Chapter 1: The first summer

Xinlong is eight years old when he first finds the cove. It's not an easy task, and one he really only stumbles into by accident. The path is poorly marked and overgrown, but he's a child set free to wander and what he finds beyond the thornbushes he has to pick his way past is truly worth every little scratch.

It's like a magical little *secret*, just for him. The water is closed off on three sides by massive rocky cliffs, but the sand is soft and warm and a long wooden dock stretches far out towards the ocean, with ample room for a little boy to sit on the edge and dangle his feet in the water.

He's slow to explore at first- it feels almost too good to be true- but as he gingerly creeps along the shore, taking it all in with a childlike wonder, the feeling that he's *intruding* quickly fades. The dock creaks under his feet, old but sturdy, and Xinlong makes his way to the end, shucking his shoes and settling on the edge to dip his toes in the deep blue sea.

It's *cold*- but it's a *nice* cold. The summer sun is beating down from above, dancing beautifully across the tops of the waves, and here at the end of the dock it almost feels like he's a part of the ocean itself. Here, alone, he doesn't have to worry about grandparents shooing him off to play, or other kids laughing when he's scared to get too close to the waves. Here he can just be *him*.

The ocean is beautiful on the island, just like Mom always said. Xinlong sighs, kicking his feet, and gazes down at the rippling water.

"Hi, Dad," he says- quietly, but the words feel loud. It's the first time he's actually said them in years. "It's me, Xinlong. Can you hear me?"

The waves brush the shore behind him and splash against his feet, but no one responds. Not that they would. He continues anyway.

"I know it's kind of stupid, but it feels like maybe you could. Mom says all the oceans are connected, that it's all just one big body of water, so when you got swept away you were kind of just returning to something you loved. She says you always loved the ocean." He sighs, leaning back on his hands and looking out towards the horizon. "I wish you loved it a little less though. Or that you could wait to go back until I got to grow up. I know it wasn't your fault, but I miss you a lot."

This is…nice. His dad's not *really* here, obviously, but it *feels* like he is. A soft breeze rustles the treetops, light and refreshing in the warm summer air, and Xinlong smiles.

"The kids at school would probably think this is stupid," he says. "Cause one time I said I didn't have a dad anymore, cause you're part of the ocean now, and this one kid said you probably just got turned into *fish food*." He scrunches up his face at the memory. "I got really mad at him, you know? Cause that was a mean thing to say. But Mom said it was probably true, actually, and it's not a bad thing if it is. It's just part of the *cycle of life*."

He kicks his feet again, watching how the water splatters ahead and leaves little circular disruptions in the surface to be wiped away by the waves. What else should he say?

“I’m a lot bigger now than the last time you saw me,” he adds. “I remember I couldn’t even tie my shoes. You used to have to help me. But now I can do that myself, and loads of other stuff too. I’m old enough to come out and visit Grandma and Grandma all on my own, cause Mom has to work. She said you guys came here once, after you got married, and you really liked it. I think it’s really pretty, but there’s a lot of other kids and they’re kind of loud, so I don’t like that part so much. But I think *this* place is pretty nice. I bet you would’ve liked it.”

“Who are you talking to?”

Xinlong yelps, nearly jumping out of his skin, and scrambles back on the pier. A strange boy is floating in the water, just his head poking up above the surface. He looks to be around Xinlong’s age, maybe a little younger- small and pretty, and tanned from the sun.

“How long have you been there?” Xinlong asks. *How much did you hear?*

The boy shrugs. “A while. This is my secret hideout, so I’m here like all the time.”

“Oh,” says Xinlong. “I’m sorry. I can leave.”

He starts to get up, but the boy shakes his head. “You don’t have to! Just as long as you know it’s mine. I’m Anxin, what’s your name?”

“Xinlong,” he says, settling back down. Then he frowns. “Wait, how did you even get here? There’s just the one path.” If Anxin really comes here *all the time*, wouldn’t there have been signs? Like… footprints or something?

“I swam,” Anxin says, turning in the water to float backwards past the end of the dock. He makes it look so *effortless*, and Xinlong feels a sharp ping of envy.

“From somewhere else on the island?” he asks. The mouth of the cove looks pretty far out- sure, *maybe* you could swim around from one of the beaches, but that seems like the sort of thing the lifeguards would get mad about.

Anxin shakes his head. “No, from home. I don’t live around here.” Xinlong’s disbelief must show on his face, because Anxin grins and adds, “I’m a *really* good swimmer.”

“Oh,” Xinlong says, ducking his head. “That’s cool. I can’t swim.”

“Why not?”

Xinlong shrugs. *Because my dad was supposed to teach me and then he got caught in a riptide and drowned and now I’m too scared of the water to even try* doesn’t seem like the best thing to tell a kid he met five minutes ago. Anxin seems nice enough so far, but maybe he’s the kind of person who’d think it’s funny to shove him under. There’s no lifeguard here to stop it this time.

“I don’t know,” he says instead. “I just never learned.”

Anxin accepts that easily enough, turning again to float back the other way. “So who were you talking to?” he asks. It sounds more *curious* than anything else. “Cause there’s no one here but me, and you didn’t even know I was here.”

“No one,” Xinlong says, looking away. “I was just- I was just talking.”

Anxin stops at the edge of the dock, wrapping his arms around one of the pilings. “Are you sure? You sounded kind of sad.”

“Yeah, I’m sure,” Xinlong says. “I mean, there’s obviously no one else here, so…”

He trails off, biting his lip. Anxin is frowning at him like he doesn’t buy it at all, but there’s *no way* Xinlong’s going to admit he was talking to his *dead dad*. Then, suddenly, Anxin brightens up.

“Wanna see something cool?”

Xinlong nods slowly, and Anxin flashes him a grin- then dives under the water. He doesn’t come back for ten seconds, then twenty, then *thirty*, and fear starts to clench in Xinlong’s chest.

“Anxin?” he calls, to no response. “Are you okay?”

It hasn’t been long enough to be *really* scary, but there’s no sign of him at all. The blue-green water is too murky to see more than a few inches below the surface, and what if something happened? What if Anxin’s *hurt?* Should he go for help? Try to find someone who can actually swim, who can see if he’s okay? But there’s no way they’d make it back in time…

His worries vanish in a sigh of relief as Anxin breaches the surface a few feet from the dock, perfectly fine and clutching something in his hand. He swims back over, holding it out to Xinlong. It’s something halfway between a rock and a *gem*, smooth and shiny and glittering in the sunlight.

“Whoa,” Xinlong says, turning it over in his hands.

