?

Chapter 3: hold on for a minute

Chapter Notes

> Hi again! This one kind of got away from me a little bit lol- I meant to get it out sooner but the past few weeks have really been kicking my ass. Things should be a bit calmer moving forward though. Speaking of: I have not had much social brain to respond to things lately but please do know I so deeply appreciate everyone reading / liking / commenting; it makes me so happy to hear you're enjoying it :) so thank you, and I hope you like the update 💚
>
> Chapter title from One by Sleeping at Last

The other him hasn't stopped moving since Xinlong entered the room- and he hasn't stopped *talking* either. Not that Xinlong can process any of the words. All he can do is *watch*.

None of this makes any sense. Not that it did before, but now… *none* of it makes *any sense*. This is way past something he can pass off as a dream. It's been hours, horribly *detailed* hours- he certainly should've woken up by now. Either this is really happening, for *real*, or he's having a complete psychotic break.

It's almost funny actually, how he easily he accepted waking up as an entirely different person with an entirely different life. Now, watching *himself* pace back and forth, gesticulating wildly as he rants and raves… *this* is what it took to break him? He doesn't know whether to laugh or cry.

Maybe neither. He's not exactly *feeling* much of anything right now.

Other Xinlong, whoever he is, seems to be having the opposite problem. He's been working himself up more and more since Xinlong arrived and now looks completely distraught, practically on the verge of tears. Somehow that's more disturbing than anything else- Xinlong rarely cries in front of people.

The overwhelming need to *help* teams up with the discomfort at seeing his own tears to override whatever's got him stuck, and the words are out before he can think to say them: "Are you okay?"

Other Xinlong whirls on him, and he instinctively shrinks back. "Am *I* okay?"

Xinlong glances at Leo, then hesitantly nods. Other Xinlong bursts into tears and collapses to the ground.

"Xin- deep breaths, remember?" Leo says, taking a step towards him.

“This is the worst thing that’s ever happened to me,” Other Xinlong moans into the floor.

Xinlong bites his lip, looking to Leo again. He desperately *wants* to help but… what does he even *do?*

“He’ll be fine,” Leo assures him, though he doesn’t sound that confident. He fixes his gaze on Xinlong. “Are *you* okay?”

Oh.

Now, that’s an *excellent* question. Xinlong opens his mouth to answer, then pauses. *Is* he okay? He *feels* fine, if a little far away. He’s certainly not *upset*, the way his counterpart seems to be. But there sure is a lot happening right now, and he might be going insane, and all of this is starting to make his head hurt-

“I think I have a concussion,” he says eventually.

The other him looks up at Leo, lip wobbling, and gestures towards Xinlong. “Hyung, are you hearing this? I gave *He Xinlong* a *concussion!”* He falls into another fit of sobs as Leo hurriedly tries to placate him. For a moment, no one is looking at him, so Xinlong takes the opportunity to stumble into a chair and finally sit down.

They know who he is, who he *really* is. Other Xinlong knows his *name*- which means they don’t think he’s Anxin, because he’s *not* Anxin. Because…

“You’re me,” he says out loud. That’s the part that’s easy to say- the one they’ve already confirmed.

Anxin, because that’s who Other Xinlong *has* to be, nods miserably.

Xinlong swallows, forcing himself to continue. “And…I’m you?”

“Yeah.”

Okay. That’s…something, at least. This isn’t a dream, or a mental break- or maybe it is, but it’s not just him hallucinating a different life. It’s him *switching lives* with someone else, which seems less likely to be something his brain just invented. So then…

“How?”

Anxin’s face- his face- crumples. “I don’t *know!”*

Xinlong rubs at his neck, checking his pulse- a nervous habit he’s had for years. It’s much faster than it should be. “Can- can we fix it?”

He looks to Anxin, then they both look to Leo, who glances between them and shrugs.

“Probably?” he says. “I honestly don’t know, guys. If you asked me an hour ago if *this* was even possible, I would’ve sworn it wasn’t. So if there is a way to fix it, I don’t know what it is.”

“Don’t say that,” Anxin whispers, eyes round with fear.

Leo shakes his head. “No, no- I’m sure there’s *some* way to get you back where you belong. Just…”

“Just?” Xinlong asks, when he trails off.

“It just might take a while,” Leo finishes with a grimace. “Cause we’re starting from nothing. So I think the *first* thing to do is figure out how to get through the rest of today- maybe even the next couple days- just until we can get this sorted out.”

Anxin groans, dropping his face back into the floor. “I’m going to *die*.”

Something buzzes in his pocket- *Xinlong’s phone*. Anxin pulls it out and shoves it away from him without even looking at the notification.

Xinlong frowns, hands twitching with the urge to grab it. Leo clocks the motion.

“Who’s that?” he asks, a little too casually.

“Probably just *Hao-ge* again,” Anxin mumbles into the floor. “Like it was the last five times.”

Ice shoots through Xinlong’s veins and the worried look on Arno’s face leaps back to the forefront of his mind. “Have you been ignoring him?”

Anxin gives him a look. “Well, yeah- what am I supposed to say?”

“I-” Xinlong stops himself, because that’s a good point. “You have to say *something*,” he says. “Otherwise- if you don’t, he’s gonna think something happened.”

Scratch that, he *already* thinks something happened. If Arno’s texted him *five times* this morning, he’s probably wondering if Xinlong died in his sleep.

“Something *did* happen,” Anxin reminds him. “We switched bodies, remember?”

“Yeah, but-” Xinlong stops again, the world tilting underneath him as horrible reality finally hits. “Oh my god,” he whispers. “This is really bad.”

Arno can’t find out about any of this. He already worries way too much- now he’s worrying *even more*- and if he finds out *Anxin’s* walking around in his skin…

He’s going to think I’ve lost my mind.

Anxin sighs, sitting up. “That’s what I said.”

Xinlong shakes his head, drawing his knees up to his chest. “No, this is really bad. Really, *really* bad.”

“Hey, no-” Anxin starts, reaching a hand towards him before aborting the motion and glancing nervously at Leo. “It’ll be okay. We’ll figure it out. Right, hyung? We’ll figure it out?”

“Right,” Leo says.

Xinlong shakes his head again, barely listening. He stares into the floor, thoughts racing through his head. This is a nightmare, an absolute *nightmare*. He has *so many* responsibilities that he’s barely juggling as is- how is he supposed to handle *any* of them in the body of a stranger? It’s not like he can ask Anxin to do it. Everything is finally falling apart in from of him and there’s absolutely nothing he can do to stop it.

This is *just*…bad. Very, very bad.

Leo approaches carefully, placing a hand on his shoulder to get his attention. “Xinlong, it’s okay. Try to stay calm.”

“I-” Xinlong stares at him and swallows, panicked tears once again pricking at the back of his eyes. “I *can’t*,” he whimpers, and the tears make good on their threat. He buries his face in his knees, squeezing his eyes shut and holding his breath to try and force them back inside.

“You can,” Leo says gently, squeezing his shoulder. “Hey, listen- it’ll be fine, okay? We’ll figure this out together.”

Xinlong takes a long shuddering breath, forcing himself to listen to the words.

Leo’s right- there has to be a solution, and he’s not going to find it by sitting here crying like a baby. It’s a waste of time, and he should know better than that. These *feelings* are just inconveniencing everyone, and they need to *go away*.

It takes effort, but Xinlong manages to swallow the fear and lift his head.

“Sorry,” he murmurs.

“Don’t say that,” Anxin snaps, and Xinlong startles at his ferocity. Anxin’s eyes widen before he quickly looks away, cheeks flushing. “I just mean- you don’t have to apologize.”

Xinlong frowns. Something about that is…*odd*. But Anxin does seem like an emotional person, and there isn’t time to worry about it now- they have bigger fish to fry. Speaking of: he takes a deep breath, straightens up, and locks the last of the panic away, fixing his gaze on Anxin.

“What do I need to know to be you?”

Anxin looks back at him, confused. “What?”

“If we’re stuck like this for now, I need to know how to be you. Assuming we don’t want everyone to find out?” Anxin blanches, shaking his head, and Xinlong nods. “Didn’t think so. I’ve been making a list of what I’ve learned so far, but it’s pretty short.” He pulls up the note as he speaks, reading off the first few points: “Zhou Anxin, nineteen years old, born on

Christmas. Recently concussed?" He pauses, glancing at Anxin for confirmation- it *sounded* recent, the way Sanghyeon was talking about it.

Anxin nods slowly. "Yesterday evening."

"That makes sense." Xinlong chooses to skip over his comments on Anxin's physique and poor notetaking, jumping to: "Roommate: Chung Sanghyeon- he's really friendly, but I think he's already suspicious-"

"Did he tell you anything?" Anxin blurts out. "About me, I mean?"

Xinlong blinks in surprise. "Um. Not really?" He glances at Leo. The only really weird thing Sanghyeon said was about *seeing Anxin naked*- maybe they *are* hooking up? If that's true and it's a secret, it would explain why Anxin looks so intense. The last thing Xinlong wants to do is accidentally expose him in front of his friend.

"He said you love statistics?" Xinlong offers instead, and watches confusion flicker through Anxin's eyes before something dawns on him.

"Yup!" he says, only slightly strangled. "I really do."

Xinlong nods as if that makes sense, even though he's pretty sure he's still missing something. If it's important Anxin will tell him. "Okay," he says. "Um, but with Sanghyeon actually, I don't know how well I'll be able to hide this-"

"You *can't* tell him," Anxin says, surging forward. "Please, he can't know. He'll never let me live it down, not in a million years."

Xinlong frowns, instinctively leaning back. "Okay, um. I won't tell him. I guess- I guess I can play up the concussion? That might be enough to explain anything weird." He's already flicking through scenarios in his head, making contingencies. It's actually pretty convenient, now that he thinks about it- at least the injury is useful for something.

"And it gets you out of basketball practice," Leo offers.

"Oh, you play basketball?" Xinlong glances at Anxin, adding that to his note. That tracks with his earlier analysis- not a dancer, but a different type of athlete.

Several things flicker across Anxin's face, and despite it really being *his* face, Xinlong can't read any of them. "Yeah," he says quietly.

"Okay." Xinlong nods. "Anything else I should know? We actually have the same first class today- I took notes, and I can send them to you. And if you send me your schedule I'll try not to make waves in any of the others."

Hopefully none of Anxin's classes are discussion based- he wouldn't even know what to talk about. At least in that case he can pull the concussion card.

Xinlong looks up to see Anxin staring at him, and frowns. "What?"

“How are you not freaking out anymore?”

