more than physics

Kian didn't know what he was doing when he called her. It only felt real when she picked up on the first ring, her voice tinny through his cheap headphones.

"Hi," she said.

He hadn't heard from Leena since they talked a few days ago about their physics midterm. She had done well and called to tell him.

Kian had gotten a perfect score, but he didn't tell her that. He didn't tell her a lot of things. Like how he'd written his first poem about her, only to fold into a tiny square and place it in a corner of the fireplace at his parents’ house. It was poorly written anyway.

"Hey, I'm stuck on number 12,” he said.

"Really? You're stuck?"

"Yes." *No*.

"Okay, well, I asked about that one at office hours — hang on, I'll text you a picture of how the prof did it." There was a scuffling sound as she searched through her pages. He could imagine her desk, the pile of papers and textbooks and CDs and old coffee mugs. Kian didn't know why he smiled at the thought.

"Thanks," he said.

When they hung up, Kian let out a sigh. He did this a lot; getting to the point too fast, hanging up as soon as he could, and then wishing he had spoken to her more, made up another question to ask her, said something to hear her speak for a little longer. What he felt for her was new to him, too new to share with anyone, too new to fully admit to himself, way too new to admit to her. Maybe if his sister was here, he would have talked to her about it. But she wasn’t, so he didn’t.

He had met Leena a month ago in their first physics lecture. In the crowded lecture hall, she had been struggling to take her backpack off and had elbowed him in the eye in the process. There were a lot of apologies that followed, but Kian didn't mind. She had a nice face, and she spoke like she meant every word. Maybe he was just unlucky, but he hadn't met many people that meant even half of what they said.

The next few lectures, they sat in the same seats. One week, he was running late but when he got to their row, hair dripping from the rain he had just sprinted through, she lifted her bag from his seat.

"Thought you weren't going to make it," she whispered with a smile, eyes never leaving the front of the hall.

"Same here."

She laughed and he wanted to say something else to hear that sound again, but he couldn't think of anything.

The coffee shop was small, its silence explained by the Starbucks across the street.

Whenever their usual spot at the library was taken, they studied here. The second physics midterm was in a day and neither spoke as they completed yet another practice test. The timer Leena had set still had a few minutes left, but Kian had finished a half hour ago, and was now checking his answers for the third time and discreetly glancing at Leena to see if she was finished.

He knew it usually took Leena longer than it took him, but he was getting impatient. He wanted to finish this so he could tell her how he felt about her. He always forgot half of what he wanted to say when he was with her, so he had written out a few points on the back of his formula sheet. Most of what he had written was crossed out. Maybe he was overcomplicating things. At this point, he just wanted to get it over with.

The timer rang. Leena dropped her pencil, leaning back against her chair, closing her eyes, sighing loudly through her nose.

When she started to cry, neither of them expected it.

For a moment, he was still, frozen in place. Then, hands clammy, heart pounding, he went to get her some water. She stopped him, patting her eyes with the back of her hand until he gave her a napkin.

“No, it's okay. I'm sorry, I’m so melodramatic. It's not anything you did, obviously. I'm just stressed about some other stuff,” she said.

Her nose was red from wiping at it with the napkin and Kian wished he hadn't run out of the pack of tissues he always carried in his bag. He folded his hands into each other to stop from reaching out for hers.

“You know, we can talk about more than physics problems. We can talk about anything you need to talk about,” he said, instead of what was on the back of his formula sheet.

"Do you want to get dinner after this?"

Kian had been taking a sip from his two-liter water bottle when she asked him, and he coughed violently, spitting water out everywhere. Thank God they were in the first row. The professor paused, and the people around him stared.

"Are you okay?" He held up a thumb, breathing slowly through his nose, and the professor continued.

Leena was drying his laptop screen with the cloth of the sling she used to keep her casted hand elevated. She said she fell off her bike, but there was something in her eyes that told him it wasn't the whole story.

Kian wished she would tell him her story. He had told her his.

She was the first person he had talked to about the accident, his sister’s death. He didn't feel weak when she saw him cry; she made him feel strong for feeling. He wanted to give her the same comfort, the same feeling of strength. He wanted to talk to her without their textbooks between them. He wanted to kiss her.

Long after he had stopped coughing, the redness in his face didn't subside. He meant to say yes to her, but as every moment stretched away from when she had asked him, it felt like he had messed up the one chance that might lead to something between them. He didn't even know if she was asking him out.

When the lecture was finally over, they packed their things and filed out of the hall. She tapped his shoulder before he could start walking away.

"Come on, it's this way."

Kian was sitting on the purple couch in Leena’s room.

In a few hours, he was going to walk to the physics exam with her. Physics was the last one for both of them, so after today, he wouldn’t see her until the fall.

He had asked if she wanted to visit in the summer. She hadn’t really given him an answer yet. Kian knew it was a selfish invitation, bordering on desperate. He knew they weren’t in the right place for a relationship – it’s what she had told him halfway through dinner all those weeks ago. But he wasn’t asking for a relationship; he just didn’t know if he could spend four months without seeing her.

She sat next to him, handing him a cup of earl grey, sipping on her cup of coffee. Leena was quiet today, and she avoided his eyes. She had just gotten her cast taken off, and while he still didn’t quite believe her “I fell off a bike” story, she hadn’t offered a better one and he hadn’t pressed her for one.

He placed his cup on her nightstand.

“What’s wrong?”

“My grandparents spent their whole life together,” she said.

He had never heard her speak about anyone in her family until this moment, even when he had asked months earlier.

Leena stood up, walking to the black and yellow Nirvana poster on her wall. A little while ago, when they were memorizing kinematics formulas, she had told him she didn’t even listen to Nirvana until her friend gave her this poster for her birthday. “Some friend,” he had said. She had laughed like she was laughing at herself. It was the kind of laugh he didn’t want to hear again.

She stared at the poster, now, as Kian stood beside her.

“My mom called me a few months ago, said she was sorry for leaving. She wants me to visit her.” She pulled the poster down to reveal the wall behind it. “I guess I got a little angry.”

When she told him she wasn’t ready for a relationship, he changed topics, shifting from one meaningless conversation to another, until they were walking back to her house. Then, only trusting himself an hour later in the cold night that flushed her face, he asked why.

“I don’t think anyone is ready for the kind of relationship I want at this age.”

He looked at her then, stopping under a streetlight as she continued forward. “What do you mean?”

She turned to face him. “I mean I want to try even when it doesn’t feel the way it did in the first little while. If you’re going to hold my hand, you’ll have to hold on forever.” She offered him a smile, before turning back to the path ahead, tucking her hands into the pockets of her coat. “If I’m going to go through the excruciating pain of opening myself up completely to someone, I don’t want to go through the excruciating pain of stitching myself closed again.”

Now, they stood, staring at the wall behind the poster. He could hear her breathing slowly, the way she did to keep from crying.

He reached for her hand, the once-broken one, the just-healed one.