“It’s part of my collection,” Anxin explains. “I have a whole bunch of treasures here. This is one of the best ones. I found it yesterday.”

“That’s so cool,” Xinlong says. “It’s really pretty.”

Anxin grins, a wide toothy grin. “I know, right? I’m really good at finding this sort of stuff.” He pauses, then adds, “You can have that one, if you want.”

Xinlong frowns. “Really? Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I’ve got plenty,” Anxin says. “And I can always find more. But it’ll be hard for you to find your own, if you can’t swim.”

“Thanks.” Xinlong looks down at the rock. It’s the first real present he’s gotten from another kid, not counting his birthday. “I don’t have anything to give you though- well, I have some snacks I can share.”

“Ooh, yeah!” Anxin cheers, and Xinlong grins.

“Okay, be right back,” he says, and runs back to the shore to grab his bag, clutching the rock to his chest. He and Anxin have only just met, but this already feels like he’s found his new *best friend*.

-

The two of them easily fall into the pattern of childhood friendship. Every day Xinlong returns to the cove, bearing convenience store snacks and the occasional homemade treat, all of which absolutely

delight Anxin, who “doesn’t have this kind of stuff where he lives.” In return, Anxin brings him more little gifts from the ocean: shells and pebbles and pieces of sea glass, each more beautiful than the last. He never comes out of the water and Xinlong never goes in, but aside from that tiny difference they’re just two little boys running hand in hand through the summer.

Anxin is always there by the time Xinlong arrives, so he doesn’t try to talk to his dad again. It feels a little too embarrassing to do in front of someone else. He *does* tell Anxin about it eventually, when he’s explaining why he’s only here for the summer. It’s nice being with his grandparents, he says, but he misses his mom. And she probably misses him too- it’s been just the two of them for so long.

Anxin’s a good listener, and he *is* nice. He doesn’t point and laugh when Xinlong’s voice gets wobbly, or say his dad must’ve been stupid to die like that. He just *listens*, with the solemn gravity of someone who understands the importance of the emotion, if not the feeling itself.

“What about your parents?” Xinlong asks into the silence that follows his story.

“They’re fine.” Anxin shrugs. “I mean, they’re both alive and stuff, so that’s good. But they’re not always around and they don’t really care what I do- which is pretty great actually. Cause I can kind of just do whatever I want.”

“That’s kind of cool, I guess,” Xinlong says, then frowns. “Do you go to school?”

“School?”

“Yeah, to like learn and stuff. You know, reading, and math…”

He trails off as Anxin shakes his head. “Nah. I learn on my own. I mean, I have an older brother and he teaches me stuff sometimes, but I don’t *go* anywhere for it. Is it fun?”

Xinlong thinks about his classmates, how even the nicer ones are still really loud, and about having to sit still for hours on end- not to mention *homework*- and shakes his head. “Not really. I mean, there’s some parts that aren’t so bad, but I don’t think you’re missing out.”

-

A month into their friendship comes the first real test, and like any good friendship it’s no one’s fault. One minute they’re playing around like any other day- Xinlong tossing fruit snacks into the air and Anxin throwing his head and shoulders out of the water to catch them- and the next, Anxin lands a little too hard, a little too close to the dock, and a huge splash catches Xinlong in the face, drenching him from head to toe.

The salt water splashes onto his tongue and down his throat, turning his laughter to coughing, and with a sharp pain in his chest comes a terrifying thought: *Is this what drowning feels like?*

And just like that, it’s not a game anymore.

Anxin surfaces with a grin, a grin that falters the moment his eyes land on Xinlong. “What’s wrong?”

Xinlong shakes his head, trying to fight back the tears already falling. “Nothing,” he says. “Nothing, I just-”

He can't even finish the sentence. He's *scared*, and it's *stupid*, cause it's just *water*- but now he's crying and he doesn't want to be here anymore-

"Wait!" Anxin calls after him as he sprints back down the dock, sobbing into his hands. "I'm sorry! It was an accident!"

But Xinlong isn't listening. He needs to get *home*, he needs to hug his mom- or, since she's not there, one of his grandparents will do. He needs to remember that he's safe on land, that the ocean won't take him away.

-

When he comes back the next day, he's *nervous*. Except for that first time, when he didn't know what he was looking for, Xinlong's come running into the cove every morning ready for the next best day of his life- but now? What if Anxin doesn't want him here, after what happened yesterday? What if he ruined it? This was Anxin's spot first, after all. He might not want some dumb little *crybaby* hanging out with him.

There's no sign of his friend in the water, but there is something at the end of the dock. Xinlong frowns, making his way over to find a small pile of *shiny sea treasures*. The kind Anxin always brings him.

Xinlong sits down, letting his toes dip into the water, and picks up a shell to turn over in his hands.

"Anxin?" he call softly. "Are you there?"

For a moment he thinks he might actually be alone- then Anxin slowly slinks out of the reeds, staring down at the water as he approaches the dock. "I'm sorry," he murmurs when he gets close. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"It's okay," Xinlong says. "Are these yours?"

Anxin shrugs. "Yeah. I mean, they can be yours. If you want. I brought them to say sorry, cause I didn't want you to be mad at me."

Xinlong shakes his head. "I'm not mad at you."

Anxin flicks his fingers through the surface of the water, still not looking up. "I thought you might not come back."

I thought you might not want me to, Xinlong thinks. "Why wouldn't I come back?"

"Cause I splashed you," Anxin says, and *finally* looks at him with big eyes that are practically screaming *I'm sorry*. "And you got scared."

"Well- yeah," Xinlong concedes. "But it wasn't on purpose, so it's okay. Cause- cause we're friends, right?"

Anxin's face lights up with a brilliant grin. "Yeah," he says. "Best friends."

-

A week later it storms, and Xinlong isn't allowed to go outside lest he "get himself hit by lightning" and "break his poor mother's heart". He spends the whole day staring out the window, watching the rain hammer down and wishing he knew where Anxin lived. They were supposed to play together today, like every other day, and now he's just stuck at home.

So is Anxin, probably. If Xinlong had a phone number for him or his parents, maybe they could at least talk. Well, his grandparents probably wouldn't like him tying up the phone all day long, but he could at least tell Anxin not to come to the cove. He said he doesn't live on the island, so maybe it's not storming where he is. Maybe he doesn't know not to come.

The next day is clear, and Xinlong is set loose once again. He rushes straight to the cove, bursting through the trees and kicking off his shoes as he sprints down the dock.

"Anxin!" he calls. "I'm back! Are you here?"