Xinlong shrugs. “Well, panicking isn’t going to help anything. It’s better to focus on the things I *can* do.” He’s well-practiced in pushing anxiety out of the way. If he couldn’t work under pressure he’d have burned out years ago- what is this situation but slightly higher stakes?

“Yeah, but-” Anxin stops, biting his lip. *“You* don’t have a concussion.”

“So?”

“So, does that mean I have to *dance?”*

Anxin looks petrified by the prospect, and suddenly all of his nerves make sense. Xinlong’s been so focused on pinning down the pieces he *can* control, he completely forgot the side of this he *can’t*. He’s almost managed to convince himself he can be Anxin, but can Anxin be *him?* The thought is absolutely terrifying.

“Oh,” is all he can think of to say. “Fuck.”

-

Sitting in Xinlong's class a few hours later, Anxin tries to ignore the way his heart is pounding. He’s been heavily debriefed on what to expect for the rest of the day- Xinlong is *incredibly* meticulous- and now it’s just a matter of not messing it up.

Right now that means paying attention and taking notes, despite not understanding any of what’s going on. He’s trying his best to write neatly and capture what he thinks are the key ideas. Hopefully at least some of it is right.

At least he hasn’t had to worry much about convincing anyone he’s Xinlong. No one really bothers to talk to him, actually, aside from his neighbor asking to borrow a pen. One that he doesn’t return at the end of class.

The professor finishes the lecture with a reminder about an upcoming project, the date of which Anxin dutifully notes down. She also emphasizes the late policy- ten percent off their grade per calendar day- and looks directly at him as she says it. Anxin frowns, writing that down as well, and reminds himself to make sure Xinlong knows about it.

Something about the way she said it felt *pointed*, but he could be overthinking it. During the hour or so they’d planned together in that classroom- which was almost like a *date*, if he lets himself be lovesick; Leo left once they’d reached a sort of rhythm and then it was *just the two of them*- Xinlong had taken his laptop from Anxin to submit some assignment for this class he’d apparently been working on last night.

> *“It’s not exactly finished, but something is better than nothing,” he’d said. “I was in the middle of working on it when I fell asleep.”*
>
> *“Oh, so that’s why I woke up on your desk.”*

Xinlong cringed apologetically. "Yeah. Sorry about that."

Anxin valiantly resisted the urge to tell him not to apologize. Again.

So maybe the professor's singling him out, or maybe Anxin's just reading into things that aren't there.

Unfortunately, this sets the pattern for the rest of the day: too many classes he doesn't understand, assignments and due dates piling up in his notebook, and a complete and total lack of any social interaction.

He knows from observation that Xinlong isn't very talkative, but it's weird seeing it from the inside. It doesn't feel like *he doesn't talk* so much as *no one talks to him*. Anxin catches people *looking* at him occasionally, but they never actually say anything. Whether or not that's intentional on Xinlong's part is unclear- maybe they're just intimidated by his sharp features or semi-famous childhood.

Maybe it'll be better at dance. At least in theory, Xinlong should be closer to his teammates.

Anxin gets to the studio early, as instructed. This is the part of the day he's the most afraid of- sure, he's seen Xinlong perform plenty of times, but that doesn't mean he can do it himself. He's got incredibly detailed notes on who everyone is and what he should do or not do, but putting it into practice is another story. He's bound to forget *something*- hopefully whatever it is doesn't completely blow his cover.

Arno's going to be the hardest to convince, since he already has reason to be suspicious. At least Anxin has an excuse to fall back on if need be: Xinlong helped him craft a response to the increasingly curious texts from this morning, claiming he forgot to charge his phone last night and slept through his alarm.

(Arno's response, half an hour later, was to praise him for *finally getting some sleep*. And sure, sleep deprivation is going to be Anxin's version of the *"I have a concussion"* excuse, but it doesn't sit right with him how easily Arno buys into it.)

He's taking his time stretching on the floor as the rest of the team filters in. Xinlong is much more flexible than he is, which he's trying very hard *not* to think about. It's already bad enough he's taken over Xinlong's body- thinking about him like *that* feels like an utter violation. One Xinlong doesn't have any reason to suspect, and if Anxin is careful, he never has to.

(Leo promised before he left that he'd "try to keep Sanghyeon in check." Anxin can only pray that it works.)

Most of Xinlong's teammates don't really talk to him either, except one who offers a greeting of "hey superstar" that he barely acknowledges. Xinlong mentioned something like that might happen.

"It's a joke," he said, though he didn't sound too happy about it. "It's sounds like a compliment, but it isn't really. But it's not worth fighting over. Just like, smile and nod,

and they'll move on."

Arno is the real exception. As soon as he walks in he's joining Anxin on the floor and launching into a conversation.

"You're serious today," he says, poking the furrow in Anxin's brow. "Thought sleep would look better on you."

Anxin shrugs. "I guess."

Arno glances around, then lowers his voice as he leans forward into a stretch. "You sure you're doing okay? I know it's been a lot lately, and you can always take a break."

"He's definitely going to ask if you're okay, especially with the whole ghosting thing. Probably more than once," Xinlong told him. "Just smile and tell him you're fine."

"Won't he get suspicious?" Anxin asked. "I don't know if I'm a good enough liar."

Xinlong shrugged. "Neither am I, but he's never called me out on it before."

He'd quickly moved on before Anxin could say anything else on the subject.

Anxin forces a smile, gritting his teeth against the memory. "I'm fine."

Arno raises a disbelieving eyebrow, but- just like Xinlong said- doesn't push the issue. Something deeply uncomfortable curls in Anxin's stomach.

"Well, let me know if that changes. You know I'm always down to fistfight your problems for you."

It's a fun image, and the question slips out before he can stop it. "What if my problems aren't something you can fight?"

Arno's face splits into a grin. "Oh, I guess *someone's* never punched an abstract concept in the face before."

Anxin laughs in spite of himself, covering his mouth with his hand to block out the sound. Arno cocks his head, giving him a weird look.

"Since when do you try to cover up your laughter?"

He doesn't wait for an answer, giving Anxin a friendly nudge on the shoulder as he stands to call everyone's attention. On the inside, Anxin is panicking- that was way too close. He has to be more careful.

The practice itself goes just as poorly as he feared. He's trying his best to follow Xinlong's advice-

"Isn't there any way I can just sit out?" he'd asked. "It doesn't have to be obvious. Maybe I'm just not feeling well."

Xinlong started shaking his head before he'd even finished speaking. "Not unless something's broken or you're actively dying." He sighed, offering Anxin an apologetic shrug. "If you just show up and say you're not up to it, Hao-ge will definitely know something's up."

"Then what do I do?" Anxin asked. "There's no way I can actually learn the dances by then."

"Just…try to copy what everyone else is doing. Stick to the sides or the back, so you can watch them in the mirror. Don't volunteer to demonstrate- if Hao-ge looks at you to do it, don't meet his eyes. If you mess something up really badly, just stop and reset-"

"Won't that be obvious?" Anxin interjected. "If I just stop in the middle?"

"Well, yeah," Xinlong said, "but it'll be more obvious if you keep doing the wrong thing."

"I guess."

"It'll be fine," Xinlong told him, after a beat of silence. "Don't worry. You'll be fine."

It sounded more like he was trying to convince himself.

-and at least does better than he could have, almost making it through two full runs before Arno pulls him out.

"Something's up with you today," he says. "I think you need to take a break."

"Wait- no, I can do it," Anxin protests.

"I know you *can*," Arno tells him, "but for whatever reason you're *not*, and it's throwing everything off. So you're sitting the next one out- captain's orders."

Anxin wants to argue, for Xinlong's sake more than his own, but Arno's face leaves no room for disagreement. "Sorry," he mumbles.

"You know I thought yesterday was a fluke, but maybe he actually *is* human," someone murmurs. Anxin doesn't see who says it, but he hears another of his teammates giggle and his ears burn red.

"Mind your own business," Arno snaps. "He's allowed to have bad days."

I don't think he is, actually, Anxin realizes as practice picks up again. Being Xinlong is opening his eyes to a lot of things he'd never fully considered before. The way Xinlong talks about this, the way he behaves…*having a bad day* doesn't sound like something he *lets* himself do.

It's a sobering thought. Xinlong's life is honestly…really difficult. So much work, so much pressure- and maybe it's just cause Anxin's always been a social butterfly, but it's also really *lonely*.

He shouldn't read too much into it. It's not his job to fix all of Xinlong's problems, even if he'd love nothing more in the world. As much as he tried to hide it Xinlong was clearly uncomfortable having someone else in his skin, so Anxin really should respect his boundaries as best he can when he's been forced on the other side of them.

He sighs. Loving someone is *hard*. Hopefully Xinlong's having an easier time in his life.

-

Xinlong is certainly trying his best- with *painfully* little direction. He'd given Anxin detailed notes on everything he does, everyone he interacts with. Anxin essentially just told him to *wing it.*

> *"I mean, if you're acting weird or there's something you "forgot", you can always just blame the concussion," he'd said. "And if someone's pushing you about it, just pout and accuse them of being mean to you. Or with Sanghyeon specifically, roll your eyes and tell him to shut up, and if he's eating something, steal it. I do that all the time- he actually might notice if you don't."*
>
> *Xinlong frowned. "That's not very nice." He'd hoped Leo leaving the room might make Anxin more willing to clarify his deeply confusing relationship with his roommate, but no such luck.*
>
> *"It's fine, we're friends," Anxin said. "He might complain, but it doesn't mean anything. Trust me."*

Xinlong has his doubts, but he doesn't really have a choice. Fortunately it's yet to come up. So far he's just been going through Anxin's classes, which thankfully aren't too difficult despite his unfamiliarity with the material. He makes sure to take detailed notes so as to not miss anything important- he can't have Anxin falling behind due to *his* shortcomings.

What's really unsettling is the way people just…talk to him. He's so used to coming off an unapproachable that when his seatmate strikes up a conversation before class it takes a full thirty seconds to register that the guy's talking to *him*.

And, of course, Xinlong doesn't even know his *name*. He nods along as best he can, eyes darting around for clues- until he spots something at the top of one of the guy's papers: *Lee Sangwon*. Okay. He can work with that.

Except that in searching for it he fully stopped listening, and Sangwon *definitely* noticed- but before he can apologize Sangwon asks, "Are you okay? You seem a little off."

"Oh," Xinlong says. "Yeah, no, sorry. I just- I have a concussion."

"Ah." Sangwon nods sympathetically, like that explains everything. "Basketball?"

"Yeah."

"That sucks. Should you be in class?" Sangwon taps his notebook. "I can send you a copy of my notes, if that would help?"

“Oh, um.” Xinlong glances around the room. No one appears to be listening to them- because why would they? It’s a silly thing to worry about. “That’s okay, I think. You don’t have to do that.”