He scans the water, searching for a sign of his friend, and just when he's about to worry something's wrong, Anxin surfaces with a scowl.

Xinlong frowns. "Are you okay?"

"Fine," Anxin says, crossing his arms and rolling his eyes.

"You don't sound fine."

"Well, I *am*."

"Okay." Xinlong bites his lip, not sure what to do with that. Anxin's definitely upset about *something*, but if he won't say what it is…

"I brought cookies," he says, sitting down and turning to pull the container out of his bag. "My grandma made them yesterday, and I helped."

Anxin scowls harder. "I'm not hungry."

"You're *always* hungry."

"Well, now I'm *not*."

Xinlong's brow furrows with confusion. "Are you mad at me?"

Anxin glares at him, but doesn't answer. Which probably means *yes*.

"What did I do?" Xinlong asks. "Is it cause I wasn't here yesterday? Cause it was raining, that's all. I told my grandma I had somewhere to be but she wouldn't let me."

Anxin purses his lips, like he's *considering* it, but he still doesn't give in. Xinlong sighs, fishing out a cookie and holding it out as an offering.

"I'm sorry," he says. "I would've come if I could. But I also didn't think you'd be here anyways. Cause isn't it like really dangerous to go swimming in a storm? I mean, there was lightning and stuff. Wouldn't it be really bad if it hit the water while you were in it? You could get *electrocuted*."

Anxin rolls his eyes again, but snatches the cookie out of his hands. “Not if you know what you’re doing. It’s not like the *whole ocean* gets electrified, just the part near the surface.”

“Oh,” Xinlong says. “Yeah, I guess that makes sense. Cause if it was the whole ocean, then probably all the fish would die.”

“Yeah, *obviously*,” Anxin says. “I thought you went somewhere to learn stuff.”

Xinlong shrugs. “We learn different stuff. I really don’t know that much about the ocean.”

“That’s weird,” Anxin says. “I know all about it.”

At least he doesn’t seem mad anymore. And it kind of makes sense that Anxin would know about this stuff, with how much time he spends in the water.

“You really like to swim, huh?” Xinlong says. “I’ve never even seen you get out of the water.”

“I like the water,” Anxin says. “And I’m good at it.”

“That’s true.” Anxin is probably the best swimmer Xinlong knows. Most people would at least take a break to sit on the dock sometimes- even the grown-ups. Anxin’s so cool.

“What do you like to do?” Anxin asks. “Besides hang out with me, obviously.”

“I don’t know.” Xinlong leans back on his hands, thinking about it. “I like dancing, I guess. I used to take classes when I was little, but we can’t afford it anymore.”

“That sucks.”

Xinlong nods. “Yeah. My mom said it’s a shame cause I was really good at it. She used to say if I learned to sing too, I could go off and be *famous*- but I’m pretty sure she just said that cause she’s my mom.”

Anxin makes a face. “Ugh. Singing sucks.”

“You don’t like it?” Singing never really called to Xinlong the way that dance did, but it can still be fun sometimes.

“It’s *fine*,” Anxin says, turning to float on his back. “It’s just a whole *thing*. Cause like, my whole family sings, and I’m supposed to be good at it too, but it’s so *boring*. Everyone’s all like *oh, it’s important!* But I just don’t really care that much.”

Anxin hasn’t shared much about his family, but Xinlong is starting to put together a picture in his head. He seems kind of weird- he loves to swim, he doesn’t go to school, and now his family are all singers? It doesn’t really make sense. But maybe it’s just a different way of doing things. Xinlong’s family isn’t exactly normal either.

“Do you think I could hear you sing sometime?” he asks.

Anxin shrugs, looking disinterested. “Maybe,” he says. “Hey, do you have any more of those rice crackers? Or did you just bring cookies?”

Xinlong may be a kid, but he can recognize a subject change when he sees one. “Yeah,” he says, digging out the package. “I know you really like them.”

-

All good things must come to an end. Nearly every day for two months, Anxin comes to the cove to find Xinlong racing up the dock with snacks and stories, and they stay there til the sun starts to set, laughing and playing and just being *free*. It’s his own little secret- technically he’s not supposed to come this close to shore, but the cove has been his hideout for years and Xinlong’s the first person to ever find it. Anxin’s been careful not to show his tail, and if Xinlong suspects anything he hasn’t said so. He’s a friend, a real *friend*, and the best thing that’s happened to Anxin his whole life.

But finally comes a day where Xinlong is *late*, and when he does show up he’s got none of that bright bubbly energy Anxin’s come to know and love.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, swimming up alongside Xinlong as he plods towards the end of the dock.

“Nothing,” Xinlong sighs. “It’s just. Summer’s over, you know?”

Anxin frowns. “So?”

He’s never really understood the whole distinction of the seasons. The days get longer and shorter, the water gets warmer and cooler, but Xinlong talks about it like a definitive period of *time*.

“So I have to go home tomorrow,” Xinlong says. “And like, it’s good cause I get to see my mom again, but-” he glances quickly at Anxin, then down at the water. “It *also* means I won’t be able to come play with you anymore.”

Anxin stares at him, the meaning of the words sinking in with a crushing horror. *But you’re my best friend*, he wants to argue. *You can’t just leave*.

“I’m sorry,” Xinlong says, hunching his shoulders. “I’ll be back next summer, probably. And if your family has a phone, maybe we could call…?”

He looks *so* sad. Anxin swallows, steeling himself. It’s not Xinlong’s fault he has to go; he’d obviously choose to stay if he could.

“We don’t have one,” he says. He’s not exactly sure what a *phone* is, but it’s probably some kind of human thing. It sounds like something that would let them stay in touch, but Xinlong’s mom doesn’t live near the water. Which means *staying in touch* isn’t really an option.

Anxin picks a splinter off the dock. “Will you come back?”

Xinlong nods. “Yeah, definitely! My grandpa said I can come visit whenever, but that it’s probably too far to travel except for in the summer. And then my grandma said “of *course* he’s coming next summer! I’m going to miss my little-”” he cuts off abruptly, ears turning pink. “Um. She said she’d miss me, is all. So I should be back next year, it’ll just be a while.”

That’s better than nothing. Anxin sighs. “But why do you have to go?”

“School, mostly.” Xinlong leans back, kicking his feet in the water. “Plus my mom probably misses me too. She’d be really sad if I didn’t come back at all.”

Anxin frowns. *Yeah, but I’m going to miss you more*. “I guess,” he says.

“But we should make today *fun*,” Xinlong says, straightening back up. “Cause if it’s gonna be the last day for a while, then- then it should be the *best*. And then we can spend the rest of the school year thinking about it and remembering how awesome it was.”