Sangwon shrugs. “It’s no trouble.”

Xinlong hesitates. Asking for help has always been difficult- but this isn’t asking so much as Sangwon offering, and more importantly it’s for *Anxin’s* sake, not his. Sangwon’s notes will probably be more useful than anything he can come up with. So he nods. “Okay. Thanks.”

“Sure thing.”

That’s the end of it, because class is starting, but the conversation sticks with him for the rest of the hour. Is this what it’s like to have friends? Is Sangwon even Anxin’s *friend*, or are they just classmates? Anxin didn’t mention him- is that because they’re not close, or Anxin’s close to too many people to name?

Whatever it is, it’s nice.

-

Despite the concussion, Xinlong heads to basketball practice when classes are over on Anxin’s instruction.

> *“You’re not cleared to play, obviously, but you should probably still hang out and watch,” Anxin said. “It might be kind of boring if you’re not really a sports person, but you don’t have to pay attention if you don’t want to.”*

That was *all* he’d bothered to say on the subject before moving on to the next thing. Xinlong had to stop him just to get the names of his teammates- something he’s glad he did, since one of them- Kim Geonwoo- approaches him right off the bat.

“How’s your head?” Geonwoo asks.

“Huh?” Xinlong blinks at him. “Oh, it’s, um, fine I guess. I’m not cleared to play though.”

He’s not exactly lying about being *fine*- the pain comes and goes and it hasn’t been bothering him for a while. Right now, it’s not bothering him at all.

Though he *is* still supposed to be playing it up.

“That’s good,” Geonwoo says. He smiles awkwardly, rubbing his neck. “I know I said it a bunch already, but I really am sorry.”

“For what?”

Geonwoo frowns. “Hitting you with the ball?”

Oh- this must be the guy who concussed him. Another thing Anxin didn’t actually explain.

Xinlong shakes his head. “Right, yeah. Of course. Sorry. It’s fine, don’t worry about it.”

Geonwoo starts to say something, but he’s interrupted by another teammate slinging an arm around his shoulders. “Hey Anxin, how’s it going? This guy bothering you?”

Xinlong blinks at him, not sure how to react. The newcomer- *Junseo* is the name that comes to mind- is grinning like it’s a joke, and Geonwoo sticks out his lip in a pout. “I’m saying *sorry*.”

“Of *course*,” Junseo says, giving Xinlong a conspiratorial look. “Don’t worry, Xin- I gave him a *stern* talking to last night. He won’t do it again.”

“Hyung, come on!” Geonwoo protests. “You’re making it sound like it was on purpose.”

Junseo raises his eyebrows with a look that says *I mean…*, and Geonwoo’s jaw drops. “It *wasn’t!”* he insists. “I swear it wasn’t!”

Over Geonwoo’s shoulder, Junseo catches Xinlong’s eye and stifles a laugh. He’s obviously just fucking with Geonwoo but Geonwoo’s falling for it hook, line, and sinker. The realization has Xinlong’s face cracking into a smile, and Junseo’s grin widens.

“Got him,” he says, poking Xinlong’s right cheek, then grabs Geonwoo to drag him over to where the rest of the team is circling up. *Right,* Xinlong remembers, touching the same spot as they leave. *Anxin’s dimple*. He noticed it in the mirror this morning, thinking it an odd coincidence that it sits opposite his own.

Anxin has a nice smile. He must not have been wearing it when he came in- too busy thinking about what to do next- and Junseo was trying to cheer him up. *Maybe he thinks I’m sad about having to sit out*, Xinlong thinks. *Or maybe he’s just that friendly*.

Either way, it’s kind of him to reach out.

Anxin told him he didn’t have to pay attention during practice, but he does anyways. Not so much to the game itself, but definitely to the players. They all work *together*, like an actual team. Even split in two and playing against each other, it doesn’t seem like there’s much real competition. He can *feel* the comradery- and the way they’re even including *him*, sitting on the sidelines. It’s…nice.

Junseo and Geonwoo are on opposite sides, and partway through the game, Junseo catches Xinlong’s eye after blocking one of Geonwoo’s shots. He grins, shouts “this one’s for you, Anxin!” and hurls the ball across the court in a wild three point shot that misses the net by several feet.

“Dude, the fuck was *that?”* one of their teammates asks as he and several others burst into laughter. It’s contagious- Xinlong can’t help but join in.

“Junseo, come on,” Coach sighs. “Focus?”

Junseo bows in apology, but grins at Xinlong as he straightens up. Xinlong returns it, letting Anxin’s beautiful smile shine back.

-

Anxin should still be at dance, so he gets dinner with Leo and Sanghyeon. In some ways this is easier than anything else today, since Leo's one of the only people who knows who he is- but on the other hand, Sanghyeon knows Anxin better than anyone and he's not allowed to find out.

Which is a problem, because Sanghyeon won't stop talking about how *weird* he's being today. Xinlong's trying his best to ignore it.

> *"You can just not listen to him," Anxin said. "I tune out all the time. If it's really important, he'll get your attention."*
>
> *"Do you not like him?" Xinlong asked.*
>
> *Anxin frowned. "Of course I do. He's like, my best friend."*
>
> *"Then why wouldn't you listen to what he has to say?"*
>
> *Anxin rolled his eyes. "I do most of the time. Sanghyeon just talks a lot. And sometimes he says really stupid things, that aren't worth the attention." Then he paused, like he was realizing something important, and quickly added, "Actually, just don't listen to anything he says- whatever it is it's probably not true anyways. He likes to exaggerate, you know? He can't be trusted."*
>
> *Xinlong didn't bother to ask why Anxin can't trust his "best friend". It didn't seem a question that would get a real answer.*

"…but you know the weirdest part?" Sanghyeon is saying as Xinlong tunes back in. "He hasn't mentioned you-know-who even *once*."

Leo chokes on his drink, coughing loudly.

"What are you talking about?" Xinlong asks. This sounds like something he should *know*- why didn't Anxin *tell* him?

Why didn't Anxin tell him *anything?*

Sanghyeon rolls his eyes. "Don't play dumb. It's all *you* talk about these days- "Oh Sanghyeon! Isn't he just so pretty? I saw him in the library and I almost said hi, but I couldn't do it. Does he look stressed to you? More than usual, I mean. Look at his hair, doesn't it look perfect?"" He clutches his hands to his chest, batting his eyes as he speaks, then drops the act entirely. "Like, I'm not *complaining* that you've finally stopped, but you have to admit it's *weird.*"

Xinlong glances at Leo, who's pointedly not making eye contact with him. So, whatever this is, he's on his own.

Here goes nothing.

“Oh, shut up,” he says, rolling his eyes. Then, with only the slightest hesitation, snatches a piece of chicken off Sanghyeon’s plate and shoves it in his mouth.

For a brief moment he’s terrified this was the wrong move- Anxin wouldn’t lie to him about what it’s okay to do in his body, right?- but Sanghyeon just laughs. “There he is,” he says, nudging Xinlong with his shoulder.

It also seems to get Sanghyeon off his back, just like Anxin predicted. Though that might be because Leo blurts out a question like he’s trying to change the subject and the conversation quickly moves on, leaving Xinlong free to process whatever just happened.

From the sound of it, Anxin has a crush. One he talks about a lot, but has never spoken to? Maybe he’s embarrassed, and that’s why he didn’t mention it to Xinlong? It certainly sounds like Sanghyeon’s trying to embarrass him.

Leo’s reaction is weird, though. Sure, maybe Anxin didn’t want to bring it up- or somehow just didn’t *think* to- but it almost seemed like Leo was trying to hide something from *Xinlong* specifically. That *something* being Anxin’s crush. But what would Anxin having a *crush* have to do with him?

There’s an obvious answer, and it has his guts twisting with guilt.

Does Anxin like me?

It’s not like he can ask. If he’s wrong, it’ll sound so self-centered- and if he’s right, what a horrible violation of Anxin’s privacy. Clearly he’s not ready for his crush to know.

Is that *why Sanghyeon can’t know about the switch?*

The more he thinks about it, the more it makes sense- and the worse he feels. Why would Anxin even like him? They don’t know each other at all. It must be because of his dance, then- he’s well aware of how he shines onstage. If Anxin knew him outside of that- really *knew* him- the feelings would probably fade. Which means this whole thing could be a blessing in disguise, giving Anxin the info he needs to move on.

Poor Anxin. There have to be better ways to get over a crush than getting stuck in their raging dumpster fire of a life.

Hopefully this will all be over with soon.

-

Anxin stays after practice once everyone else leaves, like Xinlong always does. He’s counting the seconds until he can go meet up for their promised debrief- and hopefully get something to eat too; he’s *starving*- but he has to at least wait until everyone else is gone so no one questions the difference.

Arno lingers the longest, slowly packing up while Anxin stretches. It feels like he’s waiting for something- for Anxin to say something, maybe- but Anxin stays quiet.

Eventually Arno makes his way out, pausing in the doorway with a sigh. “Just…take care of yourself, Longlong.”

He says it with the resigned cadence of something he’s said before and knows he’ll say again. Anxin nods, but can’t meet his eyes. “I will.”

But I can’t promise Xinlong *will do so.*

Then Arno leaves, and Anxin is alone.

He sighs, leaning back against the mirror and letting some of the tension he’s been holding all day finally drain out. Being Xinlong is so *hard*- and it’s not even just the having to pretend. From the outside it looks like a balancing act, but Anxin could imagine he wasn’t juggling it *all* on his own. He’d (perhaps naively) assumed at least *someone* was helping. Arno seems to be trying his best to be that person, but for some reason Xinlong just won’t let him.

> *“Hao-ge can’t know,” was the very first rule he’d set down. “It’ll just make him worry, and he does that way too much already.”*

It wasn’t like Anxin could argue, could he? He’d already said the same thing about Sanghyeon- for different reasons, of course, but still.

It’s just so *lonely*. Even dance, which it always seemed like he loved- well, maybe that sucked because Anxin can’t dance to save his life, but it feels like more than that. Does he even like his teammates? Do they even like him?

Is Xinlong even *happy?*

His wish- to know how to make Xinlong smile- flickers back into his mind, and Anxin frowns. It’s a thought he remembers having recently, but he can’t quite place *when*.

Maybe I can try to figure that out while I’m here, he thinks. *He deserves to be happy.*

Eventually, when it feels like enough time has passed that no one will catch him leaving, Anxin gets up and heads out. He maybe cuts it a little closer than he should, but practice ran late already and he doesn’t want to keep Xinlong waiting any longer than he already has. Even though he has to have known this was a possibility.

Anxin rushes across campus to the classroom they met in earlier that day, bursting through the doors to see *himself* gazing out the window with a paper bag in front of him. “I’m here!”

He’s spent the past few hours in a room full of mirrors so by now he’s almost *used* to the idea of the swap, but it’s still surreal to see another person looking at him with his own face. Xinlong jumps at the noise, but mostly relaxes when he sees who it is. “Hi,” he says softly, and holds out the bag. “I brought dinner.”

“You’re *amazing*,” Anxin says, trotting up to take it. “I’m *so hungry.*”

Xinlong shrugs. “It’s from Leo-hyung.”

That explains how it has Anxin's favorites, something Xinlong obviously wouldn't know. But he'd rather pretend *Xinlong* got it for him, as silly as it makes him feel.

"Your life is *exhausting*," he says as he sets up the food, so he doesn't do something stupid like say his lovesick thoughts out loud. "Like, I knew it has to be, for you to be so tired all the time, but actually *living* it is a whole different thing. Your schedule has like, no breaks in it, ever, you know? It's just one thing after another. And you have *so much* homework! No wonder you've been stressed lately; I'd lose my mind if I had this much to do."

Once he's started it's hard to stop talking. He pauses briefly to take a bite, then picks up right where he left off. "Also dance was *crazy*. Everyone's always looking at you to know everything, and the moment you don't- or, I guess, when *I* didn't- they'll just jump down your throat about it." He points his chopsticks at Xinlong. "Hao-ge made me sit out after a few runs, like you predicted. And guess what? As soon as he did, someone was all like "oh maybe he *is* human," which…yeah? Obviously? Just cause you can dance circles around everyone else doesn't mean you're not a *person*."

He scoffs, shaking his head. "And it's not just today either- you know, I've always kind of wondered why you don't really *celebrate* after your performances the way everyone else does. You'll smile through the bows and all, but as soon as the lights go down it all drops, like- like you're waiting to find out what you did wrong. But I kind of think I get it now? Cause if you *did* do anything wrong, like literally anything at all, someone is bound to tell you about it, even if it's "just a joke" about how you're supposed to be perfect. But that's crazy! How do they expect you to be absolutely perfect *all the time?* That's just like, *impossible*. It's exhausting just to *think* about- I can't believe you *live* like this."

Throughout the whole rant, Xinlong watches him in silence. He looks a bit taken aback actually- which, to be fair, Anxin *did* just burst in here and spend two minutes straight complaining about his life while barely taking a breath.

(In fairness to Anxin, he's hardly spoken to anyone all day. So maybe he got a little bit carried away.)

He swallows another bite and smiles apologetically, feeling his face turning red. "Sorry- it's just frustrating. I hope your day was better."

Xinlong nods slowly, then looks back out the window. "Yeah, I guess."

He doesn't say anything else. Silence stretches between them, and threatens to turn awkward.

"You got any brilliant insights into what it's like to be Zhou Anxin?" Anxin prods.

Xinlong shrugs. "Your friends are nice."

"Yeah?" says Anxin. That's not what he expected- not that he *disagrees*, it's just…not what he expected.

Xinlong nods again. "Yeah. People talk to you, a lot, like…" He trails off, and shrugs again. "I don't know. Like they just like talking to you."

And no one talks to Xinlong. Besides Arno, that is, and a couple of the other dancers, but they kind of act like they see him as both an icon and a threat. So it's *not* just Anxin- Xinlong *is* lonely.

I like talking to you, he almost says. It's true, even if he's only had the opportunity under these most bizarre of circumstances. Xinlong's *nice* and he's *interesting* and Anxin wants to spend every second with him-

-which is why he swallows the words and lets them return to silence. It may be true, but it's also dangerously close to a confession.

Eventually he sighs. "I think you might have to take a break from dance."

Xinlong's gaze snaps back to him, his whole body tensing. "What?"

"No, that's not-" Anxin waves his hands, straightening up. "I don't mean *you*, I mean me, as you. Just until we figure this out. Cause I was trying my best, really, but it was *super* obvious something was up. So I just think- I mean, I can keep trying, but how many "off-days" will it take before people start getting suspicious? Hao-ge's *already* suspicious, he just thinks it's burnout or something."

Xinlong chews on his lip, fingers sneaking up to his pulse point. "…I guess."

"Plus it'll give us time to get you caught up on everything else," Anxin offers. "You have *so* many assignments coming up. It's kind of insane."

"Everything else is fine," Xinlong says, shaking his head. "I can handle it."

Anxin raises an eyebrow. "You sure about that? Cause it seems like-"

"Do you think I can't?" Xinlong cuts him off with a sharp glare, and suddenly Anxin understands why Sanghyeon used to find him so intimidating. He leans back slightly, breaking eye contact.

"No, I just…" he pauses, trying to choose his words carefully. "I think you shouldn't have to. That's all."

Xinlong doesn't say anything right away, and when Anxin lifts his eyes again he's looking down at his hands, shrunken in on himself.

"Sorry," Xinlong murmurs, and Anxin frowns.

"You say that a lot, you know." *And it's rarely your fault.*

Xinlong glances at him, fidgeting with his hands, then looks away again. Anxin doesn't want to push anymore than he already has, so he holds his tongue and returns to his food.

"There's something else," Xinlong says quietly. "About your friends- or, about Sanghyeon, I mean."

Anxin frowns. “What is it?”

Did he find out about the swap? It’s okay if he did. Or well, not *okay*, it’s an absolute *nightmare scenario* that means Anxin might have to flee the country- but it was probably inevitable, so he’s not going to let *Xinlong* feel guilty about it.

Xinlong traces a pattern on his knees, not meeting Anxin’s eyes. “He was teasing me- teasing *you,* I guess- about some, um. About a crush.”

“Oh.” Anxin’s eyes go wide. *Oh no. Worse. End of the world.*

“He didn’t say who it was,” Xinlong adds quickly. “Just that it was weird I wasn’t talking about him. I told him to- to shut up, like you said, and he did laugh so I think that was okay. And then Leo-hyung changed the subject, so that was it. But I just… I thought, since you didn’t mention it earlier, that… that maybe it was a secret. So I just thought you should know that I know.”

“Oh,” Anxin says again. So Xinlong doesn’t know it’s *him?* Except he has to, doesn’t he? Even if Sanghyeon didn’t mention Xinlong by name, he must’ve still figured it out. And hell, Anxin basically admitted to watching him for months during his rant about Xinlong’s life. If he hadn’t figured it out before…

So Xinlong’s just being *nice* right now. Giving him an out, letting him pretend. That only hurts his heart *more*.

Anxin takes a deep breath. *Here goes nothing.*

He opens his mouth, intending to confess, and what comes out it, “Please don’t be mad.”

Xinlong’s face crinkles with confusion and he *finally* looks up. “Why would I be mad?”

“Because…” Anxin trails off. *Because it’s you. Because I’m in love with you. Because you didn’t even know I existed, so this whole thing has to be my fault. Because you deserve better. Because I’m ruining your life.*

But of course, Xinlong would never see it that way. Xinlong puts everyone else’s needs before his own- hell, he won’t even admit he *has needs*, will he? Xinlong would never be mad at him, even if he really should be.

Anxin sighs, looking down at his hands. Xinlong’s hands. “Xinlong, um. I- I really like you. I have for a while actually. And I wasn’t gonna say anything, because- well, I wanted to, I just didn’t know how. And then this happened and- I don’t know. I didn’t want to make it weird, or for you to think I did it on purpose or anything- I promise I didn’t, you have to believe me- but… I really, really like you.”

He peeks up under his eyelids to see Xinlong nodding slowly. He doesn’t look surprised, because, of course, he already knew.

Anxin bites his lip. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Xinlong says. He smiles- but it’s a sad smile. “Don’t worry about it. I’m sure it’ll go away soon.”

Chapter 4: show me where my skin begins

Chapter Notes

Chapter title from Pluto by Sleeping at Last

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Xinlong wakes up the next day to find that he's still in Anxin's body, there's a small part of him that's secretly relieved. Sure, it'd be nice if it was just *one weird day*- but it was a *good* day. He's not quite ready for it to be over.

Something about being Anxin is just so…freeing. Xinlong's life is literally out of his hands, so while the consequences of his actions (or lack thereof) are still very real, he can't exactly *do* anything about most of it. He just has to trust that Anxin will try his best.

He did manage to convince Anxin not to quit dancing right away, which he feels a little guilty about. It's clearly a major source of stress for Anxin, but he's been dancing since he was *four years old*. Even if *he's* not really quitting… the idea of He Xinlong without dance is terrifying. But Anxin has a point. He can frame it as needing to focus on school (something Xinlong is loathe to admit is actually worth doing), and in the meantime Xinlong will have to get by with the thrill of pretending Anxin's friends are his. And once they're back where they belong, everything can go back to normal.

Normal.

Any relief Xinlong felt upon waking sours at the thought of *going back*. As stressful as it is keeping a secret, he *likes* being Anxin. It's straightforward, simple, *happy*- he didn't realize how much weight he was carrying, but being Anxin makes him feel so much *lighter*. And Anxin himself is just…too *good*. It's only been one day, but in addition to their planning and debrief sessions Xinlong's already gotten to see him firsthand through the eyes of everyone in his life. Anxin's…*fun.* He's friendly, sociable, snarky- so many people *like* him, and Xinlong can see why.

Hopefully the crush doesn't make things too complicated. Xinlong's certain it'll fade when he fails to live up to the image Anxin's built in his head, but maybe he was a bit quick in dismissing it last night. It's not that he wants to invalidate Anxin's feelings, just… well, they're going to go away. He should know Xinlong won't hold that against him.

(A tiny part of him does dare to hope that they might become friends when all this is over. That's something he actually could see happening- maybe. If Anxin is okay with it.)

He sighs, sitting up in bed and rubbing his temples. The headache is worse today than it was yesterday and it's really not helping his mood- and it's made worse still by Sanghyeon

knocking loudly, then bursting through the door with a sharp *bang* that sends shooting pains behind his eyes.

Xinlong groans, burying his face in his hands, and finds himself snarling, “Do you have to be so fucking *loud?”*

Sanghyeon, fortunately, takes it in stride. “Yes,” he says, dropping into Anxin’s desk chair. “I take it you’re not feeling too hot?”

“No,” Xinlong mumbles, a fresh wave of guilt washing over him. *Why is he being so nice?* “I’m sorry.”

He rubs his eyes, finally looking up at Sanghyeon- who’s staring at him with something like shock.

“Did you just say *sorry?”* Sanghyeon asks. “For yelling at me?”

Uh oh. Xinlong blinks at him twice, mind racing. Of course Anxin wouldn’t apologize for that- they’re best friends and they apparently bicker all the time. What if this makes Sanghyeon suspicious?