Anxin brightens instantly. “Deal,” he says. “And we should promise that no matter how much fun we have between now and then, it won’t be any better than this.”

That makes Xinlong laugh, but he nods and holds out a hand to shake. “Yeah,” he says. “It’s a promise.”

-

That day *is* the best so far, if only because both of them put every drop of energy into having a good time- but it’s bittersweet. Eventually, inevitably, the sun starts to sink on the horizon, and Xinlong turns away from the water for what could be the last time.

“Remember your promise!” Anxin calls after him. “You have to come back. Next summer, you have to come back.”

“I promise!” says Xinlong. “Have a safe trip home!” He walks backwards down the dock so he can wave goodbye, and Anxin waves back, and they keep waving until Xinlong has vanished out of sight into the trees. Only then does Anxin slump into the water, letting the lonely disappointment rise back up.

He’ll be back, he tells himself. *It might take a while, but he’ll be back. He promised*.

With that thought in mind, he dives under the surface to make his way back home.

-

Home is nice, but pretty lonely. Anxin’s parents haven’t been around for a while, preferring to spend their time in the open ocean like most adult mermaids. These days it’s mostly just him and Jiahao- and Jiahao used to be fine, but ever since his side fins started growing he’s been acting like *such* a jerk. He thinks he knows *everything*, just cause he’s a few years older. And he’s always nagging Anxin about his singing.

The cove was Anxin’s hideout long before Xinlong showed up, but now it doesn’t feel the same without him. Being there by himself is lonely, in a way it never was before- but he doesn’t want to share it with anyone else. Least of all his *brother.*

“Are you still hanging around your nursery all the time?” Jiahao asks one day when Anxin slithers home.

“It’s not a *nursery*,” Anxin retorts. “It’s my *secret hideout*. And you’re *not* invited.”

Jiahao laughs. “Oh, don’t worry, I wasn’t gonna ask. But you better be careful, little fish- there’s more people on that island than there used to be, and you’re still so small and easy to catch.”

Anxin rolls his eyes. “Am not.”

“Are too.” Jiahao grins, circling him in the water. “You know, humans like to put little fishes like you in big tanks for people to gawk at. Or cut off your fins to make into soup. You’re lucky you have me around to protect you.”

“That’s not true,” Anxin snaps. “You’re just trying to scare me.”

Jiahao shrugs. “I mean, it’s fine if you don’t believe me. Your funeral. I’m just *saying*, there’s a reason we learned how to lure them into the water. It’s *self-defense*.”

Anxin narrows his eyes. Jiahao’s not saying anything *new*, really, just repeating the stuff they’ve been told their whole lives. *Land-walkers are dangerous. Don’t get too close, and definitely don’t let them see you have a tail*. Anxin knows this.

But that was before he met *Xinlong*. And Xinlong’s not scary at all- he cries all the time, and he can’t even *swim*.

Maybe *some* humans are dangerous, but definitely not all of them. Jiahao’s probably never even met one. He doesn’t know what he’s talking about- and Anxin feels a swell of pride that *he’s* the smarter one, for once.

“I don’t believe you,” he says, drawing himself up tall. “I think you’re *wrong*, about all of it.”

Jiahao gives him an unimpressed look. “How would you know?” he asks, then laughs as he swims away- not even waiting for an answer.

Chapter 2: The second summer

A year is a long time when you're seven or eight years old, but Xinlong promised to come back and Anxin promised to wait for him. He doesn't know exactly when his best friend will return, only that once the water starts warming his heart lifts every morning as he swims to the cove, and falls every evening when he slinks home alone.

He'll be back soon, he reminds himself every time. *He promised*.

By the time Xinlong does come back, Anxin's long since grown bored of waiting. He's explored every inch of the nearby sea, never straying far enough that he might miss his friend's return, and turned from treasure hunting to magic tricks, learning how to make the water swirl with just a flick of his wrist. He's practicing tossing it higher and higher, making little patterns in the air, when the sound of something rustling through the trees makes him panic and dive deep.

"Anxin?" a soft voice calls, slightly distorted by the water above. "Are you there?"

Xinlong!

Anxin's heart *sings* as he speeds to the surface- but he stops short just before he reaches it. It does *sound* like his friend, but maybe he should make sure. Just in case. It's been a long time, after all- maybe things have changed.

Footsteps on the dock tell him Xinlong is getting closer, so Anxin circles around underwater to hide in the reeds by the cliff before poking his head up to look.

The boy on the dock is a little taller than he remembers, but it's still *Xinlong*. He stands at the edge, shading his eyes with his hand as he scans the water. No sign of Anxin, of course- Xinlong's looking out at the ocean, not off to the side.

"I guess not," Xinlong says with a sigh. He sits, setting his backpack down behind him, and lets his feet hang off the edge and dip into the ocean. "That's okay. I can wait."

A massive grin splits across Anxin's face. Any fear- that Xinlong *forgot*, that he's only here out of *obligation* or because it's *convenient*- vanishes. He surges forward, opening his mouth to call out, then-

"Hi dad," Xinlong whispers to the water. "Did you miss me?"

Anxin slows to a crawl. Xinlong was talking to his dad the first time they met, though Anxin didn't know it at the time. And he hasn't done it since, at least not here. He doesn't know Anxin can hear him, so maybe it's rude to listen- but he's kind of curious what Xinlong has to say.

"I'm waiting for Anxin," Xinlong continues. "Do you remember Anxin? We were here all summer together. I guess if you're out there in the water, you probably saw all that. So I don't have to tell you he's my best friend."

My best friend! Anxin dips underwater for an excited little twirl, then surfaces again to watch Xinlong smile as he looks up towards the horizon.

“Mom isn’t here this year either, but she was less sad about me going by myself. I think she’s happy that I made a friend, cause she worries about that stuff. She pretends like she doesn’t, but she does. Like- you know, we found a kitten abandoned outside our house last winter, and Mom said we could keep it if I really wanted, but it might be a lot of work. She said you always planned to get a dog, but it just didn’t happen. And then you were gone, so.”

Xinlong sighs, leaning back on his hands. “We didn’t keep the kitten though. It moved in with our neighbors and they said I could come visit whenever I wanted, but a few months later they moved away. Mom got really sad that I couldn’t see it anymore, but I told her it was okay. I was sad too, though.”

Anxin frowns. Xinlong doesn’t *sound* very sad right now, just sort of wistful- but still the story makes him want to do something to cheer his friend up.