“Please, he can’t know. He’ll never let me live it down, not in a million years.”

“My head hurts,” Xinlong groans, flopping back down on his side. Hopefully the concussion is enough of an excuse for now- he certainly can’t think of a better one.

Sanghyeon raises an eyebrow. “Yeah, I bet.”

In that moment Anxin’s phone buzzes with a text and Xinlong picks it up.

longlong <3
im still you
guess it wasnt just a one day thing :(
hope your feeling okay tho :)

They exchanged numbers last night- Anxin suggested it right after Xinlong dismissed his crush, in what felt like an obvious attempt to change the subject. He’d made some good points though, about being able to check in and keep each other updated. He’d *also* insisted on naming the contact himself “in case anyone sees it- it has to look accurate.” Hence the heart.

“Who’s that?” Sanghyeon asks, craning his head to see.

Xinlong instinctively tilts the phone away. “Leo-hyung,” he says- the first name that comes to mind. “Wants to know if I’m feeling better.”

Another text comes in:

longlong <3
remember i don’t have morning classes today so feel free to rest if you need it <3

Xinlong tosses the phone aside without responding. Anxin's too good to him. He's clearly in over his head living Xinlong's life, but after the initial panic he's barely complained- hell, even last night mostly sounded like he was complaining on *Xinlong's* behalf. Hopefully hes not suffering too much. As worried as Xinlong is about the potential fallout *he* might have to deal with, he doesn't want *Anxin* overworking himself to stop that from happening. Hypocritical as it is.

Maybe I shouldn't have pushed him to keep dancing, he thinks, the guilt only growing. It's just- it's not *fair.* Anxin has to juggle all of Xinlong's responsibilities, while Xinlong just has to…what? Put up with a few bad headaches? He scowls, rubbing his temples. It's pretty obvious who got the worse end of the deal.

Sanghyeon studies him for a moment, then nods and ducks out of the room. Xinlong can only pray he hasn't figured out something he shouldn't- he's really not in the mood for damage control. He closes his eyes, trying to block out the pain.

Sanghyeon returns shortly- much quieter this time. "Here," he says, and Xinlong opens his eyes to see him holding out a glass of water and some painkillers. "Seems like you could use it."

Xinlong's heart lurches with the urge to cry. "You're so nice to me," he chokes out, pulling himself upright. "You're such a good friend."

"Okay, now I *know* you need it," Sanghyeon laughs.

"Shut up," Xinlong mumbles, swallowing the pills. At least he still believes it's just the concussion. *What would Anxin say?* Thinking is so *hard.*

"You can't be mean to me," he settles on, pouting. "I'm injured."

Sanghyeon laughs again, and pats him on the shoulder. "Sure, hyung. Whatever you say."

He doesn't stick around long after that, so Xinlong settles back down to let the meds kick in. He picks up the phone again to respond to Anxin.

Me
head hurts but i'll be fine
you don't have to dance today if you don't want to

longlong <3
nah don't worry about me ill be okay :):)
like you said it'll look suspicious if you stop right away
and im tough 💪
feel better soon ❤️❤️

Xinlong frowns at the texts, wishing he could make Anxin understand. He doesn't have to push himself for Xinlong's sake, especially not when all Xinlong has to do is *rest*. Anxin's life is so free and simple- it's not *fair.*

Wasn't he thinking about this sort of thing just the other day? Something about wanting to be *more carefree*. It's almost like he got his wish- too bad it came at the cost of Anxin's freedom.

And to think he was *relieved* it wasn't over. What a horrible thing to feel. Xinlong sighs, setting an alarm so he doesn't miss afternoon classes, and rolls back over to try to get more sleep.

Anxin deserves better.

-

When he wakes up again (naturally, not to the alarm) the pain is mostly gone. He checks the time to confirm that he didn't oversleep and finds a dozen texts from Anxin- who apparently has a very different idea of what constitutes "checking in." Not that he can really complain.

longlong <3
first class complete!
no new hw for this one 😱
omg i know its childrens literature but is this class really about reading kids books??
this is so cute
are you sleeping btw
srry for spamming i hope im not being too annoying :(
its just weird not having anyone to talk to like at all
okay you probably know this but your weekly reading journal is due tmrw

Xinlong scrolls down to see a slightly shaky picture of a pair of birds taken through a window, and several messages about them "watching him all class" and "I swear I'm paying attention but they're so distracting 😭". As he's reading, another message pops up:

longlong <3
okie dokie that's 3 classes down. today seems less bad maybe?? idk
oh are you awake now? feeling any better?

Me
a bit yeah, i took a nap :)

longlong <3
yay 🎉🎉
wanna get lunch together?
or wait no that probably doesn't work for your schedule
my schedule
whatever you know what i mean

Xinlong giggles as the messages flood in. Anxin talks fast and he talks *a lot* and it's kind of funny to see how that translates into his texting.

Me
yeah i should probably get ready for class

we could meet up later tho? if you want to debrief again

longlong <3
yeah definitely!! :D

Me
i could come meet you after dance?

longlong <3
🎉🎉🎉

-

That evening, Xinlong waits until everyone else has left, then sneaks into the dance studio with dinner for two. It's weird being there as *Anxin*- it's the one place on campus he spends the most of his time, but now he almost feels like an outsider. He tries his best to shove the feeling away.

"I just talked to Hao-ge," Anxin says the moment he walks through the door. "He told me he's worried cause I keep messing up. So I said I just think I need a break from the team for a bit." He looks up at Xinlong, eyes big with regret. "Sorry, I really thought I could hold out longer. I just didn't want him to get more suspicious."

"It's okay," Xinlong assures him, ignoring the rush of anxiety in his stomach. "It's- it's probably for the best. For now. Was he okay with it?"

Anxin nods, shoulders dropping in relief. "Yeah. Honestly I think he was maybe gonna suggest it himself, so he just was glad we didn't have to fight about it." He sighs, leaning back on his hands as Xinlong joins him on the floor. "I don't get why I *can't* do it though. I mean, it's muscle memory, right? And I've got your muscles." Here he flexes Xinlong's arm and Xinlong huffs out a laugh. "But it just doesn't work. I try to follow what everyone else is doing and I just feel like an idiot. I thought it'd be really cool if I could, I don't know, do a handstand or something- cause you can do that, right? But- here, look."

He stands, shuffling a few steps away to give himself space, and kicks up into a very shaky handstand that lasts less than a second before he's toppling sideways to the ground with a comedic yelp. Xinlong stifles a laugh.

Anxin points an accusing finger at him. "See? I'm hopeless."

"It wasn't that bad," Xinlong assures him. "You're probably just focusing on the wrong parts. It's not exactly intuitive." He stands up to demonstrate, tilting his head from side to side to gauge the current state of his concussion- it should be okay, as long as he's careful. "You want to keep your shoulders elevated and your body hollow. You were arching, which can feel natural since it's weird pointing your head at the ground, but it makes it harder to balance. And then it's really just a matter of stacking your joints- hips over shoulders over hands." He places his hands on the floor and kicks up halfway to show what he means, just enough to get his hips in place before coming down slow and controlled. Anxin's shoulders

are a fair bit tighter than he's used to, so he takes a moment to stretch them out. "The muscles help, obviously- and the flexibility- but proper form is really what makes it work."

Anxin stares at him. "I can't believe you just almost did a handstand in *my* body."

Xinlong laughs. "That just means you can do it too, right? Come on, I'll spot you."

Anxin gives him a dubious look, but gets to his feet and lets Xinlong guide him into position. After several attempts, he finally gets up into a semi-stable handstand that he holds on his own for a few seconds before tipping back down.

"Wait, I did it!" he cheers, high-fiving Xinlong. "Did you see that? I did it!"

"Good job," says Xinlong, smiling back. "You're a fast learner."

Anxin shrugs. "Well, I had good teacher."

Xinlong ducks his head, feeling a blush creeping onto his cheeks. He likes teaching- it's why he's studying education- but it's been a while since teaching movement actually felt *good*. These days most advice he gives on dancing gets taken as criticism. It's not something he's ever really talked about, not even with Arno, but he finds himself opening up to Anxin as they return to their meal.

"It's like they think I'm judging them for not already knowing things," he says, "but I'm really not. I mean, everyone starts somewhere, and I like helping people learn. It doesn't matter where you're coming from."

"I mean, people *are* pretty weird to you about dancing," says Anxin.

Xinlong frowns. "You think?"

"Yeah." Anxin lies down on his back, starfishing his limbs on the floor. "It's like I said last night- they act like you're this untouchable *god of dance* and not, you know, a person." He sighs, closing his eyes. "I knew you mostly kept to yourself but I honestly just figured it was cause you didn't like people all that much. But seeing it firsthand, it's like- I mean, no judgment, obviously, but your life seems really lonely."

He says it so casually, but the words hit like a knife to the heart. It *is* lonely- so lonely he never even knew what he was missing- but Anxin seeing and stating it so clearly is terrifying.

"It's not that bad," Xinlong mumbles, looking away.

Anxin shrugs, eyes still closed. "If you say so."

They lapse into silence, Anxin still lying on the floor. *Maybe he's tired?* He did inherit Xinlong's massive sleep debt- a thought that makes guilt spike in his stomach once again.

"So, do you have any more thoughts on how this could've happened?" Xinlong asks, mainly to distract himself from that train of thought. Could it really be his half-remembered wish, to be more carefree? That seems a bit out there- why would *Anxin* get dragged into his mess?

Anxin shrugs again, opening his eyes. “Not really. I mean, you said you haven’t been sleeping much and I got a concussion, so it could be like weird brain stuff. Dunno why that would do it though, cause college students do crazy things to their brains all the time and I’ve never heard of something like this happening.” He sits up slowly, frowning. “Did anything weird happen to you the day before?”

“I don’t know,” Xinlong says. “It was normal, I think.” Except for meeting with his advisor and learning his future might be doomed, but that doesn’t exactly seem relevant. “I guess… it stormed pretty hard that night?”

“Oh, right!” Anxin snaps his fingers. “The storm- do you think both of us watching it could’ve meant something?”

Xinlong frowns. “How do you know I was watching it?”

“Cause of the lightning.”

Xinlong just stares, watching in real time as Anxin’s brain catches up with him and he throws up his hands in a wild panic, blushing furiously.

“No, no, it’s not weird, I promise! I didn’t- I just- there was, a while ago, there was this other storm and I saw you watching the lightning and you looked really happy! Like, actually *happy*, which you kind of never do. I swear I’m not a stalker or anything, I just happened to see it, and it stuck with me cause- cause- I don’t know. So anyways, I just figured, if you were up for the storm…”

He trails off, looking away. Xinlong stares at him, not sure what to say. Just how long has Anxin been paying attention to him? And, more importantly, *why?*

Anxin takes a deep breath, still not meeting his eyes. “That’s actually… that’s why *I* was watching the storm. Cause I was thinking about you, and how you would like it, and- okay, this might sound really bad, but I swear it wasn’t on purpose.”