“You know, it was *really* dirty when we found it,” Xinlong adds with a giggle. “We had to give it a bath in the sink and it got *so mad*. Mom said cats don’t like getting wet, so it was probably just scared. I felt a little bad for laughing, but it was okay after when it was all clean and happy. And so I told Mom you just have to do things that are a little scary sometimes, and she said that was really mature.”

He kicks absent-mindedly at the water, falling silent for a moment. It’s enough of a pause that Anxin takes a deep breath and closes the distance to the end of the dock. “Your mom sounds nice.”

Xinlong jumps in surprise- just like he did a year ago- then *lights up*. “Anxin!” he cheers. “I missed you.”

Anxin grins. “Me too. You were gone for *ages*.”

“I know,” Xinlong says. “I’m sorry. But I’m back now, for the whole summer, and we can hang out every day. Oh, and I have something for you!”

He digs around in his bag to grab a small plastic toy that he holds out triumphantly to Anxin. Anxin takes it, turning it over in his hands. It’s a little humanoid figure, with arms and legs that move- but its skin is bright red and covered in stripes. And the face doesn’t look like a person at all.

“It’s Spider-Man,” Xinlong says, his smile starting to falter.

“Oh!” Anxin says, like that explains everything. “Cool!”

Xinlong frowns. “You don’t know Spider-Man, do you?”

Anxin bites his lip, and slowly shakes his head. “What is it?”

“He’s a superhero,” Xinlong tells him. “He got bitten by a radioactive spider and now he has spider powers, and he uses them to fight crime and save people from danger.”

“For real?!” Anxin’s pretty sure a spider is just some kind of bug and he’s not sure what *powers* it has, but if there’s some guy out there using bug powers to *save people*, then that sounds *awesome*.

“Well- no, it’s a movie,” Xinlong says. “He’s not *real*, just a character. But I think he’s really cool.” He looks down at his hands. “You, um. You don’t have to keep it. Sorry, it’s dumb.”

“No, I like it!” Anxin insists. “I don’t have anything like this at home.”

“What, like toys?” Xinlong gives him an incredulous look. “How do you not have toys?”

“I have *toys*,” Anxin says, rolling his eyes. “They’re just- I don’t know. Most of them are kind of old.” It’s not exactly a lie. Everything he has to play with is salvaged from the ocean floor, which means the kind of toys Xinlong’s thinking of are often worn down by the water or missing pieces.

“Oh,” Xinlong says. “That sucks.”

“It’s fine, I don’t really mind.” Anxin grins at him, waving the figure in the air. “So what kind of powers does he have? Does he grow extra legs or something?”

Xinlong laughs. “No, nothing like that. The main thing is he can shoot *webs* with his hands that like stick to things- here, I’ll show you.” He gets up to demonstrate the motions- complete with sound effects- as he continues the description. Anxin listens with rapt attention, asking all sorts of questions, as Xinlong recounts the whole Spider-Man *story.*

And just like that, it’s like he was never even gone. They fall right back into their normal routine and everything is *perfect*.

The only real change comes when Jiahao starts to notice.

“Anything interesting happen today?” he asks a week after Xinlong gets back, when Anxin comes swimming home with a smile.

“No,” Anxin says. “I was just at my hideout.”

Jiahao narrows his eyes. “You were smiling.”

Anxin scowls. “Was not.”

“Were too.” Jiahao circles around him, studying him with sharp, calculating eyes. “You’ve been *at your hideout* every day for ages, but you used to come home all sulky. Something changed.”

“Nothing changed,” Anxin snaps. Jiahao thinks humans are dangerous. If he finds out about Xinlong…

“I was just playing,” he lies. “I found a whole bunch of treasures. But you can’t have any, they’re mine.”

Jiahao scoffs. “I don’t want your dumb little rocks.”

“Good. They’re *mine*.” Anxin lifts his chin, glaring at his brother and hoping he doesn’t ask any more questions.

“You better not be lying, little fish,” Jiahao says, as he turns to swim away. “Remember, it’s my job to keep you safe- if you’re keeping some kind of *secret* you’re going to be in *so* much trouble.”

“I’m not!” Anxin calls after him. “And no one asked you to do that! I’m just having *fun*, on my own- you should try it sometime!”

Jiahao sticks out his tongue, but doesn't respond, and Anxin huffs to himself, trying to quell his racing heartbeat. So far, at least, his insistence that the secret hideout is *his* is something his brother has always respected. He just has to hope that won't change.

-

A few weeks into the summer, for the first time Anxin *isn't* waiting when Xinlong sprints out of the trees and calls out his hello. That's a little odd, but not necessarily a problem. Xinlong is sometimes late, depending on how much conversation his grandparents want over breakfast, and he can't come at all when it rains (which thankfully isn't very often). Maybe Anxin just got held up.

Xinlong settles in his spot on the edge of the dock, dangling his feet in the water, and gazes out towards the horizon. He supposes he could talk to his dad again, while he's waiting, but he doesn't really have anything to say. Since his last update he's spent every day *here*, and he doesn't need to tell his dad about that.

Besides, Anxin might show up in the middle again. He's overheard Xinlong twice now and never made it a *thing*, but it still feels weird. He can just wait- Anxin will surely be here soon.

He's not sure how long it takes- long enough that he's shifted to lying on his back with his arms spread wide, closing his eyes against the blazing of the sun- but it can't be that long before he hears the quiet splash of a head poking through the surface. Xinlong shoots upright with a grin.

It's not Anxin.

Xinlong frowns, watching the stranger as he swims up to the dock. It's another boy, a few years older, and *pretty*. He looks slightly familiar in a way Xinlong can't place, and that's honestly a little scary. Most kids are *fine*, but Xinlong doesn't really have many *friends*. Who is this boy, and what is he doing in Anxin's hideout?

"Are you waiting for Anxin?" the boy asks as draws closer.

"You know Anxin?" Xinlong blurts out. No one on the island knows Anxin- they all think Xinlong either misheard the name or is making stuff up. Which makes sense, if Anxin doesn't live around here- but then how does this guy know him? Anxin's never mentioned any other friends.

"He's my little brother," the boy explains with a smile- so *that's* why he looks familiar. Xinlong relaxes immediately.

"Oh," he says. "Yeah. Is he okay? Do you know where he is?"

The boy shrugs, glancing back towards the mouth of the cove. "He'll be here soon, probably. What's your name?"

"Xinlong."

"Xinlong, huh." Anxin's brother nods, looking him up and down. "Okay."

Xinlong waits to see if he'll say anything else, but he just stays there silently in the water. *Watching*.

“What, um. What’s your name?” Xinlong asks eventually, and the boy’s face falls, his lip poking out in an exaggerated pout.

“Anxin didn’t tell you about me?”

Xinlong freezes. “No- well, he said he had a brother, and- and some other stuff about you I guess. But he didn’t tell me your name.” He bites his lip, suddenly nervous he’s done something wrong. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine,” the boy sighs. “I’m Jiahao.”

“Nice to meet you.” Xinlong holds out a hand to shake, and Jiahao tilts his head like Xinlong’s said something *interesting*.

(Xinlong suddenly wants very desperately for Jiahao to find him interesting.)

“You too,” Jiahao says thoughtfully, taking the offered hand. Then he smiles, showing his teeth. They’re kind of pointy- *just like Anxin’s*. The thought is reassuring, honestly. This really *is* Anxin’s brother- not that Xinlong thought he was lying, of course. It kind of makes sense that they would meet eventually, though it is a little weird Anxin’s not here for it.

“So what’d he tell you about me?” Jiahao asks, startling him out of his thoughts.

“Um, not much.” Xinlong thinks, trying to remember everything Anxin’s said. “He said you teach him things sometimes, cause he doesn’t go to school, and… you like to sing? Well, he said your whole family sings, I guess, but that he thinks it’s kinda boring.”

“Huh,” Jiahao says, studying him. “Yeah, that sounds like what he would say.”

“Yeah.” Xinlong kicks his feet, fidgeting under the scrutiny. “I don’t know. He didn’t really tell me that much about you though. Sorry. He mostly just talks about the ocean, like- like currents and things. Cause he knows a lot about that stuff, and I don’t, so- so yeah.” He can tell that he’s rambling, but Jiahao is still just *watching* him, so he’s not sure when to stop. “Anxin said you guys don’t live around here, and he has to swim from far away. He really likes to swim. I guess that means you must be a good swimmer too?”

Jiahao smiles brightly, eyes crinkling like Xinlong said something funny. “Yeah,” he says, with a little bit of a laugh. “So, you want to come in the water?”

“Oh- no, I’m okay,” Xinlong says, shaking his head.

“You sure?” Jiahao tilts his head again, floating past the edge of the dock. “It’s really nice.”

“No, I just- I can’t swim.” Xinlong ducks his head, a little embarrassed. Nine years old, and he *still* can’t swim. Anxin swims so well, and so does Jiahao, clearly- and then there’s Xinlong. He’s such a *baby.*

“Oh,” Jiahao says. Xinlong cringes a little, waiting for him to laugh. Jiahao’s all grown up and *cool*- he’s probably old enough to be in *middle school*- and for some reason he’s bothering to talk to Xinlong. All while Xinlong’s here with just his feet in the water like some dumb little kid.

“I could teach you if you want.”

Xinlong frowns, lifting his head. Jiahao…looks like he means it, probably. He’s giving Xinlong that *look* again, like he’s *curious*, like Xinlong is *interesting*- but the idea of getting into the water…

“I don’t know…”

“Aw, come on.” Jiahao grins at him again, swimming closer. “Don’t tell me you’re *scared*.”

“No,” Xinlong says quickly. He *is* scared, obviously, but Jiahao doesn’t need to know that.

“Then what’s the problem?” Jiahao is right in front of him now, reaching out his hands. “Come on, Xinlong. Trust me.”

I don’t want to, Xinlong thinks, but he can’t bring himself to say it out loud. He bites his lip, glancing at Jiahao’s expectant smile, then at the mouth of the cove. Anxin will probably be here soon- that’s what Jiahao said- so this could be a nice thing to try while he waits. And wouldn’t it be kind of cool if he *could* swim? Then they could both be in the water sometimes, instead of Xinlong always being stuck on the dock.

You have to do things that are a little scary sometimes, he reminds himself. *That’s just part of growing up*.

So with a deep breath and a nod, he takes Jiahao’s hands and lets the older boy yank him forward into the water with a big splash.

The second it touches his chin he *panics*, tears springing to his eyes as he clings to Jiahao with a frightened whimper. Jiahao, fortunately, doesn’t push him off. He just laughs- but it doesn’t sound *mean*.

“See?” he says. “You’re fine, I’ve got you. Just kick your feet, okay?”

Xinlong nods, sniffling- he’s not *crying*, he’s just a little scared, that’s all- and starts to kick. His grip relaxes slightly, though he’s still mostly supported by Jiahao holding his arms. How Jiahao is staying afloat so easily while essentially *carrying* Xinlong is beyond him, but it’s reassuring that he does seem to know what he’s doing.

“Am I doing it?” Xinlong asks, a little breathlessly. He’s focusing too much on his own motions to do much more than blindly follow his teacher, but it feels like he is. This is still scary, but it’s also kind of *exciting*. Maybe he actually *can* learn to swim.

“Yeah, you’re doing great,” says Jiahao. “Look how far out we are.”

Xinlong looks up, back towards the dock- which is *much* farther away than he’d thought- and yelps, grabbing onto Jiahao once again. He can barely even *see* the shore from here. How’d they get out so far? What if something *happens?*

Jiahao laughs again. “You wanna go back?”

Xinlong nods fervently, no longer caring if it makes him look like a baby. He keeps his eyes locked on the shore- this was a nice little practice, but right now he needs to be back on land.

“Okay.” Jiahao turns in the water, guiding him back towards the dock. They’re moving pretty slowly, but they *are* getting closer, and as the shoreline comes into clearer focus in the distance Xinlong tries to force himself to relax again. He holds onto Jiahao, kicks his feet, and keeps his eyes firmly fixed on the dock.

Then, suddenly and without warning, something slams down on his shoulder and *shoves* him under. Xinlong screams, earning a mouthful of water as he loses his grip on Jiahao. The panic is back ten times over- he thrashes and kicks to get back to the surface, his head pops up through the waves for just a second, and he opens his mouth to scream for help only to slip back under before he can make a sound.

Where’s Jiahao? Anxin’s brother is nowhere to be seen, and the already overwhelming fear is only amplified by the thought that something might’ve *happened* to him. Why else would he have vanished? Why wouldn’t he be here to *help?*

Xinlong tries to fight his way up, but he’s losing strength and his lungs are burning as he chokes on the sea. His flailing limbs slow as his energy fades, and all too soon he feels himself start to *fall*. A terrifying darkness dances at the edges of his vision as he gets the answer he never wanted to a question he’s had for years:

This is what drowning feels like.