“What wasn’t?”

Anxin bites his lip, peeking up from under his lashes. “I think I might’ve…made a wish? Not for this, but-”

“You made a wish too?” Xinlong interrupts, then claps a hand over his mouth.

Anxin’s jaw drops. *“Too?”*

Xinlong shakes his head. “No, nothing, never mind. What was- what did you wish for?”

“You first.”

“Why me?”

“Cause mine’s embarrassing!” Anxin whines, flopping back onto the floor. “I don’t wanna say it!”

Xinlong frowns, looking down at his hands. “Does it really matter what it was? Unless you wished for us to switch places…”

“No, definitely not.” Anxin sighs. “I mean, maybe it doesn’t, but isn’t it kind of suspicious? We both wished for something while watching the same storm, and the next day we’re living each other’s lives?”

“I guess.” Xinlong traces the pattern of the floor with a finger. “Mine was- it was something about being- or, knowing how to be more, um. Carefree.” He glances carefully at Anxin, trying to gauge his reaction. If *that* wish somehow turned him into Anxin, isn’t that kind of calling him lazy?

“Huh.” *At least he doesn’t sound insulted*. “Okay, that makes sense.” Anxin takes a deep breath, and rolls onto his side to meet Xinlong’s eyes. “I wished I knew how to make you smile.”

Xinlong scrunches up his face. “Really?”

“Yeah. The way you smile at lightning.” Anxin sounds confident, but he’s bright red. It’s kind of cute, actually, which is such a strange thing to feel about his own face.

“That has to be it then,” Xinlong sighs, opting to ignore the odd flutter in his chest. “So do you think we’re stuck like this until the next big storm? And then we…wish on lightning to switch back?”

It still sounds pretty insane. They could just be stuck like this forever.

“It’s as good a plan as any,” Anxin says with a shrug. “Or it could be fairytale logic. Like, we switch back once the wishes come true.”

“I hope not.” Xinlong sighs again, joining Anxin on the floor. “Waiting for a storm sounds a lot simpler.”

Anxin shifts closer, bumping their shoulders together. “Well, *I’m* going to try it anyways.”

That means he’s going to try to make Xinlong smile. He won’t say it out loud, but the thought makes his heart beat a little bit faster.

-

The next several days pass by without even a hint of rain.

Being Xinlong has its difficulties, but Anxin is honestly getting used to it. And they’ve been spending practically all their free time together, which is something of a dream come true. Even if it’s really just out of necessity. They kind of have to in order to maintain the illusion nothing has changed- and to not fail their classes. Aside from statistics there’s no overlap, so every assignment has become of sort of joint project for them to piece together the new material with the old. It’s a little inconvenient, sure, but it’s *fun*. While Xinlong is still quiet and reserved, the more time they spend together the more it feels like Anxin is slowly pulling him out of his shell.

They haven't talked any more about his crush. Xinlong dismissing it so easily was a huge blow to his ego, but Anxin suspects it's less about *him* and more about *Xinlong*. It's like Xinlong simply can't fathom the thought of anyone *liking* him- which is *insane*, because Xinlong is *perfect*.

Except, the more time Anxin spends in Xinlong's shoes, the less insane it seems. The way people talk to him (or *don't* talk to him) makes Xinlong's skewed self-perception disturbingly understandable. It's just…sad.

So as much as he'd wanted to push back on the idea that Xinlong's *unlikable*, chances are it wouldn't have landed. He'd reacted so strongly to even the slightest implication he could use a break, so Anxin clearly needs to tread carefully. Since Xinlong has no reason to trust him yet, just *telling* him he's wrong won't change anything. He'll have to show it instead- and show it he will. At least they're *together* now, all the time, and Xinlong *is* warming up to him. Even if it never goes further than friends… well, at least they're friends.

They *are* friends. Even if Xinlong doesn't know it yet. Anxin still *desperately* hopes they'll become more.

By far the hardest part of Xinlong's life (for him, at least) is the complete lack of social interaction. He's making up for most of it by constantly bothering Xinlong over text- and refusing to entertain the fear that he's being *too much*. It serves the dual purpose of giving him a social outlet (with his *crush*, no less) and, if he's not mistaken, giving Xinlong more of an opportunity to open up. The first day Anxin's messages outnumbered Xinlong's ten to one, and now… well, the balance is still solidly in his favor, but it's getting better.

Aside from Xinlong, the *only* person he talks to is Arno. He definitely *could* still socialize with the other dancers (as much as Xinlong ever *socialized)*, but taking a break from dance meant opening himself up to all sorts of little jokes about "finally cracking" and "abandoning the team"- comments he can't even bring himself to share with Xinlong, because that would just be leading the barely-hidden insults straight to their actual target. So instead he made the quiet decision to remove himself lest he start burning bridges that aren't his to burn.

He'd originally meant to avoid Arno too for simplicity's sake- he can't explain *why* he's avoiding the others, since Xinlong's made it clear that's not his business to meddle in- but Arno's a *good friend*. He didn't ask any questions, just took it upon himself to split his time without once pushing for a reason. Feigning such a close friendship with a stranger is a little weird, but he's glad Xinlong has *someone*. Even if he refuses to rely on Arno the way Arno clearly wants him to.

This brings them to lunch on day four of the swap, with Arno at his side as Anxin searches the crowded plaza for a place to sit that isn't with the people he's trying to avoid.

"Hey, Xinlong!" calls an all-too-familiar voice, and Anxin turns to see *Leo* of all people waving him over. He's at a table with a few empty seats, and with him are Sanghyeon and Xinlong wearing twin looks of surprise- Sanghyeon's delighted, Xinlong's *terrified.*

Anxin hesitates, glancing at Arno. He'd absolutely *love* to spend the hour with his three favorite people, but Arno doesn't know them at all. Or, he *does* know Xinlong, but he doesn't

know that he does. And it's a huge risk, one that Xinlong doesn't look at all prepared for- what if they give something away?

What is Leo thinking? Is he trying to get us caught?

He doesn't know what to do, but it ultimately doesn't matter. Before he has the chance to decide, Arno grins and grabs his arm to steer them in that direction.

"Am I finally getting to meet whoever you've been spending so much time with?" he murmurs in Anxin's ear.

Anxin gapes at him, and Arno laughs. "You really weren't hiding it that well," he adds at a normal volume. "Don't worry, I won't push. I'm glad you're branching out."

And there's no time to process any of *that*, because they've already reached the table where Arno practically shoves him into the seat across from Xinlong before plopping down next to him to introduce himself.

Xinlong fixes Anxin with a worried look. *Is this okay?* he asks with his eyes, glancing furtively at Sanghyeon.

Right- *Sanghyeon.* Sanghyeon is *loving* this, of course he is. From his point of view, Leo has *finally* taken his side in pushing Anxin to *talk to his crush.* Never mind that they're way past the point of talking. Sanghyeon can't *ever* find that out.

And according to Xinlong, neither can Arno. This whole setup is a massive risk- once again, what is Leo *thinking?*

Anxin hesitates for half a second, then jerks his head in the tiniest approximation of a nod. If they play this right, Sanghyeon won't figure it out. They might be stuck like this for a while, depending on how long before the next storm- and a selfish part of him misses his *friends.*

He meets Xinlong's eyes again, subtly tilting his head towards Arno. *Same question.*

Xinlong's eyes widen and he bites his lip, looking down at his hands. Anxin's heart rate spikes- what does he do if the answer is *no?* They're already here. He knows how to handle Sanghyeon, easy, but Arno's still mostly a stranger. What if he does something to give it away? What if he says something wrong and messes up the one good thing in Xinlong's life? What if-

Xinlong lifts his head, the corner of his mouth poking up in a tiny smile that doesn't reach his eyes, and Anxin lets out an internal sigh of relief.

We can do this.

"So since when do you two know each other?" Sanghyeon asks, jerking them out of their telepathic communication.

Xinlong startles, eyebrows shooting up his forehead, and he looks to Anxin in panic. *What do I say?*

Anxin, thank *god*, has a much better poker face. He's been working full time on his Xinlong impression and now it's finally time to flex his progress- Sanghyeon will never suspect a thing.

"Just the past couple of days," he says with a shrug, keeping his voice soft and his eyes down. "We're in the same stats class."

"Oh, really?" Sanghyeon says, grinning at "Anxin". Xinlong shoots him a look, and half a beat later (when he realizes Xinlong won't do it himself), Anxin kicks him under the table. Sanghyeon jumps and Xinlong startles again, eyes flicking between them rapidly as he puts two and two together.

"Yeah," Anxin continues, pretending not to see any of it. "We've, um. I've been giving him copies of my notes, since-" he cuts himself off, glancing at Xinlong.

"Because of the concussion," Xinlong finishes, taking the cue perfectly. "And then besides that, we've just been talking more. That's all. It's no big deal."

"No big deal?" Sanghyeon echoes, giving him a look.

"It's really not," Anxin says, hunching his shoulders to make himself small. "We're just… we're just classmates."

Something flickers across Xinlong's face, but whatever it is he hides it quickly. "We're *friends*," he says.

Anxin's heart *soars*.

Friends. Xinlong said they're *friends!* Which, they are, obviously, but he didn't realize *Xinlong* felt it too. He'd been playing it safe, avoiding putting words in Xinlong's mouth- especially since he can now feel Arno next to him practically *glowing* with pride- but Xinlong already considers him a friend. That's the first step to becoming something more.

"Oh," he says out loud, because he *does* still need to respond. Wait- he's still Xinlong. *What would Xinlong do?* "Yeah, um. Friends." He lets his mouth curl into the tiniest bit of a smile, then drops his gaze to his lunch, poking at his food and projecting as much *I'm nervous, don't talk to me* energy as he can muster.

"Oh," Sanghyeon says, sounding disappointed. "That's…good."

Anxin's over the moon right now, but Sanghyeon must think Xinlong just rejected him. Or worse, that he's made it clear Anxin has no shot without ever realizing it was on the table. Which means he's probably starting to feel bad about pushing Anxin so hard to go for it.

Serves him right. Sanghyeon doesn't need the chance to gloat about them actually getting close, and if he thinks Anxin's moved on to pining over something he *knows* will never happen, maybe he'll back off a bit. That should make Xinlong's life a little easier, at least for the time being.