Xinlong squeezes his eyes shut, then opens them again because the darkness makes everything worse. *I don’t wanna die*, he thinks. *I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have gone in the water. Please Dad, help me- I don’t wanna die*.

The last thing he remembers, before everything fades, is a flash of bright blue-green, and the feeling of something grabbing him around the waist.

I don’t wanna die.

I don’t wanna die.

I don’t wanna die.

-

Xinlong comes to on the dock, his small body wracked with coughs as a stream of seawater spools out of his mouth. He blinks his eyes open to find Anxin’s face inches from his own, eyes big and wet with terror, one hand reaching out towards him. The hand pulls away as soon as their eyes meet.

“Are you okay?”

Xinlong keeps coughing as he sits up, feeling like he’s somehow swallowed the whole ocean. “I think so?” He’s *alive* at least, which is better than expected.

“Why were you in the water?!” Anxin demands, his voice pitched high with fear. “You were just *sinking*, you could’ve- that could’ve been really bad!”

“I wasn’t-” Xinlong coughs again, shaking his head and looking around. “I didn’t- I was just- where’d your brother go?”

Anxin goes very still. “What?”

“Jiahao, he was-” Xinlong swallows, the fear sinking its teeth back into his skin as he desperately scans the ocean for signs of life. If Jiahao’s not *here*… “He was teaching me how to swim, and then- something happened.”

Anxin’s voice gets sharp. “I thought you didn’t want to learn how to swim.”

When Xinlong looks back at him, he’s glaring- like he’s *angry*, and maybe he *should* be. This is all Xinlong’s fault, after all. He should’ve said *no*, he should’ve stayed on land. “I- I *don’t!”* he wails, eyes filling up with tears that he hurries to brush away. “I didn’t- I just thought- I was really scared, I didn’t- I’m *sorry*.”

“No, don’t cry!” Anxin says, reaching for his arm. *“I’m* sorry, it’s not your fault-”

“I don’t like the water,” Xinlong sobs, tears falling faster than he can wipe them away. “I want my mom, I- I wanna go *home*.”

“I know,” Anxin says, his voice small and fragile. “I’m sorry. Don’t worry, you’re safe. I’ll protect you.”

Xinlong shakes his head. “No, I- I wanna go home. I wanna go *home*.” And with that, he shakes Anxin off and scrambles to his feet, leaving his bag where it is as he sprints down the dock. Back home, back to shore, back to *land*. Where it’s safe.

-

As Xinlong vanishes into the trees, the fear in Anxin’s heart swells like a bubble and *pops* into a sharp burst of anger. Whatever Jiahao was doing here it wasn’t *teaching Xinlong to swim*. This is all *his* fault, he let it happen- and that rage boils Anxin’s blood as he rushes back home to confront his brother.

It takes some time to actually find Jiahao- it’s not like he’s just waiting for Anxin to show up- but if anything that time only builds on his righteous fury. The moment he sees Jiahao’s long purple tail Anxin tackles him with a roar, throwing his full weight into taking his brother down.

“Hey!” Jiahao shouts, shoving him away. “What’s your problem?!”

“Shut up!” Anxin screams. “I hate you, I hate you!” He lunges forward again, fists flailing at Jiahao’s face with wild abandon.

Jiahao catches his wrists, easily wrestling him back. “Get off!”

“No!” Anxin yells. “You hurt Longlong, I’m gonna kill you!”

“Oh, is that all?” Hao scoffs. “You’re mad I messed with your little pet *human?* You weren’t even supposed to be talking to him. I’m just protecting you.”

Anxin growls, jerking against his grip- and when that doesn’t work, he leans forward and *bites*.

“Ow!” Jiahao lets go, shoving Anxin away and grabbing his injured forearm.

“He’s not a *pet*,” Anxin snarls. “He’s my *friend*. And he could’ve *died*.”

Would have died, if Anxin hadn't been there to help. The image of Xinlong's body lying so still on the dock as Anxin pulled the water from his lungs with trembling hands has angry tears springing to his eyes.

Something like *guilt* flashes across Jiahao's face, but it's gone as quickly as it appears. "So?" he says, crossing his arms. "It's not like I made him do anything, I didn't even *sing*. If he's stupid enough to get in the water when he can't even swim, then- then whatever happened is his own fault."

Anxin balls his hands into fists. "He's not stupid! He- he *trusted* you! You *tricked* him, he thought you were safe and you hurt him and- and I hate you!" He launches himself at his brother again, and Jiahao doesn't even fight back so much as try to hold him off. It's infuriating how hard it is to *hurt* him the way Anxin wants to- stupid Jiahao, being bigger than him.

"Cut it out!" Jiahao snaps as Anxin grabs a fistful of his hair and pulls. "He's *fine*, isn't he?" He holds Anxin at arms length, uncertainty flickering across his face. "Isn't he?"

"Only cause I saved him," Anxin snarls, and for a moment Jiahao actually looks *scared*. "You were gonna let him *die*. I hate you so much, I'm never going to forgive you, not ever! Not as long as I live!"

Hao's face contorts with *something* and he shoves Anxin off again, moving out of range. "Whatever," he says, hunching his shoulders defensively. "It's not my fault, you know, this- this wouldn't have happened if you just *listened* to me-"

"Shut up!" Anxin yells. "Just *shut up!* You don't know anything, you're just pretending. You think you're *so* smart, but- but I bet you're just *jealous*-"

"Jealous?" Hao scoffs. "Of *you?"*

"Yeah." Anxin glares at him, sniffling. "You *hate* that I know more about something than you do. But you're not *that* much bigger than me, and you don't know everything. So you better leave me and my friend *alone*."

-

The next day Anxin returns to the cove, once again terrified Xinlong is gone for good. He waits at the dock, swimming nervously in circles- until finally, the sound of quiet footsteps on the shore catches his attention.

He's back!

Anxin's heart leaps- then ever-so-slightly falls at the sight of Xinlong trudging down the dock without any of his usual energy. Anxin bites his lip, cautiously swimming up to meet his friend.

Xinlong takes his seat at the end of the dock- but instead of letting his feet dangle down into the water, he folds them under himself and smiles half-heartedly at Anxin. "Hi."

"Hi," Anxin says softly. "Are you okay?"

Xinlong shrugs. "I guess."

"I'm sorry about Hao-ge," Anxin says. "He shouldn't have done that yesterday. He was being a jerk."

Xinlong hunches his shoulders. “It’s okay. I think- it was just an accident, probably. I shouldn’t have gone in the water.”

“No, but-” Anxin stops himself before he can finish the sentence. It doesn’t sound like Xinlong *knows* what happened was on purpose. Whether Jiahao actually meant to kill him or not, telling Xinlong might just scare him even more. “I mean. Yeah, I guess.”

Xinlong fidgets with his hands. “Is, um. He’s okay too though, right?”

Another bolt of anger shoots through Anxin. How *dare* Jiahao hurt Xinlong again- first by leaving him to drown, and now by making him *worry*. “He’s fine,” he says, and it comes out a little harsher than he means, causing Xinlong to flinch. “Sorry,” Anxin adds quickly. “I’m just mad at him. Not you. Cause he was- he just sucks.”

Xinlong nods, looking down at his lap. “Well- that’s good, I guess. That he’s okay.”

I wish he wasn’t, Anxin thinks bitterly. For a moment he just watches his friend, wondering how he can ever hope to *fix this*. Xinlong looks so small and scared- and it’s all stupid Jiahao’s fault.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” he asks again, after a brief lapse into silence.

Xinlong shrugs. “I think so. I don’t know.” He hunches further, somehow making himself even smaller as he tucks his face into his knees, and his voice comes out tiny when he asks, “Can we talk about something else?”

“Okay.” Anxin frowns, trying to think of what might be *safe*. Nothing to do with his brother, or swimming, or the ocean… “Do you wanna hear about my turtles?”

Xinlong lifts his head slightly. “You have turtles?”

“Well, not exactly. They’re not *mine*, they just live nearby, at least until mating season. But we play together sometimes.”

“Is it fun?”

“Kind of.” Anxin finally lets go of the dock to float around as he usually does. “I mean, they kind of just ignore me a lot of the time. But there’s like a bunch of them around every year, and it’s fun to watch them, or mess with them a little, even if they don’t really do anything back.”

Xinlong nods, and it seems like he’s starting to come back to himself. “That makes sense,” he says. “Turtles are pretty slow, right?”

“On land, yeah,” says Anxin. “They can swim pretty fast-” he stops, shooting a nervous glance at Xinlong- he *just* told himself not to mention anything about *swimming* and he’s already messed that up-

“Oh, they’re sea turtles?” Xinlong asks. “That makes sense. Are they like really big?”

He doesn’t *sound* upset, and Anxin breathes an internal sigh of relief. “Yeah,” he says, holding out his arms to demonstrate. “Like, this big.”

It’s an easy shift into a normal routine- Xinlong asking questions about the ocean (or in this case, the ocean-adjacent), and Anxin answering them. Later he shifts it back, asking Xinlong questions about *his*

life, and if it weren't for the way Xinlong keeps his limbs firmly on the dock it would almost feel like a normal day. The sun starts to set, and Xinlong heads off, and everything is the same even though it's all changed.

It takes several more days before Xinlong touches the water again, and Anxin is very careful not to mention it. Xinlong's fear feels *different* now, more *concrete*. This isn't something that'll be fixed by a pile of sea treasures and an apology.

There's now a few things like that- Jiahao, for one- topics Anxin deliberately avoids lest he risk scaring Xinlong off for good. At first he was careful not to show his tail because *humans aren't supposed to know*. It's not something he really *thought* about, just a lifelong rule he'd never bothered to question. But now he's even more careful. Xinlong still thinks he's just another kid- if he learned Anxin isn't just a really good swimmer, that he's actually *part of the ocean*…

It's selfish to hide it, maybe, but he really doesn't want Xinlong to leave.

-

Jiahao makes himself scarce after their fight, and Anxin honestly can't complain. As Xinlong's marginal comfort with the water slowly returns, some of Anxin's fury starts to fade, but he can't let go of it completely. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

A week and a half later, he returns home from the cove to find something waiting for him near the cavern where he sleeps: a small fossil *tooth*, probably from a shark, that fits almost perfectly into the palm of his hand. He picks it up and turns it over- it's smooth and fully intact, unlike the various shed shark teeth he's found on his own treasure hunts. This is a *special* kind of treasure, the kind that takes real effort to find. Where did it come from?

There's a flash of purple in the corner of his eye, and Anxin whips around just in time to see the tip of Jiahao's tail vanish behind a rock.

"Hey!" Anxin calls. "Come back!"

He darts after his brother, turning a corner to see Jiahao floating nearby, studying the wall like it's interesting and not just a big slab of rock.

"Oh- hey," he says as Anxin comes into view, eyes darting around nervously. "I didn't know you were home."

Liar.

Anxin holds up the tooth, glaring at him. "What's this?"

"Oh, um." Jiahao swims forward to take a closer look and raises his eyebrows. "It looks like a tooth. That's pretty cool. Did you, um. Did you find it somewhere?"

"You suck at lying," Anxin tells him.

Jiahao crosses his arms and looks away. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You're the one who found it," Anxin accuses, "and then you left it here for me. Why?"

“I didn’t do anything,” says Jiahao. “I don’t care about your stupid little treasures. I’m busy doing important stuff, like- like making sure you’re *safe*. You’re making stuff up.”

He glances once at Anxin, then away, twisting his face into a scowl- but the tip of his tail is swishing nervously back and forth.

Oh.

Anxin frowns. “Are you trying to say you’re *sorry?”*

Jiahao tenses. “No,” he scoffs. “What would I be sorry for? Don’t be stupid.”

Anxin purses his lips, considering. He *is* still mad about what happened with Xinlong- but Jiahao clearly feels bad, even if he won’t admit it. He probably did think he was doing the right thing, as horrible as it was.

“Well, thanks,” he says eventually, and Jiahao perks up for a second before quickly hiding the reaction. “I don’t think I forgive you yet, but this is pretty cool.”

-

The rest of the summer comes and goes in the blink of an eye, and all too soon it’s time for Xinlong to leave again. He tells Anxin in the morning that it’s his last day, and Anxin’s heart *hurts*- but not as much as it did last year. Xinlong will be gone for a while, but he’ll come back.

Just like last year, they put all their energy into making the last day *perfect*. Theirs is a friendship that has already stood the test of distance, but a year is still a long time. The better the memories they leave off on, the longer they’ll last.

As the sun starts to set, Xinlong settles down on his stomach at the end of the dock, trailing a hand lightly through the surface of the water. “I should probably go,” he says with a sigh. “But I’ll be back before you know it.”

“Promise?” Anxin asks.

Xinlong smiles, and holds out his hand with pinky extended. Anxin tilts his head in confusion, but mirrors the motion, and Xinlong links their fingers together.

“Promise,” he says. “You promise you won’t forget me while I’m gone?”

Anxin looks him dead in the eyes and grins. “I could never.”