“Well, it’s nice to finally meet you, Anxin,” Arno says. Anxin peeks up from under his lashes and catches Xinlong’s eye, smile creeping wider as they share in the private joke. *Nice to meet you, he says to his best friend.*

Arno, thankfully, doesn’t notice. “You know, I have been wondering about the person taking up so much of Longlong’s time. He keeps to himself a bit too much.”

“They really *have* been spending a lot of time together,” Leo pipes up with a grin, and Anxin once again has to wonder *what the hell he’s thinking*. “It’s almost like they’re hiding some big secret or something.”

Anxin narrows his eyes- if he were *himself* right now he knows exactly what he’d do, but as Xinlong… “There’s no secret,” he mumbles, shrinking even further. “It’s just homework.” He glances at Xinlong, flicking his eyes to Leo.

Xinlong takes the hint only a second or two late, and rolls his eyes. “Cut it out, hyung,” he says. “This- this is why I don’t tell you things.” Then- to Anxin’s absolute *delight*- he snatches the apple off of Leo’s tray and takes a bite, slouching back in his seat to sulk as the tips of his ears turn a faint shade of red.

He’d never have expected that from Xinlong, not in a million years, but it’s exactly the sort of thing Anxin would do. Except, well-

“Wow, you must’ve *really* hit a nerve,” Sanghyeon says to Leo, then- to Arno and Anxin- “He steals *my* food all the time, but I’ve never once seen him take Leo-hyung’s.”

Anxin sees the moment the words land in Xinlong’s ears, and with them, *panic*. It’s true: Sanghyeon has always been fair game to steal from in a way Leo *isn’t*. Mostly because they live together and that makes food communal property more often than not, but also because Leo’s kind of picky and can’t necessarily just replace what’s taken with something else. But of course, Xinlong doesn’t know that. How could he, when Anxin never thought to tell him? He didn’t do anything wrong, just something a little…off.

Fortunately, Leo is already laughing, and whatever his plan is here Anxin *does* trust him not to put Xinlong in *too* horrible of a position. He reaches out under the table to nudge Xinlong’s ankle with his foot. *It’s okay,* he thinks in his direction, hoping the telepathy is still working. *You didn’t do anything wrong. Don’t worry.*

“You’re all bullying me,” Xinlong pouts, glancing very briefly at Anxin before looking down. “I’m- I’m *injured* and instead of being *nice* you’re just making fun of me all the time.”

Leo puts a hand on his shoulder, schooling his expression into something serious. “You know, you’re right- and I sincerely apologize.” Xinlong glances up at him, and Leo valiantly holds his laughter back for several seconds before it bursts out of him, setting Sanghyeon off into a fit of cackles. The look on Xinlong’s face- on *his* face- is so *betrayed* that Anxin snorts out a laugh himself before he can stop it, which sets Arno off too.

For the first time, Anxin kind of understands why Sanghyeon finds him so fun to mess with sometimes. Not that he’ll *ever* admit that out loud.

Xinlong huffs, crossing his arms in exaggerated annoyance, but he at least seems more relaxed with how no one's freaking out about his mistake. Leo turns to Arno and changes the subject, tactfully steering the conversation to something less laser-focused on the two of them, and Xinlong finally meets Anxin's eyes again with a nervous question hovering in his: *Was that too much? Is this okay?*

It was perfect, Anxin sends back as best he can. *You're so perfect.*

Those first few minutes are easily the hardest, and Xinlong especially seems to get much more comfortable as the conversation goes on. Maybe being Anxin is good for him- he's certainly talking a lot more than usual. Sure, he's also been talking more than usual when it's just the two of them, but even then the split's probably around 70-30 in Anxin's favor at *best*. Xinlong always seems to weigh his words before he says them, half the time pausing his sentences partway through like he needs permission to keep going. But *Anxin* doesn't do that, so the version of him Xinlong is performing right now doesn't either.

There's something really sad about the thought of Xinlong *needing permission* to talk. Especially when he looks so much happier without it.

Anxin's also talking a fair bit- probably more than he should, honestly, with the role he's playing. But Arno is well-practiced in reeling Xinlong back into conversations he's trying to hide from, and Anxin is more than happy to take the bait. He *is* trying to keep Xinlong's natural reticence in mind, but it's hard when he's barely talked to his friends- or really anyone besides Arno and Xinlong- in *four days*. Leo's checked in once or twice, but he hasn't even *seen* Sanghyeon since he got concussed.

Then Sanghyeon turns to him to ask, "So how's dancing going?" and across the table Xinlong gets very still. "You're like, really good at that, right?"

"Um," Anxin says intelligently, glancing nervously at Xinlong. The question took him completely off guard and it's *really* not something he should be talking about. Not in front of Xinlong, at least, when he can't speak for himself.

Once again it's Arno who comes to his rescue, casually tossing an arm around his shoulders. "Longlong's actually taking a short break from the dance team right now," he says, with a tone that's light but invites no further questions. "He'll be back when he's ready, but for now we're holding down the fort without him."

"Oh, okay," Sanghyeon says. "Sorry."

Anxin shrugs. "S'fine." The tension hasn't left Xinlong's shoulders and he doubts it will until they're onto some other topic so he doesn't want to drag this out any longer than he has to.

"It's surprisingly good timing, though, isn't it?" Arno continues, grinning at him. "Cause now you have the time to help out a classmate with his concussion, to make a new friend."

Anxin ducks his head. "I would've had time anyways," he lies, because it's what Xinlong would say.

Arno ignores him, turning his grin on Xinlong. “You know, I’m beginning to think you’re a pretty good influence, actually. It’s usually way harder to get Longlong to talk this much.”

Anxin makes eye contact with Xinlong across the table, trying to stifle a laugh. In fairness, Arno’s not *wrong*- Xinlong *is* being unusually talkative- but he’s got the whole thing backwards. Xinlong’s clearly having the same thought, fighting back a smile of his own. A giggle slips out of one of them- who’s to say which?- and the floodgates open. Anxin’s hand flies up to cover his mouth as they both shake with laughter.

“What’s so funny?” Sanghyeon asks, glancing between them.

“Nothing,” Xinlong says, shaking his head as he gets a hold of himself. He catches Anxin’s eye again and they erupt into another shared fit of giggles.

Xinlong doesn’t cover his mouth when he laughs. It’s a habit Anxin picked up since his laughter can be too loud- but Xinlong’s is loud too. It sounds nice, coming from him.

Sanghyeon and Arno are clearly baffled by their hysterics, but not in any way that seems like a problem. Leo- who’s in on the joke, of course- is just amused, though he’s doing a much better job of keeping it to himself. He catches Anxin’s eye with a smile before changing the subject again, and suddenly Anxin *gets* it: sooner or later they’re going to switch back, but he’s not just going to let Xinlong go. Not if he can get away with it. So as stressful as it is keeping this secret in front of people who know them, it’s much better to start blending their social circles *now* so it doesn’t come as a surprise how close they’ve gotten so quickly. Leo’s such a good friend, setting that up.

It’s also just…really nice, seeing Xinlong *happy*. He *has* been more relaxed than usual when it’s just the two of them, but watching him laughing and joking with Anxin’s friends in a way he so rarely did in the past makes Anxin believe even more that their wishes were the cause of all this. Slowly but surely, Xinlong *is* getting more carefree.

It’s a good look for him, and hopefully one he can carry back to his own body. He deserves it.

-

Ten days after the first one, the forecast finally calls for another storm. The notification pops up on Anxin’s phone and Xinlong is hit with an overwhelming mixture of relief and regret.

At least now we can go back to normal.

The past week has made him *infinitely* more carefree, and he’s been smiling more around Anxin than, well, probably ever. So unless their wishes were more complicated than he understands, it’s not just *fairytale logic* that will swap them back. It has to be the storm.

Twenty minutes later, Anxin is lighting up his phone.

longlong <3
[screenshot of weather app]
storm tonite!!

wanna watch it together?
we can make wishes :)))

Texting with Anxin is always a highlight of his day, second only to talking in person. Anxin is bright and fun and talks *so much*- but he never talks *over* Xinlong. It's the opposite, even. Xinlong doesn't talk much himself, but whenever he does he has every ounce of Anxin's attention.

It's like they're friends. No, they *are* friends, he's pretty sure. That's what he'd told Sanghyeon and Arno, at least, and Anxin never corrected him. Xinlong's never had many friends, only a handful before Arno and none that lasted very long- it's hard to form a bond with someone when you're constantly moving around for training and competitions. But now he has Anxin. If he's lucky enough to keep him once they're no longer forced together by circumstance, he might have Leo and Sanghyeon too.

The thought is thrilling, and therefore *terrifying*. He can't let himself get too attached- what if it *doesn't* last?

In this moment, however, he can't help smiling at Anxin's message. For all that he'd insisted the contact names had to "look realistic", Anxin has no such qualms about the texts themselves.

If he's letting his whole personality bleed through, Xinlong might as well do the same- after all, Anxin knows it's him, so he doesn't have to pretend. But *being Anxin* these past ten days has made him a little bolder. He's less likely to second-guess what he wants to say, armed with the excuse that it's *not really him*. So, while normally he'd send something simple like "works for me", this time he decides to take a risk:

Me
its a date ❤️

longlong <3
😍😍😍

> *"A date, hyung!" Anxin repeats to Leo over the phone less than ten minutes later. "He called it a date!"*
>
> *"So you've said," says Leo. "Maybe five or six times."*
>
> *"But do you think he actually means it?" Anxin flops down on Xinlong's bed, staring up at the ceiling. "Or is it just a figure of speech? He did say we were friends in front of people the other day, remember? So maybe he does mean it for real…"*
>
> *"You could always ask."*
>
> *Anxin makes a face. "No way."*
>
> *He can hear Leo suppressing a smile through the phone as he sighs. "Suit yourself."*

The storm is scheduled to start around nine pm.

Anxin suggests meeting up at a spot by the lake, and Xinlong gets there first because he doesn't want to be late. He's never been here before but it's cute and cozy: a little stone bench sits under a wooden overhang with strands of ivy twisted around the pillars. He settles on the bench, looking out over the water to wait. The view is pretty, and it's nice and secluded from the hustle and bustle of campus.

It's almost romantic.

He dismisses the thought as soon as it comes. The whole point was to meet somewhere out of the way, where they're unlikely to get caught or interrupted- of course that could seem intimate. It doesn't mean anything.

A small part of him wishes it did. *Maybe*, he thinks, *Anxin's crush hasn't gone away.*

That thought is quickly dismissed as well. Of course it has. He's trying not to get his hopes up about them *staying friends*; he definitely shouldn't aim them even higher. Sure, Anxin's been being super friendly with him this whole time, but that could just be out of necessity- he did say Xinlong's life was *lonely*. Once he's back in his own body, he can talk to his real friends again. Xinlong takes a deep breath, vowing to accept whatever happens. Anxin doesn't owe him anything.

By the time Anxin gets there the rain has already started. He doesn't have an umbrella, but rushes up with his hood pulled over his head to block out the worst of it.

"I'm here!" he calls ahead. "Don't start without me!"

"Of course not," Xinlong says, grinning as Anxin plops down beside him.

"Is there lightning? I didn't see any."

Xinlong shakes his head. "Not yet, but it's only been a couple minutes."

In that moment, as if summoned by their conversation, a bolt of lightning steaks across the lake. Xinlong's grin widens, a hint of a laugh slipping out.

"So I never asked," Anxin says, once the thunder finishes its roar, "what is it about lightning you like so much?"

Xinlong shrugs. "I don't know. I've always loved it, as long as I can remember." He tilts his head up to the sky, shivering with excitement at the next flash. "It's just…really *beautiful*, you know?"

"Yeah," says Anxin. "It really is."

When Xinlong glances his way, Anxin's not watching the sky. He's watching *Xinlong*, with something like *love* in his eyes, and Xinlong's heart skips a beat. He looks away quickly, feeling his ears start to burn.

If all goes well, they'll be back in their bodies by tomorrow- which means it's now or never. He's not *ready* to lose the connections he's made as Anxin, but maybe he doesn't have to. It's

a risk the old Xinlong would never have dared to take.

“When this is over, um…” He trails off, flexing his hands in his lap, then takes a deep breath and starts over. “When this is over, can we- can we still talk?”

“Yeah, of course,” Anxin says, bumping Xinlong’s shoulder with his own. “I like talking to you.”

“Really?” Xinlong looks up, raising an eyebrow. He’s pretty sure no one’s ever told him that before- which makes sense. He’s not exactly the best conversationalist.

Anxin looks like he wants to say something, but hesitates. He turns his head to look out over the lake and sighs, hunching slightly like he’s trying not to be seen. “You know, I- I do still like you. It doesn’t- we can just be friends, if that’s what you want. It doesn’t have to be more than that. But I think- you know, at the start it sounded like you thought my crush would just go away, cause of- you know, cause all of *this*. And I just think you should know that it hasn’t. Maybe the opposite, actually. You’re- I think you’re really special. And I like you a lot.”

Xinlong stares at him in shock, heart pounding in his chest. That sounded like a confession- no, not sounded like, that *was* a confession. Anxin likes him.

Despite everything, Anxin *still* likes him. This is more than he ever could’ve asked for.

“Sorry, was that too much?” Anxin asks, shooting him a nervous look. “There’s really no pressure or anything- I don’t want to make you uncomfortable-”

Xinlong kisses him.

He’s never been an impulsive person- way too risky. Xinlong has always measured every option carefully, weighing them against each other to pick the safest one- but *this* decision he makes without a second thought. The storm rages on around them, rain pouring down in sheets on all sides, but for a brief, beautiful moment everything vanishes. It’s only him and Anxin, and everything is *perfect*.

Then Xinlong pulls back, and his eyes go wide as he realizes what he’s done.

Panic spikes in his chest. “Sorry, I don’t- I didn’t”

That’s as far as he gets before he’s stopped by Anxin grabbing his shoulders and kissing back. Xinlong’s breath hitches and he freezes in place, before his brain catches up and he relaxes into the feeling, eyes slipping shut.

Anxin likes him. Anxin still likes him- which means wanting this is *okay*.

The second kiss is longer, slower, sweeter. A streak of lightning flashes across the sky, followed by an enormous roll of thunder as they melt into each other. Xinlong sighs as the sound fades out, opening his eyes and leaning back to see a face he’d never once noticed until seeing it in a mirror- a face now lit up with joy and wonder.

“It worked,” Anxin breathes. “We’re back.”

Xinlong nods, looking down at his hands and flexing his fingers. He’s back. He’s *him* again.

It feels *right*, being back in his body. He’d gotten used to Anxin’s by now, but this is safe and familiar in a way he didn’t know he was missing. He wants to run and jump and roll in the grass, to twirl around and *dance*- but he settles for wrapping his arms tightly around himself and exhaling in relief. He’s *home.*

“Did you make a wish?” he asks, suddenly remembering the reason they were here in the first place. “I don’t think I did. At least not consciously.”

“Oh,” Anxin says, ears turning red. “Um. Yeah, I think so. I don’t know if it’s related though. It might not come true.”

“Why, what was it?”

Anxin hesitates. “First I need to ask you something. And you have to answer from the heart- no overthinking, just- just answer.”

Xinlong frowns. “Okay?”

Anxin takes a deep breath, straightening his shoulders and taking Xinlong’s hands in his. “He Xinlong: I really, really like you. Will you go out with me?”

Xinlong blinks twice, then his face splits into a smile. “Yeah,” he says. “I’d really like that.”

Anxin grins, tackling him into a hug that nearly knocks him off the bench. “Yes, yes, yes!” he cheers, pressing a series of kisses against the side of Xinlong’s head. “This is the best day *ever*.”

Xinlong laughs, squirming away from the ticklish feeling. “So wait, what was your wish then? That we could date?”

Anxin shrugs. “Not exactly. It was when we were kissing. I kind of wished we could do that forever.” He glances at Xinlong, biting his lip- like even with Xinlong finally accepting his affections, he’s still not sure if it’s going to be too much.

It’s never too much. Xinlong leans in to kiss him again, and this time when they pull apart, he rests his head on Anxin’s shoulder. “Of course we can,” he says, as another streak of lightning dances over the lake. “Forever.”

-

Xinlong is dancing again.

It hasn’t been that long since he came back, but something about him is…different. He’s *lighter*, somehow. Since the day they met, Xinlong has always held himself to impossible standards- no matter how hard Arno tried to convince him to *rest*, Xinlong would fight him every step of the way. He’s not sure what magic Anxin worked to change that but it must be

his doing. One day Xinlong was falling apart at the seams, then Anxin appeared like some kind of guardian angel and a few short weeks later he's happier than he's ever been. It's truly wonderful to see.

They have a performance coming up soon. It's not a major one, but today was their first chance to practice in the actual venue, and it went surprisingly well. The piece is really coming together- not just Xinlong's part, but everyone's.

Rehearsal has just wrapped up and Arno is taking the time to stretch out his aching muscles while Xinlong lies next to him on the stage. He pushed himself today, Arno noticed, but not in a bad way. More like he was really *feeling* the movement. It's been a long time since he's seen Xinlong like that.

Their pleasant silence is punctured by a singsong voice from the edge of the stage. "Hey superstar, your boyfriend's here!"

Arno looks up, and sure enough, there's Anxin. Here to pick Xinlong up, apparently. *Cute*.

Except Anxin stops mid-stride to shoot the girl who spoke an angry look. "Don't call him that," he snaps. "He doesn't like it."

"Xin…" Xinlong protests softly, sitting up.

Arno glances at him. "You don't like it?"

Team dynamics have always been complicated, especially when it comes to Xinlong, but that nickname has been there since day one. It's not like the jealous snarking that often gets thrown his way, the snide comments Arno tries his best to snuff out. *Superstar* was never meant to be an insult.

But if that's how he's hearing it…

"No, it's- it's fine," Xinlong says, glancing between him and Anxin.

"No, it's not fine," Anxin tells him, climbing up to join them on the stage. "It makes you feel bad- we've talked about this. You're allowed to have feelings, remember?"

Arno watches Xinlong shrink, and sees the truth in the words. *Why didn't he say anything?*

He feels the eyes of their remaining teammates watching the couple, and knows the answer before he's even finished the thought. It's followed by a crushing wave of guilt. *The real question is why didn't I notice?*

"Okay, chill out," another guy says, rolling his eyes. "It's doesn't mean anything. It's just a joke."

"Well, get a better joke," Anxin retorts.

"Sorry, Xinlong," the first girl says, sounding genuinely remorseful. She's one of the newer recruits- she probably picked it up from everyone else and never questioned whether it was

okay. “I didn’t mean it as a bad thing.”

“It’s fine,” Xinlong murmurs, staring at the ground.

Arno sighs, getting to his feet. “Alright, so no more *superstar*. No big deal. Come on guys, let’s get going- they need to close up this space.”

He really wants to say something to Xinlong- an apology, maybe for not picking up on the discomfort when clearly Anxin was able to- but right now his focus should be getting the attention off him before he crawls any deeper into his shell. Anxin can be the one to coax him back out.

Arno makes a point of ignoring the couple as he starts packing up and the dancers start to trickle out, though he keeps an ear out for their conversation.

“You ready to go?” Anxin asks behind him. “Sanghyeon’s cooking tonight and he’ll get all cranky if we’re late.”

“Yeah,” Xinlong says quietly, and a few seconds later. “Thanks.”

Arno watches out of the corner of his eye as they hop down from the stage so Xinlong can gather his belongings.

“Of course,” Anxin says. “It was bugging me too, you know. I would’ve said something, but I didn’t want to make *you* say something you wouldn’t.”

“But now you *can* say it for me.” Xinlong flashes a smile, and Anxin grins back.

Arno suppresses a smile of his own, pretending not to listen. The conversation is a little odd, but Xinlong is happy.

“Bye guys,” he says as they shuffle past him. “See you tomorrow, Longlong.”

“Bye hyung,” Xinlong says, looking down at his shoes. “Sorry I didn’t- it really wasn’t a big deal.”

Arno rolls his eyes. “Don’t worry about it. You know you *can* always talk to me, but I’m never going to be *mad* if you don’t.”

Xinlong gives him a look like he doesn’t quite believe it so Arno twists his face into a pout. “Do you really think that badly of me?”

Xinlong’s eyes widen in alarm as he starts to stammer out a protest- which doesn’t get very far before Anxin cuts him off with a laugh. Arno’s fake pout vanishes into a giggle and soon all three of them are laughing.

“Come on, get out of here,” Arno says, nudging Xinlong towards the exit. “Have a good night.”

They head off, hand in hand, as he packs up the last of his things and does one last check of the space to make sure nothing got left behind.

It's strange- he noticed, when they were laughing, that Anxin covered his mouth with his hand. That's something Xinlong started doing recently, though he stopped once they started dating. And he can't remember Anxin doing it before.

Arno shakes his head, dismissing the thought. Maybe he just wasn't paying attention. It's probably nothing- at most a temporary quirk Xinlong picked up from his crush. Thinking of it that way, it's actually pretty cute.

The two of them are good together, and Xinlong is happy. That's really all that matters.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading :) I hope you enjoyed this story as much as I enjoyed writing it <3

End Notes

Let me know what you think <3

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